



The Crisis of Unwed Motherhood As Marriage Plummets Among the Less Affluent, Religious Renewal Is Needed

“Liberals blew it,” declared Nicholas Kristof in the *New York Times* (March 12, 2015), when Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote his now famous 1965 report on the family breakdown among African Americans. Moynihan, then in the Nixon White House before he would go on to become the U.S. Senator from New York, warned that the rise of single-parent households would ensure and accelerate high poverty rates among blacks.

Moynihan focused his report only on African Americans. His report immediately became an issue of race, as black civil rights leaders and many academics attacked him for being a racist. Civil rights leader Floyd McKissick captured critical sentiment in stating, “My major criticism of the report is that it assumes that middle-class American values are correct values for everyone.”

40.7% of U.S. Births

Moynihan was prescient in his warnings fifty years ago. By 2013, 72.2 percent of black children in the U.S. were born out of wedlock. What Moynihan did not realize, however, was how out-of-wedlock births would spread like a virus to other groups. The federal compilation of out-of-wedlock births in 2013 showed a rate of 66.9 percent for Native Americans, 53 percent for Hispanics, and 29.4 percent for non-Hispanic whites. **Overall 40.7 percent of U.S. births were reported as out of wedlock.**

Feminists like to talk about a new non-patriarchal family structure being born, in which mothers, grandmothers, aunts and others help raise children. Katie Roiphe, a professor of journalism at New York University, typifies this view in her *New York Times* op-ed on August 18, 2012, “In Defense of Single Motherhood.” She dismisses claims of the destruction caused in single-parent households as conservatives obsessing over “moral decline” and liberals worrying “extravagantly” and “condescendingly” about a problem

she feels really does not exist. Those worrying about the breakdown of the family “exhibit a fundamental lack of imagination about what family can be.”

Roiphe notes that she has two children with two different fathers, neither of whom she lives with, and both of whom are “close.” She says that she is not the “typical” single mother, but “then there is no typical single mother any more than there is a typical mother. It is, in fact, our fantasies and crude stereotypes of this ‘typical single mother’ that get in the way of a more rational, open-minded understanding of the variety and richness of different kinds of families.”

She opines further, “The structure of my household is messy, bohemian, warm. If there is anything that currently oppresses the children, it is the idea of the way families are ‘supposed to be,’ an idea pushed . . . on American children at a very early age and with surprising aggressiveness.”

What Stigma?

We can agree that Roiphe is not the typical single mother. Most unwed mothers are not professors at major American universities. We might disagree with her, however, over just how strong the stigma of single parenting is these days. With 53 percent of babies born to women under 30 being born to unmarried mothers, it’s questionable that a stigma on unwed motherhood still exists. If a moral norm against being an unwed mother is being pushed “aggressively,” as she claims, it is not having much of an effect. More importantly, while Roiphe’s children might be doing well in her household, other children in single-parent households lead lives that should concern professors such as Roiphe who may teach only six hours a week (if that).

This rosy vision of a world of kids without two parents in the home is belied by study after study that shows the destructive effects of the breakdown of the traditional family. Growing up in a one-parent household means probable

lower educational attainment and increased likelihood of poverty, unemployment, alcohol and drug addiction, and incarceration. As sociologists Sara McLanahan and Christopher Jencks report, “A father’s absence increases antisocial behavior such as aggression, rule-breaking, delinquency, and illegal drug use” (*Education Next*, Spring 2015). This is especially the case for boys growing up in single-parent households.

Another way of looking at the problem is to ask how two-parent families are doing. The answer is clear: much, much better.

Race and Single Parents

Blacks are disproportionately affected by the crisis of single parenting. The 72.2 percent black out-of-wedlock birth rate eclipses that of other groups. Changing black community values, including the decline of black churches, have enabled this breakdown of the traditional black family.

“Nobody talks about it. It’s like some big secret,” Houston obstetrician Dr. Natalie Carroll told NBC News on November 7, 2010. “Part of our community has lost its way.” Her patients “don’t think they have to get married. I tell them children deserve a mama and a daddy. They really do.” She bluntly explained, “A mama can’t give it all. And neither can a daddy, not by themselves. Part of the reason is because you can only give that which you have. A mother cannot give all that a man can give. A truly involved father figure offers more fullness to a child’s life.”

