

[Conference on the Family](#) |

"Economic Trends and the Decline of the African-American Family"

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Introduction

From 1960 to 1990, the remarkable changes in family structure of black American households have drawn demographers and economists attention since the mid-1960s. In 1965, Daniel Moynihan suggested that a major cause of the changes in black families was unemployment and its negative effects on matriarchal structure. Confirming part of Moynihans argument, James L. Starkey and David Ellwood add that unemployment of African Americans weakens also marital stability and eventually influences black family structure. Yet their arguments do not explain fully the rise in the female-headed families, especially those who receive welfare benefits from the government. Daniel Lichter and Philip Robins have focused primarily on the effects of the welfare benefits and their influence in birth decisions of never-married women.

This paper will discuss the trends of African American families mainly from 1960s to 1980s. It will focus on the causes of their decline--unemployment and welfare benefits. The analysis will also explore what should be done to prevent the negative side of the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to fully appreciate it.

Trends in Black American Family Patterns

David Ellwood and Jonathan Crane identify three trends in the black family from 1960 to 1988: large declines in marriage, increase in divorce and separation, and changes in the relative fertility of married women. In 1960, about 51 per cent of black women aged 15-44 were married. By 1988, the figure fell to 29 per cent. Meanwhile, the percentage of unmarried women in the same age cohort rose from 28 per cent in 1960 to 52 per cent in 1988. Divorce rose from 28 per cent to 39 per cent. These large shifts set new patterns for black American families, dramatically affected fertility rate and

also changed the living arrangements for children.

The changes in family structure are the main cause of the new patterns. From 1960 to 1988, the decline in marriage did not occur simultaneously with the rise in divorce and separation. The percentage of unmarried black women rose sharply in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet the increase in the proportion of divorced, separated, or widowed women took place mainly between 1970 to 1980. This suggests that in the 1960s the decline of marriage resulted from the fact that less black women were getting married rather than getting divorced. Thus, in the 1960s and 1980s, the change in the adults marital status was due to decline in marriage, whereas in the 1970s, it was due to both decrease in marriage and increase in divorce. For men, the changes in marriage had a similar trend. Over the whole period, decline in marriage was far more influential than the rise in divorce and separation.

The marriage decline, consequently, altered the fertility rate. Like the national fertility rate between 1960 and 1987, the birth rate of the black American women aged 15-44 fell considerably for legally married women relative to unmarried women. Since 1980, the birth rate of the latter has increased as the birth rate of the former has continued to fall. Consequently, the fertility rate to unmarried black women now exceeds the rate for legally married ones, for the first time in history.

Changes in both family structure and fertility rate had great impact on childrens living arrangements. In 1960, 67 per cent of black children were living with married couples; by 1988 only 38 per cent lived with both parents. The fractions of children living with never-married parents changed from 2 per cent in 1960 to 29 per cent in 1988. The changes in percentage of black children living with divorced, separated, or widowed parents rose moderately from 19.8 per cent to 24.7 per cent. Again, the proportion of unmarried black women largely contributed to the drastic changes in living arrangements for children rather than the divorced or separated women during the three decades.

The demographic changes in black American families have raised questions regarding the causes. Ellwood and Crane conclude three factors that potentially affect black family structure: welfare benefits, employment and earnings of men, and employment and earnings of women. These three factors can be summarized into two major elements that alter the black family

structure: unemployment and welfare benefits.

The Effect of Unemployment on Marital Instability

Only a few economists have studied on the determining factors of marriage, divorce and childbearing. G. Becker is among them. He perceives marriage as conferring increased utility for one or both parties. Marriage will benefit both parties if one party has a relative advantage in home production and the other has an advantage in generating market income. Stereotypically, men would be wage earners, and women would be home makers. According to Becker, any changes in these roles would put psychological pressure on one or both parties and make marriage problematic. Along the same lines, Starkey and Ellwood point out that the effect of unemployment on marital instability has both utilitarian and social-psychological perspectives.

From the utilitarian view, the largely decreased income of a household destabilizes marriage. The ratio of unemployed black men to the unemployed women has increased significantly in the 1970s and 1980s. The fall in the earning capacity of men makes them less attractive in marriage as partners since, according to Becker, it reduces their comparative advantage in generating market income. The employment rate of married black males aged 20-34 fell from 56 per cent in 1960 to 34 per cent in 1980. This sharp fall roughly mirrors changes in marriage of black Americans of the same period. Therefore, the rise of unemployment rate weakens marriage. Accordingly, there would be more children living with one parent, particularly with their mothers only.

