



SPECIAL REPORT

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Moving Beyond Moynihan: A New Blueprint to Revive Marriage and Rebuild the Black Family

Delano Squires

Richard and Helen Devos Center for Human Flourishing

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RICHARD AND HELEN DEVOS CENTER FOR HUMAN FLOURISHING

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Moving Beyond Moynihan: A New Blueprint to Revive Marriage and Rebuild the Black Family

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This Special Report revisits the 1965 Moynihan report on the state of the black family. The call to action in this new report is clear: Black leaders in religion, politics, media, entertainment, education, culture, and industry must be at the forefront of any effort to revive marriage and breathe new life into the black family. Young people in far too many neighborhoods today have no reason to believe that marriage should come before children because no one in their lives—whether relatives or religious leaders—have communicated that message. That can change, but only with a recommitment to the marriage culture and family structure that was the norm in previous generations.

Introduction

Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 analysis on the breakdown of the black family in *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* reflects two indisputable truths. The first is that the family is the foundational institution in every society. The second is that households built on the foundation of natural marriage—the union of one man and one woman—are the ideal environment for raising children. The Moynihan report, as it has come to be known, was an attempt to predict the role that family structure would play in the nation's hope for racial equality after black Americans gained civil and political rights in the 1960s.

While the Moynihan report was criticized by civil rights leaders and feminist activists after it was published, the issues he raised have only grown worse. In 1965, about 25 percent of black children were born to unmarried parents. Today, 70 percent are born out of wedlock. Even more shocking than the increase in nonmarital births in such a short time has been the

mented response to this transformation of family formation. The warning signs that Moynihan observed in 1965 moved him to call for federal action. Today, it is increasingly rare to find black neighborhoods in America's largest cities where the majority of children are being raised by a married mother and father. And yet the individuals and institutions that claim to care about racial equality remain silent. This *Special Report* revisits Moynihan's findings, analyzes the decline in two-parent families, and proposes a new blueprint to revive marriage and rebuild the black family.

Key Findings of the *Special Report*

- **The majority of black children are no longer born to—and raised by—married parents.** In 1965, about 75 percent of black children were born to married parents and two-thirds lived in two-parent homes. Today, 70 percent of black children are born to unmarried parents and close to half are raised by a single mother.
- **Economic explanations for the breakdown of the black family ignore the “poverty paradox.”** Nonmarital birth rates nearly tripled over six decades despite the fact that the black poverty rate *fell* from 55 percent in 1959 to 18 percent in 2023.
- **The “marriage” of the welfare state and second-wave feminism in the 1960s contributed to the decline in two-parent homes decades later.** The expansion of the welfare state in the 1960s displaced men, particularly black men, from their traditional role as provider in the home. This occurred at the same time second-wave feminists were encouraging women to reconsider their relationship to men, marriage, children, and family.
- **Disparities in marriage rates are a major factor in economic and social outcomes today.** Among American adults, 62 percent of Asians, 53 percent of whites, 47 percent of Hispanics, and 35 percent of blacks are married. Median household income figures follow the same pattern as national marriage rates, with Asians (\$121,700) followed by whites (\$92,530), Hispanics (\$70,950), and blacks (\$56,020).
- **Black progressives ignore racial disparities related to marriage and family structure.** The decline in marriage and changes to family

structure are not a priority for the elected officials, pastors, social commentators, activists, and civil rights organizations that claim to be concerned about racial disparities in economic and social outcomes.

Recommendations for Civic and Political Leaders

To make marriage revival and family restoration a priority, black pastors, elected officials, public intellectuals, and cultural influencers should:

- **Reframe family strengthening measures to focus on the rights of children.** Family restoration should be seen as an important civil rights issue driven by two truths. The first is that all children have a right to the affection and protection of the man and woman who created them. The second is that the ideal environment for this right to be exercised is in a loving and stable home with a married father and mother.
- **Harness the power of key institutions to create a culture of marriage.** Black churches, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), media outlets, and federal, state, and local government all have a role to play in encouraging men and women to marry before having children as well as discouraging adults from ignoring the ideal sequence for forming a family.
- **Prepare for criticism from “allies” that will oppose a revival movement for ideological reasons.** Efforts to revive marriage and rebuild the black family will not be universally supported. Resistance will also come from self-described “allies” on the political Left, including feminists, the abortion industry, LGBT groups, “antiracist” activists, and liberals who believe that social outcomes are more influenced by spending on government welfare programs than family structure.
- **Admonish civil rights groups that prioritize progressive political priorities over the black family.** Organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and National Urban League must explain why their institutional agendas include fighting DEI rollbacks, LGBT and abortion advocacy, and “climate justice” but nothing on the decline in marriage or dissolution of the traditional black family.

This *Special Report* is needed because changes in culture, social norms, policy, and technology since the 1960s require a new plan to address an old problem.

A strong nation requires strong communities. Strong communities are made of strong families. And strong families are built on strong marriages.

That means the institutions that claim to care about race and equality must be marriage-minded and family-focused. As the country witnessed in 2020 with the Black Lives Matter movement, their priorities are what drive media coverage, corporate pledges, political movements, policy proposals, philanthropic giving, and public support. There is no reason they could not do the same thing for a movement to restore the traditional black family—thereby granting countless black children the ultimate form of privilege: growing up in a loving, stable, and secure home with a married mother and father.

Moving Beyond Moynihan: A New Blueprint to Revive Marriage and Rebuild the Black Family

Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* 60 years ago,¹ yet it remains the most consequential—and controversial—analysis of the black family in American history. One explanation for its continued relevance is how accurately it predicted the breakdown of the traditional family structure. While the report was focused on the “Negro family” at the time, the issues it raised related to the relationship dynamics between men and women, welfare, employment, education, and urbanization help to explain why American families of every background look drastically different today than they did decades ago. As the saying goes, however, “when America catches a cold, black America gets pneumonia.”

The reality is that the black family is far more fractured today than it was in 1965, despite gains in civil rights, education, economic power, and political representation. In just three generations, a black child who is born to—and raised by—married parents went from being the norm to the exception. In 1959, the poverty rate for blacks was about 55 percent.² Despite those challenging economic circumstances, more than 75 percent of black children were born to married parents.³ By 2023, the poverty rate decreased to 18 percent, but the nonmarital birth rate *increased* to 69 percent.⁴

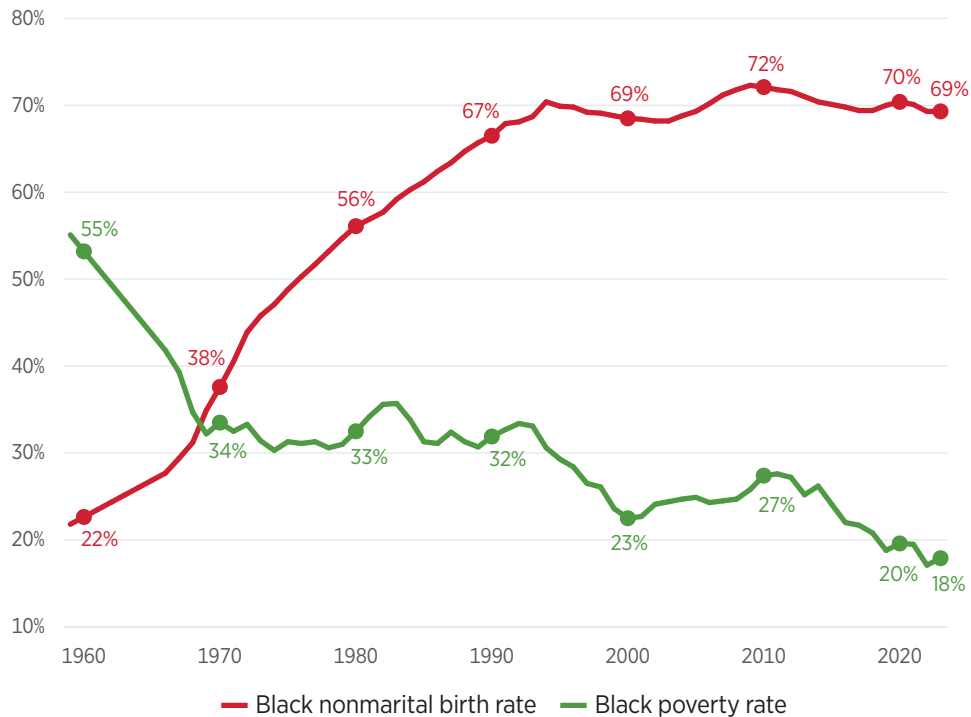
Likewise, according to the 1960 Census, two-thirds of black children lived in two-parent homes.⁵ Today, 44 percent of all black children are being raised by a single mother.⁶

These findings present a “poverty paradox” for those who believe that the fracturing of the family is mainly driven by economic factors. The findings should also prompt civil rights organizations, policymakers, and social commentators to ask a simple question: If life has generally gotten better for blacks in America since 1965, why has the state of the family gotten worse?

