

The origin of black female-headed families

by Erol Ricketts

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Introduction

The relationship between family structure and the socioeconomic conditions of blacks has sustained a lengthy and at times bitter debate. In a society in which the nuclear family is commonly assumed to be a prerequisite for social and economic success of children, black patterns of family formation—which are perceived as fundamentally different from those of whites—are often viewed as responsible for a good deal of the social and economic disadvantages experienced by blacks. Between 1960 and 1985, female-headed families grew from 20.6 to 43.7 percent of all black families, compared to growth from 8.4 to 12 percent for white families.¹ Recent estimates suggest that more than half of all black families are headed by women.

The growth of black female-headed families is a matter of grave concern because these families tend to be poorer than other families, and, as their number increases, more children will grow up in poverty and be at risk for perpetuating social problems. Quite apart from the concern about the implications female-headed families have for disadvantages experienced by the black population, family-formation patterns among blacks have taken on added significance because they are thought to emanate from slavery and/or sharecropping and to be a cause of the underclass. This essay contrasts allegations about the origin of female-headed black families with the available historical data and speculates on a theory of the recent problems of black family formation.

Background

The current controversy over the reason for high rates of female-headed families among blacks can be traced back to the publication of the *Moynihan Report*² on the black family in 1965. In the *Report* it was argued that family patterns among black Americans were fundamentally different from those found among whites and that family instability among

blacks was the root cause of the social and economic problems suffered by blacks. Family patterns of blacks were attributed to slavery and racial oppression, which focused on humbling the black male. The *Report* generated bitter debate because, on the basis of a comparison of 1950 and 1960 Census data, it characterized the black family as “crumbling” and as “a tangle of pathology.” In so doing, the *Report* echoed the message of the classic work of sociologist Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States*.³

Frazier argued that family instability among blacks resulted from the effects of slavery on black family life. According to Frazier, slavery established a pattern of unstable black families because of lack of marriage among slaves and constant separation of families as males and older children were sold. Slavery, therefore, destroyed all family bonds with the exception of those between mother and child, leading to a pattern of black families centered on mothers.⁴ Moreover, Frazier argued, newly freed blacks were rural folks with the typical family patterns of traditional agricultural society—out-of-wedlock childbearing and marital instability. When these simple folks migrated to the North in large numbers, they encountered unfamiliar ways of life in the industrial cities. Because they were unable to cope with the new conditions, their family lives became disorganized, resulting in spiraling rates of crime, juvenile delinquency, and so on.⁵

What the historical data show

In light of the continued debate about the origins of family-formation problems among blacks, including female-headed families, it is useful to examine the available historical data covering the decennial years from 1890 to 1980, presented in Figure 1. The data show, contrary to widely held beliefs, that through 1960, rates of marriage for both black and white women were lowest at the end of the 1800s and peaked in 1950 for blacks and 1960 for whites. Furthermore it is dramatically clear that black females married at higher rates than white females of native parentage until 1950.

Moreover, national data covering decennial years from 1890 to 1920 show that blacks out-married whites despite a consistent shortage of black males due to their higher rates of mortality. And in three of the four decennial years there was a higher proportion of currently married black men than white men (Table 1). Even in those years, the rate of female-headed families was higher among blacks than among whites, but the cause was high rates of widowhood, not lower rates of marriage.

