

# CIVIL RIGHTS DIGEST

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BLACK BELT, ALABAMA  
The Negro in the Rural South

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**BLACK BELT,  
ALABAMA**

## Commission Hearing on Rural Poor

**P**UBLIC AGENCIES in Alabama are doing little to break the cycle of poverty and dependency and assure the victims of slavery and discrimination the opportunity to lead decent and productive lives. Black citizens of 16 counties in "blackbelt" Alabama are not being helped to stay on the land; nor are they being equipped with the education and skills to work in the towns. Left with little choice but to leave rural areas, black citizens are moving to urban areas. In effect, the South has transformed a regional problem into a national one to the extent that it exiles its poor and their problems.

William L. Taylor, Staff Director of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, announced these preliminary conclusions in mid-June on the basis of staff investigations and a five-day public hearing in Montgomery, Ala., April 27-May 2, on the issues of economic security as they affect black people in the State.

"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 dependency," Taylor said.

Taylor added that the issues and information covered in the six-month staff investigation and at the hearing were "particularly relevant" to current Congressional debates on spending, to issues raised by the Poor People's Campaign, and to the crisis of race and poverty in America.

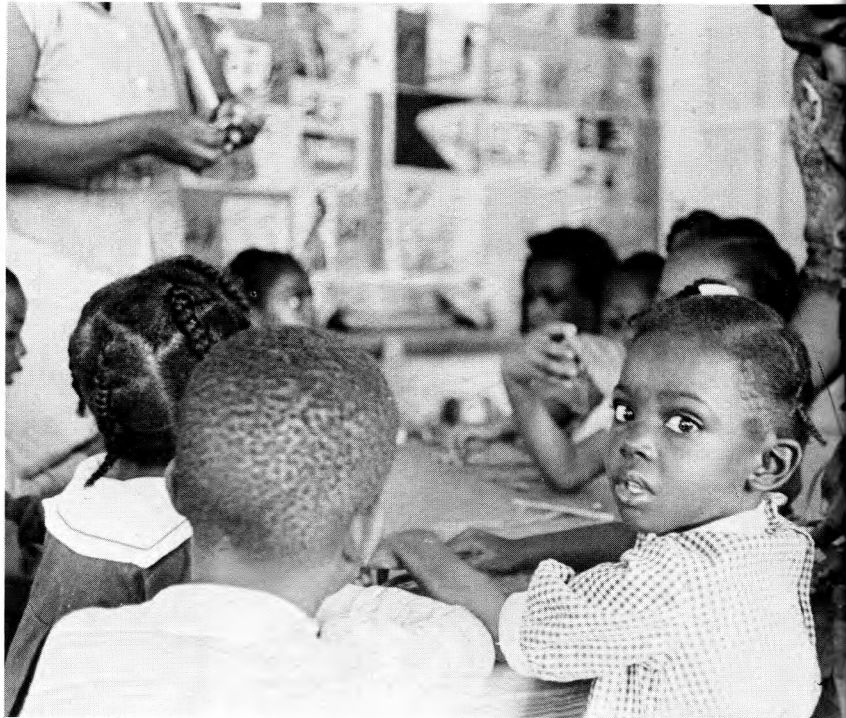
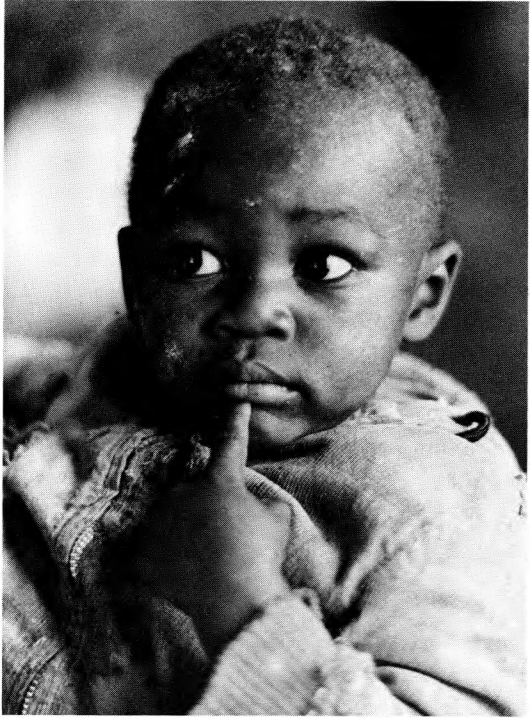
In other findings, released in the form of four staff papers, it was pointed out that black families in the area studied rely on a noncash system of credit ob-

tained from merchants and employers so that there is no regular use of money.

As a result, the report said, poverty is pervasive in the 16-county area covered by the Commission's inquiry. Federal programs which could at least allay the problems of inadequate diet, health services, or welfare assistance, the staff reports disclosed, have been insufficient or totally unrealized in many counties. The almost completely segregated school system had taken its toll, along with the ill effects of meager diets, in stunting the educational capabilities of Negro children. Alabama's segregated schools have deprived Negro children of proper schooling, equal facilities, and even of courses with an equivalent future job potential as those for white children.

