

The Family in America

A JOURNAL OF PUBLIC POLICY

Marital Parenthood and American Prosperity: As Goes the Middle-Class Family, So Goes the Nation

Ryan C. MacPherson

THE MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILY—as both a cultural ideal and a social reality—has contributed significantly to American prosperity. From the yeoman farmers of Jefferson’s republic to the white-collar workers of today, the middle-class family has passed the torch of liberty to the rising generation. The heterogeneity of America’s middle-class voters stabilized the twentieth-century political spectrum sufficiently to forestall the pressures of working-class demagoguery that fueled fascist regimes in other nations. The African-American civil-rights movement owes much of its success to the black middle class. The adage may in fact ring true: as goes the middle class, so goes America.

A second adage is like unto it: as goes the family, so goes the nation. The achievements identified above did not spring from individuals in isolation, nor from individuals united primarily into non-familial institutions. Rather, the coordinated efforts of fathers and mothers, on behalf of and assisted by their children, built a class of “middling sorts” which has sustained the American Dream amid the challenges of global warfare, economic depression, and political turmoil. This is not to say families always are self-sufficient, for the middle-class family of the industrial age owes its preservation to both private corporations and public welfare. The

irony, however, is that the same institutions that strengthened American families and fostered middle-class prosperity in the early-twentieth century weakened family bonds and eviscerated the middle class in the late twentieth century. The story of the twentieth-century American middle class involves both triumph and tragedy as individuals and their families sought to adapt their inherited wisdom to changing circumstances.

Male Breadwinning and Republican Motherhood

Two particular family values shaped the formation of the American middle class during the 1800s. Specifically, the ideals of male breadwinning and republican motherhood maintained a family-centered economy even while market pressures were undermining the home-based economic practices of the passing generation. New choices had to be made, as work became displaced from home (the family farm, the family shop) to the burgeoning cities. Men shifted from working *with* their families to working *for* their families. Women's work became less productive (generating surplus crops or crafts) and more consumptive (keeping the home). Sentimental literature espoused a new doctrine of separate spheres, according to which husbands and fathers worked productively away from home while wives and mothers worked reproductively in the home.¹ Already in the early 1800s, the cultural foundation had been laid for "republican motherhood": a woman's highest calling was to provide her husband with a haven insulated from the vices of both the marketplace and the political sphere, to raise her daughters to become like her, and to raise her sons for civic leadership.² By the century's end, an ideal of male breadwinning was firmly established for the middle class: a man's labor should suffice to provide for his family. This portrait of a "traditional" family was new in the nineteenth century; it represents not an age-old arrangement, but rather a novel way to channel broadening "economic" activities back toward the service of the *oeconomia*, the household, in an

1. Donald J. Hernandez, "Children's Changing Access to Resources: A Historical Perspective," ch. 15 in *Families in the U.S.: Kinship and Domestic Politics*, edited by Karen V. Hansen and Anita Iltis Garey (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), pp. 201–15; Joseph H. Pleck, "American Fathering in Historical Perspective," ch. 26, *ibid.*, pp. 351–61.

2. Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980).

era when unprecedented numbers of men worked away from home.³

In the wake of the feminist revolution, the traditional family of Victorian America now seems, at best, quaintly outdated and, at worst, oppressive for its sexual division of labor. But the transition from the "separate spheres" lifestyle of the nineteenth-century middle class to the gender-neutral "equal opportunity" ideal of the late-twentieth century did not occur without significant introspection and trepidation. During the early-twentieth century, both business and government tended to favor the male breadwinner's "family wage" as the foundation of socio-economic well-being. Ford Motor Company led the way by introducing the "five dollar day" in 1914.