One major factor is the connection between “marriage inequality” and socioeconomic outcomes. For instance, median household income figures by race follow the same order as marriage rates. Among adults who are 18 and over, 62 percent of Asians, 53 percent of whites, 47 percent of Hispanics, and 35 percent of blacks are married.⁷ It is no surprise then that Asians have the highest earnings (\$121,700), followed by whites (\$92,530), Hispanics (\$70,950), and then blacks (\$56,020).⁸ The median income for black *married* couples (\$110,900), however, is higher than the overall household incomes for all groups except Asian Americans.⁹


Black married couples under the age of 65 bring in an extra \$11,000 per year. By contrast, the median household income for single black women is \$50,720.¹⁰ The connection between family structure and financial security is

CHART 1

Black Nonmarital and Poverty Rates, 1959–2023

NOTE: Some figures have been interpolated.

SOURCES: U.S. Census Bureau, “Historical Poverty Tables: People and Families-1959 to 2023,” Table 2, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/historical-poverty-people.html> (accessed September 2, 2025); U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Vital Statistics Reports, “Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States, 1940-99,” October 18, 2000, Vol. 48, No. 16, https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr48/nvs48_16.pdf (accessed September 2, 2025); and U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Vital Statistics Reports, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/nvsr.htm> (accessed September 2, 2025).

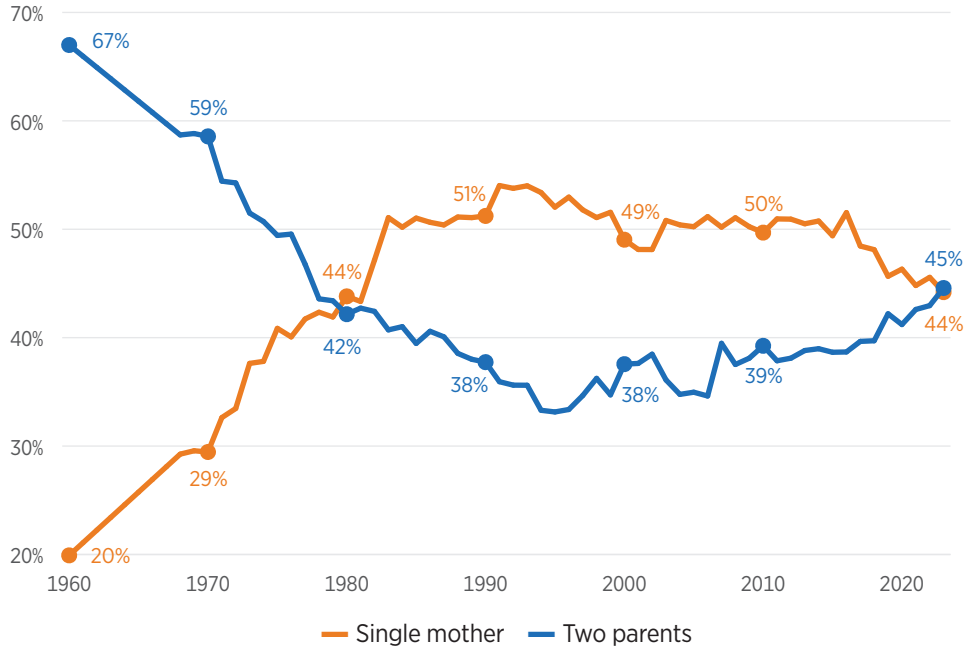
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encouraging, but unfortunately married couples only constitute 28 percent of all black households, compared to a national average of 47 percent.¹¹

The benefits that strong families, built on the foundation of marriage, provide for children extend beyond financial security. Children living with their married birth parents also earn better grades and are less likely to be suspended or expelled than those in single-parent homes.¹² Likewise, married parents are less likely to be contacted about disruptive behavior and their children are less likely to be held back.¹³ Children in nuclear families also enroll in college at higher rates and have lower incarceration rates as

CHART 2

Living Arrangements for Black Children, 1960–2023



NOTE: Some figures have been interpolated.

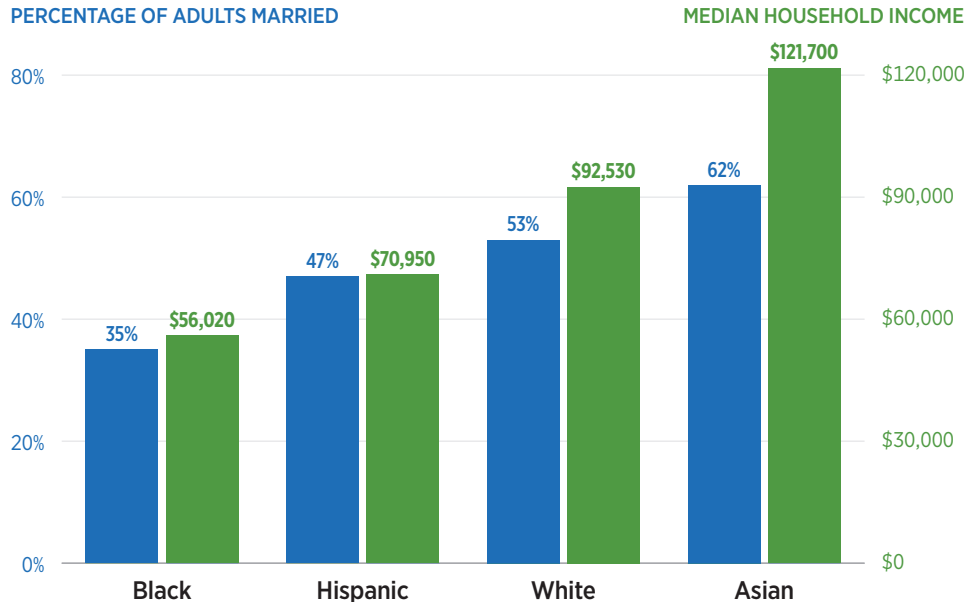
SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, "Historical Living Arrangements of Children," Table CH-3, November 2024, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/children.html> (accessed September 2, 2023).

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adults.¹⁴ Adolescent girls with present and involved fathers are likewise less likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors and become teen mothers.¹⁵

Decades of research prove what most people already know, namely that children raised in homes with their married biological parents have better outcomes on many important measures than children raised in other family arrangements, particularly single-parent homes. These outcomes go far beyond test scores and college degrees. An increase in the number of intact families means more children will grow up with the security that comes when parents love one another and create a home environment marked by affection and stability. Even the way children think about family changes based on how they are raised. The family name, family home, family car, family vacations, family traditions, family tree, and family reunions will all mean something very different in the future, or cease to have any meaning at all, if the status quo remains unchallenged.

