



City Journal
The Black Family: 40
Years of Lies

Rejecting the Moynihan report caused untold, needless misery.

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Read through the megazillion words on class, income mobility, and poverty in the recent *New York Times* series “Class Matters” and you still won’t grasp two of the most basic truths on the subject: 1. entrenched, multigenerational poverty is largely black; and 2. it is intricately intertwined with the collapse of the nuclear family in the inner city.

By now, these facts shouldn’t be hard to grasp. Almost 70 percent of black children are born to single mothers. Those mothers are far more likely than married mothers to be poor, even after a post-welfare-reform decline in child poverty. They are also more likely to pass that poverty on to their children. Sophisticates often try to dodge the implications of this bleak reality by shrugging that single motherhood is an inescapable fact of modern life, affecting everyone from the bobo Murphy Browns to the ghetto “baby mamas.” Not so; it is a largely low-income—and disproportionately black—phenomenon. The vast majority of higher-income women wait to have their children until they are married. The truth is that we are now a two-family nation, separate and unequal—one thriving and intact, and the other struggling, broken, and far too often African-American.

So why does the *Times*, like so many who rail against inequality, fall silent on the relation between poverty and single-parent families? To answer that question—and to continue the confrontation with facts that Americans still prefer not to mention in polite company—you have to go back exactly 40 years. That was when a resounding cry of outrage echoed throughout Washington and the civil rights movement in reaction to Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s Department of Labor report warning that the ghetto family was in disarray. Entitled “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” the prophetic report prompted civil rights leaders, academics, politicians, and pundits to make a momentous—and, as time has shown, tragically wrong—decision about how to frame the national discussion about poverty.

To go back to the political and social moment before the battle broke out over the Moynihan report is to return to a time before the country’s discussion of black poverty had hardened into fixed orthodoxies—before phrases like “blaming the victim,” “self-esteem,” “out-of-wedlock childbearing” (the term at the time was “illegitimacy”), and even “teen pregnancy” had become current. While solving the black poverty problem seemed an immense political challenge, as a conceptual matter it didn’t seem like rocket science. Most analysts assumed that once the nation removed

discriminatory legal barriers and expanded employment opportunities, blacks would advance, just as poor immigrants had.

Conditions for testing that proposition looked good. Between the 1954 *Brown* decision and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, legal racism had been dismantled. And the economy was humming along; in the first five years of the sixties, the economy generated 7 million jobs.

Yet those most familiar with what was called “the Negro problem” were getting nervous. About half of all blacks had moved into the middle class by the mid-sixties, but now progress seemed to be stalling. The rise in black income relative to that of whites, steady throughout the fifties, was sputtering to a halt. More blacks were out of work in 1964 than in 1954. Most alarming, after rioting in Harlem and Paterson, New Jersey, in 1964, the problems of the northern ghettos suddenly seemed more intractable than those of the George Wallace South.

Moynihan, then assistant secretary of labor and one of a new class of government social scientists, was among the worriers, as he puzzled over his charts. One in particular caught his eye. Instead of rates of black male unemployment and welfare enrollment running parallel as they always had, in 1962 they started to diverge in a way that would come to be called “Moynihan’s scissors.” In the past, policymakers had assumed that if the male heads of household had jobs, women and children would be provided for. This no longer seemed true. Even while more black men—though still “catastrophically” low numbers—were getting jobs, more black women were joining the welfare rolls. Moynihan and his aides decided that a serious analysis was in order.

Convinced that “the Negro revolution . . . , a movement for equality as well as for liberty,” was now at risk, Moynihan wanted to make several arguments in his report. The first was empirical and would quickly become indisputable: single-parent families were on the rise in the ghetto. But other points were more speculative and sparked a partisan dispute that has lasted to this day. Moynihan argued that the rise in single-mother families was not due to a lack of jobs but rather to a destructive vein in ghetto culture that could be traced back to slavery and Jim Crow discrimination. Though black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier had already introduced the idea in the 1930s, Moynihan’s argument defied conventional social-science wisdom. As he wrote later, “The work began in the most orthodox setting, the U.S. Department of Labor, to establish at some level of statistical conciseness what ‘everyone knew’: that economic conditions determine social conditions. Whereupon, it turned out that what everyone knew was evidently not so.”