Ford's new wage represented a doubling of current compensation with the aims of reducing the worker turnover rate and rewarding responsible family life. Husbands would receive a minimum of five dollars per eight hours of work, provided they were "living with and taking good care of their families." Wives were eligible for the program if their husbands were unable to work, as were single women with dependent blood-relatives, but otherwise Ford sought to promote male breadwinning paired with female caregiving: "The man does the work in the shop, but his wife does the work in the home. *The shop must pay them both.* . . . Otherwise we have the hideous prospect of little children and their mothers being forced out to work."⁴ Inspectors from Ford's Sociological Department visited workers' homes to ensure "thrift, good habits, and good home conditions." Although criticized, both then and later, as an instance of authoritarian paternalism replete with sexism and ethnocentrism, a contemporary *exposé* revealed—despite the investigator's initial expectations—that Ford's system successfully harmonized the needs of

3. Steven Mintz, "From Patriarchy to Androgyny and Other Myths: Placing Men's Family Roles in Historical Perspective," ch. 1 in *Men in Families: When Do They Get Involved? What Difference Does It Make?* edited by Alan Booth and Ann C. Crouter (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998), pp. 3–30; Andrew J. Cherlin, "On the Flexibility of Fatherhood," chap. 3, *ibid.*, 41–46.

4. Martha May, "The Historical Problem of the Family Wage: The Ford Motor Company and the Five Dollar Day," *Feminist Studies* 8.2 (Summer 1982): 399–424, quoting pp. 413, 415.

the company, its workers, and their families.⁵ During the decades that followed, welfare capitalists and labor leaders alike extolled the family wage as a gateway through which laborers could enter the middle class.⁶

Progressive reformers agreed. The Social Security Act (1935) included a provision for children's welfare that, like Ford, assumed a male-earned family wage as normative. For homes in which the male breadwinner was deceased or disabled, Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) granted a subsidy to fill the gap. Federal funding was to augment existing state programs, with ADC permitting states the discretion to channel benefits toward children living in "suitable homes," a qualification reminiscent of Ford's Sociological Department. By the 1950s, nineteen states had established marriage-favoring regulations that disqualified those children born out of wedlock after benefits had commenced.⁷ Family-wage rhetoric similarly dominated Congressional debate leading to the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938. As John L. Lewis, on behalf of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), testified in support of the legislation:

It is possible, for instance, that a cotton-mill family, in which the husband, the wife, and say three adolescent children, are all employed in the mill, may obtain a very good income by their combined efforts. But this practice is destructive to all that we cherish most in our American institutions. Normally, a husband and father should be able to earn enough to support a family.⁸

Although politicians and labor leaders disagreed on some of the details, the FLSA minimum wage provision unquestionably "was construed so that white, male, unskilled workers could come closer to a male

breadwinner wage."⁹

In two respects, however, federal programs differed from Ford's program. On the one hand, Ford's welfare capitalism was more generous. Ford had paid \$5 per day, whereas the federal minimum wage guaranteed a mere \$2 per eight-hour day, or \$1.43 accounting for twenty-four years of inflation. Meanwhile, ADC provided only \$18 per month for the first child and \$12 for the second. On the other hand, Ford's system resorted to female employment at a family wage when no male breadwinner was present, whereas ADC sought to preserve maternal bonds by replacing the male breadwinner with a government subsidy while keeping mothers at home with their children. The aim of preserving female care-giving in the home was, however, later dropped by ADC, as government priorities shifted with the national culture. The rise of female employment during World War II "began to alter public assumptions about women's work, child care, and the merits of helping poor mothers stay at home with their children."¹⁰ Even after American GIs returned from the war, middle-class women continued to seek paid employment, particularly once their children were enrolled in school.¹¹ With the expansion of daycare, all mothers—poor or middle class, married or not—would be expected to entrust their children to others, often at public expense, and seek employment.¹² Republican motherhood yielded to the new order: the Republic was the mother.

By the late 1960s, the family wage had been entirely abandoned. The Equal Pay (1963) and Civil Rights Acts (1964) required companies to treat male and female employees identically. The Supreme Court ruled in *King v. Smith* (1968) that a state's welfare regulations could not penalize

5. Clarence Hooker, "Ford's Sociology Department and the Americanization Campaign and the Manufacture of Popular Culture among Assembly Line Workers, c. 1910-1917," *Journal of American Culture* 20.1 (Spring 1997): 47-53, quoting p. 48.

