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# A Historical Overview of Poverty among Blacks in Boston

1850–1990

**Robert C. Hayden**

## **Black Poverty in Nineteenth-Century Boston**

Like most nineteenth-century residents of Boston, blacks worked hard to maintain their homes and families. Even before the Civil War, both enslaved and free blacks in "freedom's birthplace" worked long and arduous hours. Those who migrated to Boston from the South in the 1800s had come to secure higher wages, mobility, and opportunity for themselves and their families. Boston's black population grew from 2,000 in 1850 to 8,125 in 1890, and to 11,591 by 1900. In 1900, 39 percent of black Bostonians were northern-born (New England, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania), and 53 percent were southern-born.<sup>1</sup>

Residential segregation for nineteenth-century blacks in Boston was almost absolute. In fact, according to some accounts, Boston was the most segregated northern city in 1850, and by the late 1800s, ghetto conditions had increased. In 1890, only about 5 percent of black families owned a house, and expenditure of "hard-earned" money for rent left many black long-term workers poor in old age.

This high level of residential segregation led to crowded living quarters, which in turn affected health conditions for blacks. Diseases such as cholera, tuberculosis, and pneumonia spread more easily in densely populated areas. Vital records indicated that in 1890 there were

31 deaths for every 1,000 black residents, compared to 24 for every 1,000 whites. At the end of the nineteenth century, the infant mortality rate was 200 per 1,000 live births among blacks, compared to 189 per 1,000 for whites.

Two economic measures, per capita wealth and the percentage of workers in the lowest-paying jobs, illustrate the status of blacks in the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1860, when the average per capita wealth of blacks was \$91, the average per capita wealth in the city was \$872. For Irish immigrants it was \$131. The per capita wealth of blacks in 1870 was 40 percent of that of Boston's Irish immigrants, and the per capita wealth of blacks was less than half of that for whites.

From 1850 to 1900, black men and women in Boston began their careers in menial jobs, and were generally limited to them. The menial jobs held by blacks offered low pay, irregular employment, and no occupational advancement. Forty-five percent of all employed first generation black males were in menial jobs in 1850; 50 years later, 82 percent were in such jobs. Ninety-two percent of first-generation employed black females were in menial jobs in 1870 and 1900. Between 1860 and 1880, by comparison, 12 percent of native white Bostonians occupied low-paying manual jobs, and 27 percent of Boston's second-generation West European immigrants (non-Irish) occupied such jobs.

Despite the general negative economic situation for black Bostonians during the second half of the century, they were offered a range of protected civil rights by Massachusetts legislation. Moreover, a large number of blacks were elected to political office (24 between 1866 and 1898) compared to their counterparts in other northern cities. Yet over the last decades of the century, the black community experienced growing disadvantages in health, property ownership, and persistent inequality in occupational status and income.

An overview of Boston's early black community portrayed with only economic statistics is incomplete, however, because it overlooks the response of poor people to their conditions. Behind the hard statistics is a human system of survival—both formal and informal—to assist those with meager financial resources. Many households, for instance, included more than just family members. In the poor black community of Boston, for example, boarders provided a necessary additional income for the host. In 1850, about one-third of black households had boarders; ten years later, about 40 percent had boarders. Boarders included

unrelated individuals or families and adult members of the extended family, and were often new arrivals seeking employment. Married black women with no work outside the home provided washing, ironing, and cooking for boarders, offering informal support to those who had irregular employment. Taking in boarders was also a way for widows and single adult women with children to support themselves. And boarders did more than just pay rent; they also assisted with domestic chores and child care, thus allowing mothers to work to help support the family. In 1860, more than 45 percent of female-headed households had boarders, and about half of the female single adults and two-thirds of the male single adults were boarding.

In 1860, the four agencies in the city serving homeless children admitted only white children. Black children without shelter and parents were taken "off the streets" by both related and nonrelated families. Thus, poverty did not lead to social and community disorganization. Black families cooperated to provide for their community's basic needs in ways that public and private agencies did not.

