



# **More than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City**

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## **More than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City** William Julius Wilson

In this provocative contribution to the American discourse on race, the newest book of the *Issues of Our Time* series edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr., William Julius Wilson applies an exciting new analytic framework to three politically fraught social problems: the persistence of the inner-city ghetto, the plight of low-skilled black males, and the fragmentation of the African American family. Though the discussion of racial inequality is typically ideologically polarized--conservatives emphasize cultural factors like worldviews and behaviors while liberals emphasize institutional forces--Wilson dares to consider both institutional and cultural factors as causes of the persistence of racial inequality. He reaches the controversial conclusion that, while structural and cultural forces are inextricably linked, public policy can change the racial status quo only by reforming the institutions that reinforce it. This book will dramatically affect policy debates and challenge many of the leaders.

## **More than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City Details**

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**William Julius Wilson**

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# **From Reader Review More than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City for online ebook**

## **Ed Ingman says**

Lots of good research presented but it is at times so densely academic and prescribed as to make its conclusions hard to broadly apply across many scenarios. If I were conducting a research study in sociology, I would have found this book invaluable.

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## **Lauren says**

This book read like one long, conceited scholarly essay. Allow me to quote Wilson's opening line for you:

"I am an internationally- known Harvard professor, yet a number of unforgettable experiences remind me that, as a black male in America looking considerably younger than my age, I am also feared"

I can confidently say that I have never before read a book in which the author begins by telling his or her readers not only how smart and qualified, but also how good- looking he or she is. And the text simply goes on in the same arrogant, detached vein.

For an author who proudly identifies himself as a member of the African American community from the opening pages, Wilson is remarkably eager to let other people do his research for him, and not one of the statistics he reports about life for poverty- stricken American families was gleaned from his own findings. And that was a major problem for me. I want to connect with each text I read, to feel the author's passion for his or her subject. Wilson's subject, poverty and race divisions in America, is divisive and has the potential to open a fascinating discussion, but this book falls flat, largely because of how removed the author is from the people whose lives he pretends to understand.

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## **AJ P says**

This book was about the interaction of structural and cultural aspects of race and poverty in the US, and examined why poor (mostly black) Americans are at such a disadvantage. The author claims, and I agree, that the structure of society (physically, psychologically, and socially) puts blacks at a disadvantage much more than any cultural aspects, and indeed that many of the cultural aspects are probably outgrowths of ways to deal with structural disadvantage. The wuthor focuses on two main items - the marginalization of black males in the work force, and the fragmentation of the poor black family.

It's an interesting read, but is quite dry and academic. It's also very much a literature review and does not add much original research or conclusion to the discussion, though the author does use his own research in Chicago in the 80s quite heavily for evidence. Often, the book read more like an "My research is superior and right, while others do not approach the topic in the right way", though I do think the author had a lot of support for his conclusions, even if he favored his own research over others. He also didn't give much credence to views that culture has a lot to do with the continued impoverishment of black families, which

makes sense, but he does claim that it plays a role and must be considered in honest discourse, which many academics are loathe to do. The conclusion is that the structural aspects of society must be addressed first and foremost, because that is what will make a difference, which I completely agree with - but it's also a very hard problem to solve and takes a lot of political and social will.

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## **Monique says**

Seems as race has been a major conversation piece since President Obama's inauguration. Wilson says we have a "urgent need for a more frank & honest discussion of complex factors that create & reinforce racial inequality & to rethink the way we talk about addressing the problems of race & urban poverty in the public policy arena".

The government has created barriers: location of highways, redlining, and assembly line produced housing, explicit racial policies in the suburbs, public housing & the list could on.

Black males - poor education, joblessness, "republican party which focused on solutions & worsen the plight of low-skilled black men", shift from manufacturing jobs to service oriented ones, cultural factors - black on black crime, drugs, single parent homes, and gangs. The lack of networking, valuable word-of-mouth tips about jobs, stocks & policy issues aren't circulated in low income communities.

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## **Kirk Miller says**

Good. Provocative. Challenging.

Thesis - "The experience of poor, inner-city blacks represent the influences of more than just race." Their responses and situation "stem from the linkage between new structural realities, changing norms, and evolving cultural patterns." (pg. 131)

Wilson's critique - The politically liberal tend to focus on structural realities to the neglect of cultural realities. Arguments based on culture tend to be taboo for them. The politically conservative tend to focus on individual responsibility and cultural realities to the neglect of prevailing structural realities built into America's history of racial tension and segregation. Both of these approaches are inadequate.

