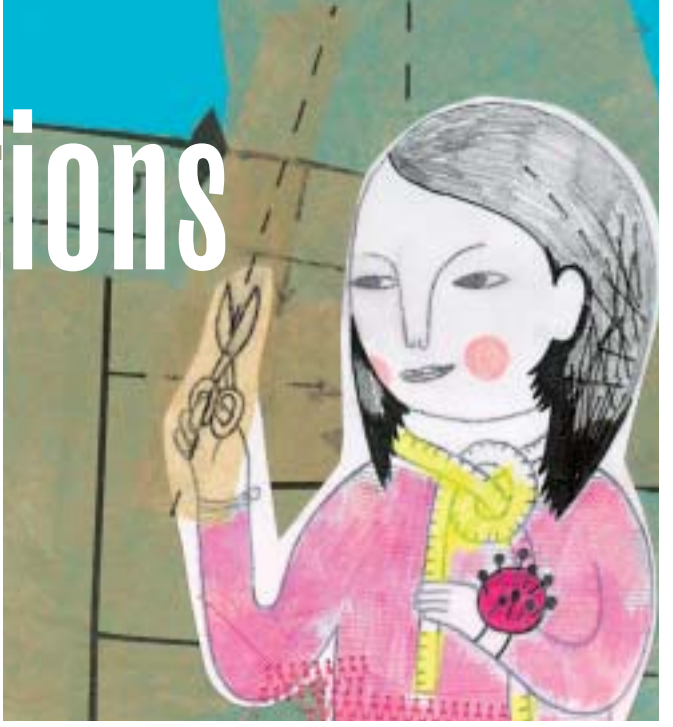
observations



On pins and needles

IN THE EARLY 1800s, it took 14 hours to hand sew a man's dress shirt and over 10 hours for a simple dress. Thankfully by the 1850s, sewing machines had reduced these times to just 1.25 hours and 1 hour, respectively. Since the price of readymade apparel dropped 51 percent since 1970, in large part because of inexpensive imports, the tedious chore of sewing one's own clothes has become unnecessary, even for penny-pinchers. Furthermore, as women have joined the workforce, they have more income and less time, making the thrifty home sewer seemingly obsolete.

But according to Anna Mazur, president of the Connecticut chapter of the American Sewing Guild, "The cream of the crop is still doing it." A 2000 Home Sewing Association survey of adult women found that 31 million American women sew, including 30 percent of women under 45. Seventy-five percent of them do it for recreation and relaxation, sewing crafts, home decorations, quilts, or embroidery. Reflecting the shift from chore to hobby, in 1998 the Bureau of Labor Statistics began classifying sewing machines as "Recreation" instead of "Apparel and Upkeep" in the calculation of the Consumer Price Index.

Though most of today's sewers are just having fun, there are still cost advantages to sewing clothes, particularly with high-quality fabrics and items where the fit is difficult or important, such as evening gowns and suits. A suit made with natural-fiber fabric may retail for $1,200 in Nordstrom's, and still require tailoring, while the same suit could be sewn to fit for less than $500, says Mazur.

But between 1992 and 1997, sales declined 25 percent in "sewing, needlework, and piece goods" stores; 2,000 of them closed. Dedicated sewers increasingly have to shop alongside other hobbyists, as retailers such as Hancock Fabrics and JoAnn Stores have survived by tapping into the broader $23 billion crafts industry and by stocking more home-decorating merchandise such as silk flowers and custom frames. The strategy seems to be working. Cathleen Campbell of the Home Sewing Association reports that the number of Chapter 11s and 13s filed by supply stores has "all but stopped" since the late 1990s. Meanwhile, the American Sewing Guild attracted 2,000 new members last year, and classes such as "Learn to Sew Clothes!" and "Getting to Know Your Sewing Machine" at the Boston Center for Adult Education have been filling quickly, says instructor Eleanor Mason of the Traveling Tailor, Inc. Apparently, bobbins and thimbles are here to stay.

—KRISTIN LOVEJOY

Education pays (for some more than others)

Education is a passport out of the lower end of the income distribution. The higher the education, the higher the salary. Indeed, the payoff to education has risen steeply in recent decades. The real wages of full-time workers with a college degree grew an average of 14 percent between 1979 and 2000. In contrast, wages of workers with only a high school diploma fell by 7 percent. But the fact that education leads to increased income does not mean that higher education by itself will let those whose wages have lagged behind catch up, according to Boston Fed economist Katharine Bradbury.