As Dr. Carroll observes, the problems of single parenting are interconnected. Black children of single parents are mostly unprepared for jobs in today’s economy, especially with the decline of industrial work for unskilled labor. The drug epidemic has hit black men hard, sending men to prison and limiting job opportunities for those who serve their time. Men coming out of prison find that most women don’t want to marry men who can’t provide for their families. Furthermore, many women make bad decisions about what kind of men they choose to share their lives with. If a man does not appear to be husband material, why does a woman consider him worthy to impregnate her?

Typical of the women who see Dr. Carroll is Sherhonda Mouton. She was having her fourth child when she came to see Dr. Carroll in 2010. She was 30 years old, unmarried, and worked full-time as a fast-food manager. She loves her children. Her datebook contains an ode to her children to remind her every day of their importance. It concludes, “My children are what keep me going, every day. They give me a lot of hope and encouragement. College, college, college.”

But most blacks raised in single-parent households do not go to college. A committed father would give a firmer foundation to her dreams for her children.

Single parenting is more than an African American problem—it is a socio-economic problem as well—but race should not be ignored in the equation. Ferguson, Missouri, the locus of recent rioting over the shooting of a black male teenager, presents a case study of problems of a black community in turmoil. The median age in Ferguson is about 35 years old. About 30 percent of the population is white. Ferguson has a marriage rate of a little over 30 percent. The birth rate over the last year was higher than in any of the neighboring townships and higher than the state or national average.

More than 75 percent of births in Ferguson are to unwed mothers. More than 75 percent of those births are to women or girls living in poverty. More than 86 percent of those unwed mothers have a high school education or less (TownCharts.com/Missouri/Demographics/Ferguson).

Ferguson was a powder keg waiting to explode, just as are many other black communities.

Children and Socioeconomic Divisions

The problem of single parenting should be seen as only a symptom of a crisis facing the nation today. We can dispute the causes of growing socioeconomic inequality in the United States and its remedies, but there is no doubt of a growing socioeconomic divide in America.

At the turn of the 20th century, economic inequality was high, but from 1910 to 1970 the distribution of income (a measure of economic inequality) became more equal. From 1945 to 1975, as Robert D. Putnam reports in his new book *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, “poverty rates fell, median incomes consistently rose, and inequality progressively dropped.” Things began to go off track by the 1970s and worsened in 2008-2012.

Putnam, a Harvard University sociologist, finds many causes for this growing inequality—globalization, technological change, changing social norms and federal policy. What is most clear from his survey data is that the dividing line between the haves and have-nots is educational attainment. Those with college degrees are faring better, even in this tough economy, than those with only a high school education. Those with college degrees tend to be more employed, married and affluent. Those without a college education are more likely to be under- or unemployed, single and getting poorer. The net worth of college-educated American households with children rose by 47 percent between 1980 and 2013. The net

worth of households with only high-school-educated heads actually fell by 17 percent during the last quarter-century (Putnam, p. 26).

Housing, Schooling Stratification

Moreover, the disparity between the college-educated and the high-school-educated is aggravated by socioeconomic residential trends. Historically, at least since the Civil War, the very, very rich often lived in exclusive neighborhoods, but most Americans lived in economically diverse neighborhoods and schools. Kids in these neighborhoods and schools would play with children of doctors, lawyers, small business owners, factory workers and menial laborers. In school, athletics was often the great equalizer. One might be the son of a factory worker, but as the star quarterback he would be looked up to by his classmates.

The rapid expansion of suburbs since World War II allowed high-income families to move away from low-income neighbors. Putnam points out that while race-based segregation has been slowly declining, class-based segregation has been increasing. Socioeconomic residential segregation within each racial group increased. Socioeconomic residential segregation means that children of impoverished families attend schools filled with other impoverished children, while children of more affluent, college-educated families attend private schools or live in better school districts. Even when poor and wealthier schoolchildren live in the same school district they often attend separate and unequal schools because the more affluent will send their kids to private or parochial schools. Going to a poor-quality high school limits access to college. Putnam finds that by 2004 “kids from the top quarter of families in education were 17 times more likely to attend a highly selective college than kids in the bottom quarter.”

