

BLACK ILLITERACY IN THE RURAL SOUTH

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Introduction

It is generally accepted, without question, that illiteracy is a problem in the United States. Statistics vary from survey to survey and there are major disagreements about what constitutes a literate person; but it is agreed that there are vast numbers of illiterate adult citizens in America.

A new statistical report is published every few years disclosing the latest "revelation" about the United States' illiteracy rate.

In 1980, the U.S. Census Bureau grandly announced that 99.5 percent of all adult American citizens could read and write.¹ Only two years later, Barbara Bush, the spokeswoman for a national literacy program and the wife of the vice-president of the U. S., said that 60 million Americans, or 33 percent of the adult population, are able to read or write at only a minimal level or not at all.² In 1986, the Census Bureau published another report which identified 21 million illiterates.³ Another study by a Princeton University group reported that 10 million adults were illiterate.

As you can see, the literacy issue is a very complicated and highly political one. Statistics seem to be used to prove or disprove the validity of each group's estimates.

Determining one literacy figure is, at this point, an impossible task. However, there is one point of agreement. That is that the rural south has a higher illiteracy rate than the northern U.S. For the purposes of this paper, the south consists of the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia.

Rural southern blacks have an even higher illiteracy rate than the rest of the south. Article after article refers to the rural black illiteracy rate. The

purpose of this paper is to define the depth and scope of the problem and its social and economic implications for rural black southerners.

In this paper, a standard of an eighth grade education will be used to define functional literacy. The choice is not based on any educational or statistical theory. It simply seems plausible that, as the world becomes more complicated, a person should at least be able to read at an eighth grade level in order to be able to fill out a job application, make change for a dollar, write a check, read a utility bill or follow a bus schedule.

Also, for this paper, a rural area will be defined as any place with a population of 2,500 or less.

"One in four southern adults never went beyond the eighth grade," concluded one research team which recently studied the illiteracy problem. "For black adults, the figure is three out of every eight."⁴

Nearly all blacks who live in rural areas live in the South. One million black families lived in the South as of the 1980 Census. They comprise the largest ethnic minority group in America—also, the most economically disadvantaged.⁵

In general terms, the functional illiteracy rate for rural blacks in 1977 was nearly five times that of non-rural whites.

In actual numbers, according to the 1980 Census, there are 435,648 black males over the age of 25 who have eight years or less of formal education. Of that total, more than half are age 60 or older. For rural black females, the total is 427,799. A little less than half of those women are over the age of 60.⁶

Rural blacks are behind other groups in numbers of individuals 25 years and older who have finished high school. In 1977, 31.5 percent of rural black males completed high school.⁷ Among black females, 30.7 percent of those age 25 or older had completed high school, compared to 61.3 percent of their white counterparts.⁸

Many black adults have not developed the basic literacy skills usually acquired through education. A study of four rural counties found that blacks had not only low education levels but little job training or work experience. These basic skills are needed in order to obtain employment that pays even a minimum wage or salary.

A more recent study shows some improvement for rural blacks in these areas but they are still lagging far behind whites.

Using the poverty level established by the 1980 Census, which is a yearly income of \$3,414 or less for a family of four, blacks in the rural South have a higher poverty rate than blacks in other regions.⁹ While the rural South contains 16.7 percent of all black families in the U.S., it has 22.2 percent of all poor black families.¹⁰

In black families headed by a female, the poverty rate is 56 percent.¹¹ Though smaller in number, households headed by black women are in worse financial condition generally than those headed by a man.¹² While rural black women generally have attained a higher level of education, they earn only about 65 percent of the income of black men (an interesting observation, but the subject of another research paper altogether).

The distribution of black households by age shows that 12 percent of black female heads of households are under 25 years of age and 29 percent are 65 years or older.¹³

Poverty falls disproportionately on minorities. Thirty-eight percent of all rural blacks are poor. That is more than triple the poverty rate among rural whites.¹⁴ Rural poverty often is not the result of unemployment. Instead, it reflects low-skill, low-pay jobs.

