

MASS VIOLENCE IN AMERICA

THE COMPLETE REPORT OF
MAYOR LaGUARDIA'S COMMISSION
ON THE HARLEM RIOT OF MARCH 19, 1935

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the 45 rooms were out of use because of a recent fire. This school, which is classified as a partially fireproof building, has had six fires during the past four years. This school, like other schools in the Negro area, is overcrowded and therefore must run two sessions. Moreover, the school has no gymnasium or library and is generally lacking in the educational equipment which is deemed necessary in modern schools of its grade.

While this is probably the worst school in the Negro section of Harlem, the majority of the other schools show similar characteristics in varying degrees. Since most of them were built from 25 to 40 years ago, they show many of the same characteristics relative to construction, lack of equipment, and, in some cases, fire hazards. One principal excused the school's bad odor, which he tried to have overcome by spreading carbolic acid about, on the ground that students not caring to go to the lavatories outside used the stairs for toilets. In another school, where there had been a fire five years ago and the Fire Department had made recommendations, none of them had been followed. In many of the other schools, one finds the same problem of overcrowding. That this overcrowding affects chiefly the schools in which Negro children represent the majority of the pupils is shown by the figures on schools having more than one session. Of the 9 schools in this area, only 1 school with practically 100 per cent Negro attendance has a single session. In 5 of these schools in which Negro children constitute from 85 to 100 per cent of the pupils, there are three sessions in three schools and double sessions in the other two. The remaining three schools in which Negro children constitute from 10 to 20 per cent of the pupils have only single sessions. In addition to two and three sessions in at least

half of the elementary schools, there are between 40 and 50 pupils per class.

2. Administration and Educational Problems

Overcrowding under any circumstances would tend to make more difficult the problem of discipline. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that in these schools discipline presents a serious problem. However, there are other factors that are responsible for the situation in regard to discipline which we find in these schools. While it is of course impossible to say to what extent each factor is responsible for the general lack of discipline in these schools, one may indicate in what way each contributes to the present condition. We shall consider, first, the teaching staff in these schools, not however because they are primarily responsible, for we believe that there are more fundamental factors. It seems that many of the white teachers appointed to the schools of Harlem regard the appointment as a sort of punishment. They look upon their appointment in Harlem in this way, not only because they are to teach Negroes, but also because of the conditions under which they teach. At any rate, there appears to be a great deal of turnover in the white personnel of these schools. It is quite natural that teachers who regard their work in this light certainly will not have a sympathetic attitude towards the children who present many behavior problems in the Harlem schools. In the second place, it appears from observation that a disproportionate number of older white teachers are to be found in the Harlem schools. It has been claimed that these teachers have asserted their right to remain in the schools in which they have served a long time, although the influx of Negroes has brought new problems, or they have been

appointed to serve in Harlem until they were eligible for retirement. These older teachers are naturally impatient and unsympathetic towards the children. Moreover, the problems presented in these schools often require the physical vigor and energy which only young men and women are able to exert. These statements in regard to white teachers in Harlem are not criticisms directed at white teachers as a group for many of them exhibit an intelligent and sympathetic understanding of Negro children which some Negro teachers in these schools do not possess.

No one should expect teachers, either white or colored, to overcome the deficiencies in training which result from broken homes, poverty, a vicious environment, retardation, and ill health. Yet the general lack of discipline which the teachers have to deal with is due in part to all of these factors. About 25 per cent of the Negro families of Harlem are broken families, i.e., families with only a woman as head. According to the principal of one of the schools of Harlem, in 699 of 1,600 families represented by the children the father was either dead or had deserted his family. That delinquency among the children seemed to be tied up with broken homes appeared in the report of another principal who found that 75 per cent of delinquent children in his school had come from broken homes. These facts covering the family background of a large percentage of the school children of Harlem are indicative of some of the social and cultural factors which must be taken into consideration in relation to the lack of discipline. They call attention to the vicious neighborhoods surrounding these schools. One principal, in denying that there was a sex problem in his school, admitted that men and older boys who did not attend the school often chased girl students into the school and attacked them.

It is not surprising that this happens since it appears that the principals are powerless to exert any pressure on the police to prevent such occurrences or to close the vicious resorts which are allowed to operate in the neighborhood of the schools. It is difficult to say to what extent the vicious behavior exhibited by the students in their practice of carrying weapons or in their homosexual relations is a direct reflection of the vicious environment about the schools.

Poverty Among Children High

Since poverty, as we have shown in the third chapter, is the problem of primary importance to the Negro in Harlem, it is responsible for many of the problems of the schools in the community. Many of the children stay away from school because of the lack of food and especially clothing. Many come to school hungry and are listless or complain because of the lack of food. In one school alone, 1,000 free lunches were served daily. The lack of nourishment is responsible for low vitality and makes the children susceptible to disease. In a junior high school, between January 4 and June 20, 1935, there were 139 cases of malnutrition and eight cases of tuberculosis brought to the attention of the school authorities.

