

THE HUMAN DILEMMA

A DECADE LATER IN BELMAR

SECOND EDITION



Melvin D. Williams

**THE HUMAN DILEMMA:
A DECADE LATER IN BELMAR**

(A Revision of *On the Street Where I Lived*)

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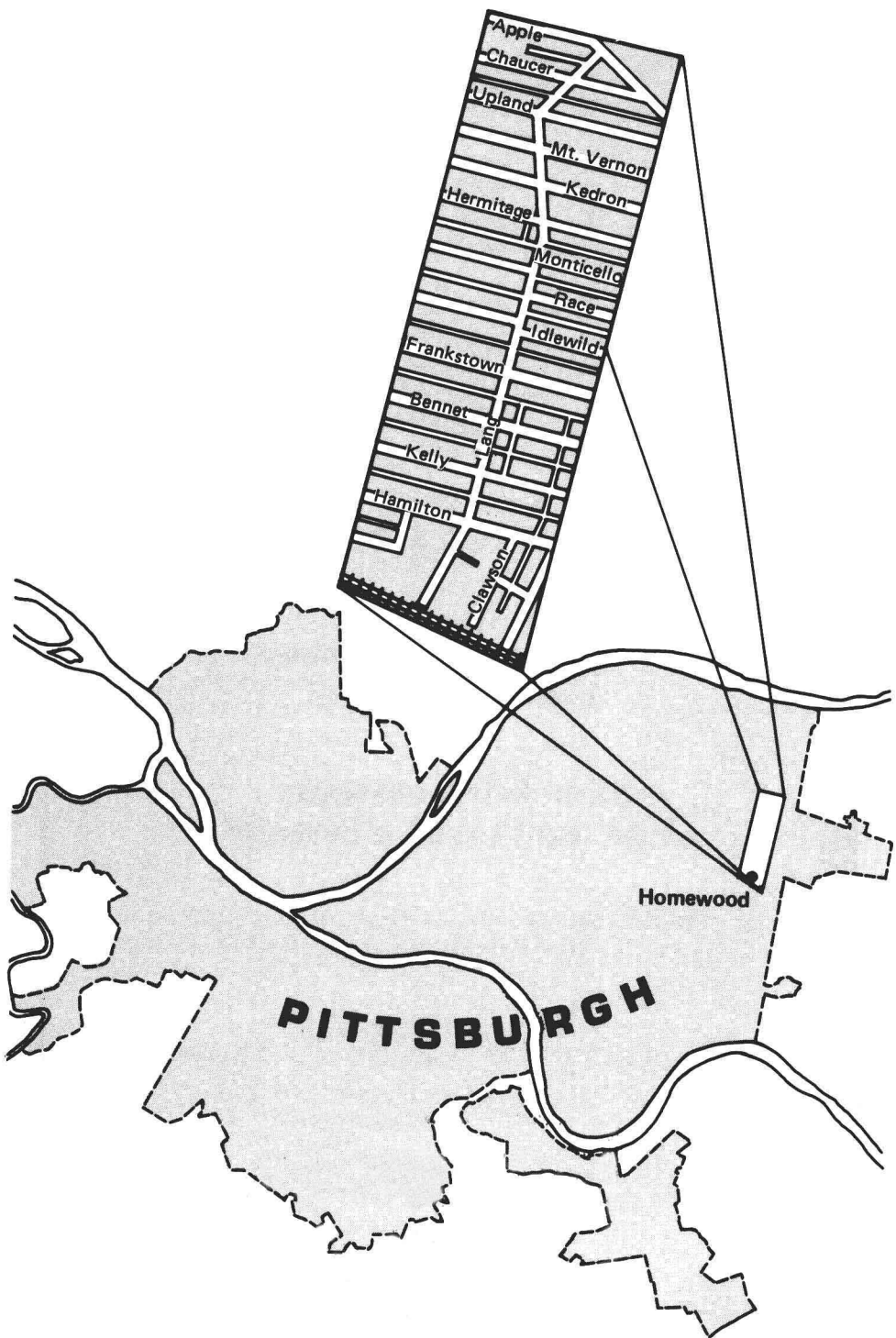
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**CASE STUDIES IN
CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY**