At the end of the 1990s, blacks not only earned lower wages at each education level, but they also received a smaller payoff for graduating from high school or earning a college degree than otherwise similar workers. In 2000, a black man working full-time saw a 40 percent increase in wages by attaining a college degree. A similar worker of another race enjoyed an even greater boost with a

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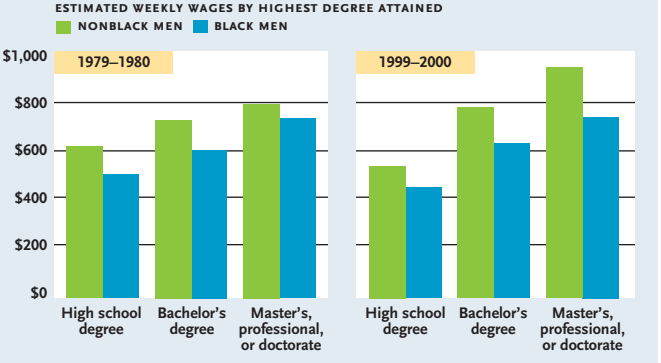
GROWING APART



NOTE: Estimates reflect full-time weekly wage differences associated with race and educational attainment for men who are otherwise similar in terms of usual work hours (within the full-time category), marital and family status, potential work experience, geographic region, occupation, and industry.

SOURCE: "Education and Wages in the 1980s and 1990s: Are All Groups Moving Up Together?" *New England Economic Review* Q1 2002.

ILLUSTRATION BY MARTINA WITTE

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44 percent increase. Twenty years earlier, by contrast, all men working full-time received less than a 20 percent increase in wages, on average, by going from a high-school degree to a college diploma. Though returns to education rose for women too, black women also saw the payoff to an additional degree rise more slowly over the past two decades than it did for their non-black counterparts.

What causes these differences is not clear. Some of the disparity may be due to discrimination. But it could also be the result of other factors, such as differences in the quality of education that blacks typically receive relative to other workers. Though education remains the best ticket to higher wages, "the incentives created by these differential growth paths and differential current payoffs augment the disadvantages that blacks have long faced in the U.S. labor market," notes Bradbury.

—Miriam Wasserman

▸FROM READERS

Another prescription?

Carrie Conaway's article, "Diagnosis: Shortage" (Q4 2001), was excellent, except it left out one important reason for the shortage of registered nurses.

Foreign countries, particularly the Philippines, train nurses (in English) specifically to enable them to work abroad. From 1952 to 1995, the United States brought in more than 100,000 of these nurses to work in hospitals on temporary visas. Due to union pressure, the temporary visa program was eliminated in 1995. Restoration would help to relieve pressure on overworked nurses and increase the nurse-to-patient ratio at beleaguered U.S. hospitals.

The solutions that Ms. Conaway mentioned in her article will take time and money. Restoration of the temporary visa program for RNs would take effect immediately, and at no cost to the taxpayers.

Carl Shusterman
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perspective

A NEW ENGLAND APPROACH TO PRESERVING OPEN SPACE

by Richard W. England § During the past decade, land-use issues have received considerable attention throughout the United States. Phrases such as "smart growth," "compact development," and "sprawl" have begun to enter our political lexicon. These concerns rose to the forefront in 1999 when the National Governors' Association called for preservation of open space and encouragement of growth in existing communities across the nation.

In New England, these issues have particular resonance. The region's identity is rooted in its distinctive landscape—the spectacular beauty of its mountains, seashore, forests, and farmland. But New England is also known for the unique character of its many cities and towns, and the tradition of local autonomy and strong municipal government is an important aspect of the region's charm. Some have argued that preserving our natural landscape will entail sacrificing some local authority, particularly over land use and zoning. Perhaps we can try to preserve both the region's civic and physical terrains by taking a distinctly New England approach.

THE NATURAL LANDSCAPE

New England faces its own distinctive land-use issues. On the one hand, a rate of population growth far lower than the national average means that the region has confronted less intense pressure to develop its rural landscape. Even New Hampshire's population, by far the fastest-growing in New England during the 1990s, grew more slowly than the U.S. population as a whole.

But by other measures, New England may face more serious land-development issues than most other regions. Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island have already developed more than 30 percent of their land areas; New Hampshire has built up 10 percent. By contrast, only 6 percent of the nation's acreage has been converted. This means that the social benefits of preserving open space are especially high in the region's densely populated southern states.

Also worrisome is New England's rapidly declining population density in its developed areas. Between 1982 and 1997, the average number of

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