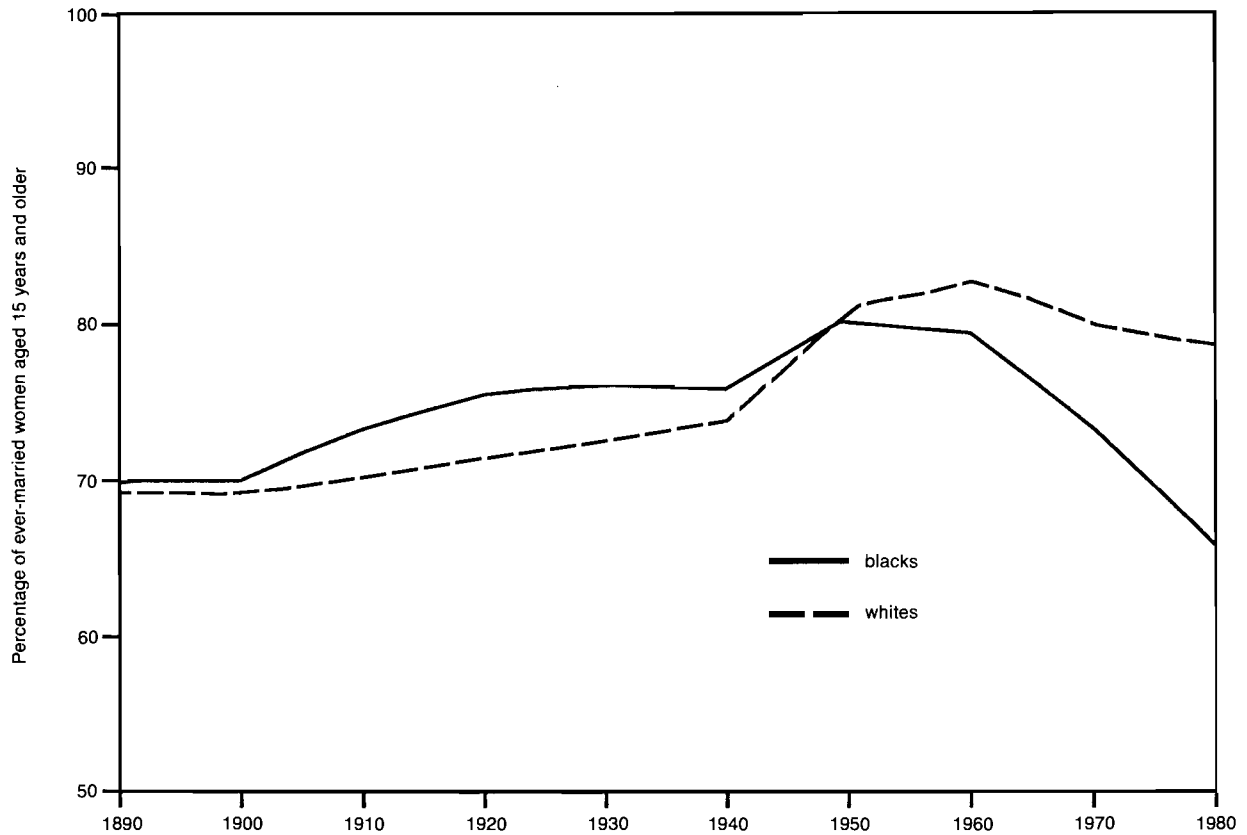


Figure 1. Comparison of Marriage Patterns of Blacks and Whites, 1890–1980.

Source: Data from decennial censuses.

Table 1
Marital Status of the Population Aged 15 Years and Over, 1890–1920

	Blacks				Whites—Native Parentage			
	1890	1900	1910	1920	1890	1900	1910	1920
Single								
Male	39.0	39.2	35.4	32.6	41.7	40.2	39.0	35.3
Female	30.0	29.9	26.6	24.1	32.0	31.4	30.1	27.7
Married								
Male	55.5	54.0	57.2	60.4	53.9	54.6	55.7	59.1
Female	54.6	53.7	57.2	59.6	57.0	57.3	59.0	60.7
Widowed								
Male	4.3	5.7	6.2	5.9	3.9	4.5	4.4	4.6
Female	14.4	15.4	14.8	14.8	10.5	10.7	10.1	10.7
Sex ratio	99.5	98.6	98.9	99.2	105.4	104.9	106.6	104.4
% urban	—	23.0	27.0	34.0	—	42.0	48.0	53.0

Source: Data from the decennial censuses.