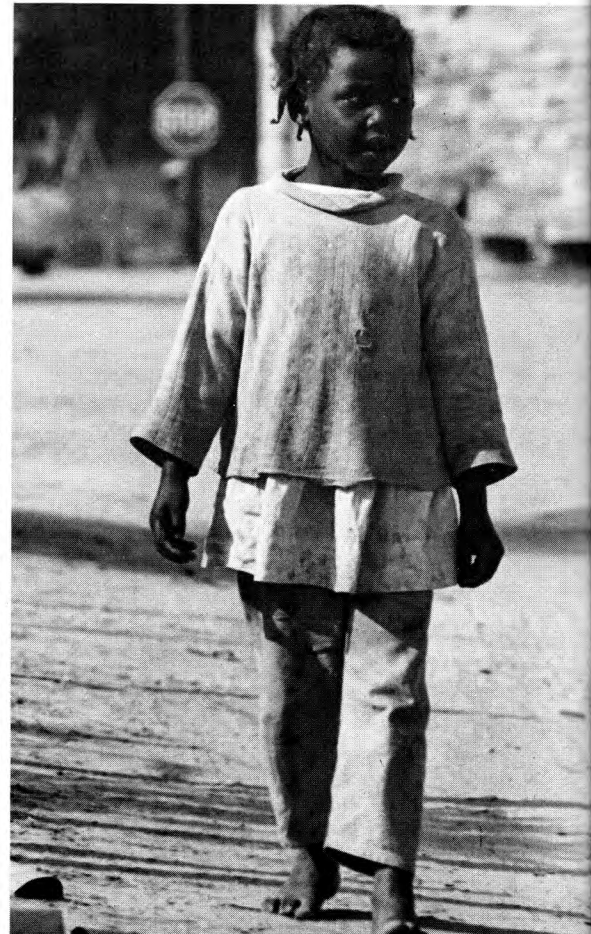
Lack of educational achievement and training in skills evidenced itself in the kinds of jobs open to black citizens, but "blatant" racial discrimination—even by large government contractors—had limited job opportunities as well. In agriculture, many farmers continue in marginal or total dependency due to their relegation to methods dating back to the 1930s. The Cooperative Extension Service and the Farmers Home Administration were both found to discriminate in providing programs and benefits to Negro farmers, the staff reports said.

Because of economic subjugation and dependence, the staff reports said, Negroes are deterred from seeking to improve their lot by asserting themselves politically, voting in greater numbers, and seeking election to public and party office. □



"I hope for my children a better education than I had."

"I've got four out of school because they didn't have shoes and clothes."



"Here in Alabama I don't feel like I'm living . . . Demoted from a Staff Sergeant down to a boy is kind of hard to take."



"If things were changed, I would love living here . . . ."

" . . . We don't have enough of nothing."



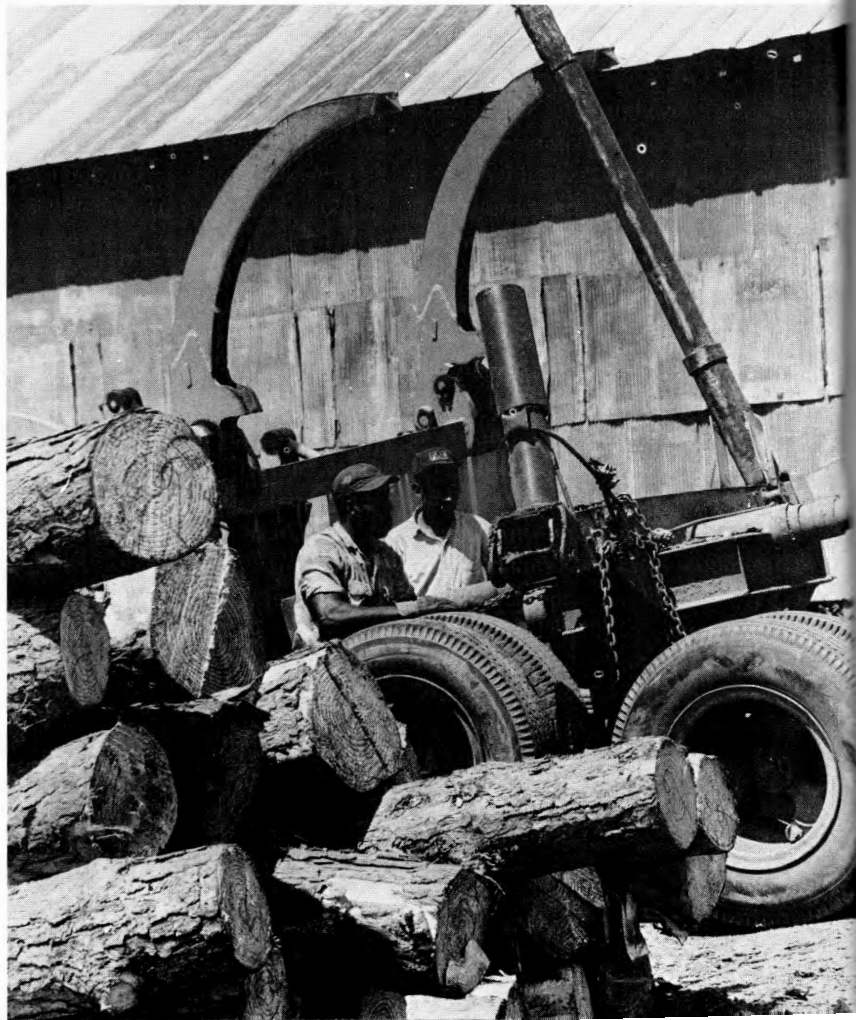
"I did mine the hard way, plowing a mule, making it by a lot of sweat there . . .



... but it could be made better than that."



"If they would give us more  
job opportunities . . . we would have  
better housing and more food . . ."





"I was just blind, didn't know nothing but work . . .  
Just 25 or 30 years too late . . . hope it ain't  
though . . . I hope I have some more  
years to live . . . ."





*Photographs by James Pepler*

*Text from U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Hearing,  
Montgomery, Alabama, April 1968.*