

Sociologists examine the state of black families 50 years after groundbreaking report

January 14 2015, by Ashley Inman

Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report on the structural causes of the fragmentation of the black family has been so hotly debated that serious research on the complexity of the problem has been undermined for decades. Now on the 50th Anniversary of "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," and in new research for Education Next, Harvard sociologist William Julius Wilson, Lewis P. and Linda L. Geysler University Professor and director of the Kennedy School's Joblessness and Urban Poverty Research Program, with Harvard colleagues James Quane and Jackelyn Hwang, find poor black children today are increasingly likely to grow up in family units in the inner city whose dire circumstances affect every aspect of their lives.

As they enter adulthood, many young blacks, particularly males, have experienced unemployment and disconnection from schools and vocational institutions at rates ranging from 20 to 32 percent. By 2011, nearly two years after the Great Recession, more than one-quarter of young black males were neither employed nor enrolled in school or vocational training. The rates for white and Hispanic young people were also high in 2011, around 20 percent, but for [black youth](#) the rate has been about 10 percentage points higher throughout this period.

Black youth are also more likely to be confined in correctional facilities. Although the percentage of juvenile offenders under the age of 18 confined in a correctional facility declined from 1 percent to half that

level between 1997 and 2011, they were still five times as likely to be in detention or [correctional facilities](#) in 2011 than their white peers. Today, blacks constitute nearly half of all people jailed and imprisoned in the U.S., but their rates of incarceration vary greatly by education level.

Among black young men who were behind bars in 2008, 37 percent were high school dropouts. For those with a [high school diploma](#), that rate drops to 9 percent. Among those with some college, the rate falls to 2 percent, closer to that for young men from other racial backgrounds. Because of these incarceration rates, poor [black children](#) are more likely to experience a period when at least one of their parents is absent. Rates for black children with a parent behind bars more than tripled from 3 percent in 1980 to 11 percent in 2008.

Inner-city neighborhoods are where all these dynamics interact, the study points out, and in neighborhoods with poverty rates at or above 40 percent, higher rates of school dropout, teenage pregnancy, and crime, and lower rates on cognitive and verbal skill tests and health indicators among school-age children continue. In 2010, 19 percent of poor children who are black lived in high-poverty neighborhoods, as compared to 3 percent for whites.

The authors conclude that the problems faced by poor black children will not be solved by incremental approaches. What is needed are policies that provide pathways to self-sufficiency and equality.

"Moynihan's call for an expansion of such things as youth employment opportunities, improvements in high-quality education programs, greater housing options, and a broadening of income supplements to combat inequality is as pertinent today as it was in 1965," the authors say. The problems are still there, 50 years after Moynihan's report, and as urgent now as ever.

This article is part of a special Education Next issue focused on single-parent families in the U.S.

More information: Read "Black Men and the Struggle for Work: Social and economic barriers persist:" educationnext.org/black-men-struggle-work/

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