

Book Review

Cycles of Poverty and Crime in America's Inner Cities, by Lewis D. Solomon. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers (2012). 163 pp. (ISBN: 978-1-4128-4738-4). \$39.95 (hardback).

In this slim volume, Lewis Solomon, Professor of Law at George Washington University, recycles the 1960s Culture of Poverty arguments for the 21st century with an emphasis on Black, urban males. Heavily researched with over 300 endnotes, Solomon's theme of "Black urban pathologies" includes "joblessness; the failure of the public education system; crime, mass incarceration, and drugs; collapse of two-parent married families often marked by parental neglect; and negative cultural messages" (p. 2). Solomon interprets the past 60 years of antipoverty programs as policy failures and points away from government policies toward a potpourri of local initiatives that he believes show promise for effecting change. The naïve reader is unlikely to realize that Solomon's interpretations may not tell the entire story; however, there is much of value in this book. Solomon's succinct summaries of effective local and regional nonprofit programs in chapter three are exceptional.

The first chapter describes the "abyss" that the inner city has become. Jobs are scarce. Public schools do not appear to be up to the task with half of students dropping out before earning a high school degree. Crime and drugs abound often leading to incarceration. The problem in Solomon's view is a deficiency in human capital, "most black males enter the criminal justice system hard to employ due to a history of unemployment, low educational attainment levels, few marketable skills, substance abuse, mental and physical health problems, and lower measures of cognitive skills" (p. 12). One cannot turn to the Black family to address this lack of human capital because the Black family is broken. Single mothers are the norm, and fathers are absent. Childbearing techniques lead to vocabulary deficiencies as poor and working class mothers talk *at* rather than *with* their children. In contrast to the middle class parents' intentional cultivation of their children, poor and working class homes pursue a natural growth strategy, one that is problematic in segregated neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. Solomon's recitation of the problems of the inner city is uninformed by research suggesting higher levels of noncustodial Black father involvement in their children's lives, nor does he attempt to balance his criticism of working class Black

households with a corresponding awareness that working class white households face many of the same challenges.

Federal antipoverty programs are the subject of Chapter 2, but Solomon limits this discussion to workforce development programs, private employer tax incentives, and offender reentry programs. Some might argue that Solomon is evaluating antipoverty programs unfairly by focusing attention on the least effective and most poorly funded programs. Solomon explains the services provided to both adults and youth under the Workforce Investment Act, Job Corps, and YouthBuild, correctly pointing out the failure of the federal government to evaluate program outcomes. In this regard, Job Corps is an exception, but the evidence suggests that this program is fiscally indefensible if evaluated by graduates' employment outcomes. The Work Opportunity Tax Credit for employing members of disadvantaged groups, the Empowerment Zone Employment Tax Credit, and the Federal Bonding Programs have been ineffective due to underfunding, administrative complexities, and insensitivity to the magnitude of disincentives facing employers. Federal programs to reintegrate ex-offenders include the Second Chance Act and release preparation programs in the Federal Bureau of Prisons. In every instance, Solomon's descriptions are brief, accurate, and well documented. He closes the chapter with an impassioned argument for more rigorous program evaluation, a corrective that he considers essential, as economic austerity becomes a more pressing concern on the federal level.

The next chapter focuses on nonprofit approaches to rehabilitation and workforce development for ex-offenders that have immediate implementation potential. Social work practitioners working with this population are strongly encouraged to look to the chapter for examples of effective local programming. The D. C. Central Kitchen training program for the food service industry, New York's Getting Out and Staying Out mentoring program, Center for Employment Opportunities transitional employment program, and Chicago's Safer Foundation postrelease training and job placement services are the effective programs from which Solomon constructs effective strategies for workforce development. These strategies include demand-driven skills needed by employers, job placement, and retention efforts (e.g., transportation and childcare), youth mentoring, and wrap-around social services. Solomon also applauds the Tampa-based Wheels of Success, Inc. for providing transportation services, Homeboy Industries of Los Angeles for operating small businesses with ex-offender employees, and Bizdom U of Cleveland's entrepreneurial training program. Solomon sees much potential in the social business model in which investors finance private solutions to social problems without an emphasis on profits, low profit limited liability companies organized under a nonprofit umbrella, and public-private partnerships like The Work Place DC that provides a one-stop location for workforce development and job placement. However, he does not provide any

examples of social businesses or public–private partnerships that have produced sustainable outcomes.