But Moynihan went much further than merely overthrowing familiar explanations about the cause of poverty. He also described, through pages of disquieting charts and graphs, the emergence of a “tangle of pathology,” including delinquency, joblessness, school failure, crime, and fatherlessness that characterized ghetto—or what would come to be called underclass—behavior. Moynihan may

have borrowed the term “pathology” from Kenneth Clark’s *The Dark Ghetto*, also published that year. But as both a descendant and a scholar of what he called “the wild Irish slums”—he had written a chapter on the poor Irish in the classic *Beyond the Melting Pot*—the assistant secretary of labor was no stranger to ghetto self-destruction. He knew the dangers it posed to “the basic socializing unit” of the family. And he suspected that the risks were magnified in the case of blacks, since their “matriarchal” family had the effect of abandoning men, leaving them adrift and “alienated.”

More than most social scientists, Moynihan, steeped in history and anthropology, understood what families do. They “shape their children’s character and ability,” he wrote. “By and large, adult conduct in society is learned as a child.” What children learned in the “disorganized home[s]” of the ghetto, as he described through his forest of graphs, was that adults do not finish school, get jobs, or, in the case of men, take care of their children or obey the law. Marriage, on the other hand, provides a “stable home” for children to learn common virtues. Implicit in Moynihan’s analysis was that marriage orients men and women toward the future, asking them not just to commit to each other but to plan, to earn, to save, and to devote themselves to advancing their children’s prospects. Single mothers in the ghetto, on the other hand, tended to drift into pregnancy, often more than once and by more than one man, and to float through the chaos around them. Such mothers are unlikely to “shape their children’s character and ability” in ways that lead to upward mobility. Separate and unequal families, in other words, meant that blacks would have their liberty, but that they would be strangers to equality. Hence Moynihan’s conclusion: “a national effort towards the problems of Negro Americans must be directed towards the question of family structure.”

Astonishingly, even for that surprising time, the Johnson administration agreed. Prompted by Moynihan’s still-unpublished study, Johnson delivered a speech at the Howard University commencement that called for “the next and more profound stage of the battle for civil rights.” The president began his speech with the era’s conventional civil rights language, condemning inequality and calling for more funding of medical care, training, and education for Negroes. But he also broke into new territory, analyzing the family problem with what strikes the contemporary ear as shocking candor. He announced: “Negro poverty is not white poverty.” He described “the breakdown of the Negro family structure,” which he said was “the consequence of ancient brutality, past injustice and present prejudice.” “When the family collapses, it is the children that are usually damaged,” Johnson continued. “When it happens on a massive scale, the community itself is crippled.”

Johnson was to call this his “greatest civil rights speech,” but he was just about the only one to see it that way. By that summer, the Moynihan report that was its inspiration was under attack from all sides. Civil servants in the “permanent government” at Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) and at the Children’s Bureau muttered about the report’s “subtle racism.” Academics picked apart its statistics. Black leaders

like Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) director Floyd McKissick scolded that, rather than the family, “[i]t’s the damn system that needs changing.”

In part, the hostility was an accident of timing. Just days after the report was leaked to Newsweek in early August, L.A.’s Watts ghetto exploded. The televised images of the South Central Los Angeles rioters burning down their own neighborhood collided in the public mind with the contents of the report. Some concluded that the “tangle of pathology” was the administration’s explanation for urban riots, a view quite at odds with civil rights leaders’ determination to portray the violence as an outpouring of black despair over white injustice. Moreover, given the fresh wounds of segregation, the persistent brutality against blacks, and the ugly tenaciousness of racism, the fear of white backsliding and the sense of injured pride that one can hear in so many of Moynihan’s critics are entirely understandable.