**GENERAL EDITORS
George and Louise Spindler
STANFORD UNIVERSITY**

**THE HUMAN DILEMMA:
A DECADE LATER IN BELMAR**



To Big Man, Bob, Hannab, Leonard, Mattie and Tobias

Foreword

ABOUT THE SERIES

These case studies in cultural anthropology are designed to bring to students, in beginning and intermediate courses in the social sciences, insights into the richness and complexity of human life as it is lived in different ways and in different places. They are written by men and women who have lived in the societies they write about and who are professionally trained as observers and interpreters of human behavior. The authors are also teachers, and in writing their books they have kept the students who will read them foremost in their minds. It is our belief that when an understanding of ways of life very different from one's own is gained, abstractions and generalizations about social structure, cultural values, subsistence techniques, and the other universal categories of human social behavior become meaningful.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Melvin D. Williams is professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and Ombudsman of the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts. He held the Olive B. O'Connor Chair in American Institutions at Colgate University in 1976–1977. He has been the organizer and president of a citywide chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He is the author of *Community in a Black Pentecostal Church* and *The Black Middle Class and Social Transformations: The Reproduction of Social Inequality*. He has been chairperson of the Project Area Committee of the Urban Redevelopment Authority in Belmar. He has published articles in professional journals and was active in community affairs in Pittsburgh, where he was born and educated.

ABOUT THIS CASE STUDY

In this ethnographic account of a Black neighborhood in Pittsburgh, Dr. Williams describes the pain and pleasure of being poor and Black, and the various life styles that accompany these conditions in one neighborhood. He states, "I intend an intimate look at the trials, tribulations, and joys of a street and neighborhood scene that can probably be found in places like this all over the United States." Dr. Williams allows people to speak for themselves in telling us how it is and uses his lifelong experience to explain what it is all about. What emerges is a vivid picture by an African-American anthropologist of a small Black world that looms large in America.

This is one of several studies in this series, *Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology*, which focuses on a segment of North American society. When we started the series in 1960, with five titles concerned with the Palauans, Cheyennes, Tepozlan,

Tiwi, and the Bunyoro, we declared our intention of including studies of our own society. The concepts and methods of cultural anthropology should be applicable anywhere. Since then many anthropologists have “come-home” to study America.

This case study by Dr. Williams has particular meaning for us as teachers of anthropology, for its argument is a significant part of the central thesis of a course we developed at Stanford, “Anthropological Perspectives on American Culture.” Since its first publication in 1981 we have authored and published *The American Cultural Dialogue* (1990) which carries further the major themes of this course. Dr. Williams contributes a chapter in that volume. We have been significantly influenced in our thinking by his observations and interpretations. Dr. Williams interprets what he terms the “genuine” Black life style as a reaction to and confrontation with mainstream norms, expectations, and models, as well as a development in its own right. We interpret “American culture” not as a single set of norms, values, or behavioral patterns, but rather as a complex interaction of groups that in itself exhibits certain regularities. One of the important regularities is in the conflicts and accommodations between mainstream segments and others who, by reasons of economics, oppression, access to power, history, and culture, are not full participants in the mainstream. These conflicts and accommodations take predictable forms. Dr. Williams’ “genuine” and “spurious” typologies, developed in the introductory pages of this case study, are versions, original with him, of forms of adaptation exhibited in other settings in American society. The many individuals whom the reader will meet on these pages give life to these categories.

This new edition of *On the Street Where I Lived* exhibits clearly the anguish that Dr. Williams feels as he views the inner city and its miserable circumstances. He shares with us the reasons for this anguish and frames his analysis in a perspective that is both passionate and reasoned.

Everywhere in the inner city black communities in America the traditional institutions of family, religion, education, and social cohesion have been eroding as the middle class moves out to the suburbs, the shops, clinics, restaurants, and even the churches disappear, and the drug culture moves in. Belmar, the particular community of Melvin Williams’ focus, has lost most of its business establishments. He describes it as a “scene of blight”. The empty buildings and vacant lots attest to a “process of abandonment”. And yet there is social life. People belong to a neighborhood that belongs to them, partly because “no one else wants it”. Williams describes this social life in telling detail. He puts himself in the setting in his telling, and goes further to speak of what it is like to be a Black in America outside the deteriorating inner city.

This case study is essential reading for anyone who wants to understand contemporary America and the problems we all must squarely face if we are to maintain a viable society.

George and Louise Spindler
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Acknowledgments

This revised volume is the culmination of a three-year study and fifteen years of revisits for anthropological observations of a Pittsburgh neighborhood, beginning in 1973. Much of this time was spent residing in the neighborhood, visiting the homes of neighbors, intensively interviewing a selected group of *residents*, conducting a survey and leading a citizens' neighborhood organization.

