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## **THE HARD CORE NEGRO DEAF ADULT IN THE WATTS AREA OF LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA**

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By **LINWOOD SMITH**

The primary purpose of this study concerning the hardcore Negro deaf adult of Watts was to report on their occupational, educational, and social conditions; their self-image, and their awareness or unawareness of Vocational Rehabilitation, Welfare, and other community services.

A secondary purpose was to add to the meager amount of existing information regarding the Negro deaf and to stimulate additional articles, reports, and research studies regarding them.

The sample was comprised of four men and eight women. The handicaps which make up this group were: 1) deafness, 2) race, 3) social and economic condition, and 4) education, imply the name "hardcore". Hardcore also refers to the fact that they are reluctant to seek help and are suspicious of helping persons, organizations, and Government. A loose interpretation of hardcore as used in the study is that given to describe a disadvantaged and poor person in the Manpower Administration Act of 1969:

"A member of a family receiving cash welfare payments or whose annual income is below specified minimum levels, who is without suitable employment, and who is either: 1. a school dropout, 2. minority group member, 3. under 22 or over 45 years of age, 4. handicapped physically or mentally, and in addition may be culturally isolated and deprived, educationally limited, geographically isolated, mentally retarded . . . in a low socioeconomic status, with a language problem, or easily discouraged and frustrated."

### **METHOD OF INVESTIGATION**

As a result of professional contacts made at the South Central Los Angeles Service Center in Watts, the initial investigative step was to solicit

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the help of the Vocational Rehabilitation counselor for the deaf there in supplying information on the background, characteristics, and conditions of the deaf Negro adults in Watts. These people were contacted and inquiries were made concerning their deaf friends in the neighborhood whom the Vocational Rehabilitation department was unaware of and whom they were not currently serving.

The prime data gathering technique used to obtain information was the conduction of a questionnaire-interview. Questions were asked on the educational background, economic condition, employment history, method of communication, and social attitudes of the samples. This questionnaire-interview was conducted by the investigator since the respondents were preconceived not to be able to complete or understand the questionnaire on their own.

The majority of those to whom the questionnaire was given to fill out needed assistance in filling out the form. This monitoring of the interview on the part of the investigator had considerable impact on the information received.

Five subjects were found as a result of visiting community agencies, and three were obtained from church visits and four from other sources.

Most of the hard core Negro deaf were very suspicious and would not offer anything unless the investigator established some type of rapport and empathy with them. One of the main problems was *communication*; signs had to be slower, words carefully chosen, and the sentence structure geared to the educational level and background of the clients. This communication factor was a big gap and the investigator's previous contact with low-verbal deaf people in urban and rural environments proved to be the biggest boon in establishing a sense of rapport and mutuality and getting the respondents to feel at ease and open up about themselves and their experiences.

More than half of the total population in the study proved to be females, mostly unemployed, unmarried mothers on welfare.

## RESULTS

Twelve subjects were found in a two month period. Three of the interviewees were able to complete the questionnaire with little assistance from the investigator. All other questionnaires were filled out by the investigator because of the limited reading and communication ability of the respondents.

Four men and eight women were interviewed. The age range of the men was from 19 to 42, the median being 31 and the mean 35. The women ranged in age from 21 to 49, the median being 22 and the mean 29.

Nine or 75% of the 12 persons interviewed reported being born deaf. One became deaf at age four, one at age five, and one at age 11. (See Table 1)

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**TABLE 1**  
**AGE OF ONSET OF DEAFNESS**

Age	Number
Congenital . . . . .	9
1-12 months . . . . .	0
1-5 years . . . . .	2
6-10 years . . . . .	0
Later than 10 years . . . . .	1
Total . . . . .	12

All of the respondents have lived in the project area for more than two years, with the longest period of residence being 16 years. Of the twelve subjects, four were born in Los Angeles, three were from Arkansas, and one each from Mississippi, Louisiana, Ohio, and Oklahoma.

School attendance varied widely among the subjects. None of the four born in California attended either of the two state residential schools for the deaf; two graduated from public schools having programs for the deaf; two did not complete school past the ninth grade. Seven attended their respective state schools for varying lengths of time, however, only two graduated. One person had never attended school and could not read or write. (See Table 2)

**TABLE 2**  
**EDUCATIONAL LEVEL OF RESPONDENTS**

Grade Level	Number
No school . . . . .	1
Kindergarden-6th . . . . .	0
7th-12th . . . . .	7
Graduated . . . . .	4
Total . . . . .	12

One of the respondents was currently employed, three had held jobs of short duration. Table 3 shows the responses given to the question: "Who helped you find your job?"

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**TABLE 3  
EMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE RESPONSES**

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
Friend . . . . .	1
Relative . . . . .	0
Vocational Rehabilitation . . . . .	1
Self . . . . .	2
Other . . . . .	0
Total . . . . .	<u>4</u>

Table 4 shows the method of communication the respondents used with co-workers and/or friends and acquaintances.

**TABLE 4  
MODE OF RESPONDENT'S COMMUNICATION ON THE JOB  
AND WITH FRIENDS**

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
Signs . . . . .	5
Speech . . . . .	6
Writing . . . . .	6
Other (Gestures) . . . . .	3
Total . . . . .	<u>21</u>

The communication ability of the respondents was very poor. For the most part, what they designated as being signs were only gestures whose meanings had to be figured out by the investigator.

There is little or no interaction among these people with other deaf people, and most of them did not know each other although they lived in the same area. Outside of their immediate families there is little interaction with the hearing community.

When asked if they liked their jobs, all but one of the respondents who had held jobs previously replied in the affirmative. When asked, "Would you change jobs if you could?", all but one replied "yes". Table 5 shows the responses given to problems encountered on the job.