From a social-psychological perspective, a womans superior role in a family could have negative effect on marriage. According to Starkey, if a wife earns more than her husband, or if she is employed while he is not, marital instability may occur. If the father figure of a family faces prolonged unemployment, the marriage may become unstable unless love and respect characterize the marriage.

As opposed to black men, the effects of employment of black women are more difficult to determine. If women are employed and independent, they have fewer incentives to marry. Unlike unemployed women, they do not have the pressure to marry as a means to obtain financial security. On the other hand, Starkey argues, employed women are seen as more attractive potential

wives by men than unemployed women. However, the increased employment opportunities for women also contribute to the declining rate of marriage. The employment/population ratio for black men aged 25-34 fell from 0.86 to 0.81 between 1960 and 1988, whereas the rate for black women rose from 0.45 to 0.65. It explains that the rise in employment rate of black women causes the decline of marriage.

In addition to employment effects on marriage, education also plays a considerably visible role in the decline in marriage. Women who receive more years of education tend to have lower fertility rate. Data show that marriage rates fell sharply for women at all educational levels from 1960 to 1988. However, the marriage rate of those who have less than 12 years of education plummeted from 63.4 per cent in 1960 to 23.3 per cent in 1988. Additionally, their employment rates are lowest comparing with other women who have received more than 12 years of education: 0.41 to 0.66 in 1960, and 0.39 to 0.78 in 1988. This means that the less education they get the less likely that they would get married and vice versa.

Employment and education conversely affect fertility rate. Educated women tend to have lower fertility rate than less educated ones. Data suggest that out-of-wedlock childbearing is lowest among women with more education and better employment prospects. They also imply that many of those born to unmarried mothers would remain poor and dependent on social welfare. One of the welfare benefits is the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). AFDC is debated regarding whether it helps encourage the birth rate of never-married women.

Welfare and the rise in female-headed families

Like Ellwood and Crane, Lichter, McLaughlin and Ribar assert that welfare benefits, such as AFDC, have encouraged the rise in black female-headed families and have directly influenced the family formation. Robins and Fronstin add that AFDC positively affect the black family size decisions. The out-of-wedlock birthrate has increased rapidly since the mid-1970s. Today, nearly one-third of all babies are born out of wedlock and divorced women account for approximately 30 per cent of all nonmarital births. The rise of out-of-wedlock births results from two underlying phenomena. First, the birthrate among unmarried white women increased sharply from six births per thousand in 1950 to twenty-nine births per thousand in 1989. Second, black women

have had a record proportion of the total population of unmarried women. Along with Hispanic women, they constitute roughly one-quarter of the population of never-married women, and close to three-fifths of the AFDC population.

Theoretically, economic factors influence a woman's decision to have children. The key economic variables include the wages and the cost of bearing and raising children. The AFDC benefit levels and differentials can be seen as subsidies that reduce the cost of children. Unfortunately, a negative effect of subsidies is that they may serve as a disincentive for women to work. In addition, it encourages women to have more children, hence increasing the fertility rate.

Further analysis suggests that high school dropouts benefit most from the AFDC benefit variables. As a result, several states have proposed or enacted legislation to deny access to higher AFDC benefits for women who are already receiving these benefits and want to have more children. Robins and Fronstin argue that it will be more beneficial for high school mothers to continue to receive the AFDC benefits provided that they stay in school and earn a high school degree. They oppose the uniform cutting of benefits to all AFDC dropout high school mothers. By earning a high school degree, these single mothers increase their employment opportunities. In this way, they would not need to rely on government benefits to support them and their children any longer. Furthermore, they may want to have fewer children than they had when they were dependent on welfare benefits.

In Ohio, a program called LEAP (Learning, Earning, And Parenting) was put into effect. This program intends to generate incentives among welfare mothers to complete high school by giving them monetary awards. These mothers receive an extra \$62 in additional benefits for every month they stay in school, but their benefits are reduced by \$62 every month they do not stay in school. This approach may be a plausible social policy to discourage out-of-wedlock births and to maximize the AFDC benefits.

Conclusion

The rise in unemployment of black Americans has destabilized marriage and has contributed to both decrease in marriage and increase in divorce and separation. It has also positively affected the proportion of children living with

one parent. On the other hand, welfare benefits, particularly AFDC, have encouraged never-married women to have more children. Welfare has great influence in the increase in female-headed families. Consequently, unemployment and welfare benefits have mainly altered the African American family structure and have led to a decline in African American families.

These causes of the structural changes since 1960 are complicated due to the interaction of social, economic and psychological factors. The decline in African American families cannot be explained thoroughly by one single element of the causes. Only by considering both unemployment and welfare benefits can the analysis of the decline of the African American family be fully satisfactory.

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