CHART 3

Marriage Rates and Household Income by Race, 2024

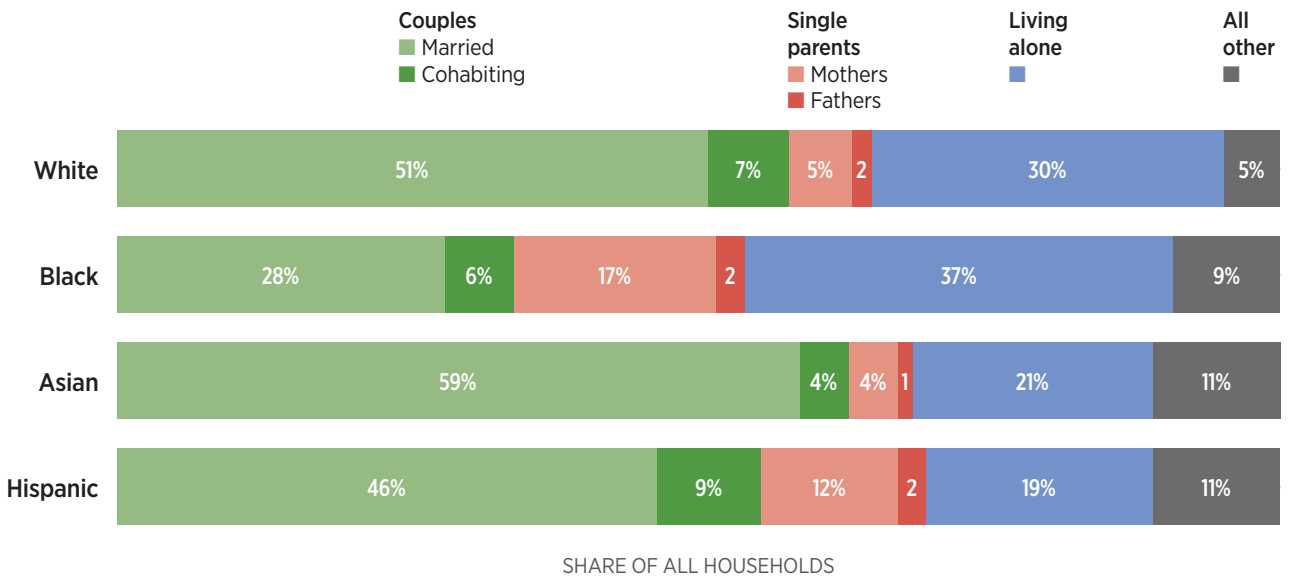
SOURCES: U.S. Census Bureau, “Historical Marital Status Tables,” Table MS-1, November 2024, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/marital.html> (accessed September 2, 2025), and U.S. Census Bureau, “Income in the United States: 2024,” September 2025, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/2025/demo/p60-286.pdf> (accessed September 10, 2025).

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A world in which every black child is raised in a loving household with a married mother and father would do far more to advance racial uplift than any new government program. When the political Left periodically acknowledges the breakdown of the black family, it most commonly blames it on the legacy of slavery and mass incarceration. Others will point to deindustrialization and redlining. While these views are understandable, they miss the true nature of the issue. Every social trend related to the family involves at least one of three fundamental elements: men, women, and the institution of marriage. Any analysis of the rise in fractured families—regardless of race—must deal with fundamental changes to at least one of those three. For example, economic instability can explain why a man feels unprepared to start a family, but it does not explain why he would have a child—or multiple children—with a woman he refuses to marry. There is also a bipartisan assumption that low-income single mothers lack “marriageable” mates. This idea presumes that a man can be unqualified to be a woman’s husband while being a suitable father to her children.

CHART 4

Composition of Households by Race, 2023



NOTE: Figures may not sum to 100 due to rounding.
SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, “Historical Households Visualizations: Figure HH-7a, Percent of Households by Race and Hispanic Origin of the Householder, 2023,” <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/visualizations/time-series/demo/families-and-households/hh-7a.pdf> (accessed September 2, 2025).

A world in which every black child is raised in a loving household with a married mother and father would do far more to advance racial uplift than any new government program.

All the evidence presented in this *Special Report* points to the same conclusion: The black family is in a state of emergency and there are only two choices about how to respond. The first is to accept the disappearance of marriage and two-parent homes as the norm, both now and in the future. This path will consign more black children to lives of poverty and all the negative social and emotional outcomes that come with family breakdown.

The second is to marshal the resources and capital needed for reconstruction. This path has the potential to restore and revitalize communities because it acknowledges that the *only* way for black America to thrive in future generations is to rebuild the family, an intergenerational reconstruction project that requires a cultural commitment to reviving the institution of marriage.

Like the Moynihan report, the following five chapters use a retrospective analysis to understand black family formation patterns today before making a call to action for a new movement to make “marriage before baby carriage” the norm again.

Chapter 1: Revisiting Moynihan

In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then Assistant Secretary of Labor under President Lyndon Johnson, released the report that remains synonymous with his name. Formally titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, Moynihan wrote that in the post–Jim Crow era—punctuated by the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964—African Americans would expect equal opportunities to generally produce equal outcomes with other groups.¹⁶ He believed that was unlikely to happen, however, for two reasons. The first was the “racist virus in the American bloodstream” that continued the prejudice and discrimination directed at black Americans for another generation. The second, in his words, was the impact of “three centuries of sometimes unimaginable mistreatment” that led to collective stagnation, despite individual examples of success. In Moynihan’s view, racial disparities were increasing because of changes in black family life, especially in the inner city:

The fundamental problem, in which this is most clearly the case, is that of family structure. The evidence—not final, but powerfully persuasive—is that the Negro family in the urban ghettos is crumbling. A middle-class group has managed to save itself, but for vast numbers of the unskilled, poorly educated city working class the fabric of conventional social relationships has all but disintegrated. There are indications that the situation may have been arrested in the past few years, but the general post war trend is unmistakable. So long as this situation persists, the cycle of poverty and disadvantage will continue to repeat itself.¹⁷

Moynihan listed several statistics to support his argument. He stated that close to one-quarter of black women “living in cities who have ever married are divorced, separated, or are living apart from their husbands.”¹⁸ He also stated that the nonmarital birth rate for blacks rose from 16.8 percent in 1940 to 23.6 percent in 1963.¹⁹ For context, the rate for whites increased from 2 percent to 3 percent over the same period.²⁰ Moynihan also reported that 14 percent of black children were receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) assistance, compared to only 2 percent of white children.²¹ He concluded that the “steady expansion of this welfare program, as of public assistance programs in general, can be taken as a measure of the steady disintegration of the Negro family structure over the past generation in the United States.”²² Moynihan saw early signs that black family life was beginning to unravel and viewed welfare dependence as one symptom of family breakdown.

Moynihan went on to list several reasons to explain the challenges facing the black family. He believed slavery played a significant role, a well-founded conclusion for someone writing a century after the ratification of the 13th Amendment. Moynihan observed the enslaved man's inability to fulfill his obligations as husband and father, specifically by the fact that his children could be sold and his wife sexually violated by her owner.²³ Moynihan went on to quote a social psychologist who noted that the prevalence of slave owners who separated families meant that the "slave household often developed a fatherless matrifocal (mother-centered) pattern."²⁴ While there is ample evidence demonstrating the efforts that freed slaves undertook to put their families back together, Moynihan believed the system of legal segregation that emerged at the turn of the century had a particularly negative effect on black men:

When Jim Crow made its appearance towards the end of the 19th century, it may be speculated that it was the Negro male who was most humiliated thereby; the male was more likely to use public facilities, which rapidly became segregated once the process began, and just as important, segregation, and the submissiveness it exacts, is surely more destructive to the male than to the female personality. Keeping the Negro "in his place" can be translated as keeping the Negro male in his place: the female was not a threat to anyone.²⁵

Moynihan believed these racial dynamics "worked against the emergence of a strong father figure."²⁶

The role men play in the life of the family was a recurring theme in the Moynihan report. For instance, Moynihan found that *work*, not welfare, was needed for men to fulfill their duty as the head of household.²⁷ His report included an analysis of economic data that found the black family was stable when work was plentiful but grew more fragile as jobs became scarce.²⁸ He also found that black men had higher rates of unemployment, lower wages, and larger families than their white counterparts, all factors that made it more difficult for them to support their households.

Moynihan found that *work*, not welfare, was needed for men to fulfill their duty as the head of household.

Moynihan was also interested in how gender dynamics in the workforce played out in the home. He claimed that 70 percent of the black employees

at the Department of Labor, where he was Assistant Secretary, were women, compared to 42 percent of the white employees.²⁹ This gender imbalance could also be seen in education, where black women had lower dropout rates and higher college attendance rates than their male counterparts.³⁰ Moynihan concluded that these larger structural factors led to the “reversed roles of husband and wife” in many black families, a pattern within the household that “reinforces itself over the generations.”³¹ Moynihan saw this “matriarchal” family structure as detrimental to the progress of black Americans, but he—like many progressives today—framed the problem as a departure from white social norms:

There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement. However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another.³²

Moynihan’s rhetorical embrace of androgynous egalitarianism undermined the roles that men and women play in the family and set the stage for ideas that made the problems he wanted to solve even worse. Foremost among them is the belief that a man’s responsibility to provide for his family could be outsourced to the government. This view led to an alternate family structure that became entrenched in low-income black neighborhoods over subsequent generations.

