

SELECTIVE RACIAL STATISTICS

Henry Lee Moon, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People has not adopted a definitive, overall position on the collection, use and publication of racial data. Within the organization, as within the Negro community generally, there are varying attitudes on the advisability of compiling and publishing such information. The views expressed here conform with the practices of the Association in the absence of a formally declared policy.

The NAACP was founded in 1909 to combat racial segregation, a major obstacle to the progress of the Negro in the United States. One form of segregation is the racial breakdown of statistical information. Nevertheless, the Association from the beginning recognized the need for certain of this information as an instrument in the struggle against segregation. Dr. W.E.B. Dubois, the Association's first director of research, early initiated the collection, publication and interpretation of racial data. On the other hand, the segregationists have effectively employed certain data to retard progress toward the NAACP goal. That goal is the attainment of a society in which considerations of race and color are insignificant, in which the white majority ceases to think of Negroes as a special, different and inferior people, and in which Negroes are no longer compelled to regard themselves as a group apart. In such an ideal society, there would be no thought of classifying data racially.

In his editorial column announcing this panel (The American Statistician, April, 1962), Dr. Philip M. Hauser reviews the pros and cons of the issue and reaches the conclusion "that it is an act of professional integrity and consistency for the statistician to oppose any effort to suppress any form of knowledge about man or the social order."

Both the case for and that against were explored at some length at the Institute on the Collection and Use of Data Based on Race, Religion or National Origin (Philadelphia, Nov. 18, 1959). At that Institute, as in his column, Dr. Hauser set forth three bases in support of the compilation of such data and two against.

To Dr. Hauser's two grounds against, a third may be added: irrelevancy. There is no valid reason for including race on a driver's license, or on any other license issued by a governmental agency. This item has been removed from drivers' licenses issued by the State of New York.

Dr. Hauser cites "the fear that such information may be used to deal with the person or the group in a categoric way, and thus evoke discriminatory practices." This fear is well founded, and is widely shared by members of minority groups. It is the heart of the NAACP opposition to the collection of certain kinds of racial data, even though it is realized that racial statistics

do not cause the discrimination; rather they are the product of longstanding discriminatory attitudes and practices. Elimination of such data would not make the Ku Klux Klan or the White Citizens' Councils hate Negroes less. But it would deprive them of official information with which to document their biases.

Take the FBI's annual Uniform Crime Report for the United States which compiles the number of arrests by race. There may be no sound basis on which to challenge the authenticity of the FBI data. Nevertheless, these reports are objectionable on two grounds: first, that crime is an act of the individual, save when committed by mobs, as lynchings in the United States, or by the state, as genocide in Nazi Germany; and secondly, that the figures are distorted and misleading in that they reveal nothing of the vital socio-economic and psychological factors which restrict the life of every Negro in this country.

Negroes are more easily and frequently arrested and more often convicted than white persons. In part, this is because of their low economic status. The police prey on the poor. Moreover, the poor do not have the means to secure competent legal counsel or to exert political or other influence to get them out of difficulties with the law. In addition, the Negro is all too often the victim of bias in law enforcement and in the administration of justice. Poverty and prejudice thus tend to inflate the figures for Negro arrests, convictions and prison population.

Of a total of 75,385 gambling arrests in 1961, the Uniform Crime Report lists 53,155 Negro arrests as compared with 17,630 white. Can anyone seriously believe that this represents a true picture of gambling in the United States today? That an underprivileged 10 per cent of the population accounts for more than 73 per cent of the country's gamblers? The figures merely reflect the Negro's high vulnerability to arrest.

Equally misleading are the statistics on illegitimate births so widely cited as evidence of low moral standards among Negroes. They show a rate among Negroes ten times greater than that among whites. What they do not show is the relative frequency of abortion or of the use of contraceptives or of the misreporting of legitimacy status. To pass judgment on the sex morality of Negroes on the basis of these figures without reference to comparable data on contraception, abortion and misreporting is gross distortion.