Wilson's assessment - Wilson addresses both structural and cultural realities and discusses the relationship between the two as he seeks to assess the situation of the inner-city poor black community in America. On structural realities relationship to culture, he states, "Culture mediates the impact of structural forces such as racial segregation and poverty." (pg. 133) And on cultures relationship to structural realities, he states, "The behavior generated by these autonomous cultural forces often reinforces the very conditions that have emerged from structural inequities." (pg. 134)

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## **Allison says**

This is a good review of the relevant literature on structural factors that result in the reproduction of

inequality in urban poor neighborhoods. I found the chapters on concentrated poverty and joblessness particularly useful, and this would be a quick read if you're interested in learning more about the political history behind segregated neighborhoods. However, the analysis of "cultural factors" that contribute to inequality was weak throughout the text (Wilson says this himself). Additionally, the chapter on "the fragmentation of the poor black family" struck me as dated. It almost completely ignored the work of gender scholars who study family (a pretty big omission if you ask me), and leaned heavily on a cultural analysis while neglecting to analyze many of the structural factors that feminists would have identified. Accordingly, it comes off sounding awfully sympathetic w/ a "culture of poverty" type approach, which I think is problematic.

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### **Histteach24 says**

We purchased this book for a new high school elective "Race, Class, and Gender". In framing curriculum, we wanted students to understand that we were exploring these three themes through U.S. history. There is often a balance, as many students take the class with motives that don't align to the course's original intent. Much I guess of what they see at first comes naturally from first hand experience, stereotypes, and maybe even from a "cultural" lens. The structural is what is still left to be understood and often times why an educational course is much needed and popular among peers through word of mouth. This book illustrates the need to balance cultural framework with structural to move forward and bring about change. A concept that brings balance to the course's intent. From an educational perspective, this book is high level reading and may be one that students with low reading levels struggle with. The topics explored must be done in chunks possibly, with supplemental materials.

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### **Martyn says**

needs to widely read please

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### **Walter says**

In the spirit of full disclosure, I am a big fan of WJW, even though I think that his work has been alternately insightful and not over the years. This book is more the former, as it attempts to synthesize the themes in his other books, starting with the breakthrough volume *The Declining Significance of Race* almost 30 years ago. I agree completely with his thesis that addressing the problems of urban poverty, especially in communities of color, necessitates both structural and social/cultural strategies. Unlike many on the left, he acknowledges that some pathologies among people of color are effectively self-imposed, reflective of elements of a culture that are clearly no longer effective from a mainstream perspective (though they make sense within the group). These have to be addressed as part of any solution, as difficult as this may be in our (overly) political and politically correct society (especially at the risk of being accused of that old standby, blaming the victim). Yet, he argues persuasively, I think, that structural impediments (e.g., poor urban education, the suburbanization of work, the shift to a services-based economy [and away from manufacturing], globalization, etc.) are actually even more powerful and need to be addressed by the society as a whole through the political/governmental process. The book has just enough data to prove his points without being dense and is mercifully manageable in its length. As such, I recommend it highly as a thoughtful treatment of

one of our most pressing societal challenges, argued with a point of view but moderately so. Although I suspect that the professor will publish again, this volume is certainly a worthy capstone to an insightful and influential career.

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## Joan says

*More than Just Race* is William Julius Wilson's attempt to sift through the numbers of studies of the inner-city black poor and assess which studies can aid in the framework in which we think about the issue. His primary thesis states that while structural forces are the primary cause of inner-city black poverty, it is necessary to also examine cultural forces that have arisen, over generations, due to the structural forces.

It was fascinating to me to read his analysis of the famous/infamous Moynihan Report, which was spoken about with derision throughout my liberal arts education. I have never read the Moynihan report myself, but Wilson's analysis is compelling, and in fact he believes the Report was not solely "blaming the victim" as academics have painted it for decades. The history he outlines following the release of the Report is exceptionally interesting: how inner-city black culture, once linked very strongly in academia to slavery, Jim Crow, etc., became taboo to talk about as a contribution to black poverty.