The research was supported in part by funds from the Social Science Research Council. *I am grateful.*

I am indebted to the residents of Belmar who accepted me in their neighborhood in spite of my often peculiar behavior and unique role. This long Belmar sojourn has brought us to the brink of the twenty-first century. It has taught me that the problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of the human line—*the challenge to eliminate* boundary decisions about who belongs within the human community at any given time (see fig. P 1-4). The Belmar residents await the end of the *social lag* in our cultural evolution when we humans will “catch-up” in *our social and political relationships* in the *Ecological Revolution*.

Writing endeavors are usually the result of much support and assistance. Most of it remains unmentioned. I mention David P. Boynton, who discovered me and my original manuscript in my office in Pittsburgh in 1978. Rachel Cohen in the anthropology department of The University of Michigan typed the manuscript into the computer system. She is a rare young woman. Dianna S. Campbell, a pleasant and able colleague at Michigan, read the manuscript and advised me *on revisions*. Dr. Ralph D. Story, another colleague, provided me the administrative support that enabled me the time to write. *Early in my academic career Marise Melson taught me the value of a concerned and able editor. I regret that I was not wise enough then to appreciate it.*

Finally, there continues to be my supportive family—Faye, Aaron, Steven and Craig. To them I must now add my grandson, Christopher.

My efforts here continue to be designed to contribute to the complex process of unraveling the conceptualization of the urban African American. This time that process seems inseparable from the total human dilemma.

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1 / Introduction

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

In 1981, I wrote:

I suggest that the song "We Shall Overcome" is fast becoming obsolete among the young of these disillusioned poor, and unless this society commits itself to a more equitable distribution of resources and justice, the tactics of urban guerrilla warfare will soon replace the song. Denial, defiance, and defilement will reach an apex of violence in "genuine" life styles in response to that violence in the wider society and the world.

Humans create meaning, and ultimately culture, from the material and institutional resources available to them. If we restrict and differentiate these resources among populations, we differentiate the nature and meaning of the world for them. We set the stage for subcultures. If we want to integrate Americans, we must provide similar ecological niches for them. We must destroy the Belmars in America by an equitable distribution of national resources, whatever the economic device. If we do not want to integrate America, we must recognize, validate, legitimate, and accept the expressive life styles of these slum dwellers. We must assign them equal merit within the scheme of things, whatever the sociocultural device. To do neither in a world destined for economic retrenchments is to further isolate them from this society. It is to recall the violent energies that reemerged during the New York City blackout of July 13, 1977, and the Miami riot of May 17, 1980. It is to hasten the last ray of sunshine in these Western skies. It is to encourage the articulation of ghetto institutional patterns into cohesive movements whose poor Black identities are aligned with the Third World to the extent that they cast their lot and their allegiance with the majority of mankind. (p. 141)

Now, ten years later, we have had the homeless crisis; the teenage-gang phenomenon (including "wilding") in the inner cities of Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and others; more riots in Miami, the MOVE murders in Philadelphia, and still cries of "and we are not saved." We are witnessing a pervasive growth in an underclass without hope, drug subcultures, Black male incarcerations, and single-female parents in an America that is still not sufficiently motivating us to take the necessary social and political action (see Branch 1988, Lemann 1991 & Williams 1990).

We can no longer pretend to contribute to the well-being of the poor and the Black by studying them. We have overstudied them "and they are not saved." Many books and papers about the Black and poor, economics and social policy, and government action and spending priorities are designed to promote the authors and their supporters, not those in poverty. This volume's revision is justified only because I believe I have some new and different solutions to these social problems.

On a level of abstraction above social action, any treatment of Blacks as a separate and distinct category of human being reinforces the oppression of all

Blacks. We should study the white churches that shun Black members, white leaders who shun Black input, and the rich and powerful who tolerate and exploit oppression, not the Black and the poor. As Hylan Lewis (1971) stated:

My own view is that the most important research into this area now should focus not on the culture of poverty but on the culture of affluence—the culture that matters more and that is far more dangerous than the culture of poverty. Jean Mayer has put the thrust and the focus succinctly:

There is a strong case to be made for a stringent population policy on exactly the reverse of the basis Malthus expounded. Malthus was concerned with the steadily more widespread poverty that indefinite population growth would inevitably create. I am concerned about the areas of the globe where people are rapidly becoming richer. For rich people occupy much more space, consume more of each natural resource, disturb the ecology more, and create more land, air, water, chemical, thermal and radioactive pollution than poor people. So it can be argued that from many viewpoints it is even more urgent to control the numbers of the rich than it is to control the numbers of the poor (Mayer, 1969, p. 5).