Moynihan went on to connect family instability to negative social outcomes for children. He pointed to research that suggested that black children from intact homes did better in school than their peers who did not have a father present. He also cited the work of criminologists Eleanor and Sheldon Glueck who found that “a higher proportion of delinquent than nondelinquent boys came from broken homes.”³³ The report continues: “They identified five critical factors in the home environment that made a difference in whether boys would become delinquents: discipline of boy by father, supervision of boy by mother, affection of father for boy, affection of mother for boy, and cohesiveness of family.”³⁴

Moynihan’s observations at the time seem prophetic today. In many cities across the country, violent crime is concentrated in a handful of neighborhoods, often disproportionately black and poor, where it is rare to see children raised in homes with married parents. In Washington, DC, 79 percent of babies in Wards 7 and 8—home to the poorest neighborhoods in

the city—are born to unmarried parents.³⁵ It is no surprise that is also where 60 percent of the homicides in the nation’s capital occur.³⁶ In contrast, 88 percent of babies in Wards 2 and 3—home to some of the wealthiest neighborhoods where homicides are uncommon—are born to *married* parents.³⁷

Ultimately, Moynihan was clear that the intent of his report was to define a problem, rather than propose a particular set of policy solutions. In his words, “Three centuries of injustice have brought about deep-seated structural distortions in the life of the Negro American.”³⁸ He believed that the “tangle of pathology” he described in the report was “capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world,” adding that “the cycle can be broken only if these distortions are set right.”³⁹ Moynihan concluded his report with a declaration that the programs of the federal government should be designed to “enhance the stability and resources of the Negro American family.”⁴⁰ He did not specify what form government intervention should take, but it did not take long for the Johnson Administration to make its plans clear.

President Johnson gave a commencement speech at Howard University in 1965 that included his belief that the family is the “cornerstone” of society and that broken homes have a devastating effect on their surrounding communities.⁴¹ His acknowledgement that men need jobs that help them provide for a family sounded completely in line with the analysis provided by his Assistant Labor Secretary. The President’s views on racial uplift, however, are what most people remember about his speech: “You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, ‘you are free to compete with all the others,’ and still justly believe that you have been completely fair.”⁴²

Government intervention exacerbated the problems that Moynihan wanted to solve and transformed welfare from a symptom of family breakdown to a cause.

The idea that President Johnson expressed that day became the foundation for 60 years of big government paternalism, foreshadowed later in his speech when he declared that welfare and social programs “better designed to hold families together” were part of the answer to racial inequality and the breakdown of two-parent homes. In reality, government intervention

exacerbated the problems that Moynihan wanted to solve and transformed welfare from a symptom of family breakdown to a cause. One reason is that welfare moved the primary responsibility to provide for a family from fathers to the government. In a cruel twist of irony, the black family, an institution that survived the darkest periods in the nation's history, was destroyed by people whose "help" sent the message that men are optional when the government plays the role of husband and father. What made matters worse was that this new norm took place at the exact moment in history when another movement encouraged women to rethink their relationship to men, marriage, children, and family.

Chapter 2: The Unholy Matrimony of Welfare and Feminism

Betty Friedan's 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique* is widely credited with sparking the second-wave feminist movement. The author, activist, and co-founder of the National Organization for Women believed that the suburban housewife, largely focused on her family and domestic life, was trapped in a "comfortable concentration camp" where she was destined to a "slow death of mind and spirit."⁴³ Other feminists held similar views about women, men, marriage, and the home. Gloria Steinem's *Time* magazine essay in 1970 titled, "What It Would Be Like If Women Win," challenged the social norms that kept women at home playing the role of "housekeeper" and "hostess."⁴⁴ While Steinem explicitly stated, "Women's Lib is not trying to destroy the American family," it is clear that she, and other feminists, saw men and marriage as barriers to true female fulfillment.⁴⁵

The *Black Woman's Manifesto*, published in 1970 by a group called the Third World Women's Alliance, used similar rhetoric in its hostility toward women in the home: "There is no reason to repeat bad history. There is no reason to envy the white woman who is sinking in a sea of close-quartered affluence, where one's world is one's house, one's peers one's children, and one's employer one's husband."⁴⁶

Early black feminists mocked African American women who they believed romanticized the roles of housewife and mother, attributing their views to societal conditioning based on white, middle-class norms.⁴⁷ They wanted black women to reject traditional gender roles and family life in order to commit themselves to "throwing off the yoke of capitalist oppression."⁴⁸ The black feminists writing at the time wanted to see women pursue higher education and fill the roles they believed were needed to wage a revolution. In their view, black women "sitting at home reading bedtime stories to their children are just not going to make it."⁴⁹

Early black feminists wanted black women to reject traditional gender roles and family life in order to commit themselves to "throwing off the yoke of capitalist oppression."

Despite expressing similar views on the oppression of women—and sometimes similar prescriptions to fix the problems they saw—black scholars in the 1970s nonetheless believed that the mainstream feminist movement reflected the interests of middle-class white women. The Combahee River Collective Statement, published in 1977, is one of the most important texts in black feminism, in part because it describes capitalism, racism, and sexism as “interlocking” systems of oppression. The authors believed that their fight for freedom required embracing “identity politics” focused explicitly on the needs of black women, while paying lip service to solidarity with black men:

Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.⁵⁰

This struggle between the sexes has been a consistent theme in black feminist scholarship since it emerged as a distinct political philosophy. Writers would declare their love for black men as comrades in the battle against racism in one sentence and critique their embrace of “patriarchal” thinking in the next. Patricia Harper Collins’s book *Black Feminist Thought* cites a scholar who argues that “protecting black women was the most significant measure of black manhood and the central aspect of black male patriarchy.”⁵¹ Black men defending black women seems uncontroversial, but the analysis that followed displays the adversarial lens through which black feminists viewed the relationships between the sexes:

If [Barbara] Omolade [who argued that “protecting black women was the most significant measure of black manhood and the central aspect of black male patriarchy”] is correct, then this important choice to protect Black women, for many men, became harnessed to ideologies of Black masculinity in such a way that Black manhood became dependent on Black women’s willingness to accept protection. Within this version of masculinity, a slippery slope emerges between *protecting* Black women and *controlling* them.⁵²

This way of thinking reveals an important reality, namely that a political ideology marked by strife between the sexes is incapable of producing

healthy marriages and strong families. The work of women like Alice Walker, bell hooks, Angela Davis, and Audre Lorde kicked off more than half a century of black feminist hostility toward men, marriage, and family.

What emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s was a new marriage that decimated the black family, which already had unique challenges because of its genesis in American chattel slavery. On one side was the government that displaced men from their traditional role as providers and protectors. On the other was the feminist movement that pushed women to seek financial independence and see a man in the home as unnecessary.

The expansion of welfare programs, particularly AFDC, made the federal government the de facto husband for millions of poor women across the country.

The new family structure that emerged—Uncle Sam playing the role of provider in millions of low-income neighborhoods—was incentivized by the symbiotic relationship between liberal politicians, government administrators, and single mothers. Everyone in the scenario had something to gain. Politicians were elected to powerful positions in federal, state, and local government. Unelected bureaucrats and civil servants received job security as important cogs in the poverty economy. Low-income mothers, often struggling to care for their children, received financial support. In this arrangement, black men played a role in procreation but not in household leadership.

Family structure was a key element of welfare policy, given that married couples, regardless of need, were ineligible for AFDC.⁵³ States had discretion to set eligibility rules and many also deemed families ineligible for the program if an able-bodied man (such as a boyfriend), considered a “substitute father,” frequently had sexual relations with an AFDC mother in her home.⁵⁴ The Supreme Court struck down this “man-in-the-house” rule in the 1968 *King v. Smith* case. The unanimous decision rejected the idea that an unrelated male in the home was truly a “substitute father.”⁵⁵ Politicians and bureaucrats, however, had no problem playing that role. The expansion of welfare programs, particularly AFDC, made the federal government the de facto husband for millions of poor women across the country.