6. Julia Kirk Blackwelder, *Now Hiring: The Feminization of Work in the United States, 1900-1995* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1997), p. 57.

7. Susan W. Blank and Barbara B. Blum, "A Brief History of Work Expectations for Welfare Mothers," *The Future of Children* 7.1 (Spring 1997): 28-38.

8. Deborah M. Figart, Ellen Mutari, and Marilyn Power, *Living Wages, Equal Wages: Gender and Labor Market Policies in the United States* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 111.

9. *Ibid.*, 107.

10. Blank and Blum, "A Brief History of Work Expectations for Welfare Mothers," p. 30.

11. Blackwelder, *Now Hiring*, pp. 148-61.

12. Brian C. Robertson, *Day Care Deception: What the Child Care Establishment Isn't Telling Us* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2003); James R. Walker, "Day Care: Changing Incentives," in *Day Care: Child Psychology and Adult Economics*, edited by Bryce Christensen (Rockford, Ill.: Rockford Institute, 1989), pp. 69-98.

a household for unwed cohabitation.¹³ Congress, rejecting the original ADC aim of empowering impoverished mothers to stay at home, enacted the Work Incentive Program (1967) that made welfare benefits contingent upon strides toward economic self-sufficiency. In particular, welfare mothers were encouraged (and, by 1971, *required*) to seek employment once their children reached school age.¹⁴ But employment could no longer deliver what it once had. By the 1970s, neither the private sector nor public assistance would offer the family wage as a tool for advancement into the middle class. Henceforth, “the ‘average’ household always relied upon more than one income.”¹⁵ Not since 1971 has the minimum wage measured up to the federal poverty threshold for a family of four.¹⁶ The median real income (in 2010 dollars) of male-breadwinning households, after rising steadily since World War II to \$50,080 in 1973, declined 10.4 percent over the next twenty years to \$44,899, while husbands with working wives experienced a 13.8 percent growth in median household income from \$66,834 to \$76,081 during the same period.¹⁷

Marital Procreation and the Postwar Economic Boom

By nearly all measures, the mid-twentieth century was a time of growing prosperity for most Americans. Employment levels, wage rates, and savings rose during the postwar boom. People married earlier and had more children than during the depression, and couples remained married longer than during the late-twentieth century. The general inequality between the rich and the poor narrowed, as did the special inequalities between whites and blacks and between the middle aged versus the young

13. Linda Gordon and Felice Batlan, “Aid to Dependent Children: The Legal History,” The Social Welfare History Project, <<http://www.socialwelfarehistory.com/programs/aid-to-dependent-children-the-legal-history>>.

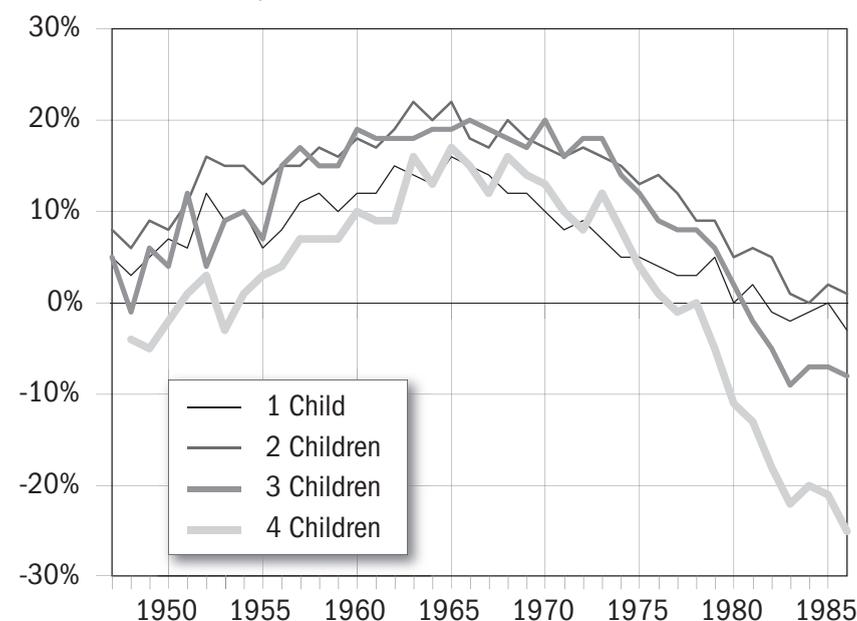
14. Blank and Blum, “A Brief History of Work Expectations for Welfare Mothers,” p. 31.

