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The Moynihan Report 50 Years Later: Why Marriage More Than Ever Promotes Opportunity for All

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In 1965, Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who later served as a U.S. Senator from New York, introduced what has come to be known as the Moynihan Report.¹ His report focused on the increases in disparities between white and black Americans in terms of income, standard of living, and education. Moynihan boldly asserted that the root cause of these disparities was the breakdown of marriage in the black community. “The fundamental problem,” he assessed, “is that of family structure.” In his report, Moynihan called for a national effort to strengthen the black family in America.

While the report was denounced by activists at the time, Moynihan’s observations were valid and the problems he identified have worsened over the past 50 years. Family breakdown among all Americans is a far greater problem today than it was five decades ago. To advance opportunity for all in America, policymakers and other leaders must promote marriage and the intact family in policy and culture.

Where We Were in 1965

The following statistics illustrate the state of the American family when Moynihan released his report:

Marriage. Overall, in 1965, only about 7 percent of men and women had never married by age 35. The percentage of whites who never married by age 35 was just about 7 percent. For black women, it was roughly 6 percent; for black men, the percentage was just below 10 percent.²

Single-Mother Households. Overall, about 11 percent of children lived in homes headed by a single mother (1968 data). About 6 percent of white children and 29 percent of black children lived in homes headed by a single mother.³

Unwed Childbearing. In 1965, 7.7 percent of all children in the United States were born to single mothers. Roughly one-quarter (approximately 26 percent) of black children and about 4 percent of white children were born outside marriage.⁴

Divorce. In 1960, just 2 percent of all men ages 15 and older had ever been divorced and 2.5 percent of all women had ever been divorced. Among white Americans, 2 percent of men and 2.5 percent of women had ever been divorced. Among black Americans, 2 percent of men and 4 percent of women had ever been divorced.⁵

Poverty. In 1965, the poverty rate had been steadily declining for more than a decade and was at 17.3 percent.⁶

Where We Are 50 Years Later

Since Moynihan’s report 50 years ago, marital breakdown and unwed childbearing in the United States have reached far greater levels among all Americans.

Marriage. Overall, the percentage of never-married Americans has increased significantly since 1965. About 10 percent of women and 14 percent of men have never married by age 35, according to 2010

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data. Among black men and women, the percent never married was substantially higher, at about 25 percent for both men and women in 2010.⁷

Single-Mother Households. In 2014, about 24 percent of children in the United States were living in a household headed by a single mother, over twice the amount in 1965. Among white children, the percentage had more than tripled, from 6 percent to about 19 percent, and for black children had increased by 42 percent such that over 50 percent of black children were living in a single-mother household last year.⁸

Unwed Childbearing. The number of children born to single mothers has also skyrocketed since the 1960s. More than 40 percent of children in the United States are born outside marriage. About 29 percent of white children, 72 percent of black children, and over half of Hispanic children were born to single mothers in 2014.⁹

Divorce. In 2014, the percentage of individuals ever divorced had increased dramatically from the 1960s. Overall, about 9 percent of men and 11 percent of women had been divorced. These percentages were roughly the same by gender for both white and black Americans.¹⁰

Poverty. In 2014, the poverty in the United States was slightly lower than it was in 1968, at about 14.5 percent.¹¹

Family Structure Matters for Opportunity

Tragically, family breakdown, including the decline in marriage and the rise in unwed childbearing and divorce, leave children in fragmented families and at significantly greater risk for poverty and other negative outcomes that can hinder their opportunity to thrive.

First, children in single-parent homes are at a much greater risk for poverty. Compared to their peers in married-parent homes, children in single-parent homes are more than five times as likely to be poor.¹²

Children in single-parent families also experience diminished educational opportunities. They are less likely to graduate from high school and to attend and graduate from college.¹³

Furthermore, marriage protects children against delinquent activity. Teens in father-absent households are significantly more likely to engage in criminal activity and are also more likely to be

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 3. U.S. Census Bureau, "Families and Living Arrangements," <http://www.census.gov/hhes/families/data/children.html> (accessed March 25, 2015).
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 6. U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Poverty Tables - People," <https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/data/historical/people.html> (accessed March 25, 2015).
 7. Diana B. Elliott et al., "Historical Marriage Trends from 1890-2010."
 8. U.S. Census Bureau, "Families and Living Arrangements."
 9. Joyce A. Martin et al., "Births: Final Data for 2013," *National Vital Statistics Report*, January 15, 2015, Table 14, http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr64/nvsr64_01.pdf (accessed March 25, 2015).
 10. Calculations based on data from U.S. Census Bureau, "Marital Status," Table MS-1.
 11. U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Poverty Tables - People," Table 2: Poverty Status by Family Relationship, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1959 to 2013 (accessed March 25, 2015).
 12. Robert Rector, "Marriage: America's Greatest Weapon Against Child Poverty," Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 117, September 5, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/09/marriage-americas-greatest-weapon-against-child-poverty>.
 13. "Family Structure and Children's Education," Heritage Foundation *Family Facts Brief* No. 35, <http://familyfacts.org/briefs/35/family-structure-and-childrens-education>.

incarcerated.¹⁴ Teens from single-parent households are also at greater risk for abusing alcohol and drugs.¹⁵

Teens in non-intact families are also at a greater risk for engaging in early sexual activity and of becoming a teen parent.¹⁶

Moynihan's Report and Opportunity for All

The need to strengthen the family is even more urgent today than it was 50 years ago. While Moynihan's report focused on the black family, and while the concern today is all the greater for this original group, trends in marriage and family breakdown are a concern among Americans of all races. In order for all families in America to have the greatest opportunity to thrive in the 21st century, it is crucial that America heed Moynihan's original warning and seek to reestablish the stability of the family.

In 1965, the generations of injustice and racial oppression that had contributed to the weakness of the family in the African American community were poignant. While it is still necessary today to fight systemic injustice where it exists, it is crucial to strengthen the institutions that nurture opportunity and protect against the many adverse outcomes that are associated with family breakdown. Without addressing these issues, far too many children will be left with diminished opportunities to reach their potential.

Conclusion

Policy makers and other leaders must find ways to strengthen marriage. They can start by ensuring that policy does not undermine marriage. This can be accomplished by reducing marriage penalties prevalent in the nation's means-tested welfare system.

Furthermore, policy makers should send a clear message about the crucial importance of marriage and the intact family, particularly with regard to how strong families protect children from poverty and other risks. They can do this through a public advertising campaign, following the model of anti-smoking campaigns and campaigns that have encouraged youth to "stay in school."

Leaders in all sectors should utilize their resources to strengthen and nurture healthy marriages. Churches and nonprofit and community-based organizations must also make the strengthening of marriage and family a priority.

It will require great courage from leaders to push back against the prevailing cultural trend of family breakdown, particularly since America is now seeing second-generation and third-generation fragmented families. However, these efforts are necessary if America hopes to restore and expand opportunity for all Americans.

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16. "Teen Sexual Behavior," Heritage Foundation *Family Facts Brief* No. 12, <http://familyfacts.org/briefs/12/teen-sexual-behavior>.