"Part of the disparity in education levels between white and black citizens," Ghelfi writes, "is due to the low educational attainment of older blacks."¹⁵ As was mentioned earlier, more than half of the black men and women who have not achieved an eighth grade education are 60 or older.

At the beginning of the Civil War, 95 percent of black southerners were illiterate, the principal reason being that every Confederate state had laws prohibiting the education of slaves. The first 20 years after the Civil War saw the number of black children enrolled in school increase by almost 500 percent. With the return to power of reactionary white Democrats in the elections of 1876-77 and the end of Reconstruction, whatever gains had been made toward educational equality between races stopped.

At the turn of the century, 35 years after the Civil War, half of the black population remained illiterate. At the start of World War II, 40 years later, the

figure was one-tenth of the total black population. It took 75 years for blacks to equal the literacy rate whites enjoyed at the end of the Civil War.¹⁶

There is now abundant evidence that literacy is almost exclusively acquired in school. Not surprisingly, we can see a sharply declining number of black illiterates as we move from older to younger blacks. The belief that, after slavery was abolished, large numbers of blacks acquired, on their own, basic reading and writing skills, is a myth. Black illiteracy remained high; changes come slowly and only as new generations were born and attended school.

Few question the role of education in the reduction of black illiteracy. It is more difficult to establish a direct connection between education and income, surprising as that may seem. People automatically assume there is a strong correlation between educational level and income. However, reliable income data by race is a new phenomenon. Before 1940, the Census did not include racial income data. Consequently, there is a limited amount of pre-1940 data.

New industries in the rural South have tended to avoid counties with large numbers of blacks, possibly because of discrimination but more likely because the labor force is presumed to be less productive as a result of poor educational levels.¹⁷

Fewer and fewer jobs are available to those who lack basic skills. The adult without a high school education is four times as likely to be unemployed as a high school graduate.

Those counties in the South with the lowest percentage of adults who have finished the eighth grade also have the worst unemployment and the slowest economic growth rates.¹⁸ In counties with less than four percent unemployment, only an average of 13.2 percent of their adults had not gone beyond the eighth grade. By contrast, in counties with more than 16 percent unemployment (most of which are predominantly black counties), 35.3 percent of the adult population, an average, had no schooling beyond the eighth grade.¹⁹

Rural black illiteracy will not be eliminated simply by throwing money at the problem. Individuals must want to help themselves. The dropout rates of adults in basic education programs ranges from 23 percent to 48 percent.²⁰

One literacy program in Albertville, Alabama, is particularly successful. Albertville has a population of 15,000 and is the largest city in rural Marshall

County, Ala. The county population is predominantly white. Economically, it is an example of a county undergoing a gradual transformation from an agricultural county to an industrial county. As of 1980, 30 percent of the population had less than an eighth grade education.²¹

The Albertville literacy program is designed for workers from local businesses. The four employers participating from the start were Keyes Fibre Company, Arrow Shirt Company, and the City of Albertville municipal government. Each employer surveyed its employees to determine educational levels and took part in designing the curriculum.²²

Response by the employees was extremely favorable. One hundred and forty participants completed the program. The focus of the classes was basic reading, writing and mathematics skills.

Volunteer tutors worked individually with students. The employers provided classroom space, conference rooms, materials, and snacks. Classes were held after regular working hours. More than half of the students completed their high school equivalency, or GED, for which the sponsoring companies paid the \$20 examination fee. The total financial contribution of employers to the experimental program was \$40,000.

The employers renewed the project for the 1987-88 school year and four more businesses have chosen to participate.

One interesting statistic: Eighty percent of those in the program indicated they would not have participated had it not been offered where they work.²³ They would not, on their own initiative, have sought out a literacy or adult education program.

For fewer rural blacks than rural whites pursue adult education programs. In a survey taken in 1975, only 10 percent of those taking classes were black.²⁴ It is not clear whether the low participation is due to lack of opportunity, finances, or motivation.