Wilson proposes a different approach which comes off as much less defensive and more realistic than either the classic left-wing solely structural or the right-wing solely cultural arguments.

It was interesting, and unfortunate to find out that this area has actually not been studied very much, but he works with the few studies that exist. Several of the studies he cites for structural and cultural points were new to me and quite interesting, including (and these are grossly summarized):

- job shifts to suburbs, away from city centers and public transportation
- mortgage tax exemptions for particular neighborhoods
- decreased relative demand for low-skilled manufacturing jobs in the US and shift to technological jobs
- "cool-pose" culture in inner-city ghetto
- culture of distrust leading to incredibly low statistics of job referrals for friends and relatives in inner-city ghetto
- discourse of individualism/ reluctance to ask for assistance or provide assistance compared to other cultures
- lack of awareness, particularly among black men, of certain cues that have negative meaning to other communities (e.g., failure to make eye contact)

A tangential issue of interest to me, not discussed in the book, relates to women's employment. Low-skilled women suffered greatly when the only good-paying jobs were in manufacturing because they were perceived as unfit. The growth of service sector employment has been a boon to low-skilled women's employment in many ways because women are seen as hospitable and friendly. Both of these, the relative under-employment of qualified women in manufacturing and later the relative over-employment of women in the service sector, are discriminatory, of course, and disgusting in that they rely on stereotypes about gender.

Interestingly, and this is obvious even though I had never thought about it before, the exact opposite shift happened for low-skilled black men due to discriminatory and disgusting stereotypes about gender and race. Low-skilled black men were seen as exceptionally capable of low-skilled manufacturing (and were perhaps over-employed, excluding women?), whereas now are seen as incapable of doing service sector jobs, and are under-employed.

I'm not suggesting low-skilled women and men are pitted against one another, simply that the stereotypes should be questioned in both instances and both groups should also think about their relative over-employment in certain sectors due to stereotypes seen as positive attributes in those sectors.

All in all, it was a good book, but I wouldn't go so far as to say it is required reading unless you are doing academic research on this type of thing.

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## **Aida says**

Note: taken from a book report I did for my Sociology class, so it is a bit comprehensive.

### **More Than Just Race**

William Julius Wilson has one main argument in *More Than Just Race*: "...more weight should be given to structural causes of inequality, despite the dynamic interrelationships of structure and culture, because they continue to play a far greater role in the subjugation of black Americans and other people of color." (Wilson 135). In order to support this, Wilson separates his key points for this argument in three chapters, each on what he identifies as key aspects of African American's current plight. These are "The Forces Shaping Concentrated Poverty", "The Economic Plight of Inner-City Black Males", and "The Fragmentation of the Poor Black Family." In each chapter, Wilson brings up various pieces of evidence supporting structure as the main issue that ill-affecting culture comes from, each time noting and recognizing the relationship between culture and structure and how they affect these aspects of the life of the poor, inner-city, black person. In Chapter 2, what Wilson means by the forces that shape "concentrated" poverty, is why there are such specific clusters of poverty-stricken neighborhoods specifically. One of the explanations he chose to discuss was the "self-selection bias" concept, which was "to describe the effect of people grouping themselves together according to common characteristics." (Wilson 46). Wilson tells that this means that it is simply the fact that families have weak job-related skills, low awareness of and concern that the local environment where their children are growing up will affect their development, and other unfavorable aspects cause them to choose poor neighborhoods (Wilson 47). Wilson argues against this, maintaining that "living in a ghetto neighborhood has both structural and cultural effects that compromise life chances above and beyond personal attributes." (Wilson 47). But he does respond to a study that seemingly proved that the self-selection bias was a solid argument. This experiment was the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experiment which was performed between 1994 and 1998. What occurred was the U.S. Department of Housing and Development (HUD) gave out housing vouchers to families living in high poverty, in five different cities. In these cities, they were put in three different groups randomly, and each one had a different form of housing change. One was permitted to rent in the private market anywhere, another was allowed to rent in low-poverty neighborhoods, and one did not receive either of the two groups and was the "control group." (Wilson 49). The results were mixed; there was improvement for people who moved into low-poverty areas in terms of mental and physical health (as in obesity), but there was no impact on employment rates or wages or educational and physical health amongst children and young men (while there had been improvement to young women's lives) and this caused some to believe that maybe there really were negative effects that lasted from living in "poor, segregated neighborhoods" (Wilson 50).