Less forgivable was the refusal to grapple seriously—either at the time or in the months, years, even decades to come—with the basic cultural insight contained in the report: that ghetto families were at risk of raising generations of children unable to seize the opportunity that the civil rights movement had opened up for them. Instead, critics changed the subject, accusing Moynihan—wrongfully, as any honest reading of “The Negro Family” proves—of ignoring joblessness and discrimination. Family instability is a “peripheral issue,” warned Whitney Young, executive director of the National Urban League. “The problem is discrimination.” The protest generating the most buzz came from William Ryan, a CORE activist, in “Savage Discovery: The Moynihan Report,” published in *The Nation* and later reprinted in the NAACP’s official publication. Ryan, though a psychologist, did not hear Moynihan’s point that as the family goes, so go the children. He heard code for the archaic charge of black licentiousness. He described the report as a “highly sophomoric treatment of illegitimacy” and insisted that whites’ broader access to abortion, contraception, and adoption hid the fact that they were no less “promiscuous” than blacks. Most memorably, he accused Moynihan of “blaming the victim,” a phrase that would become the title of his 1971 book and the fear-inducing censor of future plain speaking about the ghetto’s decay.

That Ryan’s phrase turned out to have more cultural staying power than anything in the Moynihan report is a tragic emblem of the course of the subsequent discussion about the ghetto family. For white liberals and the black establishment, poverty became a zero-sum game: either you believed, as they did, that there was a defect in the system, or you believed that there was a defect in the individual. It was as if critiquing the family meant that you supported inferior schools, even that you were a racist. Though “The Negro Family” had been a masterpiece of complex analysis that implied that individuals were intricately entwined in a variety of systems—familial, cultural, and economic—it gave birth to a hardened, either/or politics from which the country has barely recovered.

By autumn, when a White House conference on civil rights took place, the Moynihan report, initially planned as its centerpiece, had been disappeared. Johnson himself, having just introduced large numbers of ground troops into Vietnam, went mum on the subject, steering clear of the word “family” in the next State of the Union message. This was a moment when the nation had the resources, the leadership (the president had been overwhelmingly elected, and he had the largest majorities in the House and Senate since the New Deal), and the will “to make a total . . . commitment to the cause of Negro equality,” Moynihan lamented in a 1967 postmortem of his report in *Commentary*. Instead, he declared, the nation had disastrously decided to punt on Johnson’s “next and more profound stage in the battle for civil rights.” “The issue of the Negro family was dead.”

Well, not exactly. Over the next 15 years, the black family question actually became a growth industry inside academe, the foundations, and the government. But it wasn’t the same family that had worried Moynihan and that in the real world continued to self-destruct at unprecedented rates. Scholars invented a fantasy family—strong and healthy, a poor man’s Brady Bunch—whose function was not to reflect truth but to soothe injured black self-esteem and to bolster the emerging feminist critique of male privilege, bourgeois individualism, and the nuclear family. The literature of this period was so evasive, so implausible, so far removed from what was really unfolding in the ghetto, that if you didn’t know better, you might conclude that people actually *wanted* to keep the black family separate and unequal.

Consider one of the first books out of the gate, *Black Families in White America*, by Andrew Billingsley, published in 1968 and still referred to as “seminal.” “Unlike Moynihan and others, we do not view the Negro as a causal nexus in a ‘tangle of pathologies’ which feeds on itself,” he declared. “[The Negro family] is, in our view, an absorbing, adaptive, and amazingly resilient mechanism for the socialization of its children and the civilization of its society.” Pay no attention to the 25 percent of poor ghetto families, Billingsley urged. Think instead about the 75 percent of black middle-class families—though Moynihan had made a special point of exempting them from his report.

Other black pride-inspired scholars looked at female-headed families and declared them authentically African and therefore a *good* thing. In a related vein, Carol Stack published *All Our Kin*, a 1974 HEW-funded study of families in a midwestern ghetto with many multigenerational female households. In an implicit criticism of American individualism, Stack depicted “The Flats,” as she dubbed her setting, as a vibrant and cooperative urban village, where mutual aid—including from sons, brothers, and uncles, who provided financial support and strong role models for children—created “a tenacious, active, lifelong network.”