The concept, conspiracy, and mythology of a Black middle class does violence to the African-American dream of community and pushes the mythological treatment of race to its extreme (see Majors 1976 as an illustration, Williams In Press). The “genuine” Black is threatened as the carrier of Black culture in a system in which the ultimate goal is to be white and upper class. How can Blacks trust or follow the Black middle class? Culturally secure Blacks are “genuine.” African Americans whose livelihoods are imperiled because economic circumstances have allowed them to fall through the societal safety net are the Black “underclass,” to the extent that the term is useful. The others are Blacks aspiring to be something else. Langston Hughes, Marcus Garvey, and E. Franklin Frazier understood that.

In 1981, I wrote:

Humankind is on the threshold of new experiments in human societies. The old models have run their course and appear inadequate to deal with the social problems they have inherited and created (see Nisbet 1975). My material may suggest new life styles and new orientations toward living once we destroy old preconceptions about material excesses and obsessions with possessions, property, prestige, power, fame, money, wealth, and competition. We are beginning to appreciate the nature of our limited world and the potential of human satisfaction without the waste of manpower and materials (see Dubos 1976, McHarg 1972). The crisis of our times is such that we begin to think the unthinkable and attempt to achieve the impossible. The alternative is to end it all in human folly—the present petty goals and successes that fill our daily lives. This simple and modest work about a poor Black neighborhood may present a timely and important message about humans everywhere. There has never been a people as patient with an oppressor as the poor Black in America. His final recourse to violence will not be an isolated event, but it will be one of the last signals that this culture and society are no longer capable of providing the cognitive orientation necessary for every human group within it. His call for justice is a call for salvage of a potentially great American society (Harrington 1976, Hall 1976, Heilbroner 1976, Lekachman 1976, Mead 1975, and Nisbet 1975). Such a society can then be an example to a world awaiting solutions to similar problems. (Williams 1981:140)

Now, ten years later, I offer you the new approaches to which I alluded in that

earlier volume. "New life styles and new orientations toward living" are difficult to formulate within an acceptable form. People who control the instruments of communication are not easily convinced of the merits of new ideas. As one director of a press at a prestigious American university told me, "I want to get on the map, not on the mat."

The pervasive problems of discrimination and oppression of human populations have historically been treated population by population, nation by nation, when the phenomena are panhuman (see Williams In Press b). We have sought piecemeal explanations and remedies when something far more was required. The human conditions that foster and perpetuate racism are the same conditions that create many of our other social problems. We must no longer treat the symptoms of those conditions, but we must alter the conditions, change the present course of civilization, and establish a new and necessary respect for life and planet. We must not only recycle the products of human culture, but also recycle human culture (values, attitudes, and myths about being human) itself. As Montagu, repudiating the innate aggression of man, said:

What, in fact, such writers do, in addition to perpetrating their wholly erroneous interpretation of human nature, is to divert attention from the real sources of man's aggression and destructiveness, namely, the many false and contradictory values by which, in an overcrowded, highly competitive, threatening world, he so disoperatively attempts to live. It is not man's nature, but his nurture, in such a world, that requires our attentions. (1968b:16)

The law of survival requires no less in the next century. We must somehow convince a fragmented world that has been forced into a global society that what Kenneth Clark said is true:

The truth of the dark ghetto is not merely a truth about Negroes; it reflects the deepest torment and anguish of the total human predicament. (1967:xxv)

In his preface to *Black Bourgeoisie*, Frazier stated:

Another criticism which deserves attention was that this study did not reveal anything peculiar to Negroes. This was a criticism offered not only by Negroes who are sensitive about being different from other people, but by white people as well. Some of them were the so-called liberal whites who, when any statement is made which might be considered derogatory concerning Negroes, are quick to say that the "same thing is found among whites." Other whites pointed out what is undoubtedly true: that this book dealt with behavior which is characteristic of middle-class people—white, Black, or brown. Some of my Jewish friends, including some young sociologists, went so far as to say that the book was the best account that they had ever read concerning middle-class Jews. (1968:13)

This classic book remains the best example of the myth of Black solidarity as many Blacks struggle to separate and distinguish themselves from their poor brothers and sisters. But as Frazier suggests, this is not a Black problem; it is a human problem. And that is how we must approach the solution. So this revised volume is merely another example of the human dilemma, not just the American dilemma.