What Wilson points out about the study is that there were serious problems in the way the experiment was set up. Pointing out these issues, he provides logical reasons that any reader could agree with. He notes that the way the voucher worked, people could move into areas that in actuality were very similar to the ones they previously lived in, negating the effects of moving. The idea seems sound, and to bolster the argument,

he brings in another sociologist, Robert Sampson, who analyzed a group of MTO from one of the cities and found that the neighborhoods the people chose to move to were still poorer than an integrated neighborhood, because they chose predominantly black neighborhoods (Wilson 50). So it is clear that not only is Wilson making a point against the MTO experiment, but he has back up to agree with him. Wilson does this throughout the book when he intends to prove why an argument that opposes him is incorrect. When he tries to support the Gautreaux experiment over the MTO experiment, his support mainly comes from the fact that he has already noted the key flaws of the MTO experiment that the Gautreaux experiment did not have. The main difference that he claims is relevant is the fact that Gautreaux families “moved to white suburban areas that were significantly less impoverished than their previous neighborhoods.” (Wilson 50). This difference underscores the point he made about the families moving into black neighborhoods instead of white ones. Moving into a white neighborhood automatically takes the families out of a more impoverished environment. If the MTO experiment had required them to move into a white experiment, then perhaps Wilson would have less ground to stand on, but as it Wilson clarifies it, the MTO experiment is flawed. In Chapter 3, Wilson is discussing black males specifically, and why they are having such a hard time surviving in the economy. As Wilson does throughout the book, he separates his main arguments between structural and cultural factors. In the case of cultural factors, he outlines what a good “exploration” of cultural factors would be: “1) provide a compelling reason for including cultural factors in a comprehensive discussion of race and poverty, 2) show the relationship between cultural analysis and structural analysis, and 3) determine the extent to which cultural factors operate independently to contribute to or reinforce poverty and racial inequality.” (Wilson 79). Wilson then explains that while there is evidence of cultural factors, this evidence is less “compelling” because of the lack of research in this area, something he discusses in detail with the Moynihan report later.

His opinion of the cultural explanations currently around are then backed up by Professor Orlando Patterson from Harvard University, who has said that because of a bias against cultural explanations, sociologists have not been willing to look at “attitudes, norms, values, habits, and worldviews” which Wilson says are “all indications of cultural orientations” but instead have been focusing on “in short, structural factors.” (Wilson 79). Patterson decided to look at culture again, and asked some specific questions about poor black men, and worked to answer them. One of them was the behavior of young black men in the ghetto, which he looks at through “anecdotal evidence collected...by one of his former students.” (Wilson 80). From this non-systematic ethnographic evidence, Patterson’s student uncovered the concept of the “cool-pose culture” that includes “hanging out on the street after school, shopping and dressing sharply, sexual conquests, party drugs, hip-hop music and culture.” and this culture Patterson concludes that this culture is what encourages young black men to essentially dig themselves into a hole by participating in a behavior model that is risky (Wilson 80).

Even though Wilson does not expressly suggest that Patterson’s conclusions may be off due to the methods that were used in obtaining the ideas that pointed to such a culture, he does inform the reader that how this information was obtained - and allows the reader to choose for themselves how they should evaluate such data. He also does not particularly agree with the cool-pose culture as the direct explanation of young black male risky behavior. He instead picks a point of Patterson’s argument - “black male pride has become increasingly defined in terms of the impregnation of women.” and then brings in a different sociologist who found a similar pattern in young black men, but decades before. After bringing this up, Wilson suggests a counterargument that reinforces his preference towards structure dictating culture: if young black men are put in fairly similar structural positions then other generations will eventually have similar cultural responses (Wilson 81). In this case, because Patterson does believe that cultural explanations should be a part of the discussion, Wilson is more accepting of his information and less willing to completely cut it apart because it does allow him to build off of and make a point about culture.