In fact, some scholars continued, maybe the nuclear family was really just a toxic white hang-up, anyway. No one asked what nuclear families did, or how they prepared children for

a modern economy. The important point was simply that they were not black. “One must question the validity of the white middle-class lifestyle from its very foundation because it has already proven itself to be decadent and unworthy of emulation,” wrote Joyce Ladner (who later became the first female president of Howard University) in her 1972 book *Tomorrow’s Tomorrow*. Robert Hill of the Urban League, who published *The Strengths of Black Families* that same year, claimed to have uncovered science that proved Ladner’s point: “Research studies have revealed that many one-parent families are more intact or cohesive than many two-parent families: data on child abuse, battered wives and runaway children indicate higher rates among two-parent families in suburban areas than one-parent families in inner city communities.” That science, needless to say, was as reliable as a deadbeat dad.

Feminists, similarly fixated on overturning the “oppressive ideal of the nuclear family,” also welcomed this dubious scholarship. Convinced that marriage was the main arena of male privilege, feminists projected onto the struggling single mother an image of the “strong black woman” who had always had to work and who was “superior in terms of [her] ability to function healthily in the world,” as Toni Morrison put it. The lucky black single mother could also enjoy more equal relationships with men than her miserably married white sisters.

If black pride made it hard to grapple with the increasingly separate and unequal family, feminism made it impossible. Fretting about single-parent families was now not only racist but also sexist, an effort to deny women their independence, their sexuality, or both. As for the poverty of single mothers, that was simply more proof of patriarchal oppression. In 1978, University of Wisconsin researcher Diana Pearce introduced the useful term “feminization of poverty.” But for her and her many allies, the problem was not the crumbling of the nuclear family; it was the lack of government support for single women and the failure of business to pay women their due.

With the benefit of embarrassed hindsight, academics today sometimes try to wave away these notions as the justifiably angry, but ultimately harmless, speculations of political and academic activists. “The depth and influence of the radicalism of the late 1960s and early 1970s are often exaggerated,” historian Stephanie Coontz writes in her new book, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage*. This is pure revisionism. The radical delegitimation of the family was so pervasive that even people at the center of power joined in. It made no difference that so many of these cheerleaders for single mothers had themselves spent their lives in traditional families and probably would rather have cut off an arm than seen their own unmarried daughters pushing strollers.

Take, for instance, Supreme Court Justice William Brennan, who wrote a concurring assent in the 1977 *Moore v. City of East Cleveland* decision. The case concerned a woman and her grandson evicted from a housing project following a city

ordinance that defined “family” as parents—or parent—and their own children. Brennan did not simply agree that the court should rule in favor of the grandmother—a perfectly reasonable position. He also assured the court that “the extended family has many strengths not shared by the nuclear family.” Relying on Robert Hill’s “science,” he declared that delinquency, addiction, crime, “neurotic disabilities,” and mental illness were more prevalent in societies where “autonomous nuclear families prevail,” a conclusion that would have bewildered the writers of the Constitution that Brennan was supposedly interpreting.

In its bumbling way and with far-reaching political consequences, the executive branch also offered warm greetings to the single-parent family. Alert to growing apprehension about the state of the American family during his 1976 presidential campaign, Jimmy Carter had promised a conference on the subject. Clearly less concerned with conditions in the ghetto than with satisfying feminist advocates, the administration named a black single (divorced) mother to lead the event, occasioning an outcry from conservatives. By 1980, when it finally convened after numerous postponements, the White House Conference on the Family had morphed into the White House Conference on Families, to signal that all family forms were equal.

Instead of the political victory for moderate Democrats that Carter had expected, the conference galvanized religious conservatives.

Later, conservative heavyweight Paul Weyrich observed that the Carter conference marked the moment when religious activists moved in force into Republican politics. Doubtless they were also more energized by their own issues of feminism and gay rights than by what was happening in the ghetto. But their new rallying cry of “family values” nonetheless became a political dividing line, with unhappy fallout for liberals for years to come.

Meanwhile, the partisans of single motherhood got a perfect chance to test their theories, since the urban ghettos were fast turning into nuclear-family-free zones. Indeed, by 1980, 15 years after “The Negro Family,” the out-of-wedlock birthrate among blacks had more than doubled, to 56 percent. In the ghetto, that number was considerably higher, as high as 66 percent in New York City. Many experts comforted themselves by pointing out that white mothers were also beginning to forgo marriage, but the truth was that only 9 percent of white births occurred out of wedlock.