15. Figart, Mutari, and Power, *Living Wages, Equal Wages*, p. 26.

16. For the period 1968–2000, see Figart, Mutari, and Power, *Living Wages, Equal Wages*, p. 185. The current full-time annual minimum wage was set at \$15,080 (\$7.25 per hour) in 2009, when the federal poverty threshold for a family of four was \$22,050; *Federal Register* 74, no. 14 (January 23, 2009), p. 4200.

17. U.S. Census Bureau, “Table F-7. Type of Family, All Races by Median and Mean Income: 1947 to 2010,” <<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/families>>.

Chart 1: Income Premiums (Discounts) by Number of Children Compared to Households Without Children



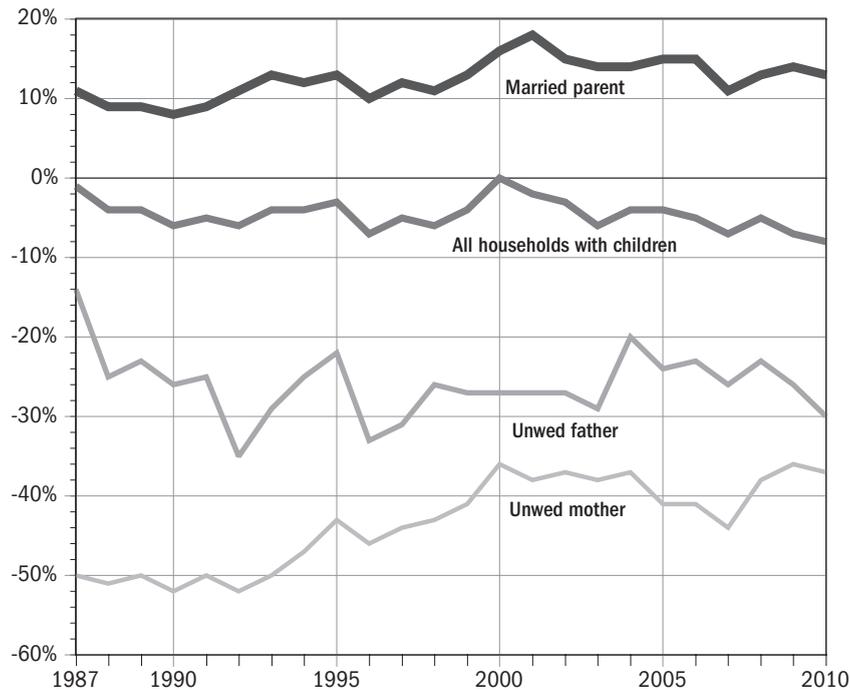
Source: Extracted from U.S. Census Bureau, “Table F-9. Presence and Number of Related Children Under 18 Years Old—Families, All Races by Median and Mean Income: 1947 to 2010,” <<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/families>>.

and old.¹⁸ Underneath these well-known facts lay a hidden foundation, often overlooked by economic analysts: those who prospered most during the postwar decades were married and raising children. Intact American families generated the bulk of the nation’s wealth. Contrary to common misconceptions, children were neither an expensive burden nor an economic stimulus merely for producers of consumer goods. As Chart 1 illustrates, the presence of children in the home correlated with higher household income, paying a virtual premium of 16 percent to 22 percent in 1965.