Furthermore, the decennial series on female-headed families covering the years 1930 to 1980 (presented in Table 2) show that the rate of female-headed families among blacks in 1980 was the highest in the series. Interestingly, the data show that rates of black female-headed families declined to their lowest level in 1950, only to rise sharply thereafter.

Interpreting the data

These facts stand in stark contrast to the characterization in the *Moynihan Report* of the black family as maintaining family-formation patterns that emanate directly from slavery and are fundamentally different from those of whites. To be sure, the *Report* turned out to be an accurate piece of social forecasting in that it predicted rapidly increasing rates of female-headed families among blacks. It left a lot to be desired, however, in its interpretation of the historical context.

What the *Moynihan Report* did not show in highlighting the increase in the number of black female-headed families between 1950 and 1960 was that the proportion of black women who were ever married in 1960 stood at its second highest level since 1890, and it was considerably higher in 1960 than it had been in 1940 (Figure 1). The proportion of black female-headed families was also lower in 1960 than in 1940, and the proportion of urban black female-headed families in 1960 was lower than it had been in both 1930 and 1940.

Although the increase in the proportion of black female-headed families between 1950 and 1960 contrasts with the decline in the proportion of white female-headed families between 1950 and 1960, after 1960 there was a rise in female-

headed white families (see Table 2). Moreover, as Andrew Cherlin has pointed out, it is hazardous to draw inferences from the conditions of American families in the 1950s, because the 1950s were probably the most unusual decade for family life in this century.⁶

In sum, the argument that current levels of female-headed families among blacks are due directly to the cultural legacy of slavery and that black family-formation patterns are fundamentally different from those of whites are not supported by the data.

It is clear from the data that 1950 is a watershed year for black families; thereafter black female-headed families grow rapidly and blacks become more urbanized than whites. Between 1930 and 1950 the rates of black female-headed families, in the United States as a whole and in urban areas, are parallel to the corresponding rates for whites. The black rates are higher than the rates for whites, as one would expect given the black socioeconomic differential and higher rates of widowhood among blacks. It is after 1950 that the rate of female-headed families for blacks diverges significantly from the rate for whites, although the rate of white female-headed families begins to converge with the rate for blacks in about 1970.

What is strikingly different in 1950 is that blacks overtake whites in their level of urbanization. After 1950, blacks become more urbanized than whites, and they continue to urbanize. Whites de-urbanized after 1970. Blacks moved to the cities after World War II, en masse. And it is after this move that severe family-formation problems began to emerge. The data suggest that the clues to recent family-

Table 2
Female-Headed Families, 1930–1980

	White Female Heads as % of White Families				% White Population That Is Urban ^a	Black Female Heads as % of Black Families				% Black Population That Is Urban ^a
	All	Urban	Rural- Nonfarm	Rural- Farm		All	Urban	Rural- Nonfarm	Rural- Farm	
1930	12.0	14.4	12.0	5.0	59.4	19.3	25.2	20.6	10.5	47.4
1940 ^b	14.5	17.3	13.1	7.2	65.2	22.6	29.5	21.7	11.5	52.3
1950 ^b	8.5	9.7	7.2	4.3	65.9	17.6	19.8	18.1	9.2	66.2
1960	8.1	9.0	6.5	4.2	70.2	21.7	23.1	19.5	11.1	76.5
1970	9.0	10.0	6.3	n.a.	72.1	27.8	29.3	20.1	n.a.	83.3
1980	11.2	12.8	7.6	n.a.	70.2	37.8	39.6	26.8	n.a.	86.1

Source: Data from the decennial censuses.

^aPercentage of total population, not merely female-headed families.

^bFigures for blacks are for nonwhites.

n.a. = not available.

formation problems among blacks are to be found in the circumstances of black urbanization after 1950.