In Chapter 4, Solomon leaves the near-term and describes the longer term changes he believes are necessary in public schools—vocational training, career academies, and charter schools. Solomon is quite critical of guidance counseling that advocates college education for everyone. In his view, limiting high school to college preparation without an alternative career or technical education (CTE) track may be one explanation for the high secondary dropout rates in the inner city. He relies upon international studies to infer that CTE increases graduation rates, an inference unsustainable in the unstructured labor markets in the United States where there are few school-to-industry linkages. He notes that the independent and small group work characteristic of CTE provides greater teacher–student mentoring without noting that comparable teacher–student ratios would probably improve every facet of secondary education. Career academies and charter schools are, in Solomon’s description, little more than CTE potential programs funded in slightly different ways. In summary, his arguments in support of CTE are unconvincing. The degree of federal funding available is miniscule (\$1.4 billion out of more than \$500 billion) in comparison to the local, state, and federal funding for public education. He seems to be unaware of the expansive paraprofessional degree programs available through community colleges that already leverage school-to-industry linkages with state-level occupational licensing. He neglects the history of racial and ethnic bias associated with CTE programs. The academic focus in secondary education is more than a necessity for global competitiveness; it is an example of social justice in action.

Solomon’s basic orientation is to explain inner city poverty in terms of human capital deficiencies that he believes should be addressed through nonprofit rehabilitative efforts and a CTE alternative in secondary education. The first is incapable of scaling up to meet the challenge; the second discriminatory. In the final chapter, Solomon seems to have finally arrived at the realization that it takes more than character building to solve the problems of poverty. He proposes elimination of occupational licensing barriers to employment for ex-offenders as well as restoration of driver’s licenses. He proposes state-funded home visit impositions on single-parent families in accordance with the Nurse-Family Partnership and the Harlem Children’s Zone to change the “culture of poverty” in these homes, a suggestion that is equally offensive to both extremes of the political spectrum. He proposes drug legalization or decriminalization to reduce the harm caused by the War on Drugs. Although he never actually admits that his Culture of Poverty argument is bankrupt, an astute reader will see that the final chapter is the best argument against Solomon’s case. Poverty results from structural barriers erected to penalize race, sustain class distinctions, and limit opportunity. Readers looking for a more nuanced interpretation of contemporary inner city culture are referred to *The New Jim Crow* (Alexander, 2012).

Despite my criticisms of this book, I recommend it to a wide readership, especially forensic social work practitioners. Solomon does not provide detailed advice for implementation in practice but provides a strong example of a conservative interpretation of the problem of poverty. Tasked as they are with the integration of social work practice and the adversarial context of legal proceedings, forensic social workers must understand the conservative perspective, sharpen their critical thinking skills to engage the conservative perspective, and develop counter-arguments that go beyond personal deficiency arguments. The language of social and economic injustice is more subtle and discrete today than it was in times past. As Michelle Alexander (2012) so carefully explained, the language of racial bias that dominates our legal system has been bleached of all color awareness and sanitized so that appeals to colorblind administration of justice hide the innate discrimination taking place in our legal systems. I think it is important for forensic social work practitioners to be able to see past conservative distortions and half-truths, no matter how well documented they may be. Only through the cultivation of insight and critical thinking will we be able to prepare ourselves to participate in an unjust legal system while sustaining our historical commitment to social and economic justice.

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REFERENCE

- Alexander, M. (2012). *The New Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York: The New Press.