In 1950, total federal expenditures on public aid programs, a fraction of total social welfare spending, totaled \$1 billion.⁵⁶ By 1975, it had ballooned to

\$27 billion.⁵⁷ It reached \$62 billion by 1985.⁵⁸ The majority of this spending took the form of cash assistance from AFDC, Medicaid, and food stamps. The welfare state not only provided resources to the home, but it also put a roof over millions of families' heads. Spending on public housing increased from roughly \$15 million in 1950 to over \$9 billion by 1985.⁵⁹ The racial demographics of these programs were striking. Despite being only 12 percent of the population in 1985, 42 percent of AFDC families were black.⁶⁰ This was hardly a surprise given that the poverty rate for black female-headed families with children under 18 was 59 percent.⁶¹

The paternalism of the welfare state contributed to the destruction of the traditional family structure that was the norm in black America.

Like every courtship, the government's "proposal" to care for poor black mothers and their children could not lead to a permanent union without their acceptance. Many single mothers were willing to say "I do" because the "feminization" of poverty made welfare a major battlefield in the women's liberation movement. Johnnie Tillmon was a welfare rights activist who worked to increase the number of black women accessing aid programs. She became a leader within the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) in the 1960s and was its president when it disbanded in the 1970s. Tillmon wrote an essay in *Ms.* magazine that showed a relationship with the government came with its own set of challenges: "Welfare is like a super-sexist marriage. You trade in a man for *the* man. But you can't divorce him if he treats you bad."⁶²

Tillmon stated that 99 percent of welfare families at the time were headed by women, yet, despite her reservations, saw government aid as a way to "liberate" poor women.⁶³ She desired more from the government—*the man*—even as she resented the control that her new provider exerted over poor single mothers like herself. Her work gave the illusion of promoting female empowerment, but the women who accepted government aid sunk deeper into dependence.

The paternalism of the welfare state contributed to the destruction of the traditional family structure that was the norm in black America by assuming the roles and responsibilities that historically belonged to men. The harsh realities of slavery created incentives for black men and women to keep

their families together. In fact, former slaves sometimes traveled across the country to put their families back together. From 1890 through the 1950s, black men and women married earlier and were more likely to be married by 35 than their white peers.⁶⁴

The fact that less than 40 percent of black adults today are married has destabilized individual households and entire communities across the nation.

Welfare, by contrast, created powerful incentives for a woman *not* to marry the father of her children or forsake having a family altogether. The feminist movement's emergence in the same era accelerated the reordering of gender and family dynamics for decades to come.

Rebecca Walker, daughter of noted black feminist Alice Walker, shared her experience with becoming a mother in 2008 and noted that being raised by a “rabid feminist” almost made her miss out on having a child.⁶⁵ Rebecca, a noted feminist author in her own right, perfectly captured the hostility her mother and her contemporaries had toward the family: “It was drummed into me that being a mother, raising children and running a home were a form of slavery. Having a career, travelling the world and being independent were what really mattered according to her.”⁶⁶

The daughter rejected the views of her iconic mother and said that having a child was the most rewarding experience of her life.⁶⁷ She stated, “feminism has much to answer for denigrating men and encouraging women to seek independence whatever the cost to their families.”⁶⁸ The union of feminist activists and paternalistic politicians radically reshaped the black family. While marriage rates have dropped for all Americans, the fact that less than 40 percent of black adults today are married has destabilized individual households and entire communities across the nation.

Chapter 3: Accepting Marriage-Optional Families as the New Normal

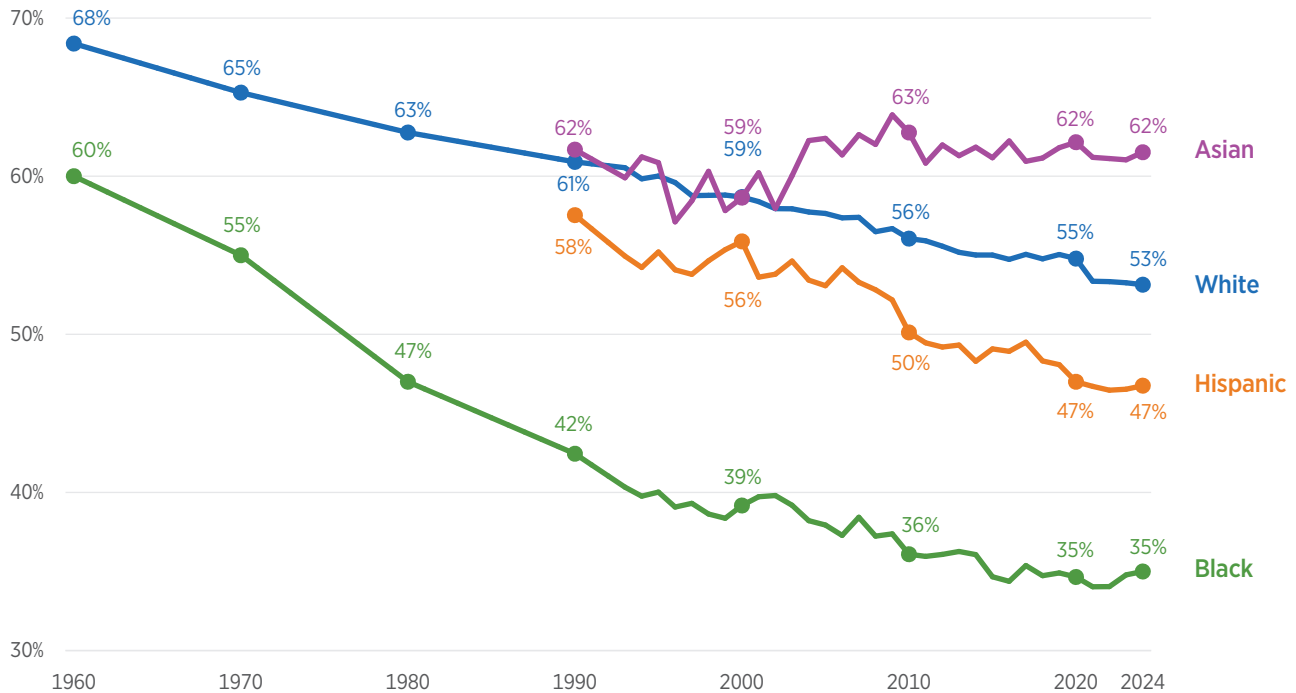
If the combination of welfare and feminism can be thought of as a pathogen that attacked the family, the failure of black leaders to adequately address the issue allowed the single-parent family structure to become an accepted norm. In 2024, *The Washington Post* published a story about a program that provided \$10,800 to low-income mothers in Washington, DC. The profile began with a 27-year-old “stay-at-home mom” with three children who reported Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) as her only income, lived in a subsidized two-bedroom apartment that cost her \$120 a month in rent, and received both food stamps and assistance from the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) supplemental nutrition program.⁶⁹ The article only mentioned fathers two times. The first was when the father of her children took an expensive trip to Florida using the lump sum payment she received from the new program. The other was when a woman stated that the fathers of her 17-year-old and one-year-old “have been in and out of their lives.”⁷⁰

This was not an anomaly. Public discourse involving the black family often writes men completely out of the picture, but unlike the 1960s, the husband-optional household increasingly transcends class.

Eboni K. Williams is a lawyer, author, and media personality. Several years ago, Williams, who is unmarried, was open about her desire to become a single mother—by choice. She expressed her vision while hosting a news program on TheGrio, a popular website catering to an African American audience. Williams stated, “single motherhood by choice is going to be an option that more and more black women consider,” later noting that these women “will increasingly decide to forego marriages and partnerships” that do not “serve” them.

Public discourse involving the black family often writes men completely out of the picture, but unlike the 1960s, the husband-optional household increasingly transcends class.

CHART 5

Share of Adults Currently Married by Race, 1960–2024

NOTE: Some figures have been interpolated.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau, “Historical Marital Status Tables,” Table MS-1, November 2024, <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/marital.html> (accessed September 10, 2025).

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Williams claimed that most black women on this “journey” want babies who look like them, which means that these single mothers by choice need, in her words, “black sperm”—a phrase she used six times in three minutes as she promoted this idea to other educated, financially secure black women.⁷¹ The messages that Williams wanted to send to her peers were loud and clear: marriage is obsolete, an economically independent black woman does not need a husband to have a family, and a child does not need a father in the home.