As time went on, the positive relation between children and household income diminished, with childless homes having greater median

18. U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstracts of the United States (1940–1960)*, <<http://www.census.gov/prod/www/abs/statab.html>>.

Chart 2: Income Premiums (Discounts) for Households With Children Compared to Households Without Children



Extracted from U.S. Census Bureau, "Table F-10. Presence of Children Under 18 Years Old All Families by Median and Mean Income: 1974 to 2010," <<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/families>>.

incomes in the late 1970s than homes with four children. During the following decade, families with one to three children also saw their incomes drop below the median level for childless homes; the child income *premium* had become an income *discount*. On closer inspection, however, a child premium remained—but it benefited only married households. Unwed men and unwed women who were raising children had incomes lower than their peers who lacked children in the home. It was, therefore, the growing proportion of single-parent homes among child-present households that had brought down the average, as Chart 2 illustrates. Lesson learned: married households have higher incomes when children are present; non-marital households have lower incomes when children

are present. As one researcher concluded, "The 1971–1989 trend away from marriage among parents accounted for nearly half the increase in income inequality and more than the entire rise in child poverty rates."¹⁹

Marriage makes a major difference not only for children, but also for men: they make more money when they have a family to feed. Two components of the marriage-income premium have been isolated from longitudinal data following a group of men as they matured from age 17 through 40 (1979–2002): 1) gains in working hours, which occur primarily in the early years of marriage; and, 2) increases in wage rates, which occur throughout married life. The combined marriage premium of 18 to 19 percent is the economic equivalent to two or three years of higher education. Controlling for other factors, the researchers concluded that one third to one half of the premium results from greater effort on the part of a married working man compared to his non-married peers. Moreover, the premium increases with marital longevity, whereas men who divorce experience declining incomes, incomes that stagnate until they remarry, presumably because a divorced man loses the motivation that a stable family provides.²⁰

Other studies concur that marriage transforms men into higher earners, defending this proposition against the rival hypothesis that women are more likely to select as husbands those men who already have greater productivity or productive potential.²¹ Controlling for such factors as age, race, education, occupation, and region, studies consistently find a marriage premium of 10 to 40 percent. A "years married" effect delivers the highest benefit to men who remain married longest.²²

Marriage brings to women even greater economic advantages than it brings to men. The median income for households headed by single

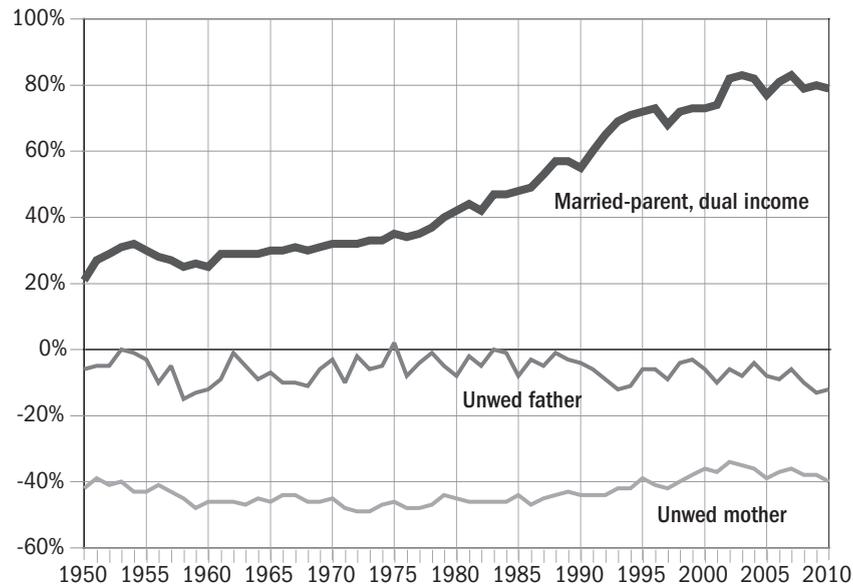
19. Robert I. Lerman, "The Impact of the Changing U.S. Family Structure on Child Poverty and Income Inequality," *Economica* 63 (May 1996): S119–39, at S137.

