

# Point of View

## To Be Equal

# BLACK POVERTY ON THE RISE

by John E. Jacob

You may have seen headlines last month proclaiming a dip in the poverty rate. Don't believe it. Poverty declined slightly among whites, but the black rate actually rose.

According to the Census Bureau, about 800,000 whites left the poverty rolls in 1987, bringing the white poverty rate down to 10.5 percent from the previous year's 11 percent.

But almost 700,000 additional blacks became poor in 1987, bringing the black poverty rate up to 33.1 percent — a jump of two percentage points above the 1986 rate.

We had plenty of company, too. The Hispanic poverty rate also went up, as some 360,000 more Hispanics became poor.

The Census Bureau's report also showed a further decline in black income. Median family income for whites rose by \$300 to \$30,852. But for blacks, the median family income declined by \$149 to only \$18,098.

What's going on here? We're supposed to be on an economic roll, but the "re-

covery" appears to be highly selective, concentrating gains among the better-off.

The Census report shows that there's been a 20-year trend, accelerating in the past several years, in which the rich have become richer and the poor, poorer.



John E. Jacob

People in the top 20 percent of the income scale have increased their share of the national income by several percentage points since 1967, while the middle and the bottom have been squeezed. The poorest 20 percent have actually lost almost a fifth of their share of the nation's income.

You'd think such explosive figures would be part of the presidential election campaign, but it's just purring along without the candidates

confronting the national scandal of increased income inequality and growing minority poverty.

Unfortunately, election campaigns appear to be the time to avoid critical national issues, rather than a time for educating the public to the needs and presenting policies that deal with them.

But once this election is

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decided, I propose that the president-elect immediately convene a task force to come up with achievable goals and policies that reverse the growth in poverty.

Such an effort should have bi-partisan support, because this is a crisis that demands an approach like the consensus that led to the Marshall Plan back in the 1940s—massive intervention backed by both parties.

The task force should focus on achievable goals — concrete steps in education, welfare and social policies, job training and creation — that provide opportunities for

## Not Voting: An Option Blacks Cannot Afford

by Eddie N. Williams

The 1988 presidential election campaign has been a curious one, and perhaps nothing is stranger than the notion, currently circulating among a few black Americans, that blacks should not vote because Jesse Jackson is not on the Democratic ticket or because he may have been slighted in Atlanta. Anybody who falls for this reasoning would stand in line to buy the Brooklyn Bridge. The fact is, most of these folks weren't going to vote anyway, they just want company.

Don't vote? What an insult to our common sense, to two centuries of struggle for full citizenship, to the memory of leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and to blacks' efforts over the past two decades to become power players in the political arena. And what an insult to Jesse Jackson's historic quest and accomplishments this year, and to his current efforts to increase voter participation.

Why vote? Because blacks have a special interest in this election's outcome. Virtually every poll shows that they are deeply dissatisfied with the policies of the past eight years and that more

people to move out of poverty.

Continuing on the present path inevitably leads to higher poverty levels and to a split-level society that will be unable to function in a competitive world economy.

Those Census Bureau figures demand immediate action, but no one seems to be listening. I suspect that the candidate who takes this issue and runs with it can win the election.

For George Bush, who says he's "haunted" by inner-city poverty, a strong stand on this issue could help among the many voters who reject the callous federal policies that have led to more poverty.

And for Michael Dukakis, this issue could galvanize his natural constituency and generate the excitement and loyalty he must have to win on Election Day.

than any other group they want to ensure major changes. For example, blacks believe they have a crucial stake in the appointment of future Supreme Court justices. They have a vested interest in enlarging the ranks of the nation's 6,900 black elected officials. And blacks have a covenant with history: to use the right to vote, which they won with their blood, sweat, and tears.

Why vote? Because there are major policy issues at stake. Blacks are still saddled with an unacceptably high level of unemployment. Black children are victims of a failing public school system, and one-third of them are mired in poverty. Blacks have witnessed a shocking erosion in federal enforcement of affirmative action and sharply curtailed assistance for higher education.

The traditional wisdom among political analysts is that black voters can decide the outcome of a presidential election when the white electorate is evenly divided between two candidates and when a large number of black voters support one candidate. In the 1988 election, which continues to be very close, the black vote looms larger and larger as a potential force in the out-

come. In addition to its size and cohesiveness, the black vote this year is especially significant due to the volatility of the so-called Reagan Democrats. George Bush wants to retain their support, Michael Dukakis wants to bring them back home to the Democratic party. One result is that neither candidate can afford to ignore the black vote.

Regardless of how black voters choose up sides on November 8, a critical test of their political will and sophistication will be whether they turn out to vote in large numbers. As Jesse Jackson might say, blacks may not always win when they vote, but they almost certainly will lose when they don't.

Fortunately, recent developments suggest that the "don't vote" squad has had little impact. Organizations such as the National Coalition on Black Voter Participation are continuing to mobilize the nation's 20.4 million black voters. If recent trends continue, blacks could close the voter participation gap between themselves and whites and even take the lead in some critical areas. If this should happen, blacks will begin to get some real respect from both political parties, regardless of who wins the presidency.

United Church of Christ

## Commission for Racial Justice CIVIL RIGHTS JOURNAL

BY Benjamin F. Chavis, Jr.

## REAGAN-BUSH AND THE DISGRACE OF THE HOMELESS

"Contemporary American homelessness is an outrage, a national scandal." This is the conclusion recently reached by the Committee on Health Care for Homeless People of the National Academy of Sciences. Congress had asked the Academy of Sciences to issue a report on the current condition of the

homeless in the United States. At a time when too many people are still unclear about the importance of the upcoming presidential election, the crisis of the homeless as a result of Reagan-Bush policies should be of paramount concern to all voters.

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