In Chapter 4, Wilson looks at the poor black family. This chapter is interesting because here Wilson utilizes information drawn from a study he headed, “The Urban Poverty and Family Life Study”(UPFLS), where he and a team performed over 2,000 interviews of “Black, White, Mexican- and Puerto Rican-origin parents



from poor neighborhoods in Chicago.” (UPFLS). However, Wilson never informs the reader directly how this study was conducted. While Wilson does make sure to mention and explain what he means when he says “our study” in the appendix, the information in the appendix consists of the location, the number of people they interviewed, the races of those people, and how they defined poverty neighborhoods (neighborhoods with poverty rates of at least 20 percent) (Wilson 173). But he does not mention that he headed a team that performed these interviews, nor does he explain their interview methods, which Tyson does do in her book *Integration Interrupted*, when she notes that the interviews performed were “semistructured” and then provided the types of questions asked over the topics that she wished to discuss, and how long they lasted, and who else interviewed them besides herself (Tyson Kindle 120). But Wilson never identifies the team that assisted with the interviews, explains how the interviews were performed, or any notable details about the interviews. Nor does he acknowledge that the way these interviews were conducted could have affected the responses provided, or how they dealt with that potential error. This lack of detail on the way an important gathering of information was done robs the reader of being able to be certain that the information being provided to strengthen Wilson’s points has been gathered in as unbiased a way possible. Especially considering the fact that he had the resources available to him and was the director of the entire study, this aspect of a study is definitely something he should know and be clear on and able to elucidate to the reader. This information is necessary because Wilson spends a good portion of Chapter 4 discussing the opinions of black women of black men and vice versa and then compares them to those of Latinos and then draws conclusions on how this could affect the marriage rates and family of black people. Although, Wilson does use outside sources to help support his points. For example, he notes from his ethnographic data that the “birth of a child did not create a sense of obligation to marry” suggests that norms in regards to the family are changing (Wilson 122). He brings in a professor of Sociology, Frank Furstenberg who has been studying respondents in the inner city on fathering for years. Furstenberg agrees that there may be less pressure being exerted on men for them to be a part of the family, in contrast to how this used to be (Wilson 122). Wilson made several connections with readings, but one of them in specific was research performed by Devah Pager, published on *Discrimination in a Low-Wage Market: A Field Experiment*. This experiment noted how a black applicant with a clean record was still less likely to be called back for a job than a white applicant with a felony conviction. Wilson uses this to underscore the fact that there is statistical discrimination against black workers. Pager’s study was so comprehensive, and also performed twice, that the empirical data proving that statistical discrimination exists in the inner-city work force against black workers is undeniable.

Wilson’s conclusions that structure is actually the underlying issue in all of the plights of poor, inner city, black people is overall well-supported in his book. While he neglects to provide certain details on pieces of information, and does not seem to bring up an argument against his own that he cannot shoot down, all of his information is well-sourced, and each source seems to be coming from respectable groups or people.

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## **asih simanis says**

This book is one of those rare books that is able to be cold headed -ly clear for an issue as hot as this, and its good so. I truly Appreciate his effort to make it as balanced as possible, because I know that every emotion and every anger shown is actually counter productive for what is needed to get things done. I appreciate also the fact that he speaks of both structural and cultural problem, not turning a blind eye to one or the other, showing true wisdom and maturity.

This book is great for those who need a thorough introduction of the academic works that are out there on race. Well worth the read, but don't expect it to be exciting. Its not meant to be.

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### **James Murphy says**

In recent months I've read 2 works on race in America by Shelby Steele:

White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era and The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America. Wilson's book sees the problem differently. His concern is the continuing existence of inner-city ghettos, the oppressive marginalization of black males, and the general breakup of black families. Where Steele attributed racially charged social problems to black cultural characteristics, Wilson, while acknowledging those characteristics, finds more fault with what he calls structural causes such as employer discrimination, public school segregation, the policy of settling the urban poor in housing projects which ultimately segregate, and other political and economic decisions that overshadow cultural factors. Wilson has his facts and figures, but he presents them in such a dry, statistical manner that they lose their punch. He lacks Steele's verbal eloquence so his argument, though sound, is less interesting.

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### **Caity Gill says**

Some good info. But I wish it was more up to date info. Also, I found the writing style very hard to connect with.

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### **Heather says**

This is a more scholarly treatment, so it's not as accessible to the average reader. It is a worthwhile addition to the dialogue, though. I think the strength of this book is that Wilson examines both structural and cultural explanations for the over-representation of things like poverty and unemployment in the black community. He explains how they feed on each other and why it's important to look at issues with both viewpoints in mind. He references a lot of important studies and highlights areas where more research is needed.

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