The dismissive attitude that Williams displayed toward marriage and the two-parent family did not occur overnight. The shift from concern to contempt evolved over decades. For example, Eleanor Holmes Norton has represented the District of Columbia in the U.S. Congress for more than 30 years. She was a contributor to the *Black Woman’s Manifesto* in the 1970s. But by 1985 she sounded like a pro-marriage conservative in an essay she wrote for *The New York Times Magazine* titled, “Restoring the Traditional Black Family.” The civil rights activist also expressed her concerns in 1986

after CBS aired a documentary called *The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America*. The special report took an honest look at the breakdown of the traditional family structure in the inner city. Many of the women in the special were on welfare. One of the fathers featured said that providing for his children was the responsibility of their mothers and the government. A roundtable that aired directly after the documentary featured Norton, Reverend Jesse Jackson, and Professor Glenn Loury. All three were troubled by the increase in out-of-wedlock births. The national nonmarital birth rate in the year the documentary was released was 23 percent.⁷² For black women, it was 62 percent.⁷³ Jackson spoke about the phenomenon of young men and women creating multiple children with different partners as a moral failing.

Black elites are quick to speak about the importance of every institution except the institution of marriage, and every social structure except family structure.

That type of rhetoric eventually went out of style among black leaders, largely to avoid being accused of “blaming the victim.” In fact, Senator Barack Obama was criticized by some of his progressive allies in 2008 after he gave a Father’s Day speech in Chicago during his first presidential run. Obama noted that half of black children live in single-parent homes and took absent dads to task for “acting like boys instead of men,” before adding that men needed to realize that “what makes you a man is not the ability to have a child—it’s the courage to raise one.”⁷⁴ Reverend Jackson felt that Obama was talking down to black people and was caught on a hot mic telling someone, “I want to cut his nuts out.”⁷⁵ Contrary to his concerns about the family in the 1980s, Jackson’s comments about Obama in 2008 reflected his belief that the future President should have been using his bully pulpit to talk about the government’s role in “impoverishing” black families. He wanted Obama to focus his platform on jobs and the economy, not family structure.

This was not the last time Obama was criticized by black Democrats for talking about the importance of marriage and fatherhood. The speech he gave on strengthening the middle class a few days after his 2013 State of the Union address included a section on the scourge of violent crime in many Chicago neighborhoods. This was an issue that the President, as he often did, connected to the family:

There's no more important ingredient for success, nothing that would be more important for us reducing violence than strong, stable families—which means we should do more to promote marriage and encourage fatherhood. Don't get me wrong—as the son of a single mom, who gave everything she had to raise me with the help of my grandparents, I turned out okay.... But at the same time, I wish I had had a father who was around and involved.⁷⁶

President Obama's concern about violence came weeks after a 15-year-old high school student named Hadiya Pendleton was killed in a drive-by shooting in Chicago. Her murder struck a personal chord with the President because she was killed only eight days after she performed with her high school's marching band at his second inauguration.

But not everyone was pleased by the President's message about marriage and fatherhood. Brittney Cooper, a professor who describes herself as a radical feminist, wrote in *Ebony* magazine that she found herself “deeply incensed” at President Obama's promotion of marriage and strong families as solutions to community violence.⁷⁷ Cooper felt that Obama was promoting narratives about broken homes and absent dads. Like many of her peers, she wanted Obama to focus on education and economic policies she believed would strengthen black families.

This anti-family ideology is so prevalent that a magazine formerly dedicated to promoting racial uplift rebuked the country's first black President for promoting marriage and intact households. Black leaders in the early part of the 20th century used their institutions and resources to uplift the race. This involved their fight against racial discrimination as well as a willingness to address issues of morality, character, and conduct. Black progressive politicians, pundits, professors, preachers, and performers today generally do not speak publicly on issues unless they believe the problems can be tied directly to racism. In this ideological framework, marriage and family are afterthoughts at best. Black elites are quick to speak about the importance of every institution except the institution of marriage, and every social structure except family structure.

While black conservatives have been consistent about the importance of this issue for decades, black progressives largely ignore it because their political party demands they focus more on who is in the White House than what is going on in the black home. It is no coincidence that Obama was the last prominent elected Democrat willing to consistently connect family structure and social outcomes. Every black leader since then knows that if the first black President can be attacked for promoting the family, then the progressives in media and academia will be even more vicious toward them. These are the people who *must* be engaged and persuaded to reorder their priorities if a movement to rebuild the black family has any chance of succeeding.

Chapter 4: A New Plan to Revive Marriage and Rebuild the Traditional Family

One of the most important differences between the case for national action that Daniel Patrick Moynihan made and the revival movement needed today is identifying the stakeholders responsible for leading it. In 1965, Moynihan recommended that the federal government direct its efforts toward “enhancing the stability and resources of the Negro American family.” His call placed elected officials and unelected bureaucrats—virtually all white at the time—in the role of moral agents, while relegating blacks to the role of clients of a beneficent welfare state.⁷⁸ Today, however, any campaign, initiative, or movement to rebuild the traditional black family *must* be spearheaded by African American leaders and institutions. There is no reason why white liberals—or conservatives—should be expected to prioritize the state of the black family more than the people who will be most directly affected by a revival movement.

The blueprint for reviving marriage and the traditional black family has several key elements, including correctly framing the issue, recruiting the institutions needed to restore a culture of marriage, identifying the types of policies, programs, and projects needed to strengthen families, and overcoming “allies” who stand in the way of progress.

Reframing the Issue. One important step that black leaders can take to begin restoring the black home is to think of family revival as a civil rights issue driven by two truths. The first is that all children have a right to the affection and protection of the man and woman who created them. The second is that the ideal environment for this right to be exercised is in a loving and stable home with married biological parents. When it comes to the family, the default in American culture today is to prioritize the desires of adults over the needs of children. That moral framework is completely inverted. Parents have a duty to make sacrifices to provide for the welfare of their children. No child has a duty to sacrifice his well-being for the sake of his parents. Unfortunately, this is exactly what happens to the children of unwed parents who are deprived of the benefits that come with having their mother and father under the same roof.

Fathers and mothers have an obligation to their children because creation and stewardship go hand in hand. Those duties are best carried out in a loving, monogamous marriage. A movement to rebuild the black family that is centered around the rights of children restores order to the household. It also puts the responsibility for the provision, moral instruction,

and emotional development of children back where it belongs—with their parents. The top priority for anyone who claims to care about improving social and economic outcomes for black Americans should be promoting a culture where men and women commit to one another and the families they build together, not creating fatherless (or motherless) children for the sake of adult fulfillment or convenience.

No one would suggest starting a national movement to address the home lives of a few thousand children scattered across the country. But when fractured families become a widespread issue hurting millions of children, it should be seen as the systemic issue that it is. The fact that most black children do not have the benefit of living under the same roof with their married parents is an injustice that a new civil rights movement must rectify. If 70 percent of black children were born with a serious health condition that affected less than 30 percent of white children, every racial justice activist would make addressing that disparity a national priority. Progressive leaders would not rest until they found individuals and institutions to hold accountable. They would do everything in their power to remove the barriers blocking precious black children from reaching their full potential. They would undoubtedly attach their new fight to the civil rights struggles of the past, giving their movement a historical connection to previous battles for racial uplift.

The same activists and organizations need to fight with as much passion *for the family* as they do against racial disparities. If they truly desire black social progress, then reviving marriage and intact families in Southeast DC should be as important to them today as voting rights were in Selma, Alabama, in the 1960s. Previous generations were willing to risk their lives to secure civil and political rights for those who came after them. Today's fight for justice simply requires a man and women coming together as husband and wife to start a new life together. That one decision, combined with the commitment to stay together through hard times, will do more to improve the lives of black children than any new government welfare program or social justice campaign.

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Achieving such a radical shift in family dynamics will not be easy. In fact, marriage revival will not be successful unless it is the top priority for black leaders for at least 10 years. Unfortunately, there is much to be gained by pushing black oppression and victimhood. Liberal politicians run on fixing racial disparities. Corporations commit to racial justice causes to stay in the good graces of progressives in media and politics. Disparities in household wealth, K–12 education, and incarceration rates are used to justify everything from racial preferences in college admissions to abolishing the police.