In an increasingly harsh and competitive economic environment Boston's blacks went beyond family and household assistance to create institutions to serve their economic needs. The African Society, established in 1796 to abolish slavery, became a mutual aid and charitable organization. Members were assessed a twenty-five-cent entry fee and the same amount for monthly dues. It was difficult for the unskilled poor or the unemployed to participate, but they were not excluded. The Society functioned as a social welfare agency, providing financial relief, job placement, and insurance plans for burials. The Society was also concerned with the control of crime in the community. Individuals were not allowed membership, nor were they helped by the Society, if they did not meet the Society's expectation that they be clean and law-abiding. Black fraternal organizations such as the African Masonic Lodge and the Odd Fellows provided free firewood for the cold winters, sponsored food collections for the needy, and made loans to members facing financial crisis.

Being forced to remain in menial jobs was not the fate of all blacks in nineteenth-century Boston. While they were certainly less likely to own retail stores than European immigrants, blacks did have businesses. On a per capita basis, more black-owned businesses (barber shops, food stores, dry goods stores, and clothing stores) existed in

Boston than in most northern and southern cities. While the rate of failure and decline of these businesses from 1870 to 1900 was an important factor in the overall poverty of the community, their presence played a vital role, as described by historians James O. and Lois E. Horton:

Since the services of Boston's financial community were not generally available to blacks, the community provided its own service. There were several grocery stores that became the finance agencies of the community. Services were generally provided in the form of credit, which was particularly important among people susceptible to irregular cash flow. Sometimes such credit made the difference between a family eating an evening meal or not. A few outright loans of cash were made. It is not clear whether interest was charged on these loans, but at the least, they promoted good will, fulfilled one's responsibility to the community, and encouraged loyal customers.<sup>2</sup>

Despite living in poverty, few blacks received public aid. Records of the "Overseer of the Poor" and census records show a small and declining number of blacks aided by city resources and facilities at mid-century: "At the poor house on Deer Island in 1850, for example, there were three blacks out of a total population of 328."<sup>3</sup> Between 1870 and 1900, despite the growing black population, few blacks entered the poorhouse.

Horton suggests that "the dramatic increase in immigrants seeking assistance severely taxed state and local relief capabilities, making it more difficult for blacks to be judged "deserving poor," and "eligible for relief."<sup>4</sup> Whatever the case, blacks provided their own social welfare and financial services. The Home for Aged Colored Women, founded by the black Twelfth Baptist Church in 1860, was still providing for women at the end of the nineteenth century. Most of these women had worked as domestics during their lifetime in Boston. For poor blacks in Boston in the nineteenth century, employment was the central issue. Newcomers and even the first- and second-generation blacks in Boston entered—and remained—in menial, low-paying jobs.



## The First Half of the Twentieth Century

At the start of the twentieth century, one of Boston's leading black clergymen, the Reverend Reverdy Ransom, summed up the atmosphere for blacks in the city:

Yes, there is race prejudice in Boston, plenty of it; but it is rarely ever brutal or violent in its manifestations, but where it appears it is nonetheless deadly and humiliating. The aloofness of manner, a politeness of speech and the kid glove handling of social and economic contacts, are under the surface, just as hard and unyielding as one finds in the solid South, in fact, one feels it more on the soil that was dedicated to freedom, than on the Southern soil that was dedicated to the institution of slavery.<sup>5</sup>

Whatever the impressions of Boston's black workers, there was hardly any change in the occupational status for black males in Boston from the late 1800s to 1940. Fifty-six percent were unskilled laborers, servants, waiters, and porters in 1900; 53 percent held such positions in 1940. While 8 percent held white-collar jobs in 1890, the percentage grew to only 11 percent by 1940. Blacks ranked far behind even first-generation immigrants in occupational distribution in 1890, 1910, and 1930. At each point, less than half as many blacks as first-generation immigrants held "middle-class" jobs, twice as many were unskilled or semiskilled laborers, and second-generation immigrants had a middle-class segment four times the size of the black middle class.

In 1940, six out of seven blacks worked in manual occupations. This fact is significant when we realize that the educational attainment for blacks and whites in the Boston school system was nearly identical, and the schooling was of high quality for all students. In fact, blacks had, on average, one year more of schooling than foreign-born whites in the city. Something more than a lack of public education was driving the majority of blacks into menial, unskilled jobs.

This lack of occupational mobility for blacks should be seen in the context of their population increase and the decline of southern black migration to the city. Boston's black population between 1900 and 1940 rose by 49 percent—from 11,591 in 1900 to 23,679 by 1940.<sup>6</sup> The steady growth rate of Boston's black community was not, however,

accompanied by any change in occupational distribution. Nor did the occupational patterns of European immigrants and blacks show any lessening of the disparity prevalent in the 1800s. In 1930, 46 percent of first-generation European immigrants were in low-paying manual jobs compared to 77 percent of blacks.