20. Avner Ahituv and Robert I. Lerman, "How Do Marital Status, Work Effort, and Wage Rates Interact?" *Demography* 44.3 (August 2007): 623–47.

21. Kate Antonovics and Robert Town, "Are All the Good Men Married? Uncovering the Sources of the Marital Wage Premium," *AEA Papers and Proceedings* 94.2 (May 2004): 317–21.

22. Martha S. Hill, "The Wage Effects of Marital Status and Children," *Journal of Human Resources* 14.4 (Autumn 1979): 579–94; Sanders Korenman and David Neumark, "Does Marriage Really Make Men More Productive?," *Journal of Human Resources* 26.2 (Spring 1991): 283–307, quoting 303.

Chart 3: Income Premium (Discount) by Household Type
Compared to Family Wage (Married, One Breadwinner)



Source: Extracted from U.S. Census Bureau, “Table F-7. Type of Family, All Races by Median and Mean Income: 1947 to 2010,” <<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/families>>.

women has consistently lagged behind the married, male-breadwinner households by 43 percent (+/- 3.9 percent) for the past sixty years. A husband’s wage can empower a married woman with flexibility in choosing whether to devote her time to unpaid labor in the home and among volunteer organizations or to seek paid employment; wives opting for the latter have boosted their household-income premium, on average, an additional 21 percent (1950) to 83 percent (2007), contributing to even greater income disparity between other married and single-headed households, as quantified on Chart 3. Meanwhile, single mothers often face the difficult choice of working longer hours to lift their families out of poverty versus forgoing those wage opportunities to spend more time with their children.

Prioritizing between family and work is challenging for all households, but an optimal balance can more readily be achieved in marital

households. Moreover, when only one spouse works, the risk of unemployment is cut in half while the non-working spouse also provides a form of disability or death insurance by entering the workforce if tragedy strikes the other spouse.²³ It is, not surprisingly, the enduring union of a man and a woman that has produced the greatest economic prosperity of our nation’s history, offering children of that union a postwar legacy of both economic and psychosocial well-being.

Ironically, just as the middle-class family achieved unparalleled comfort in the mid-twentieth century, the American middle class fell into disrepute among academicians. In 1940—eleven years after the stock market crashed and merely two years after the “Roosevelt Recession”—nearly 90 percent of Americans identified themselves as middle class, a statistic matched again by the General Social Survey for 1972 through 1994.²⁴ Whether or not nine in ten Americans fit the economic criteria for middle class, they clearly aspired to it as a respectable social identity. However, scholars during the intervening decades have typically scorned the middle class as socially disorganized, politically irrelevant, and culturally naive. Sociologists C. Wright Mills and E. Franklin Frazier built the framework for the academy’s typical critique; though feminist scholarship in recent years has modified the standard story, the middle class—especially its males and whites—continues to be cast for roles as either power-hungry villains or myopic fools.

In *White Collar: The American Middle Class* (1953), Mills distinguished sharply between nineteenth-century entrepreneurs and twentieth-century white-collar workers, underscoring that the latter were not as independent as they pretended to be since they relied upon large, impersonal corporations for their wages. Persistently faulting the middle class for failing to unionize, Mills wrote them off as “cheerful robots”

23. Elizabeth Warren, “The Growing Threat to Middle Class Families,” *Brooklyn Law Review* 69.2 (2004): 401–24.

24. Jeffrey M. Hornstein, “The Rise of the Realtor: Professionalism, Gender, and Middle-Class Identity, 1908–1950,” in *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class*, edited by Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 217–33, at 233; Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, After All: What Middle-Class Americans Really Think about: God, Country, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, the Right, the Left, and Each Other* (New York: Viking, 1998), p. 1.

of the capitalist order and “politically voiceless” victims of “impersonal manipulation.” In a scathing conclusion, Mills opined that “the U.S. citizenry is now largely composed of idiots”—middle-class individuals lacking any collective identity or purpose.²⁵ In a subsequent work, Mills identified a “power elite” of corporate leaders, mass media producers, and political party bosses who prevented the middle class from charting its own course.²⁶ His analysis entirely overlooked the civic leadership that members of the middle class displayed through participation in the Boy Scouts, Little League, parent-teacher associations, and other grass-roots organizations that sustained their communities and fostered the rising generation.

