

**RACE AND FAMILY IN THE
UNITED STATES**

By Everett Carl Ladd

Probably no other domestic problems are as intractable as those of the inner-city underclass. Far from showing signs of moving toward resolution, many of these problems—including crime and violence, drug use, and joblessness—are still deepening.

There can be no question that these social pathologies derive in some significant part from racial discrimination. But since they have surged just when the US began making greater efforts than ever before to end discrimination and mitigate its legacy, there can also be no doubt that the root dynamic is something more complex than discrimination itself. As sociologist William Julius Wilson observed in *The Truly Disadvantaged* (University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp. 3,11), “despite a high rate of poverty in ghetto neighborhoods throughout the first half of the twentieth century, rates of inner-city joblessness, teenage pregnancies, out-of-wedlock births, female headed families, welfare dependency, and serious crime were significantly lower than in later years and did not reach catastrophic proportions until the mid-1970s....[E]ven if racism continues to be a factor in the social and economic progress of some blacks, can it be used to explain the sharp increase in inner-city social dislocations since 1970?”

Family Distress is at the Center

Twenty-five years ago, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then a Labor Department official in the Johnson Administration, saw a new set of problems emerging around developments in the black family. He wrote in *The Negro Family* (US Department of Labor, 1965, pp. 5-6) that “the Negro community is in fact dividing between a stable middle-class group that is steadily growing stronger and more successful, and an increasingly disorganized and disadvantaged lower-class group.” The latter’s plight, he concluded, is inextricably caught up and expressed in the deterioration of family life in the inner-city ghettos. “[T]he family structure of lower class Negroes is highly unstable, and in many urban centers is approaching complete breakdown.” When issued in 1965, Moynihan’s report sparked intense controversy.

Today, however, its finding of unprecedented family deterioration, seen linked to a host of other problems, from poverty to crime, is accepted by analysts across the political spectrum. This has come because, unfortunately, the rising dislocations Moynihan detected in their early stages have since progressed so far. In 1960, for example, 74% of all black families were husband-wife

families. By 1970, married couple families had declined to a 68% share; and over the next decade their proportion plunged another 13 points. A new Census report (*Household and Family Characteristics*, 1990) shows that in 1990 married couples made up just half of all black families. The proportion female-headed, with no husband present, had climbed to 44%—from around 25% when Moynihan wrote his report.

Even these data understate the implications for the raising of children. In 1988, 64% of all births to black women were out of wedlock. The 1990 Census report showed that 56% of all black families with children under 18 years were single-parent, female-headed; only 39% included both parents.

The association between family status and poverty, evident for all groups, is especially sharp for blacks. The latest Census study found that for black married-couple families, the 1989 median income was \$30,650; but it was scarcely more than a third as great—\$11,630—for “female householder” black families. There are similar links between family structure and crime. For example, the Bureau of Justice Statistics’ 1987 survey showed that of all young blacks incarcerated in long-term juvenile facilities, only 22% grew up with both their parents.

Unraveling the causal structure is far more difficult, of course, than pointing to the associations themselves. If virtually everyone now sees the steep decline of the “traditional” two-parent family right in the middle of a host of social pathologies which beset inner-city black populations, analysts differ on why this decline came about—and, hence, on what to do about it. Some of these differences reflect long-familiar ideological arguments. Thus, some conservatives see the whole governmental welfare system as especially culpable in providing economic incentives for family break-up, and in discouraging individual responsibility. Many liberals are inclined to believe that the causes lie in government’s not doing enough—for instance, through programs to cut inner-city joblessness, which they see disintegrating all inner-city social life. Both sides here are probably right in part.

An Acute Case of a General Problem

Increasingly, however, the argument is shifting from invocations of liberal and conservative nostrums to a recognition that the problems of the black family may be only the most acute expressions of problems now affecting all groups of US families. Whites began experiencing historically unprecedented family dislocations at exactly the same time blacks did. The latter’s legacy from discrimination, and their current economic problems, simply left them far more vulnerable to these forces.

THE AMERICAN FAMILY BELEAGUERED/MOYNIHAN

What happened? Senator Moynihan wrote in a seminal article two years ago (see the excerpt which follows) that along with America's entry into the postindustrial era "has come a new form of social distress, associated with the 'post-marital' family." While there isn't as yet any fully adequate explanation of this development, there's compelling indication that a root cause is the radical redefinition of individualism which transformed so much of American social life in the 1960s and 1970s.

In *Habits of the Heart* (U. of California Press, 1985), the best book yet on the subject, sociologist Robert Bellah and four colleagues argue that this redefinition left the self so sovereign and its claims for personal reward so narrow as to make it hard for collective institutions like the family

to work satisfactorily. "What is at issue," they write, "is not simply whether self-contained individuals might withdraw from the public sphere to pursue purely private ends, but whether such individuals are capable of sustaining either a public *or* a private life....Modern individualism seems to be producing a way of life that is neither individually nor socially viable..." (pp. 143-44).

I believe the line of reasoning is generally right—though I think Bellah, et al, overstate the problem by overly discounting the strength of traditional limits on narrow self-serving in American individualism. This means we will need to find some of the answers to the special problems of black Americans in acts and measures that curb the excesses of modern individualism and thereby strengthen family life for all Americans.

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from his Christian Science Monitor
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COSTS OF THE "POST MARITAL FAMILY"

By Daniel Patrick Moynihan

Along with this new form of society [postindustrial] has come a new form of social distress, associated with the 'post-marital' family. As yet we have no explanation for this development, nor any great ground for thinking that we ever will. We do know, however, just how sharp and sudden the change was. It began at midcentury and has not yet stopped. Its suddenness and unexpectedness at least partially explain our inability so far to respond.... (p. 17)

Nathan Glazer was the first to suggest that some of these 'old' programs might create or perhaps 'abet' new problems. As he puts it, we come up against the 'limits of social policy' when welfare programs designed to deal with the breakdown of traditional structures weaken them further, 'making matters in some important respects worse'....(p.18)

Family structure is the principal correlate of child poverty. As demographers repeat, children in single-parent families are poor, and there are more and more of them. Thus Sandra Hofferth projects that relatively few children born in 1980 will live to age seventeen with both natural parents. For white children the likelihood of living with both parents fell from 81 percent for those born in the early 1950s to 30 percent for those born in 1980. For black

children it dropped from 52 to 6 percent over the same period....

A growing number of children—now almost one in four—are born to unmarried women. The increase in illegitimacy has been striking. In 1951 the illegitimacy rate among whites was 1.6 percent; by 1986 it had reached 15.7 percent. More extensive historical series are for some reason still hard to come by, but there can be little doubt of the trend. In 1909 W.E.B. DuBois recorded the percentage of illegitimate births among blacks in Washington, D.C., for the years 1870 through 1907; it began at 19 and ended at 21. In 1986 it was 68 percent; in Baltimore it has reached 80 percent. Among blacks nationwide the rate is 61.2 percent.... (p. 22)

In sum, family structure may now be the principal determinant of class structure. Able scholars are now testing this proposition, and while they have found evidence of intergenerational transmission of poverty and dependency, it is not as yet overwhelming. Then again, we have only just entered this period of social history; half a century may be needed to sort things out.... (p. 24)

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