My studies of the “genuine” African American who denies, defies, and defiles American values (dddav, pronounced “did-did-dav”) have culminated in my concept of DDDAK (pronounced “did-did-dac,” see Williams 1990, In Press b) for humankind. These have been adaptive human emotions. Since the beginning of human culture, humans have denied, defied, and defiled their animal kinship. That energy and that vector created culture and, eventually, modernity. But the technological sophistications of modernity no longer permit this approach to humanness. They threaten the endangered Earth. DDDAK is the human (with his/her unique perceptive ability) response (including fear) to his/her animal heritage and destiny (death). Humans fear what they are (animals) and what may happen to them—hunger, violence, homelessness, meaninglessness, loneliness, illness and death. Thus, humans substitute myth (including superiority) and power (to enforce and validate myth) for their history, their present and their future. Superiority requires comparisons and contrasts (see Veblen 1987), so humans create “inferior” (“lower”) animals and “inferior” people (races, classes, genders and “devils”). The people of Belmar are some of the victims of this human origin and cultural evolution of myth and power. The other victims are the remainder of humankind. Together, they are in the human dilemma created by cultural evolution and DDDAK. Similarly, African Americans have created their own distinctive subculture by denying, defying, and defiling American values. One of the few avenues for subgroup separation, identity, and association among humans is to disavow the values of “others.” The “hippies” and “flower children” of the ’60s, the separatist religious groups, animal-rights activists, “skin heads,” and even the radical environmentalists of the ’80s and ’90s attest to this. The behavior (dddav) of the “genuine” Black combats the hegemonic value system in America and appropriates and transforms the discourse into “genuine” Black collective identities.

Dddav created a viable subculture for African Americans, as this volume demonstrates, but like DDDAK and its obsolescence for humankind—and the parallelism is no accident—modern life in American Black ghettos can no longer tolerate this approach to subculture.

Many American cities are predominantly Black. Most have large Black populations. Mayors, police, judges, and city bureaucrats are African Americans. African Americans have access to sophisticated weapons, drugs, and local power. The traditional dddav that we describe below is no longer sufficient in modern cities. African Americans have control of many of their neighborhoods and now must create communities among themselves based on an approach broader than dddav. Just as DDDAK may create human extinction, dddav may create Black inner-city destruction:

$$\frac{\text{DDDAK}}{\text{Human extinction}} = \frac{\text{dddav}}{\text{Black inner-city destruction}}$$

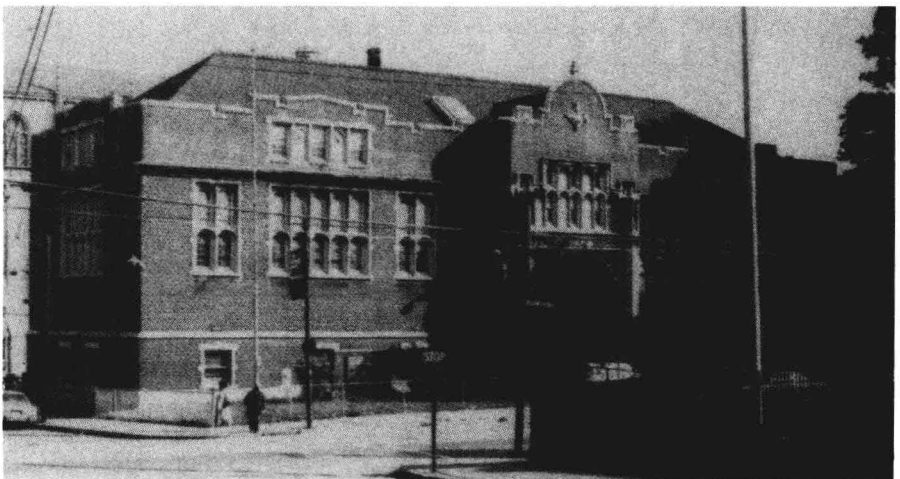
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We have created human categories and multiplied them since the agricultural revolution. For instance, one of the unique inventions in the New World was the creation of the category, race. Race, which is almost meaningless outside of political designs, has become pregnant with political interpretations and beliefs (see Montagu 1952). We attempt to assign all humans to a race, to give races a rank, and to deny the depravity of this process. Notwithstanding our denial of their existence, racial classification and ranking persist. And most nations of the world reflect this persistence in their respective minority problems. The Ibo of Nigeria, the Luo of Kenya, the Blacks, Colored, and Hindu of South Africa, the Tamil of Sri Lanka, the Hutu of Ruanda, the Kurds of Iraq, the Ukrainians of the Soviet Union, the Armenians of Turkey and the Soviet Union, the Jews of Nazi German, the Eta and Ainu of Japan, the Indians of the Americas, the barbarians in China, the Catholic Irish in Britain, the African Americans and Hispanics in the United States, and the Indians of Canada are all examples of race classifications (or similar categories) used to separate peoples, often for oppressive ends (see Berreman 1972).

