

A COMMUNITY CENTER FOR MERIDIAN, MISSISSIPPI
(LAUDERDALE) COUNTY) . ITS PURPOSE, DESIGN AND IMPLI-
CATION

PURPOSE

The lives that many people lead in rural counties throughout this nation leaves much to be desired. However, some rural people far better than others. One particular area where rural people lead extremely unfavorable existence is in Mississippi. Their home environments are poor, their chances of getting a decent education are slim, their dietary levels are significantly different (undesirably so) from those that comprise what is commonly called the national norm.

Needed in these rural counties is a place where services can be dispensed to offset the effect of the economic and cultural deprivation, a place where an attempt can be made to indicate to the children and parents of poor rural counties that their plight is not normal and that a significant change is possible, a place where people who have been cut off from the mainstream of American life can get together by developing a communal spirit and outlook of life, establish a community which will meet their needs.

An effort to replace words with deeds is now underway. Its occurring in Lauderdale County, Mississippi. The following is a brief explanation for the emergency of the center in Lauderdale County .

Lauderdale County is populated with 67,119 people, 43,635 of which are white, and 23,484 are non-white. Lauderdale County is largely a rural county. Its largest city, Meridian (second largest in the state) has 49,374 people, of which 16,761 are Negro. There is no 'Y' in the city.

	State	Urban	Rural	State	Urban	Rural
Non-white	\$440	\$693	\$390	\$606	\$871	\$474
White	\$1,236	1,826	973	2,023	2,622	1,605

(SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the census)

In low income areas there is a lack of sufficient library facilities for the young--not even considering the fact that Negroes do not have access to the existing public library facilities. Recreational and culturally uplifting activities in the rural areas are largely nonexistent. Expenditures for education are considerably below the nation's average.

Infant Mortality--The rate of infant mortality in Miss. is unbelievable. Infant mortality is a problem for Lauderdale County, as it is for all Negroes in Mississippi.

Deaths under one year, rates for selected years, 1920-1961

Deaths per 1,000 population

MISSISSIPPI

Year	Non white	White
1961	50.0	23.5
1960	54.4	23.5
1955	46.4	24.7
1950	42.6	28.1
1945	40.7	36.1
1940	40.9	46.4
1935	58.6	47.5
1930	84.5	51.0
1925	85.7	53.0
1920	101.1	59.9

(SOURCE: Miss. State Board of Health)

It is known that high infant mortality rates are statistically correlated with low income areas. Pregnant women of low income families have a greater probability of giving birth to infants who won't survive a year than do pregnant women of well-to-do families.

Premature births are one reason that the infant mortality rate among poor families is exceedingly high. When a premature birth occurs, unless the baby has access to hospital facilities, his chances of survival are almost nil. Poor folks in rural areas have the greatest proportion of premature births, and do not have access to hospital facilities. Premature births occur largely because of improper pre-natal care during the early months of pregnancy. This improper care is largely a result of lack of knowledge on the part of the pregnant mother about proper habits of eating, resting, etc. in order to insure that she give normal childbirth.

The high infant mortality rate can be decreased significantly if a person informed about how pregnant mothers should eat and carry themselves during pregnancy could tour the homes of low-income

families dispensing such information to any pregnant mother.

Housing Conditions--The following statistical presentation gives an adequate description of the housing conditions in Miss. It, however, does not portray the actual condition under which many of the poor live--this has to be seen in order to be believed.

Negro housing in Mississippi 1960

	State Total	Urban	Rural
Total housing units	207,611	77,824	129,787
Owner occupied (#)	79,059	32,913	46,146
Owner occupied (%)	38.1	42.3	35.6
Renter occupied (#)	128,552	44,911	83,641
Renter occupied (%)	61.9	57.5	64.4
Condition			
Owner occupied			
sound	36,656	17,877	18,979
deteriorating	27,545	10,005	17,540
dilapidated	14,858	5,211	9,627
Renter occupied			
sound	33,168	15,294	17,874
deteriorating	52,629	15,937	36,692
dilapidated	42,755	13,680	29,075
Water supply			
Hot and Cold			
Pipe inside	40,870	33,181	7,689
Only cold water			
Pipe inside	39,101	30,376	8,725
Pipe outside	27,502	10,229	17,273
No piped water	100,138	4,038	96,100
Toilet Facilities			
Flush toilet			
Exclusive use	62,160	52,481	9,679
Shared	7,570	6,965	605
None	137,881	18,378	119,503
Bathing Facilities			
Bathtub or shower			
Exclusive use	44,991	36,333	8,658
Shared	2,207	1,807	400
None	160,413	39,684	120,729

(SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census)

Obviously, many of the houses, simply from the standpoint of not having bathing facilities or flush toilets, are not fit for human habitation. Even more significant, almost one half of all the houses are in a deteriorating or dilapidated state. An overwhelming need for housing repair, paint and new houses, becomes apparent upon touring Lauderdale County.