Black leaders—and their white allies—have much to lose by prioritizing the tangible goals of increasing marriage rates and rebuilding the family over vague plans to end racism and rid the world of all oppression. Perpetually chasing and redefining the latter goal has certainly enriched certain black elites, but experience has proven that it has not improved the lives of the ordinary people they claim to represent.

Using Key Institutions to Create a Culture of Marriage. Of all the institutions needed to truly restore the black family, the church is by far the most important. The black church, however, is facing challenges in both the pulpit and pews. Thirty percent of black Americans under the age of 40 are religiously unaffiliated.⁷⁹ This loss of religious observance is consistent with broader cultural trends. It is particularly alarming, however, because of the church’s outsized role in black civic and political life for well over a century. The most important thing that black religious institutions can do today to rebuild the home is to boldly declare the goodness of God’s design for the human body, sex, marriage, and the family. This includes pastors publicly affirming that there are only two sexes—male and female—and that the biblical definition of marriage consists of one man and one woman. They, of all people, must acknowledge that true revival is only possible through righting the relationship between men, women, and the God who created the institution of marriage.

Churches should see a revival movement as an opportunity to reach couples through their family ministries. Some may also offer fellowship opportunities for singles, pre-marital classes for couples who are seriously dating, and workshops for married couples looking to improve their relationships.

Pastors should also be willing to nudge couples to move from “shacking up” to settling down. In fact, one of the most important roles the church can play in a revival movement is being willing to shape, guide, regulate, and police the behavior of individuals and institutions. This requires promoting values that lead to human flourishing, specifically encouraging men and women to marry before having children. It also means finding ways to discourage people from disregarding the ideal sequence for forming a family.

Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) are also crucial players in efforts to strengthen the black family. Hampton University has been a leader in this area, evidenced by the school's annual conference on the black family that started in the 1980s. Hampton should serve as a model for any HBCU that wants to host events bringing together scholars, pastors, counselors, entertainers, and other stakeholders working to increase the number of stable marriages and intact families in the black community. Family-focused HBCUs can do much more than host conferences on marriage, however. They should be at the forefront of research on how men and women view relationships, gender roles, marriage, and family.

Schools can also cultivate a local marriage culture by enlisting faculty and graduate students in the appropriate disciplines to offer pre-marital education and counseling services to couples in their surrounding communities. Another idea involves allowing campus grounds and facilities to be used for weddings, with deep discounts for couples that give schools permission to use their wedding photos for on-campus marriage marketing campaigns. Student groups may also be interested in hosting events on relationships that include married couples—especially alumni who met on campus.

None of these ideas, in isolation, can rebuild the black family. Taken together, however, they can plant the seeds of marriage and family life in the minds of students and create the “ring by spring” culture that is associated with many conservative and religious colleges. Black colleges and universities are important institutions that play a significant role in cultivating future lawyers, doctors, and engineers. There is no reason they cannot invest in marriage and family work that also produces future husbands and wives.

A movement to rebuild the home will never reach its full potential unless black cultural capital—expressed through art, entertainment, and media—is used to promote positive images of marriage and family. The creators of the website Black and Married with Kids (BMWK), Lamar and Ronnie Tyler, are a perfect example of how this can be done. Their work has been featured in a variety of media outlets, including *Ebony*, *Essence*, *Jet*, and *The Washington Post*. In addition to creating a site for articles and resources about relationships, parenting, and faith, the Tylers produced several documentaries on topics such as marriage, manhood, and wealth. They also hosted several marriage cruises that brought couples from across the country together to help them build loving relationships and strong families.

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The Tylers are following in the footsteps of black leaders who understood media and entertainment are powerful vehicles for shaping how men and women see themselves, the opposite sex, and relationships. In fact, C. Delores Tucker’s crusade against rap music in the early 1990s was driven by her belief that artists were poisoning their communities with lyrics that degraded women. Tucker specifically pointed to the release of Snoop Doggy Dogg’s debut album *Doggystyle* and called its artwork “pornographic smut.” Tucker was ahead of her time when she sounded the alarm about “continuously exposing our youth to negative media that distorts their images of male-female relationships, that undermines the stability of our families, communities and nation by encouraging violence, abuse and sexism as acceptable behaviors, and perpetuates the cycle of low self-esteem of African American youth.”⁸⁰ Tucker clearly understood that it is impossible for some of the most influential members of a group to use their talents to degrade women without it having an effect on the people who identified most with the artists.

The idea that “representation matters” is also one reason *The Cosby Show* was such an iconic television series. Bill Cosby brought in Harvard psychiatrist Dr. Alvin Poussaint as a consultant for the hit sitcom. Both men wanted the show to include positive images of a black family, including a loving relationship between Cliff and Claire Huxtable, the show’s fictional husband and wife.⁸¹ Cosby and Poussaint also wanted the show to exist in a black cultural context, evidenced by the African artwork, jazz, and references to HBCUs that were a staple in the family’s home.⁸²

The two men, like C. Delores Tucker, knew that the value of entertainment extended far beyond making money. That lesson still holds today. A movement to revive the family will never reach its full potential if black cultural capital is used to promote images of division, dysfunction, degeneracy, and destruction. Harnessing the power of media will require honest conversations about what, if any, responsibility black artists and entertainers have for the real-world impact of the content they create. It will also require honest self-reflection on the part of black consumers who support artists producing content and promoting values that sow seeds of self-hate, not “black love.”

It is easy to see the roles that the church house, schoolhouse, and art house would play in a revival movement. But the statehouse can also contribute to a culture of marriage and strong families. One example is the controversial public information campaign that New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg launched in 2013 to reduce teen pregnancy. The mayor and his administration posted bus and subway ads depicting distressed toddlers paired with slogans like, “Honestly, Mom, chances are he won’t stay with you. What happens to me?” and “Dad, you’ll be paying to support me for the next 20 years.”⁸³ The campaign was immediately met with criticism for stigmatizing teen mothers. His detractors failed to note that one of the ads gave teens the three-step plan—“finish high school, get a job, and get married before having children”—that would give them a 98 percent chance of avoiding poverty.⁸⁴

Regardless of what people feel about the execution, the ad campaign was a concrete example of how elected officials can use their bully pulpit to influence public sentiment about marriage and family formation. Any municipal government in the country could do the same today and direct city funding toward pro-marriage public awareness campaigns with simple messages, such as “In this city we believe marriage comes before the baby carriage.” Some people will inevitably claim that these messages stigmatize parents who do not meet the ideals expressed in the ads, but neutral observers would see them as inspirational and aspirational. Elected officials and other government leaders can also use their platforms and influence to speak the hard truth that a child’s life outcomes depend far more on her home environment than a politician’s policy agenda. These statements do not require any new laws or collaboration with another branch of government. All they require is an acknowledgement of the family’s importance, an honest assessment of the government’s limitations, courage, and political will.

One idea that combines all these elements would be a marriage “boot-camp” for cohabiting couples with children. Recruitment could be done through local nonprofits that work with families as well as radio, transit, and social media advertisements. The federal government has earmarked grant funds for marriage education programs in the past, including \$35 million for one initiative called Helping Every Area of Relationships Thrive—Adults (HEART).⁸⁵ A local church could use this type of grant to run a program that covers important topics like communication, money management, blended families, fidelity, and conflict resolution. Successful completion of the program would mean that couples are ready to walk down the aisle at a communal wedding by the end of the bootcamp. The bride and groom would also be matched with a mentor couple who could help them to navigate the highs and lows of married life.

The most innovative aspect of this program, however, would be to add a monetary incentive for couples to get—and stay—married. For example, each couple that completes the program could receive a wedding bonus of up to \$5,000 on their wedding day to be paid through foundations or private donors, not government funds. There would be provisions to discourage bad actors and sham marriages, such as structuring the funds as a loan that is fully forgiven after a certain number of years, and much would depend on proper vetting and recruiting of program participants. Grant recipients could be financially incentivized based on their rate of marriage success, which is a simple way to create an incentive structure geared toward the outcomes conservatives say they desire. Tangible and measurable goals are one strength of a program like this, but conservatives will also have to wrestle with the fundamental reality that creating a culture of marriage in neighborhoods where intact families are rare is going to look different than in communities with college-educated and middle-class couples who grew up in two-parent homes.