During the early years of the New Deal, a survey of the training and experience of black workers was planned as a Civic Works Administration project. The Boston Urban League was contracted to conduct the study for the city of Boston under the Emergency Relief Administration. The study was conducted between December 1934 and February 1936, and a final report was issued, titled *Report on the Survey of the Training and Employment of White Collar and Skilled Negro Workers, Boston, Massachusetts*. One purpose of the study was "to obtain statistical data relative to the training, experience and work status of white-collar and skilled Negro workers in Boston." The report began:

It was further hoped that ultimately the economic status of the Negro in Boston would be improved as a result of this survey, by disclosing the facts about his educational and vocational background; that it might become the basis on which interested local parties may work for the proper integration of the Negro worker in Boston.<sup>7</sup>

The report continued:

Consequently, when the 1930 Census swings around, we find that Boston's Negro working population approximates 11,000 men and women with over 50% of these in domestic and personal service, the lowest paying and most unstable occupational division. No considerable number of them appear in transportation, communication, or miscellaneous industry, where the middle-class of any racial group must have a fair proportion of workers if the group is not to face eternal poverty.<sup>8</sup>

The report indicated that while 37 percent of the total number of employable persons in Boston were either wholly unemployed or not fully employed, 49 percent of blacks were unemployed or underemployed.

Regarding "work trends," the Boston Urban League report concluded:

The contents of this survey seem to indicate that the Boston Negro is constantly getting certain theoretical training and experience for higher grades of employment, but that his ability to secure placement commensurate with his training is not keeping pace. In other words, an increasing number of Negro men and women find themselves having to back up in blind alley jobs principally because there seems to be very little outlet for them. If this is purely a temporary situation, due chiefly to the present work crisis, then it merits no particular comment. On the other hand, there are indications that this is a normal experience for them in both good and bad times, and if this is true, then Boston faces the long time problem of adjusting the work opportunities of its Negro population, or carrying a permanently heavy relief load in this group.<sup>9</sup>

Two organizations addressing conditions for blacks had opened chapters in Boston—the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Urban League. While the NAACP was first and foremost a civil rights organization, its history during the early 1900s included establishing programs that aided the poor and addressed employment. In 1913, the Boston NAACP established an Industrial Opportunity Committee to deal with the high rate of unemployment and job discrimination. In 1917, it established a food cooperative for the needy. In 1937, the chapter protested the discriminatory employment practices of public utility and insurance companies. And in 1942, the local NAACP and Urban League chapters joined forces to gain employment for 33 blacks at the Raytheon Company in Boston.

The National Urban League, founded in New York City in 1911, had been established specifically to attack economic and related social issues caused by unemployment and underemployment facing blacks new to larger northern cities. Boston's Urban League raised local funds to support an effort to open new job opportunities for black migrants. The annual budget was meager at \$3,000 in 1923.



Personal contact with individual employers was the Urban League's approach to fighting employment discrimination. In 1926, 1,253 blacks had applied through the League for jobs. In 1927, stimulated by "Negro In Industry Week," registrations by job seekers jumped to 4,290. Employers were influenced by the industrial campaign, and 1,157 jobs were found and filled, compared to 800 the year before. The campaign helped find employment for blacks as furniture finishers, glass blowers, and air compressor operators. In the late 1920s, after a painful struggle, the Boston Urban League succeeded in gaining jobs for blacks as elevator operators in downtown department stores.

During the 1940s, the League continued to concentrate on expanding job opportunities. One of the city's largest department stores employed fewer than six black persons in 1944, all in menial jobs. By 1950, it was employing blacks at all levels in 25 job classifications. In 1943, fewer than 12 blacks were employed by the telephone company; by 1950, the number had more than doubled, with black people employed as engineers, linemen, operators, and at every level of clerical work. The League negotiated with the Statler Hilton Hotel, the Gillette Company, and the Boston site of Ford Motor Company. Eight black men, some of them mechanics, were hired by Ford. The League's annual budget was \$18,500 by 1950.