One program that was successful in attracting blacks was Project Literacy-Memphis, Inc. As of 1980, Shelby County, Tennessee, had 80,000 adults over the age of 25 who had not completed the eighth grade. That same year, a group of citizens formed Project Literacy-Memphis, Inc.²⁵ Its stated purpose was "to seek the elimination of illiteracy and improve basic skills of the

general population in Memphis and Shelby County; to enhance and coordinate other organizations' efforts which provide literacy services in the community."

This experimental project was open to employees of the City of Memphis sanitation and parks departments. Sixteen people applied for the pilot program; 11 of them were actual non-readers and the remaining five had reading levels ranging from third to sixth grade. The students were predominantly black, male, middle-aged, and married.

All participants were paid for the 10 days they attended classes. Classes lasted eight hours a day. The students were picked up at their worksite, driven to a study center and returned to their worksite at the end of the day. Breakfast and lunch were provided. All 16 students completed the program.

The daily newspaper was a vital part of the curriculum. Teachers found that using subject matter relevant to adult learners was important to the program. It was also discovered that adult participants had a shorter attention span than originally thought. The curriculum was redesigned so that subjects were changed every 20 minutes.

All participants completed the program. The average improvement in reading level was 3.6 grade levels. Fifteen of the 15 participants signed up for follow-up classes in an adult basic education program.

The cost of the program was \$4,260. This figure does not include the students' wages for the two weeks they attended classes.

The success of the program has led to a major expansion of the project to include the long-term unemployed and prison inmates.²⁰

The obvious limitation to this program is its enormous cost. It is difficult to imagine this program being applied on a large scale and giving perhaps hundreds of adult students the same opportunities given to a handful of hand-picked participants in Memphis.

While worksite literacy programs are useful to the employed person, they do not reach the vast numbers of rural adults who are unemployed, poor whites, and blacks alike.

In North Carolina, the community colleges have been involved in the literacy campaign. The state counts as functional illiterates all adults who have

not completed eight years of formal education. Using that standard, North Carolina has 835,000 illiterates.²⁷

Business people in North Carolina were one of the first groups to see a need for an adult literacy program. Businesses estimate that they employ more than 600,000 functional illiterates.

Unlike the education of youth, who are a captive audience under states' compulsory school attendance laws, adults must want to improve their literacy skills. They have to be able to see some need for it, personal or economic, with attainable rewards for the effort. But, as we said earlier, businesses have a tendency not to locate in heavily black, rural counties.

Another problem is demographics. The largest single group of rural black illiterates is among the very old, those age 60 and over. But there are also 84,000-plus young blacks, between the ages of 16 and 24, who are illiterate. The young and the old have different needs and, often, different reasons for enrolling in literacy programs. That makes it difficult to design a program for everyone.

The elderly have different needs than a 19-year-old black female with two children to raise. Obviously, a literacy teacher is not likely to be training a 60-year-old for the workplace. Elderly rural blacks are heavily dependent on Social Security and Medicare. Such "transfer payments" from the federal government are, in fact, their chief source of income. Learning to understand a Medicare form represents a substantial accomplishment for them. A reasonable goal for a young woman of 19 would be to earn a GED diploma and acquire practical job training. But with funds limited, whose needs come first?

In 1986, the federal government appropriated about \$100 million for literacy programs. That comes to less than four dollars for every adult in the nation with less than eight years of education.²⁸

Poverty counties do not appear to be effective competitors for federal grants and other forms of aid. Rural counties lag far behind metropolitan counties in federal assistance programs. The low expenditures often prevent rural populations from reaching their educational potential.²⁹

Fewer rural black children were enrolled in preprimary programs in 1975 than any other resident group. Children attending programs such as Head

Start are proven to have an early advantage in achieving literacy. Until the black rural minority becomes as politically assertive as urban minorities, their children will continue to start their educational lives at a disadvantage.

The rural black illiteracy problem is a perplexing one. There are those who say the problem will eventually solve itself. As the population ages and those men and women born before 1920 begin to die, this argument runs, the illiteracy rates for younger blacks are not as dramatic or as shocking. But there are 53,000 young black males between the ages of 16 and 24, and some 31,000 young black females, who have only an eighth grade education. Why this is considered progress, I can't understand.