Along with delinquency, truancy, and ill health, retardation constitutes one of the major problems of the schools of Harlem. Like these other problems, it cannot be considered in isolation from the other social problems of the schools or the social and economic problems of the community. Over-aged pupils in the classes create problems of discipline and are responsible for delinquency and truancy. Some of the retardation is due to the fact that these children received part of their education in the schools of the South.

But one cannot discount the general environment from which these children come in the City of New York. In some of the schools, 25 per cent or more of the children are retarded. While special classes to deal with this problem are found in some of the schools, on the whole, personnel and equipment are lacking.

In fact, one of the most serious charges that must be brought against the schools in Harlem is that they lack the personnel and the equipment which modern schools have at their disposal for handling intelligently and efficiently the social problems of the pupils, as distinguished from the educational problems in the traditional sense of the term. Recreational facilities are lacking in most of the schools. Children are forced to use the streets for playgrounds and thereby are thrown in contact with the vicious elements in the community. Very few schools have the services of a visiting teacher. Harlem is the only section of the city without nursery schools, although no section needs them more than this area of broken homes and with a large proportion of mothers who must work. Moreover, if a Negro child is on the verge of delinquency, the school principals do not have the assistance of psychologists and psychiatrists. Usually the child is dismissed from school without any further provision since there are no juvenile homes to which it can be sent. In regard to the health of the school children, the same situation prevails. There is no program for dealing systematically with the health problems of the children in this area. Moreover, welfare agencies co-operating with the schools have not made the same provisions for sending Negro children to camp and the seashore as they have done in the case of the whites.

3. Discriminatory Practices

Although the public schools of New York City are supposed to be free from racial discrimination and we have already commented upon the extent to which they have lived up to democratic ideals, our study of the school system in Harlem has brought out many forms of discrimination which are racial in character. First, "The grossly unfair, discriminatory and prejudiced treatment of the Negro child appears from the fact that the Board of Education in asking funds from the federal government for 168 new school buildings in New York asked for but one annex in Harlem." In spite of the conditions which we have described above, of the \$120,747,000 asked only \$400,000 was earmarked for schools attended by the vast majority of colored children. Although this program has been abandoned, it indicates the general attitude of the school authorities towards the educational needs of the Harlem community.

Moreover, our investigations enable us to point to types of discrimination which have become established practices in the Harlem schools so far as Negro pupils are concerned. In this connection, we turn our attention first to the Wadleigh High School where most of the Negro girls in the Harlem area are required to do their senior high school work. The main building of this school is located on 111th Street between Seventh and Eighth Avenues and has two annexes, one in 102d Street and the other on 135th Street at Convent Avenue. About 30 per cent of the student body is Negro, the remainder being divided as follows: white American and Jewish, 25 per cent each; Italian, 15 per cent, and Spanish, 5 per cent. All of these racial groups are represented on the teaching staff but for some reason the name of the Negro teacher who has been at the school three years does not appear as a member of the teaching staff in the school's handbook. Most of the Negro girls--about 75

per cent--attending this school are pursuing courses in dressmaking, domestic science and other vocational courses which are given in the main building. Only 10 per cent of the pupils in the 102d Street annex, where the commercial courses are given, are Negro. In the 135th Street annex where the academic work, preparing pupils for entrance to institutions of collegiate standing is given, only 15 per cent of the pupils are Negro. But in the special courses which prepare girls for the outstanding women's colleges not a single Negro girl was enrolled. A comparatively large number of these Negro girls, about 12 per cent, are dropped from the academic department because of deficiencies.

Inadequate Training at Junior High Schools

In seeking the cause for the concentration of Negro girls in certain types of courses, one is naturally interested to know whether it is due to their peculiar aspirations, intelligence and general social background or to some selective and directing influence exercised by the school authorities. In the first place, the relatively small number of Negro girls who go from the junior to the senior high school is due to the fact that they are selected on the basis of their attainments in the junior high schools. Many of these girls are deficient in their training, not because of any fault of their own, but because the poorly equipped and crowded junior high schools of Harlem do not give them adequate preparation for entrance to a senior high school. While this accounts in part for the small number entering the senior high school and their concentration in the vocational courses, it is not the whole story. The selection is due in the main to the policy of the educational advisers. These advisers, often reflecting the traditional belief concerning the capacity of the Negro for purely academic pursuits, direct these girls

into vocational courses. But there are restrictions concerning the vocational courses. These educational advisers discourage Negro girls from taking the commercial courses on the ground that opportunities are not open to Negro girls in the commercial field.

The problem of giving vocational guidance to the Negro children of Harlem is an especially difficult one even for the fair-minded educational adviser. As one seemingly conscientious and intelligent adviser put the problem: Should she direct Negro children into lines of occupation according to their intelligence and interest, although it was known that Negroes were not employed in such occupations; or should she, taking into consideration this fact, direct them into fields in which they would be likely to find employment? While it is true that a conscientious adviser may be conscious of the problem involved, as a matter of fact, it requires more than conscientiousness. Some of these advisers have no knowledge of the occupations in which Negroes have been able to enter in spite of traditional notions and prejudices nor are they concerned with the Negro's struggle to break down the color barrier in industry. Vocational counsellors who are charged with mapping out the future careers of Negro children in Harlem should only be such persons as possess a broad knowledge and understanding of the Negro's economic problems and who are in sympathy with his aspirations. No one who is dominated by traditional beliefs concerning the Negro's capacity for intellectual culture or his proper place in society is fit to counsel him in his choice of a career.

