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IMMIGRATION'S IMPACT ON INNER CITY BLACKS

By Otis L. Graham, Jr. and Roy Beck

In all the weary explanations of the devastating riots in Los Angeles, a major factor has escaped serious discussion. The white-dominated news media have been loath to discuss the role of unprecedented levels of immigration in the deteriorating economic and social conditions for African Americans who live in the nation's inner cities.

While the massive immigration provides cheap labor that benefits a well-to-do portion of Americans, it depresses living conditions for the working classes in ways that disproportionately harm black citizens.

Reluctance to speak frankly in the first days after the riots was perhaps understandable; one would not want to be misunderstood and invite more conflict at a time when calming inter-group and inter-racial fears was primary.

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But the time has come for clear thinking and candid talk about what 27 years of massive immigration has done to blacks. We should not have to rediscover that immigration in large numbers widens the divide between wealth and poverty, storing up social dynamite. This country has a long and sad history of allowing the massive importation of low-skilled foreign workers to displace African Americans, though most black contemporary leaders have lost or renounced the ability to speak about this difficult reality. Now events seen on television expose the issue, and we must learn to talk about its dynamic and its cure.

Booker T. Washington dared do that in his famous 1895 Atlanta Exposition address. He implored his audience of powerful white industrialists to open factory jobs to the underemployed freed slaves and their descendants, not to the incoming millions of immigrants. "Cast down your bucket where you are," was his memorable phrase. The country did not listen. Finally, in 1921, Congress (for other reasons) drastically curbed immigration, unintentionally giving blacks a wider opportunity to enter at least portions of

the structure of higher-wage industrial jobs.

But in 1965 when the Civil Rights Act provided for major political advancement, Congress revised the immigration law, once again allowing millions of foreign workers to pour into our inner cities.

The effect on lower-skilled urban blacks has been devastating. The more than 25 million immigrants and their descendants since 1970 have flooded the unskilled labor markets causing poor wages to decline to still lower levels, according to labor economists such as Vernon Briggs of Cornell University. Businesses and governments have had little incentive to upgrade jobs and productivity through technology, capital expenditures and more efficient management. Nor have they had any pressure to train disadvantaged blacks to take the higher paying jobs that would have been created. As former U.S. Secretary of Labor Ray Marshall has said, massive imports of cheap foreign labor have led too many businesses to pursue a Third World low-wage strategy.

Adding insult to the black L.A. residents is that they must contend not only with traditional white racism but with intense discrimination through what Philip Martin of the University of California at Davis calls ethnic networking. Recent immigrants achieve positions of authority within a business and begin to recruit relatives, friends and acquaintances from their country of origin. Wages and working conditions stagnate or decline in the firm. Often the language of the workplace changes from English. Blacks are thus effectively barred from employment.

In myriad ways, blacks find themselves trapped in inner cities where tribalism is rising. Affirmative action and other remedies, originally intended to redress two centuries of exploitation of and discrimination against blacks, now must be shared with recently arrived, foreign-born populations that outnumber them.

Several aspects of the riots point to the taboo truth that there has been too much immigration and too much diversity, all of it happening at much too fast a pace. A social speed limit has been exceeded. It's time for a moratorium.

Interestingly, a moratorium on importing foreign workers would also benefit recent immigrants, whose working conditions tend to be most harmed by additional immigration. Stopping most immigration

for awhile would be a relatively easy, cheap and extremely popular way to begin to improve the lot of recent immigrants as well as to boost the status of inner city blacks.

Immigration reform to lower the immigration numbers will not in itself solve the complex problems of Americans of black, brown, yellow or white skin color who are caught in the growing urban pathology. Much more needs to be done, and we are beginning that debate. But without frank discussion and action on the immigration dimension of urban problems, no combination of the other meritorious ideas coming forward will ultimately work. ■