The Kinsey Institute study, Pregnancy, Birth and Abortion, reports a much lower rate of abortion and use of contraceptives among Negro women than among white. In a recent series, The New York Post estimated that there are 1,500,000 illegal operations performed annually in the United States. What proportion of this number is

performed on Negro women is not revealed. In view of the high costs of such operations, it may safely be assumed that relatively few Negroes can afford them.

According to Vital Statistics of the United States, 1959, Volume I, socio-economic factors "are generally believed to operate in the direction of a proportionately greater understatement of illegitimacy in the white race than in the non-white..."

Federally collected and published data on crime and out-of-wedlock births have been used, with devastating effect, by segregationists in their campaign to discredit the Negro and maintain the status quo in race relations. These figures have been widely circulated not only in the South, but also throughout the country as an argument against compliance with the United States Supreme Court's anti-segregation decrees and for the maintenance of other racial barriers. One national magazine editor cites them as a basis for what he calls "rational, valid reasons" for racial prejudice.

That organized bigots and the hate press should take great glee in publicizing these official figures and use them to confirm their ancient prejudices surprises no one. But that reputable periodicals should publish them as naked "facts," as if they existed in a social vacuum and, on this basis, presume to lecture Negroes on their behavior is shocking. John Fischer's editorial in Harper's Magazine (July, 1962) is a case in point. He uses "Negro crime" and "moral irresponsibility" as justifications for white prejudice and calls upon Negro leadership to eradicate these evils. Time Magazine (April 21, 1958), in a similar article, had the grace to concede that "... even heroic efforts by Negro leadership could only dent the Negro crime problem, because essentially it is a white problem. And it will remain a severe problem until Northern whites, private citizens as well as civic officials, recognize that Negro crime is basically a symptom of a failure in integration..."

The NAACP opposes the compilation and publication of racially classified data on crime and illegitimate births because such information sheds no significant light on the causes, because it serves no useful purpose in curbing these offenses, because it is subject to distortion and misrepresentation, and because it is utilized to thwart the drive toward an egalitarian, pluralistic society.

In rejecting these and similar racially classified statistics, the NAACP does not call for the abolition of racial breakdowns in all fields. The Association, in fact, agrees with Dr. Hauser that in certain areas there is a "need for such information for use in 'social engineering' ... as a basis for effectively and efficiently dealing with a wide range of problems ranging from marketing to public policy."

Since the NAACP is engaged in "social engineering" it must have certain racial data which can most efficiently be compiled by a governmental agency. A host of facts revealing the relative socio-economic status of the Negro is needed: how many Negroes there are in the country and in each of the states and subdivisions thereof; their age and sex distribution; the range of their income and what occupations they follow; which industries and companies employ them, in what positions and how many; how they spend their money; what kind of housing is available to them; their educational level and health status; and how many are registered voters. Periodic reports in these areas are needed in order to measure change.

The NAACP is not alone in the need for this information. The Negro press and radio are vitally interested in income and purchasing habits. They need these figures in their solicitation of advertising. Politicians, no less than the NAACP, are concerned about the number and location of Negro voters and what issues influence their ballots.

Employment figures are needed to prove or disprove discrimination and to furnish basic information for FEPC legislation or for court action. Similar information is required in the field of housing where discrimination is widespread. Such documentation aids the fight for enactment of fair housing statutes and for the issuance of an Executive Order banning discrimination in all federally-aided housing.

In the spring of 1962, the New York State Commissioner of Education ordered a racial census of every public school in his jurisdiction. The results revealed the extent of de facto segregation existing in school systems throughout the state and provided an essential factual basis for development of a desegregation program.

To forego the collection and use of such valuable information would be to handicap immeasurably the struggle to rid the nation of racial segregation. The attainment of a color blind society requires an awareness of existing color patterns. The absence of statistical information, racially classified, does not assure the absence of color discrimination. Indeed, it may be used to conceal the color bar behind a facade of impartial color blindness.

The NAACP's unformulated but pragmatic position on the collection and use of racial data is simple. Where such data serve no useful purpose, stop compiling them; where they may be used for constructive ends, continue to collect and publish them. In a word, the Association is for the selective collection, use and publication of racially classified data.