BELMAR, 1990

I have returned to the Belmar section in Pittsburgh several months every year for the past decade to observe the social and physical transformations in the neighborhood. The economic decline in Belmar that I described in 1981 continues ten years later. It will not reverse itself until the values change in America and in Belmar. Black "leaders," poverty programs, public policy agents, government intervention, private investments, housing code enforcement, school desegregation, and political realignments in Belmar and Homewood (the larger region containing Belmar) are cosmetic factors that do little to address the problems of the neighborhood. Houses continue to decay and to be replaced by lots full of debris. Pool halls are replaced by



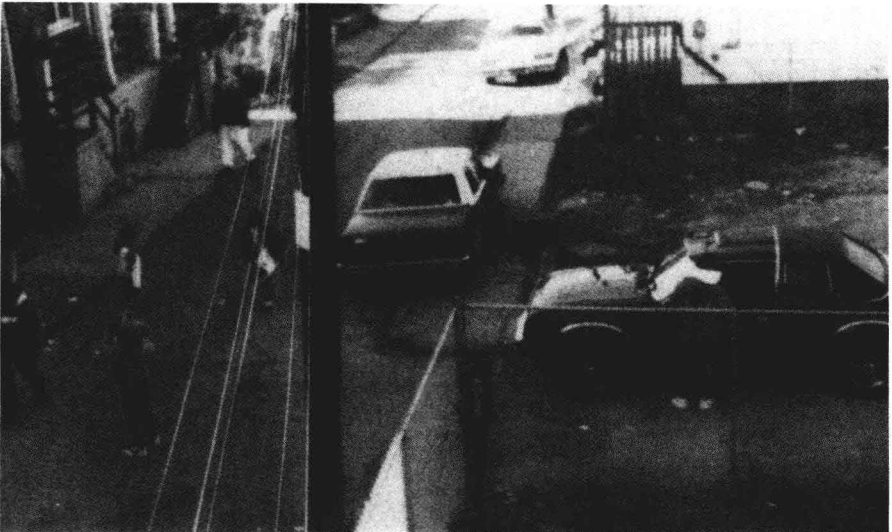
Carnegie Library on North Lang Avenue

drug streets, street corners, and houses (crack houses) while other activities, for instance, at the library, taverns, with store-corner groups, “wino” groups, street-mechanic groups, street and schoolyard game groups, “huffy” bicycle groups, and at the swimming pool seem to wane in the face of major economic enterprises in street drug traffic. Even vandalism, burglary, and robbery appear to have decreased as money seems more available in the drug traffic. The rubbish and garbage that the residents remove from their property in the early morning after the busy night’s transactions reveal new and more-expensive eating and drinking habits of those who work and litter there.

The alterations in family, church, and neighborhood life had a major impact on educational goals, single-parent families, teenage pregnancy, and the unemployables. The spirit and the activities seem dominated by the young men and women who ply their trade and participation in drugs. The children are surrounded and sometimes inducted into these drug activities. They see and know the dealers and their cars. They admire their clothes, shoes, money, cars, loud car stereo systems, and business acumen. One 21-year-old male dealer called to a nine-year-old neighbor as he stored his drugs into the trunk of his parked-car-business location, “Milton watch my stuff. Don’t let anybody mess with it. If you see anybody messing with it, let me know who it is.”

The neighborhood continues to lose its “core members” (those who invest in their community without expectations of immediate returns). Even Deacon Griffin (Williams 1981:55, p. 55 below), who was “mainstream” and “resigned to live out his days” in Belmar, has moved. If he could see the traffic in front of his former house today, he would have no regrets. The neighborhood seems alive with young adults, and many older residents appear overwhelmed by the drug networks, activities, control, noise, and the dominating impact on them and their children.

This process of blaming and debating about the victims diverts attention from



A winter marketplace under the kitchen window of an irate neighbor