The 1940-70 period witnessed the most dramatic change ever in the occupational status for black males in Boston. The concentrations of black workers in laboring and service jobs dropped from 65 percent in 1940 to about 27 percent in 1970. A factor in the decline was the opportunity for semiskilled jobs associated with the World War II industry needs. With the flourishing wartime and postwar boom, one in four workers moved into higher-paying jobs. Between 1950 and 1970, the proportion of blacks in white-collar jobs increased from 5 percent to 11 percent.

Despite this great shift in the proportion of blacks employed in higher-level occupations during this period, the proportion of professional workers in the entire city tripled. While the racial gap seemed to be narrowing in occupational levels, the income gap between the races did not change. In 1970, as in 1950, black males in Boston earned less than three-quarters of what whites earned. In 1950, the median income for black males was only seven-tenths of the white median; this fell to six-tenths by 1960.

This seeming paradox was probably caused by the fact that blacks were moving into occupations where the racial gap in income was largest. Whatever the gains in the overall occupational status for blacks, income ratios did not change significantly. The dramatic increase in the college attendance and graduation rates of blacks in the Boston area's 23 institutions of higher education during the first 15 years of the modern civil rights movement undoubtedly contributed to the occupational gains of blacks in the 1960s. For example, at Boston University in 1955 there were approximately 50 black students in the entire institution; by 1962, the university's black freshman enrollment alone was approximately 250.

### **Income and Poverty Rate Characteristics: 1950-80**

Median income data for black and white males and females, for black and white families headed by either a male or female, and for black and white individuals show a consistent and continuing gap between whites and blacks over the three decades between 1949 and 1979. At mid-century, according to the 1950 census report, the median income of persons for whom this information was obtained was \$1,587 for blacks and \$2,191 for whites. By gender, white males and females had higher median incomes than did black males and females. The white male median income was \$2,796 compared to \$2,011 for black males. White females had a median income of \$1,999, and black females had a median income of \$1,423.

In the 1960 census, the median income in Boston was \$3,243; it was \$2,369 for blacks. The difference between the white and black male median income had jumped from \$785 in 1950 to \$1,601 in 1960. In 1970, the median income for all families surveyed was \$11,654. Yet, black families with a male head of household had a \$6,740 median income and black families with a female head of household had a \$3,887 median income. Single black males had a slightly higher median (\$3,646) than the median for all single male individuals (\$3,592). The percentage of blacks families at or below the poverty line in 1970 was 25.3 percent compared to 23.2 percent for whites. This relatively small gap can be attributed in part to the improved economic climate following World War II, as mentioned earlier. By 1979, 24.8 percent of black families were below the line compared to only 11.1 percent of white families. The overall pattern of disparity between blacks and whites between the 1950s

and early 1980s continued into the mid-1980s. In a sampling of 802 families conducted by the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) to determine family household poverty rates in Boston's low-income neighborhoods between fall 1987 and winter 1988, 33.2 percent of the 802 families surveyed were living in poverty. The white family household rate in this sample was 20 percent; the black non-Hispanic rate was 48.9 percent.<sup>10</sup>

The 1985 BRA Household Survey provides the following findings on income by race and ethnicity:

Households headed by a white householder had a higher mean household income in 1984 than households headed by black or other minority householders. The average household income of white householders was \$25,750. . . . Households headed by black householders had an average household income, at \$18,150, significantly lower than the white households. Mean household income for white households increased 3.5 percent . . . between 1979 and 1984. At the same time, black households did not change significantly, falling from the 1979 mean of \$18,400, in 1984 constant dollars, to \$18,150 in 1984.

The BRA survey report further stated:

The distribution of household income by race and ethnicity highlights the disparity that exists among the incomes of these different groups. While 28 percent of all Boston households earned less than \$10,000 in 1984, only 22 percent of white households fell into this category, which was significantly lower than non-white households, with 35 percent of black households and 43 percent of other minority households reporting incomes below this amount. Twenty-two percent of all households earned greater than \$35,000, with 27 percent of white households earning this much, but only 14 percent of the black households at or above this level. Although there was no significant difference by race in the proportion of households reporting their largest source of income as wages and salaries, a greater

proportion of white households reported Social Security benefits, veterans benefits, pensions or annuities as their largest source—20 percent—higher than any other race. A higher proportion of black and other minority households reported unemployment compensation, SSI, AFDC, or welfare payments as their largest income source.<sup>11</sup>

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

This paper has focused in a panoramic way on some historical trends regarding the nature and magnitude of economic poverty in Boston's black population in the nineteenth century, and continuing into the current period. Beginning in 1865, Boston became an increasingly attractive city for blacks; between 1865 and 1900, their numbers increased nearly five times. Again, between 1940 and 1990, a more than fivefold increase in Boston's black population occurred. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, economic poverty has gripped a disproportionate number of blacks in the city of Boston.

