

Published: Aug 07, 2009 08:09 AM

Modified: Aug 07, 2009 08:09 AM

Miles to go to achieve a post-racial America

BY LEWIS W. DIUGUID, McClatchy Newspapers

One day, America will truly free itself of the chains of its racist past. But this country is a long way from the "post-racial era" that some proclaimed after the election of Barack Obama as the first African American U.S. president.

Even Obama acknowledged that in his speech last month in New York to the NAACP. Speakers at the National Urban League conference last week in Chicago agreed.

The issue of race also made national headlines in July when Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. returned to his Cambridge, Mass., home from China. Police responding to a break-in call treated the African-American studies scholar as a suspect, arresting him at his home. It shouldn't have happened, but race and the negatives blacks live with overrule reason.

The National Urban League in its book "The State of Black America 2009: Message to the President" describes the injustice and indignities that African-Americans face: "Ironically, even as an African-American man holds the highest office in the country, African Americans remain twice as likely as whites to be unemployed, three times more likely to live in poverty and more than six times as likely to be incarcerated."

Overall, the Urban League's annual Equality Index measuring the economic, health, education, social justice and civic engagement status of blacks compared with whites fell from 2008 to 2009.

The Urban League book notes that if education is a way out of poverty and other disparities, black people have found that pathway nearly bricked shut. More than 55 years have passed since the Brown v. Topeka Board of Education Supreme Court decision ending legal segregation. Yet, nearly half of the black students and nearly 40 percent of the Latino students compared with 11 percent of the white students "attend high schools in which graduation is not the norm."

"In too many ways, by too many measures, we appear to be even further away from realizing the full promise of education" than just after the Brown ruling, the book says. Each year more than 1 million kids leave school without graduating.

"Their failure to graduate has long lasting individual, community and nationally adverse consequences," the book notes. "Dropouts from the class of 2008 alone will cost the United States almost \$319 billion in lost wages over their lifetime."

In 1964, a dropout earned 64 cents for every dollar made by those with at least a high school diploma. In 2004, the dropout earned only 37 cents for every dollar made by the high school graduate.

It is an American problem. But black families will hurt more. The black median income in 2009 was only \$33,916 compared with whites' \$52,115. The homeownership rate in 2009 for blacks was 47.2 percent compared with 75.2 percent for whites.

The Urban League book also reported that average black families have a net worth that is 10 percent of white families'.

"Almost 30 percent of black families have zero or negative net worth," the book noted. "And far fewer blacks than whites benefit from inherited wealth or assets."

It affects how people view blacks and how blacks fare in education, jobs, housing, health and run-ins with police. Rather than a fair shake, continued poor treatment is the outcome.

What's clear is that education and wealth accumulation have to be the new paths in the 21st century civil rights march for blacks. They're the way out of poverty, racial profiling, inequities and despair.

Obama's words to the NAACP offer guidance.

"We need a new mindset, a new set of attitudes - because one of the most durable and destructive legacies of discrimination is the way we've internalized a sense of limitation; how so many in our community have come to expect so little from the world and from themselves. ... No one has written your destiny for you. Your destiny is in your hands - you cannot forget that. That's what we have to teach all of our children. No excuses."

My hope is progress occurs and a post-racial era becomes a reality in our lifetime.

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