And how was the black single-parent family doing? It would be fair to say that it had not been exhibiting the strengths of kinship networks. According to numbers crunched by Moynihan and economist Paul Offner, of the black children born between 1967 and 1969, 72 percent received Aid to Families with Dependent Children before the age of 18. School dropout rates, delinquency, and crime, among the other dysfunctions that Moynihan had warned about, were rising in the cities. In short, the 15 years since the report was written had witnessed both the birth of millions of fatherless babies and the entrenchment of an underclass.

Liberal advocates had two main ways of dodging the subject of family collapse while still addressing its increasingly alarming fallout. The first, largely the creation of Marian Wright Edelman, who in 1973 founded the Children’s Defense Fund, was to talk about children not as the offspring of individual mothers and fathers responsible for rearing them, but as an oppressed class living in generic, nebulous, and never-to-be-analyzed “families.” Framing the problem of ghetto children in this way, CDF was able to mount a powerful case for a host of services, from prenatal care to day care to housing subsidies, in the name of children’s developmental needs, which did not seem to include either a stable domestic life or, for that matter, fathers. Advocates like Edelman might not have viewed the collapsing ghetto family as a welcome occurrence, but they treated it as a kind of natural event, like drought, beyond human control and judgment. As recently as a year ago, marking the 40th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act, CDF announced on its website: “In 2004 it is morally and economically indefensible that a black preschool child is three times as likely to depend solely on a mother’s earnings.” This may strike many as a pretty good argument for addressing the prevalence of black single-mother families, but in CDF-speak it is a case for federal natural-disaster relief.

The Children’s Defense Fund was only the best-known child-advocacy group to impose a gag rule on the role of fatherless families in the plight of its putative constituents. The Carnegie Corporation followed suit. In 1977, it published a highly influential report by Kenneth Keniston called *All Our Children: The American Family Under Pressure*. It makes an obligatory nod toward the family’s role in raising children, before calling for a cut in unemployment, a federal job guarantee, national health insurance, affirmative action, and a host of other children’s programs. In a review in *Commentary*, Nathan Glazer noted ruefully that *All Our Children* was part of a “recent spate of books and articles on the subject of the family [that] have had little if anything to say about the black family in particular and the matter seems to have been permanently shelved.” For that silence, children’s advocates deserve much of the credit—or blame.

The second way not to talk about what was happening to the ghetto family was to talk instead about teen pregnancy. In 1976 the Alan Guttmacher Institute, Planned Parenthood’s research arm, published “Eleven Million Teenagers: What Can Be Done About the Epidemic of Adolescent Pregnancy in the United States?” It was a report that launched a thousand programs. In response to its alarms, HEW chief Joseph Califano helped push through the 1978 Adolescent Health Services and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act, which funded groups providing services to pregnant adolescents and teen moms. Nonprofits, including the Center for Population Options (now called Advocates for Youth), climbed on the bandwagon. The Ford and Robert Wood Johnson Foundations showered dollars on organizations that ran school-based health clinics, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation set up the Too Early Childbearing Network, the

Annie E. Casey Foundation sponsored “A Community Strategy for Reaching Sexually Active Adolescents,” and the Carnegie, Ford, and William T. Grant Foundations all started demonstration programs.

There was just one small problem: *there was no epidemic of teen pregnancy*. There was an *out-of-wedlock* teen-pregnancy epidemic. Teenagers had gotten pregnant at even higher rates in the past. The numbers had reached their zenith in the 1950s, and the “Eleven Million Teenagers” cited in the Guttmacher report actually represented a decline in the rate of pregnant teens. Back in the day, however, when they found out they were pregnant, girls had either gotten married or given their babies up for adoption. Not this generation. They were used to seeing children growing up without fathers, and they felt no shame about arriving at the maternity ward with no rings on their fingers, even at 15.

