

INTERIM STAFF REPORTS: ALABAMA HEARING, MONTGOMERY, ALA.,
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STATEMENT OF WILLIAM L. TAYLOR, STAFF DIRECTOR, U.S. COMMISSION ON CIVIL
RIGHTS, JUNE 14, 1968

Six weeks ago the Commission held a public hearing in Montgomery, Alabama on issues of economic security affecting black citizens living in 16 Black Belt counties of that State. The hearing was the culmination of an investigation begun last Fall. For five days from April 27 to May 2, we heard testimony from many black citizens, public officials, plantation owners and professionals.

Ordinarily, we would wait until we had completed a formal report before releasing information developed from our investigations and hearings. But today we are releasing these preliminary staff reports of the hearing because they are particularly relevant to current Congressional debates on spending, to the issues raised by the Poor People's Campaign, and, above all, to the crisis of race and poverty confronting the Nation. We think that the information developed during the course of our investigation and hearing should contribute to a better understanding of the extent and the causes of the extreme deprivation that effects so many citizens in this and similar areas. It also may suggest some guidelines for the steps which the Federal government must take to solve these problems.

The Commission on Civil Rights for the past two years and more has been concerned with the problems of race and poverty in our urban areas. During this period we have studied the racial crisis in the Nation as it manifests itself in the cities. Since last fall we have concentrated on the crisis as it relates to the economy of rural, nonmetropolitan areas of the South. We have come to believe that problems of urban and rural areas are all of a piece—that both are manifestations of the same crisis of race and poverty that troubles the Nation.

The South has been exporting its problems North. Many of the unemployed, frustrated, hopeless people of the cities are migrants from rural areas, who have left behind other unemployed, frustrated and hopeless people. In the ghetto, as a woman in Gary told us, time stops. Time stops too in the rural counties of Black Belt Alabama. For many people, despite the unprecedented affluence in this country, there have been no improvements in housing, employment or educational opportunities for generations.

We have distributed to you a series of papers that examine in some detail the principal problems of economic security that affect people living in the 16 county areas—problems of food, health and welfare, education, farm programs and employment. The papers appraise the adequacy and effectiveness of government programs in each of these fields.

When the material in each of the papers is taken together, it leads to one inescapable conclusion—that government is not intervening effectively at any point to provide people who have been victims of slavery and discrimination with an opportunity to lead decent and productive lives.

Stated another way—the overriding failure of present policy is that for the black citizen in rural Alabama, it is not providing any options at all. Government policy is not making it possible for him to stay on the land or work in the towns of the area, it is not equipping him with the education and skills which will enable him to survive in the big city or to obtain a job once he gets there, and it is not providing any place else for him to go.

ECONOMIC DEPENDENCY

To understand the reasons for the failure of government programs it is helpful to understand the system of economic dependency in which they operate. The weight of the evidence at our hearing in Montgomery was that the legacy of slavery still continues in the form of widespread racial discrimination, poverty and economic dependence.

Poverty among the Negro population in the 16 counties is pervasive. Many families must live on a noncash basis—they do not have any regular income.