One School Goes To Jim-Crow Resort

While it is naturally difficult to gauge the extent of racial discrimination

in the schools of Harlem, there is enough authentic evidence to justify this charge on the part of the citizens of Harlem. One needs go no further than Wadleigh High School, which we have been considering. Discrimination becomes evident, especially in the social relations of the students. This has been excused on the grounds that Southern white teachers in the school object to the mingling of white and Negro children in purely social affairs. Each year the school gives a boat ride to Indian Point Lake, where there is a swimming pool. The Negro girls are barred from the swimming pool at this resort, on the grounds that the owner has a provision in the lease that Negroes are not to use the pool. It is rumored that this restriction has not been objected to on the part of the school authorities, because it offers a means of discouraging Negro girls from going on the outing. In either case, if the owner of the resort insists upon including such provision against Negroes, it is clearly the duty of the school authorities to refuse to lease his resort. Neither the racial prejudices of Southern white teachers nor the prejudice of the owner of a pleasure resort should be of greater consideration than the insult that is offered to Negro children and the consequent damage that is done to the personality of young people by making them feel that they are unfit for association with other human beings.

Other cases of racial discrimination could be cited. But more important, though less well defined, practices of the school authorities in regard to the Negro need to be considered. For example, was it a mere accident that a visitor to one of the elementary schools saw the white girls dressed in nurses' uniforms directing visitors about, while the Negro girls were dressed as waitresses and served the visiting teachers? Most of the white teachers and principals of Harlem deny that there is any racial discrimination and generally

back up their statement by emphasizing the lack of overt acts of discrimination against the Negro. This is often true, for the discrimination is subtle to the extent that the Negro is ignored or regarded as non-existent. This becomes obvious when one attends the public functions of the schools. On these occasions, when the community is requested to participate in the life of the school, one would think that there were no Negroes in the world or, at least, capable of appearing as its representatives. Of course, often the Negro is not thought of simply because many of the teachers know nothing of Negroes except in the role of servants, clowns or criminals. This has furnished the basis for the contention on the part of the citizens of Harlem that courses in Negro history should be given in the schools and that the teachers in these schools should know something of the Negro's attainments in American civilization.

Vocational Education Presents Paradox

Vocational education for the Negro in Harlem deserves separate consideration. The situation in regard to this whole question presents a strange paradox. On the one hand, it is thought proper that Negro children should have industrial training, it is said that they are not prepared for such training. So, what do we find? Let us consider the Harlem annex of the Straubemuller Textile High School, which seemingly has become a dumping ground for the dull or problem children in the area from which it draws the majority of its pupils. This school has practically no equipment to carry on the work it is supposed to do. This is, of course, no fault of the principal in charge of the school. There are no facilities to give the work of the dressmaking department, in which practically all the pupils are Negro. The shop in which electricity is

taught is equipped with two dynamos supplied by the instructor himself, since the Board of Education has never put any equipment in the shop. The same is true in respect to the courses in biology, chemistry and physics. Since it is obviously impossible to give courses in this annex in any way comparable to those given in the main building, it appears that students are kept here until they reach the age limit for compulsory school attendance.

At the Manhattan Trade School for Boys, where real vocational training is given, we find relatively few Negro boys getting the advantage of the training which this school offers. Although this school is located in the heart of Harlem, nearly three-fourths of the day students come from the Bronx. The majority of the students in the evening school are Negroes. The fact that relatively few Negro students attend the day classes has been blamed partly on the principals, who make the selection, and partly on the American Federation of Labor's policies in regard to the Negro in certain trades. At any rate, it appears that, if the educational authorities were serious in their avowed intentions to give the Negro child vocational training, this school in the Harlem community should be utilized for the vocational needs of the Negro. This same observation applies to the vocational needs of the Negro girls, who comprise about 14 per cent of the students in the Manhattan Industrial School for Girls. It is claimed that Negro girls do not measure up to the standards set by this school. So, here again appears the strange paradox: Negro girls should take vocational education instead of academic work, but they are not prepared to take it! Therefore, Negro girls are directed to the vocational courses given in the junior and senior high school or sent to the Harlem annex of the Textile High School. In regard to the voca-

tional and trade schools, attention should be called to the fact that no Negro teachers are employed in them, since it appears that they must have some years of experience in addition to their educational preparation, and this experience is denied them by the unions.

This last observation brings us back to the observation which was made at the beginning of our survey of the schools in Harlem. The school situation is related to the other problems--economic, health and housing--of the Negro. Discrimination in one field has its ramifications in all other fields of Negro life. The problem of education is the same as all other problems: namely, to make the same educational provisions for the school children of Harlem as are made for children in other sections of New York City, and to see that Negro teachers are admitted to all branches of the teaching staff as other races.