This brief review of poverty in Boston's black community suggests that employment is the issue that must be confronted. These various conditions—lack of employment, irregular employment, employment at low wages, and underemployment, that is, working at jobs that do not correspond to the training and formal educational attainment of the workers—have been operating for several generations. The pervasive "hidden" factor of race discrimination in the workplace is suggested as a persistent obstacle to employment opportunities. General economic growth is not sufficient to reduce poverty in the black community, in part, because many of the poor are not even in the labor force. And too many job training programs do not reach those living in the most economically disadvantaged neighborhoods of the city.

Some general strategies suggested by this overview:

The success of future anti-poverty efforts in Boston for blacks will be determined by their effectiveness in lifting the incomes of the city's black family members who are working full time but are not earning enough to move above the poverty line permanently.

Policies and programs in both the public and private sectors are needed to bolster family stability and to reduce the incidence of single-parent families.

The success of future antipoverty programs in Boston for blacks will be determined by their ability to recruit, educate, train, and place in jobs with adequate salaries/wages those with limited formal schooling. Given the present depressed labor and fiscal situation in the city and the region, greater resources will have to be deployed, over a longer period of time. Clearly, a drastic reduction in the number of dropouts from the Boston schools must be a priority if future poverty problems in the city are to be lessened. Lack of a high school diploma greatly increases the likelihood of continuing poverty, especially for blacks, and increases the intergenerational transfer of poverty. An updated and relevant public vocational education program supported by the trade unions, business, and industry is needed. Structured, long-term apprenticeship programs in the expanding service, finance, retail, and technology industries can improve the skills of young people and put them into a position to obtain adequate hourly wages that will enable them to have families and raise children out of poverty.

While not directly addressed in this paper, the deficiency of community resources to lessen the impact of human poverty should be looked at more closely. The ghettos today appear to be more mean-spirited, more isolated, and more damaging to poor residents than those of the late nineteenth century or those in Boston after World War II. Today's neighborhoods are increasingly violent and deficient in the social institutions that control and mediate social, political, and economic relations, and that provide resources and avenues for individual advancement. The scale of poverty in Boston's black community is much larger than it was in the nineteenth century and the earlier decades of the twentieth century, and it is more complex.

This leads to one final suggestion that lies in a dynamic that



operated in the nineteenth century—the family-based approach. In the "old days" there were both formal and informal support systems and arrangements that poor families used to survive when public and private agency assistance was minimal or nonexistent. These family-to-family networks impacted the entire community. Today, more "outside-the-family assistance" is available. But the interventions or elements of a support system need to be reoriented and provided to the whole family as a unit, rather than to the individual. Every member of the family household must have, at the same time, access to the resources that he or she needs to grow and develop. Integrating public and private resources in a more comprehensive and systematic way, in combination with the cultural strengths of poor black families, could bring about permanent gains in their economic and social life.

## Notes

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1. Except where noted, all figures cited in this chapter are derived from U.S. Census records and publications.
2. James O. Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979), 37.
3. *Ibid.*, note 3-51, 143.
4. *Ibid.*, 38.
5. Rev. Reverdy Ransom, *The Pilgrimage of Harriet Ransom's Son: An Autobiography* (Nashville: A.M.E. Publishing House, 1930).
6. According to census data, an estimated two million blacks migrated north between 1910 and 1930; the percent gains for other northern cities were: Detroit, 1,900 percent; Cleveland, 800 percent; Chicago, 430 percent; New York, 250 percent; Philadelphia, 160 percent.
7. Boston Urban League, *Report on the Survey of the Training and Employment of White Collar and Skilled Negro Workers, Boston, Massachusetts*. (Boston: Urban League, 1936), 3.
8. *Ibid.*, 16-17.
9. *Ibid.*, 17.
10. Margaret O'Brien and Deborah Oriola, *Boston at Mid-Decade: Results of the 1985 Household Survey. II: Income and Poverty* (Boston: Boston Redevelopment Authority, 1985), 3.
11. *Ibid.*, 4-5.