The pushback from progressives would sound a bit different. Government spending is typically not a problem for liberals, but a program that *promotes* traditional marriage certainly would be. My earlier reference to the program that gave \$10,800 to low-income mothers is proof that progressive family strengthening initiatives are generally focused on the immediate physical needs of mothers and their children, not the type of long-term community transformation that requires a culture of marriage to take root. A marriage bootcamp for couples who already share a home and at least one child would address the relationship and planning skills needed for working-class families to flourish. It would also help to establish new norms in communities where most children do not see men and women living together as husband and wife.

Anticipating Resistance from “Allies.” One of the tragic ironies of the rise and fall of Black Lives Matter (BLM) is the reality that the most influential movement claiming to fight for the rights of black people since the 1960s was openly hostile to the traditional family. The organization said so in its “Black Villages” principle: “We disrupt the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure requirement by supporting each other as extended families and ‘villages’ that collectively care for one another, especially our children, to the degree that mothers, parents, and children are comfortable.”⁸⁶

Few, if any, journalists asked BLM co-founders Alicia Garza and Patrisse Cullors why a movement claiming to fight for racial uplift believes there are *too many* intact families in the black community. It likely never occurred to anyone to do so because the black family has been sacrificed on the altar of

progressive politics for decades. Anyone who is serious about reviving marriage and rebuilding the home must know that opposition will come from the same groups that were part of BLM's coalition: feminists, abortionists, LGBT activists, antiracists, paternalists, and functional atheists. While they are all connected under the umbrella of progressivism, the criticism from each one will sound slightly different based on which part of the traditional family model they reject.

Feminists will claim that an emphasis on marriage and family is rooted in sexism. The opposition from abortion supporters will come from their knowledge that marriage revival is a threat to an industry where close to 90 percent of women seeking abortions are unmarried.⁸⁷ LGBT activists will attack the movement because they do not believe the traditional family structure is inclusive enough for the 21st century. Functional atheists who support the biblical blueprint for the family but do not want to impose their views on others will publicly criticize a revival movement while agreeing with it privately. Antiracists will push back on efforts to rebuild the family because they believe racial progress is only possible by "eradicating white supremacy." There will also be opposition from paternalists who believe that the black family would be better served by more government programs for low-income mothers and their children than by a renewed focus on marriage. These six groups all present themselves as "pro-black" and claim to care about racial equality, but they would be among the loudest critics if revivalists launched a "Black Wives Matter" campaign that promoted the necessity of marriage and goodness of family life today. That is because progressives today care far more about their ideological commitments than fighting for what's best for black families. In fact, part of what makes this coalition so powerful is the interconnectedness of each group. The co-founders of BLM showed that it was possible to combine several different progressive priorities into a single organization. This united force wrapped its pro-abortion, LGBT, feminist activism in a thin veil of pro-black antiracism so effectively that black churches and politicians ended up promoting self-professed Marxists.⁸⁸

Resistance to a revival movement will be driven by identity as well as ideology. For example, white liberals who have all their children within marriage will attempt to lecture revivalists about why black families need more government welfare programs to get ahead. Civil rights organizations will dismiss the black families that would benefit from a renewed commitment to marriage to appease the mostly white LGBT community and Pride activists who believe that pastors promoting biblical teaching on sex and sexuality is bigoted and hateful. When it comes to today's political arena, it is clear that the Democratic Party is more invested in promoting the political priorities of white progressives than rebuilding the black family.

Chapter 5: A Call to Action

Even the most dedicated movement to revive marriage and rebuild the black family will take decades to reverse the damage done by bad public policy and destructive social trends. Unlike the Moynihan report in 1965, today's call for national action must be answered first and foremost by black leaders. Another key difference from 60 years ago is the lens through which the family is viewed. In 1965, and in subsequent decades, that lens has been largely political. This explains why so much emphasis is placed on putting the right policy interventions in place to recharge marriage and rebuild the family. Some believe the key is higher wages and more affordable housing. Others think the problem is "mass incarceration" that takes men out of the community. And for some, the key is universal school choice that provides low-income families with better education options for their children.

The traditional black family is on the brink of extinction because raising children without a father in the home has become the accepted norm, *independent* of the factors that started this trend 60 years ago.

All these assumptions suffer from the same fatal flaw: thinking about marriage and family formation *today* as an expected outcome that is downstream from other policy inputs. The truth is that social change often results from several factors—economic, political, cultural—interacting with one another in unpredictable ways. But once a given phenomenon moves from an unpopular deviation to the accepted norm, the original inputs are no longer necessary for widespread replication. To put it simply, the traditional black family is on the brink of extinction because having babies out of wedlock and raising children without a father in the home have become accepted norms *independent* of the factors that started this trend 60 years ago. Changing this reality will take more than new policies and programs, largely because the institution of marriage is no longer viewed as *valuable, desirable, accessible, and indispensable* for the purpose of forming a family.

That means that creating a culture of marriage today is largely an exercise in persuasion, conveying five messages and their underlying impact on family formation: (1) marriage is important (value), (2) getting married *before* having children is ideal (sequence), (3) it is not necessary to achieve all of one's life goals before getting married (timing), (4) marriage is meant to be a lifelong union (permanence), and (5) there is nothing strange about having what today is considered a large family (size). These five messages correspond to related indicators of family health that should be used to measure the success of a revival movement: marriage rate, marital birth rate, age of first marriage, divorce rate, and family size.

Selecting the right family formation metrics is one of the most important elements of a campaign to restore the traditional black family. Change will not come overnight. A cultural shift of this magnitude will take decades, which is one reason why it is important to celebrate progress, regardless of how incremental. True revival will be *felt* in the communities harmed most by the breakdown of the family, even when progress seems slow according to politicians, academics, and social commentators.

One reason for this lag is that the principles that hold true in agriculture also apply to marriage culture. This is why institutions must be intentional about “planting” and “feeding” the values that strengthen families and “pruning” anything that weakens them. They must also acknowledge that growth takes time, especially in environments that have been barren for decades. A sign that the seeds of strong families are taking root would be churches in cities across the country running “spouse schools” that provide education, counseling, and mentoring for people—regardless of relationship status—in neighborhoods where intact families are uncommon. Other examples include cities doing public awareness campaigns promoting family life and communities coming together to support a young married couple who are the first on either side of their families to have a wedding in three generations.

Some of these plans will be met with skepticism, both from elites across the political spectrum and people in neighborhoods where a culture of marriage has not existed for decades. But couples in these “marriage deserts” can begin to change this dynamic by modeling love, respect, and mutual support. Institutions that have the resources and influence to supercharge family revival also have an important role to play. Rebuilding the black family will require major contributions from religious leaders, educators, and elected officials. There will also be a role for civil rights organizations and media outlets that cater to an African American audience.

Recommendations for Civic and Political Leaders

To make marriage revival and family restoration a priority, black pastors, elected officials, public intellectuals, and cultural influencers should:

- **Reframe family strengthening measures to focus on the rights of children.** Family restoration should be seen as an important civil rights issue driven by two truths. The first is that all children have a right to the affection and protection of the man and woman who created them. The second is that the ideal environment for this right to be exercised is in a loving and stable home with a married father and mother.
- **Harness the power of key institutions to create a culture of marriage.** Black churches, HBCUs, media outlets, and federal, state, and local government all have a role to play in encouraging men and women to marry before having children as well as discouraging adults from ignoring the ideal sequence for forming a family.
- **Prepare for criticism from “allies” that will oppose a revival movement for ideological reasons.** Efforts to revive marriage and rebuild the black family will not be universally supported. Resistance will also come from self-described “allies” on the political Left, including feminists, the abortion industry, LGBT groups, “antiracist” activists, and liberals who believe that social outcomes are more influenced by spending on government welfare programs than family structure.
- **Admonish civil rights groups that prioritize progressive political priorities over the black family.** Organizations like the NAACP and National Urban League must explain why their institutional agendas include fighting DEI rollbacks, LGBT and abortion advocacy, and “climate justice” but nothing on the decline in marriage or dissolution of the traditional black family.

Conclusion

The call to action in this *Special Report* is clear: Black leaders in religion, politics, media, entertainment, education, culture, and industry must be at the forefront of any effort to revive marriage and breathe new life into the black family. Young people in far too many neighborhoods today have no reason to believe that marriage should come before children because no one in their lives—whether relatives or religious leaders—have communicated that message. That can change, but only with a recommitment to the marriage culture and family structure that was the norm in previous generations.

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