In the middle-class mind, however, no sane girl would want to have a baby at 15—not that experts mouthing rhetoric about the oppressive patriarchal family would admit that there was anything wrong with that. That middle-class outlook, combined with post-Moynihan mendacity about the growing disconnect between ghetto childbearing and marriage, led the policy elites to frame what was really the broad cultural problem of separate and unequal families as a simple lack-of-reproductive-services problem. Ergo, girls “at risk” must need sex education and contraceptive services.

But the truth was that underclass girls often *wanted* to have babies; they didn’t see it as a problem that they were young and unmarried. They did not follow the middle-class life script that read: protracted adolescence, college, first job, marriage—and only then children. They did not share the belief that children needed mature, educated mothers who would make their youngsters’ development the center of their lives. Access to birth control couldn’t change any of that.

At any rate, failing to define the problem accurately, advocates were in no position to find the solution. Teen pregnancy not only failed to go down, despite all the public attention, the tens of millions of dollars, and the birth control pills that were thrown its way. *It went up*—peaking in 1990 at 117 pregnancies per 1,000 teenage girls, up from 105 per 1,000 in 1978, when the Guttmacher report was published. About 80 percent of those young girls who became mothers were single, and the vast majority would be poor.

Throughout the 1980s, the inner city—and the black family—continued to unravel. Child poverty stayed close to 20 percent, hitting a high of 22.7 percent in 1993. Welfare dependency continued to rise, soaring from 2 million families in 1970 to 5 million by 1995. By 1990, 65 percent of all black children were being born to unmarried women.

In ghetto communities like Central Harlem, the number was closer to 80 percent. By this point, no one doubted that most of these children were destined to grow up poor and to pass down the legacy of single parenting to their own children.

The only good news was that the bad news was so

unrelentingly bad that the usual bromides and evasions could no longer hold. Something had to shake up what amounted to an ideological paralysis, and that something came from conservatives. Three thinkers in particular—Charles Murray, Lawrence Mead, and Thomas Sowell—though they did not always write directly about the black family, effectively changed the conversation about it. First, they did not flinch from blunt language in describing the wreckage of the inner city, unafraid of the accusations of racism and victim blaming that came their way. Second, they pointed at the welfare policies of the 1960s, not racism or a lack of jobs or the legacy of slavery, as the cause of inner-city dysfunction, and in so doing they made the welfare mother the public symbol of the ghetto’s ills. (Murray in particular argued that welfare money provided a disincentive for marriage, and, while his theory may have overstated the role of economics, it’s worth noting that he was probably the first to grasp that the country was turning into a nation of separate and unequal families.) And third, they believed that the poor would have to change their behavior instead of waiting for Washington to end poverty, as liberals seemed to be saying.

By the early 1980s the media also had woken up to the ruins of the ghetto family and brought about the return of the repressed Moynihan report. Declaring Moynihan “prophetic,” Ken Auletta, in his 1982 *The Underclass*, proclaimed that “one cannot talk about poverty in America, or about the underclass, without talking about the weakening family structure of the poor.” Both the *Baltimore Sun* and the *New York Times* ran series on the black family in 1983, followed by a 1985 *Newsweek* article called “Moynihan: I Told You So” and a 1986 CBS documentary, *The Vanishing Black Family*, produced by Bill Moyers, a onetime aide to Lyndon Johnson, who had supported the Moynihan report. The most symbolic moment came when Moynihan himself gave Harvard’s prestigious Godkin lectures in 1985 in commemoration of the 20th anniversary of “The Negro Family.”

For the most part, liberals were having none of it. They piled on Murray’s 1984 *Losing Ground*, ignored Mead and Sowell, and excoriated the word “underclass,” which they painted as a recycled and pseudoscientific version of the “tangle of pathology.” But there were two important exceptions to the long list of deniers. The first was William Julius Wilson. In his 1987 *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Wilson chastised liberals for being “confused and defensive” and failing to engage “the social pathologies of the ghetto.” “The average poor black child today appears to be in the midst of a poverty spell which will last for almost two decades,” he warned. Liberals have “to propose thoughtful explanations for the rise in inner city dislocations.” Ironically, though, Wilson’s own “mismatch theory” for family breakdown—which hypothesized that the movement of low-skill jobs out of the cities had sharply reduced the number of marriageable black men—had the effect of extending liberal defensiveness about the damaged ghetto family. After all, poor single mothers were only adapting to economic conditions. How could they do otherwise?

