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## OF RACE AND PROGRESS: HOW BLACKS FARE TODAY

A new report says racism is holding blacks back -- but the sponsors are determined to use it as a blueprint for advancement. > *By Jarrett Murphy*

When City Councilman Larry Seabrook took the podium at Thursday's unveiling of the report "The State of Black New York City 2007," there was good news and bad news to talk about. Coming seven years after the release of the last such report, its completion was itself an achievement by the Black Equity Alliance and New York Urban League, which brought together leading intellectuals for a detailed analysis of where blacks stand. But the resulting report detailed persistent disparities in black New Yorkers' access to the job market, affordable housing, health care and schools. So, Seabrook told the crowd at the JP Morgan Chase building on Park Avenue, "It's a pleasure to be here ... to see how bad we're doing."

Statistics showing the challenges facing black New Yorkers are easy to find; they're often at hand in public discussions about school test scores, incarceration rates, incidence of asthma and so on. What's different about the State of Black New York City (which the Urban League has published off and on for 40 years) is that it presents a broad picture of the multifaceted disadvantages blacks face—and weds those indicators to a critique of what the report calls America's "race-constructed society." Explaining the study's purpose, New York Urban League chairman Noel Hankin told the room that "to monitor, measure and track the effects of racism is very important."

That's especially true when those effects can be multilayered, hidden within crises that also affect whites, or masked by cosmetic changes to a more visible problem.

Take the number of blacks in construction jobs. Unsurprisingly, blacks are under-represented in the industry. But digging deeper, blacks who have managed to get into construction jobs make 61 cents to every dollar their white counterparts make. That's in part because, according to economist Darrick Hamilton, an assistant professor at The New School, "Within the industry, blacks are clustered in the low-wage jobs." Among construction job titles, black participation drops 17 percent for every \$10,000 increase in average wages.

Housing affordability affects every racial group in the city as increasing numbers of city residents devote a major portion of their paycheck to keeping a roof over their heads. But the effects aren't colorblind: One quarter of black homeowners pay more than half their income to cover housing costs, versus 17 percent of whites. And among renters, "Low-income blacks pay substantially more of their income for housing than low-income whites," said Lucille McEwen, president of Harlem Congregations for Community Improvement. The current subprime loan crisis also has a racial tinge, she said: "Some lenders routinely steer African Americans to subprime products."

There seem to be more blacks than ever in TV and magazine advertisements—but there are still too few in the multibillion advertising industry that "shapes everything that we do: What we buy, how we act, how we don't react," said Seabrook, a Bronx Democrat who chairs the Council's civil rights committee. The ad industry also receives millions in taxpayer dollars for legal notices, municipal job ads and public service announcements. By month's end, Seabrook's committee plans to issue a report on its investigation into Madison Avenue hiring practices. Seabrook, along with other black leaders, has also targeted the Arbitron radio ratings firm, which is considering a new method for measuring listenership that some feel will unfairly hurt black radio in the city by undercounting listeners and discouraging advertisers. The same day the report was released, however, Arbitron announced a delay in implementation of the system in New York and several other markets (while maintaining the technology is accurate). But Seabrook foresees the doom of beloved black stations: "You're going to wake up one day expecting to hear BLS, and you're going to hear country western."

Some disparities compound others. John Morning, one of the study's authors, who found that blacks are severely under-represented on the boards of directors of major New York City corporations, also examined leading nonprofit organizations. "There's a kind of vicious cycle here," he said. "These [nonprofit] organizations say, 'Well, we don't want to put black people on our board because they don't have deep pockets'" to help with fundraising. But that means that blacks are blocked from positions of influence where they might help begin to change the very conditions that keep more blacks' pockets shallow.

Of course, there's been no shortage of reports about disadvantaged groups in New York City. Their very

abundance suggests that studies alone won't solve anything. Backers of The State of Black New York City 2007 insist it's a road map for action. Black Equity Alliance chairman Billy Jones says the State of Black New York is a study that will prompt change, "not just one that goes on the shelf." New York Urban League president Darwin Davis says the league has teamed with three City Councilmembers to launch "Jobs to Build On," a workforce development initiative targeting underserved communities.

Opinions on the target for that action differ, however.

As statistics on the racial breakdown of the dropout rate in New York City high schools flashed on the screen behind her, Adelaide Sanford, a former member of the state Board of Regents, contended that a failure to educate blacks is not at the heart of the school system's problems.

The big problem, Sanford said, is that white people running the system "have not been adequately educated as the descendents of oppressors." Those whites who do understand their role in history, she said, "are afraid that because you were oppressed, you will become oppressors."

"They don't understand our humanity, our spirituality. Therefore, we are always having to comfort them and tell them it won't be that bad," she continued as the room murmured agreement.

It wasn't the sort of sentiment one expected to hear during a breakfast meeting at the JP Morgan Chase building. But then, as Rev. Dr. David Billings from the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond told the crowd, "It's only black people who keep race on the table in this society, and you pay a price for it." When white people accuse blacks of playing the race card, Billings wants to tell them, "Show us the 51 other cards in the deck."

- Jarrett Murphy