Explaining recent family-formation problems among black Americans

William Julius Wilson has argued convincingly that increasing levels of nonmarriage and female-headed households are a manifestation of the high levels of economic dislocation experienced by lower-class black men in recent decades.⁷ He asserts that when joblessness is combined with high rates of incarceration and premature mortality among black men, it becomes clearer that there are fewer marriageable black men relative to black women, men who are able to provide the economic support needed to sustain a family. While joblessness is a reasonable explanation for the growth of female-headed families among lower-class blacks, it does not explain why upper-class blacks, for whom joblessness is not a problem, also have high rates of family-formation problems and female-headed households.⁸

The post-World War II mass migration of blacks to inner-city areas, particularly in the North, presaged their family-formation problems because it both facilitated the civil rights mobilization and made the inner-city residents vulnerable to postindustrial changes in the economy that transformed the opportunity structure of the inner city. While urbanization and economic change have created adverse job-market conditions for lower-class blacks, the civil rights revolution and affirmative action programs have opened up opportunities for upper-class blacks. Ironically, it may be that the economic uncertainty inherent in the rapid upward mobility experienced by upper-class blacks has generated high levels of marital instability and female-headed families among that group. Hence perhaps the unprecedented levels of economic uncertainty in the postwar era are a major cause of family-formation problems for both upper- and lower-class blacks.

How does economic uncertainty affect family-formation behavior? In general, uncertainty affects the sense of predictability of life decisions—the sense of being able to predict and plan the future. Without the ability to predict the future it becomes difficult to make long-term plans. Under such circumstances it becomes desirable to be open-ended—to be noncommittal—in order to respond flexibly to changing circumstances. Demographers have long documented the negative association between economic downturn, or uncertainty brought on by war, and marriage.

The increasing vulnerability of disadvantaged black males to the vicissitudes of the economy seems to explain their avoidance of marriage and their increasing involvement in loose consensual unions. Being involved in such unions and parenting children out of wedlock are ways of simultaneously keeping one's options open and affirming one's self.⁹

At the same time upper-class blacks seem to have maintained flexibility to respond to economic uncertainties, mostly due to increased opportunities, by relying on divorce and separation and nonmarriage. Although the level of family nonformation and breakup among upper-class blacks may be higher than that experienced by other upwardly mobile groups, these problems are probably driven by the same factors. Upwardly mobile marital partners separate and divorce primarily because of the uncertainties they face as they negotiate careers and occupational change.

In their seminal work on the growth of families headed by women, Heather Ross and Isabel Sawhill argue that marital stability is directly related to the husband's relative socio-economic standing and the size of the earnings difference between men and women.¹⁰ The general thrust of Ross and Sawhill's argument is that as the economic situation of women improves relative to men, we should expect more nonmarriage and more family breakup. The income difference between black women, who have traditionally had higher rates of labor force participation than white women, and black men is smaller than the difference in income between white women and men, and as black male labor force participation and employment have declined since World War II, the employment position of black women has remained relatively stable.

Gary Becker characterizes the family-formation process as being governed by a continuous search in which men and women evaluate their relative contribution and gain.¹¹ Men and women form and maintain families to the extent they are satisfied with their net gain. In a period when individual fortunes are changing rapidly, the search is more perilous. It is my contention that the changing economic opportunities confronting upper-class blacks in the last few decades have rapidly changed individual fortunes and hence severely distorted the search process. And the uncertainties that this engenders for the search process have played a pivotal role in generating high rates of nonmarriage, family breakup, and female-headed families among upper-class blacks.

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Although the uncertainty experienced by upper- and lower-class blacks has different causes, both groups function in the same marriage market. Hence the decreasing rate of marriageable lower-class men has resulted in a marriage market for all blacks in which there is an abundance of marriageable women relative to men. Quite contrary to the prediction of marriage market theorists such as Becker (that when there is a shortage of men relative to women, all men will marry),¹² economic uncertainty and a surplus of black women available for marriage means that black men increasingly will not marry or will delay marriage as they hedge their bets in response to uncertain economic prospects and the certainty that there will be a spouse available should they decide to marry. Black women, faced with the uncertainty of spousal support and an increasing ability to support themselves, may also opt for parenting outside of marriage, divorce, or loose consensual unions as a means of coping with increasingly uncertain prospects.¹³ A general consequence of these calculi is an exponential growth of family-formation problems among blacks, as both males and females respond to uncertainties of economic change and the dynamics of the black marriage market.