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**TABLE 5**  
**EMPLOYMENT PROBLEMS**

Categories	Number of Responses
Cannot understand boss . . . . .	6
Work Is Too Hard . . . . .	1
No One To Talk To . . . . .	1
Not Enough Money . . . . .	3
Boss Does Not Understand Me . . . . .	5
Hearing People Hate Deaf People . . . . .	2
Other . . . . .	0
I Have No Problems . . . . .	0
Total . . . . .	18

When asked if they felt they were qualified for or capable of holding a better job, 66% of the respondents replied "No". When asked if they wanted training for another job, 75% replied "Yes", with the remaining 25% replying "No".

This investigator feels that the deaf of Watts are afraid of agencies and will not approach the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation facility for help even if they were aware that they could be helped. All of the interviewees showed reluctance to seek aid when informed of the services of the DVR.

It is interesting to note that when asked, "Would you like to go to school to improve yourself, family life, and job?", 50% replied "yes" and 50% replied "no", with those in the upper age bracket of the sample replying in the affirmative. All 12 respondents replied "no" when asked if they wanted to go to college.

Although all of the respondents have lived in Watts for over two years, five of them did not know the location of the South Central Los Angeles Service Center, which in addition to the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, houses offices of the Department of Public Welfare, both of which service the Watts area. These five respondents also did not know how to go about inquiring for the services they obviously need.

### DISCUSSION

The deaf Negro has been and continues to be part of a multi-disadvantaged minority – a minority within a minority. As such he has been virtually by-passed by much of the progress Negroes as a whole have made in any and all phases of life.

The Negro revolution is helping to create new avenues for combating discrimination and unequal treatment in all areas of the Negro's life. But for the deaf Negro, and particularly the less educated deaf Negro, many of these

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gains have not been realized because the handicap of deafness created yet another barrier to further progress.

In an area such as Watts, there is a Negro sub-culture that tends to be concentrated, that is, one would assume that there exists for the subjects in this study some degree of productive social interaction, group togetherness, or the like which often characterizes the dynamics of sub-cultural minority groups. There are such opportunities for the hearing Negroes of Watts but little or none for the deaf. One must remember, however, that we are dealing not with the relatively well-to-do deaf Negro in the area, but with those who have never been touched by any degree of the affluence so inherent in our society today.

According to the Schein study, we can assume that there is perhaps one profoundly deaf person per 1,000 in the Negro population. (Schein, 1969) Using this as a statistical basis, Bowe estimates that there are 22,000 deaf Negroes in the U.S. with a small number of other non-whites added to the total (Bowe, 1971). It might be further assumed that the larger proportion of these people live in urban areas, particularly in the inner cities, because these areas traditionally attract poor rural folk who are likely to believe that greater opportunity exists there for them. Eight of the subjects in this study were originally from predominantly rural areas of the South, Southwest, and Northeast, with the larger number (seven) coming from the South.

The deaf Negroes, like their hearing counterparts, do not escape the attraction of the big city, and the so-called promise of immediate jobs, immediate success, etc., that they believe awaits them there.

The subjects in this study were wary and suspicious of the investigator. This may be expected to some degree in spite of the fact that some measure of relaxed informality regarding the interview was attempted. That there was evidently a conflict between what the subjects believed themselves capable of achieving and the present status they occupied was evident in the hesitant, non-committal, and somewhat lackadaisical answers they gave to questions pertaining to further training or educational aspirations. One cannot help but sense that there exists a deeper, more inexpressible conflict within these people than they were willing to or capable of admitting.

Judging by the difficulty of locating subjects and the lack of knowledge of their existence by persons in the area, the hardcore deaf Negro appears to be untouched by the social movement taking place within the Negro community. One might say they occupy a status at the very bottom of the social scale. Lacking communication skill, awareness of what is taking place around them, and the significance of these events, the hardcore deaf Black person remains even further outside the mainstream of everyday life. As stated in the study, none of the subjects knew each other, even casually, although they lived within a few blocks of each other. These individuals tend to be stationary with regard to class mobility. Their socio-economic status does not make it possible for them to achieve any kind of mobility—either vertical or horizontal, within or outside of the deaf or Negro class systems.

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Their inability and powerlessness to change or reject their inferior ascribed identities creates for them an illusory contentment with what is closer to being degradation than equality. Yet, this is understandable when one keeps in mind that their unmet needs, both physical and social as well as psychological tend to create a desire for immediate, tangible results. Long term planning such as adult education programs, vocational training opportunities, etc. hold less glitter, less meaning, to them than a job and money *now*. They must be made to see that the means must naturally precede the end result.

This investigator gives the following recommendations for rehabilitation counselors and others working with these people: The counselor should attempt to go "beyond" the client and also work with those in his home environment. Counselors should seek out the client rather than wait for him to come in. Appointments with clients should be scheduled in a place other than the VR facility; a place downtown, street corner, ball game, etc., can yield results drastically different from interviews conducted in the sterility of an office. Educational activities such as evening adult classes might be attempted so that the client can enhance his readiness for vocational opportunities. Social activities can be set up such as Christmas parties, Thanksgiving get-togethers, etc., so that the deaf in the area can get acquainted with each other and form a sense of mutuality and togetherness. The persons served by the counselor should be brought to the attention of local groups for the deaf so that they can share in the workshops, social events, and other gatherings of these groups which are in a position to offer valuable help to them. Basic communication classes to teach signs and fingerspelling should be established.

Clearly, this is a truly multi-disadvantaged group. They are hampered in the sense that they cannot participate in or benefit from any bond of identity with either the deaf or the Negro, and hence, are deprived of meaningful, productive, rewarding work and full participation in the many activities our society offers as a means of enriching our lives.

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