To be 65 years old and unable to read the Bible is sad. To be 20 and unable to read a telephone book is frightening.

The solution? Motivation, I suspect. Adults need to see a reason for them to improve themselves. Also, somehow, industries must be convinced of the hard-working nature of rural black communities; that rural blacks are not poor because of laziness; that most poor blacks work, they just don't make much money; that most blacks who can't read, want to read. If these industries move or expand into these communities and take a chance on the workforce, perhaps they would be pleasantly surprised. They have the example of Albertville, Alabama, where employers found that an investment in literacy was welcomed by their workers and proved to be successful.

The federal government does not seem capable, at this point, of solving the problem. Whatever money is available for federal programs generally goes to urban areas. After all, if government can have an impact on a million people or on a thousand people, most politicians would choose the former. That is not a criticism, just a political fact.

Preschool education should be stressed if we are going to combat illiteracy. Reading and writing skills are best attained in school. It is much easier and less costly to teach someone to read at age six than at age 40.

I could find no examples of rural librarians in predominantly black areas taking a leadership role in literacy programs. Economically, they probably can't. With a limited budget, only so much can be done. It is probably all they can manage just to provide an adequate public library. Logically, rural librarians

should be playing a leading role in helping their neighbors learn to read. Realistically, I don't see it happening.

Putting politics aside, if the government can do one thing well, it is to compile statistics. There must be a way to establish, as a start, a valid illiteracy rate. If a definite need can be proven, federal money could not be far behind.

The United States was one of the first countries in the world to have universal education for children. Let's extend the same opportunity to adults who somehow slipped through the system.

NOTES

¹Jonathan Kozol, "Illiteracy Statistics: A Numbers Game," New York Times, 30 October 1986, 31(I).

²Kozol.

³Leslie Maitland Weiner, "Thirteen Percent of U.S. Adults are Illiterate in English, A Federal Study Finds," New York Times, 21 April 1986, 1(I).

⁴Southern Growth Policies Board. The Report of the 1986 Commission on the Future of the South (University of North Carolina, 1986).

⁵U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Poverty Among Black Families in the Non Metro South, Rural Research Report No. 62, by L. M. Ghelfi (Washington, D.C.: Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, August 1986).

⁶U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Summary of "Characteristics of the Population," and "Detailed Characteristics of the Population," From 1980 Census of Population (Washington, D.C.: Department of Commerce, 1985).

⁷U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Statistical Cooperative Service, The Education of Nonmetro Blacks, by Frank A. Fratoe, (Washington, D.C.: Department of Agriculture, Economic Statistical Cooperative Service, July 1980).

⁸Fratoe, "The Education of Nonmetro Blacks."

⁹Ghelfi, "Poverty Among Black Families."

¹⁰Ghelfi.

¹¹Ghelfi.

¹²B. Rungeling, L. H. Smith, V. M. Briggs Jr., and J. F. Adams, Employment Income and Welfare in the Rural South, 1st ed. (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1977), 46, 150-168.

¹³Ghelfi.

¹⁴White House, Rural Development Background Paper, Social and Economic Trends in Rural America, by Kenneth Deavers and David L. Brown (Washington, D.C., 1979).

¹⁵Ghelfi.

¹⁵James P. Smith, "Race and Human Capital," American Economic Review 74 (September 1984): 685-98.

¹⁷Fratoe, "The Education of Nonmetro Blacks."

¹⁸Southern Growth Policies Board. "Learning While Earning: Worksite Literacy Programs," Foresight, by Stuart A. Rosenfield (Research Triangle Park, N.C.: June 1987).

¹⁹Rosenfield, "Learning While Earning."

²⁰Rosenfield.

²¹Rosenfield.

²²Rosenfield.

²³Rosenfield.

²⁴B. Rungeling, and others.

²⁵Rosenfield.

²⁶Rosenfield.

²⁷"War on Illiteracy," The Economist, 3 May 1986, 36.

²⁸Rosenfield.

²⁹U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Federal Outlays by Type of Non-Metro County, Rural Development Research Report No. 65, (Washington, D.C.: Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, January 1987).

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