Marriage patterns are also breaking across socioeconomic lines. Interracial marriage has increased rapidly in the last quarter-century, but these marriages tend to be within the same socioeconomic group. Couples often meet in school or college. Americans increasingly marry people from educational backgrounds similar to their own. The most educated especially like to marry one another.

Contributing to the growing income and wealth disparity, Putnam emphasizes, is the breakdown of the traditional family. In the past, “a strongly patriarchal division of labor, coupled with widely shared prosperity” allowed families to get by on one male income. There were strong norms against out-of-wedlock births. Beginning in the 1970s, however, sex and marriage became delinked. Divorce rates soared for the high-school-educated lower third, while declining for

the upper third college-educated population. The sexual revolution, feminism, a changing economy and an ethos of “self-fulfillment” left the poor getting poorer. Putnam’s points echo earlier observations by Charles Murray in his book *Coming Apart* (2013).

Over the last decade, out-of-wedlock births have declined for teenagers, including minorities, by about 20 percent. So why do we have more single parents and out-of-wedlock births than ever before? While teenage out-of-wedlock births have fallen, unwed mothers aged 25-34 have soared by 70 percent. These unwed mothers are getting pregnant unintentionally or “semi-intentionally” even if they have contraceptive resources available. Advocates such as Planned Parenthood and feminists who blame poverty on the unavailability of contraceptives have been proven dead wrong.

Nonmarital Births Soar for Less-Educated

Nonmarital births to college-educated women are less than 10 percent, having risen only slightly since the 1970s, while those to high-school-educated women have risen sharply over the last 30 years and now make up about 65 percent of births in this group. Nonmarital births to black college graduates are about 25 percent and have fallen by a third over the last 20 years. In the same period the rate has nearly quadrupled for high-school-educated whites, accounting for nearly 50 percent of the birth rate for this group.

Children born to unwed mothers, whether white or black or Hispanic, often enter dysfunctional communities. These kids have fewer adults supervising them, providing support networks, watching out for them, or advising them how to advance themselves socially or economically. They are more likely to suffer abuse and less likely to develop what Putnam describes as noncognitive skills—“grit, social sensitivity, optimism, self-control, conscientiousness, and emotional stability.”

Sending everyone to college is not the answer to the problem of unwed motherhood. Better K-12 schooling, increased opportunities for vocational training, and reduced welfare incentives for childbearing would be steps in the right direction. Churches also have a role to play.

The Importance of Religion

Community matters, as Julius Wilson pointed out 25 years ago in *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1990). Essential to community cohesiveness are churches and community religious institutions. The single biggest factor in helping the poor better their lives is religion. Religion is

important for both the rich and the poor. Compared to their non-churched peers, youth who are involved in religious organizations take tougher courses in high school and get higher grades and test scores. Kids involved in religious organizations are less likely to drop out of high school.

“Controlling for many other characteristics of the child, her family, and her schooling,” Putnam writes, “a child whose parents actually attend church regularly is 40 to 50 percent more likely to go on to college than a matched child of non-attenders.” The poor who go to church find a support system of caring congregations, ministers and priests, and pastoral counselors who provide the kind of community that enables them to improve their lives emotionally, socially and economically.

While progressives advocate government programs to alleviate poverty and prevent other “Fergusons,” and libertarians focus on “individual freedom,” the truth is that religion can help to foster a well-ordered society that betters people’s lives at all social levels. One of the tragedies of the current era is that a war on Christianity is being waged at a time of growing socioeconomic disparities. This war is not just being waged abroad by Islamic extremists, but also at home as Christian groups are expelled from universities, an American president assails Christians as hypocrites, and the media deride Christians as intolerant bigots. The war on Christianity that we are witnessing today is in part a war on the poor.

The Most Important Person on Earth is a Mother

Cardinal Mindszenty’s respect for mothers was deep. Below is the Cardinal’s quote, available on a 5 ½" x 3" card in color.



The Most Important Person on earth is a mother. She cannot claim the honor of having built Notre Dame Cathedral. She need not. She has built something more magnificent than any cathedral—a dwelling for an immortal soul, the tiny perfection of her baby’s body ... The angels have not been blessed with such a grace. They cannot share in God’s creative miracle to bring new saints to Heaven. Only a human mother can. Mothers are closer to God the Creator than any other creature; God joins forces

with mothers in performing this act of creation ... What on God’s good earth is more glorious than this: to be a mother?

—*Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty*

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