The research of another social scientist, Sara McLanahan, was not so easily rationalized, however. A divorced mother herself, McLanahan found Auletta's depiction of her single-parent counterparts in the inner city disturbing, especially because, like other sociologists of the time, she had been taught that the Moynihan report was the work of a racist—or, at least, a seriously deluded man. But when she surveyed the science available on the subject, she realized that the research was so sparse that no one knew for sure how the children of single mothers were faring. Over the next decade, McLanahan analyzed whatever numbers she could find, and discovered—lo and behold—that children in single-parent homes were not doing as well as children from two-parent homes on a wide variety of measures, from income to school performance to teen pregnancy.

Throughout the late eighties and early nineties, McLanahan presented her emerging findings, over protests from feminists and the Children's Defense Fund. Finally, in 1994 she published, with Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent*. McLanahan's research shocked social scientists into re-examining the problem they had presumed was not a problem. It was a turning point. One by one, the top family researchers gradually came around, concluding that McLanahan—and perhaps even Moynihan—was right.

In fact, by the early 1990s, when the ghetto was at its nadir, public opinion had clearly turned. No one was more attuned to this shift than triangulator Bill Clinton, who made the family a centerpiece of his domestic policy.

In his 1994 State of the Union Address, he announced: "We cannot renew our country when, within a decade, more than half of our children will be born into families where there is no marriage." And in 1996, despite howls of indignation, including from members of his own administration (and mystifyingly, from Moynihan himself), he signed a welfare-reform bill that he had twice vetoed—and that included among its goals increasing the number of children living with their two married parents.

So, have we reached the end of the Moynihan report saga? That would be vastly overstating matters. Remember: *70 percent of black children are still born to unmarried mothers*. After all that ghetto dwellers have been through, why are so many people still unwilling to call this the calamity it is? Both NOW and the National Association of Social Workers continue to see marriage as a potential source of female oppression. The Children's Defense Fund still won't touch the subject. Hip-hop culture glamorizes ghetto life: "'cause nowadays it's like a badge of honor/to be a baby mama" go the words to the current hit "Baby Mama," which young ghetto mothers view as their anthem. Seriously complicating the issue is the push for gay marriage, which dismissed the formula "children growing up with their own married parents" as a form of discrimination. And then there is the American penchant for to-each-his-own libertarianism. In opinion polls, a substantial majority of young people say that having a child outside of marriage is okay—though, judging from their behavior, they seem to

mean that it's okay, not for them, but for other people. Middle- and upper-middle-class Americans act as if they know that marriage provides a structure that protects children's development. If only they were willing to admit it to their fellow citizens.

All told, the nation is at a cultural inflection point that portends change. Though they always caution that "marriage is not a panacea," social scientists almost uniformly accept the research that confirms the benefits for children growing up with their own married parents. Welfare reform and tougher child-support regulations have reinforced the message of personal responsibility for one's children. The Bush administration unabashedly uses the word "marriage" in its welfare policies. There are even raw numbers to support the case for optimism: teen pregnancy, which finally started to decline in the mid-nineties in response to a crisper, teen-pregnancy-is-a-bad-idea cultural message, is now at its lowest rate ever.

And finally, in the ghetto itself there is a growing feeling that mother-only families don't work. That's why people are lining up to see an aging comedian as he voices some not-very-funny opinions about their own parenting. That's why so many young men are vowing to be the fathers they never had. That's why there has been an uptick, albeit small, in the number of black children living with their married parents.

If change really is in the air, it's taken 40 years to get here—40 years of inner-city misery for the country to reach a point at which it fully signed on to the lesson of Moynihan's report. Yes, better late than never; but you could forgive lost generations of ghetto men, women, and children if they found it cold comfort.

http://www.city-journal.org/html/15_3_black_family.html