Education: The schools in Lauderdale County do not and cannot on their present budget meet the educational needs of deprived children in mid-twentieth century America. Supplementary assistance to present education is needed. It should come from the home, but the low-income parents in rural areas are really not capable of giving their children any advice that could possibly enable them to offset the effects of economic and cultural deprivation.

In general, there is a lack of attention given to the type of lives that people in Lauderdale County lead and can potentially lead as human beings. Recreation facilities are lacking for the young; hygienic instruction or care is unknown. Seeing barefoot kids, unshod not because of desire but because their families economic condition prohibits the purchase, lacking meaningful purpose, desire and ambition, adequately describes the state of mind of most of the rural poor. For the most part, these economically deprived children are Negroes.

It is felt by the field workers for the Congress of Racial Equality (C.O.R.E.) and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (S.N.C.C.) in Mississippi, that community centers throughout Mississippi would be a way of combatting many of the problems that people face largely because they are poor and are outside, for all meaningful purpose, the economic system. There is, as you, of course, can see, a tremendous need for such a center in Lauderdale County.

The center would serve all persons in Lauderdale County. The center's staff functions in two ways. (1) Services are distributed from the center, and (2) workers daily tour the county, dispensing information verbally and through easy-to-read pamphlets.

From the Center-

1) A library with 10,000 books should start within two weeks. This is to provide some library facilities for those in Lauderdale County who do not have access to public libraries. One half of the available space in the community center will be used for the library.

2) The center would also provide space for children to do their school homework and study in the evening, with the assistance of the staff.

3) Movies will be shown on the weekends. A bus will travel around the county picking up youngsters who want to attend the films. The films will be educational and entertaining.

4) After the movies on Saturday night, a social function for youth will be held. Not the commonly held dances that one might find in urban areas, but possibly hootenannies with guest folk singers and out of town speakers, or workshops on various phases of 20th century living.

5) In the evenings, typing lessons, reading and other classes will be offered.

6) On Saturday morning, a children's reading hour will be offered.

7) A social workers' corps is anticipated to provide 1) counselling services for school dropout in an effort to get them to return to school, 2) Give welfare aid to needy families, 3) To help in solving domestic problems, trying at all times to elevate the living standards of the families.

These are only the immediate undertakings, with which the center will be involved. Long range plans will depend on outside assistance, and will be discussed in the "implications" section.

Field Work--From the center, during the day, two field workers will visit the homes of lower-income families, giving:

1) Instruction in pre-natal care. A bold attempt will be made to bring the infant mortality rate down to, or below, the national average. The field workers are going to try to locate every pregnant woman who is a member of a low income family and inform her of what she needs to do in order to have a normal childbirth and assure her that her child lives through infancy.

2) The statistics on housing conditions have been given. A field worker will also travel to each house in a deteriorating or dilapidated condition. He will explain how the homes can be improved with a little effort and basic equipment. The center will attempt to supply paint, nails, and lumber where possible, and will have on hand a sufficient number of carpentry tools to lend.

3) It is hoped that those youths between 14 and 17 who want to form a work corps will go on Saturday mornings around the county on the center's bus and lend a hand in repairing and painting houses which need such.

4) A county worker will inform low-income families of all the programs (MDTA, WRA, RAD, FMA, etc.) that have been designed for low income rural families in an effort to help them help themselves.

5) Instruction on nutrition and the need for maintaining adequate dietary levels is beginning. It is hoped that vitamin pills and/or food commodities can be distributed to needy families.

Implications for the Future--

In Lauderdale County and throughout Mississippi, are envisioned hundreds of community centers which will ultimately have the following:

- 1) Library
- 2) Instruction in pre-natal care and child rearing
- 3) Vocational education
- 4) Nutrition classes for rural adults
- 5) Meals for children under 14 years of age when their nutritional needs cannot be met at home.
- 6) Tutorial classes
- 7) Cultural uplift
 - a) drama
 - b) reading discussion groups
 - c) music lessons
 - d) current events discussion
 - e) movies
- 8) Home repair workshops

9) Counselling for dropouts with an attempt to train them for employment or induce them to finish school.

10) Retraining program where local citizens can learn different trades (mechanics, upholstery, clerical work) and can begin their own businesses.

This program will be achieved ultimately if, and only if, outside resources, both of people and equipment, come into the centers.

It is hoped that by establishing such centers on a working basis, a change in public policy will occur; if not, then the task of attempting to 'overcome' will, as in the past, rest on the shoulders of those few who are dedicated and perceptive enough to realize that each of us is responsible for the welfare of all.