If increasing levels of nonmarriage and female-headed families are due to increasing levels of uncertainty experienced by blacks in the postwar era, then increasing family instability should be observable for all groups experiencing increased levels of economic uncertainty. It is clear that the rate of female-headed families has increased significantly for whites and more sharply for other disadvantaged minorities. The incidence of female-headed families among Puerto Ricans, for example—a group whose socioeconomic conditions are similar to those of blacks—increased dramatically from 15.8 to 43.9 percent between 1960 and 1985, compared to the previously mentioned increase of from 20.6 to 43.7 percent for blacks.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the above explanation of family-formation problems of upper- and lower-class blacks must be taken as little more than informed speculation, as research is needed to affirm the relationship between economic change, economic uncertainty, and black family formation.

Conclusion

Despite research findings to the contrary, some conservatives and liberals continue to find slavery and sharecropping compelling explanations for black family-formation problems. Perhaps it is because slavery and sharecropping are sufficiently distant that they can be used to buttress conservative views that what has been happening to black families is a consequence of an immutable history and is therefore beyond policy intervention. At the same time, liberals use the argument to tie the present problems of blacks to historical injustices, painting blacks as innocent victims. Both arguments detract from a search for the root causes of recent black family-formation problems. The danger is that by blaming black family-formation patterns on slavery and

sharecropping, society is blamed for the problems in lieu of taking action to ameliorate them.

To restate the main points of this article: Significant family-formation problems among the black population are of recent origin, for there is no evidence suggesting that family-formation patterns of blacks have historically been fundamentally different from those of whites. If anything, the evidence shows that blacks married at higher rates during most of the period studied. Serious family-formation problems among blacks began to emerge after World War II, when black urbanization surpassed that of whites. I have speculated that the unprecedented economic uncertainty experienced by both upper-class and lower-class blacks over the last few decades is at the core of the family-formation problems of both groups. And because both groups function in the same marriage market, I believe the shortage of marriageable men relative to women and the hedging of bets by both men and women will likely contribute to a spiraling of family-formation problems over the near future. It is unlikely that these problems can be easily reversed, and they are likely to get worse without significant changes in economic circumstances. ■

¹See Gary D. Sandefur and Marta Tienda, eds., *Divided Opportunities: Minorities, Poverty, and Social Policy* (New York: Plenum Press, 1988), p. 10.

²Although the official title of the document is *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, 1965), it is known by the name of its principal author, Daniel Patrick Moynihan.

³Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939.

⁴Summarized in Andrew J. Cherlin, *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

⁵For recent incarnations of this argument, see Nicholas Lemann, "The Origins of the Underclass," *Atlantic*, June 1986, pp. 31–35, and July 1986, pp. 54–68; and Leon Dash, *When Children Want Children* (New York: William Morrow, 1989).

⁶See *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*.

⁷See *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁸See Robert I. Lerman, "Employment Opportunities of Young Men and Family Formation," *American Economic Review*, 79 (May 1989), 62–66.

⁹See Dash, *When Children Want Children*.

¹⁰Ross and Sawhill, *Time of Transition: The Growth of Families Headed by Women* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 1975).

¹¹Becker, "A Theory of Marriage," in T.W. Schultz, ed., *Economics of the Family: Marriage, Children, and Human Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

¹²See Lerman, "Employment Opportunities."

¹³See Henry A. Walker, "Black-White Differences in Marriage and Family Patterns," in S. M. Dornbush and M. H. Strober, eds., *Feminism, Children, and the New Families* (New York: Guilford Press, 1988).

¹⁴See Sandefur and Tienda, eds., *Divided Opportunities*, p. 10.