The pessimism Mills expressed concerning the white middle class was echoed on the other side of the color line by Frazier in *Black Bourgeoisie* (1955). Frazier portrayed the black middle class as traitors to their race, for in rejecting the black nationalism of Marcus Garvey and the cultural fermentation of the Harlem Renaissance they instead embraced a “make-believe” world of aspirations for white prosperity. Their achievement, thought Frazier, could go no higher than the mediocrity that Mills had identified for the white middle class: “The black bourgeoisie suffers from ‘nothingness’ because when Negroes attain middle-class status, their lives generally lose both content and significance.”²⁷ Worse, claimed Frazier, the black middle class was doing nothing to help their downtrodden brothers. Unfortunately for Frazier, his book appeared just months before the Montgomery bus boycott revealed that the black middle class in fact was primed for mobilization that would benefit the entire community.

The Black Middle Class: A Champion for Civil Rights

The political leverage exercised by the middle class became increasingly apparent throughout the civil-rights movement. Every major victory for African American rights during the 1950s and 1960s can be attributed

25. C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. xvii, 233, 328, 349.

26. C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956).

27. E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (French ed., 1955; trans., Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957), p. 238.

to middle-class activism, whether within black communities or between cooperating groups of blacks and whites. Failed efforts, by contrast, generally lacked middle-class leadership. In other words, history proved both Mills and Frazier wrong soon after they painted their sociological portraits of a politically inept and culturally self-absorbed middle class.

The economic prelude to the civil-rights movement was nothing short of a “spectacular reduction in the ranks of the poor.”²⁸ Although affluence among African Americans remained rare throughout the mid-twentieth century, poverty declined and the ranks of the middle class swelled during the 1940s and 1950s. As marriage rates and fertility rose, and the percentage of female-headed households declined, black family income increased at an even faster rate than for whites.²⁹ Ironically, “many of the victories of the War on Poverty apparently took place five years before the war was officially declared.”³⁰ The proportion of blacks that were middle class rose from 26 percent in 1940 to 42 percent in 1950, and by the 1960s half of black households were middle class. This represents a dramatic change since 1940, when poor blacks had outnumbered the middle class 3 to 1, as detailed in Chart 4. Meanwhile, the wage gap between blacks and whites also narrowed significantly. Educational progress, regional migration, and advancement within the labor market each played some role in growing the black middle class, but blacks also benefited from a general “wage compression” during the 1940s, as unskilled labor was in high demand for wartime factories.³¹ The preceding factors cannot, however, fully explain how African Americans advanced from poverty to the middle class. Family dynamics significantly determined individual prosperity. As Chart 5 illustrates, households headed by married couples were far more likely to participate in middle-class expansion than those headed by divorced, widowed, or never-been-married females.

The middle-class achievements of black families during the 1950s

28. James P. Smith, “Poverty and the Family,” Labor and Demography paper no. 0403014 (The Economics Working Papers Archive, 2004), p. 144, <<http://129.3.20.41/eps/lab/papers/0403/0403014.pdf>>.

29. Blackwelder, *Now Hiring*, p. 150.

30. Smith, “Poverty and the Family,” p. 144.

31. Thomas N. Maloney, “Wage Compression and Wage Inequality between Black and White Males in the United States, 1940–1960,” *Journal of Economic History* 54.2 (June 1994): 358–81.

Chart 4: Income Groups of Families (Percentages)

	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980
White Families					
Poor	31	18	12	9	9
Middle Class	42	52	63	66	61
Affluent	27	30	25	25	30
Black Families					
Poor	71	54	48	32	30
Middle Class	26	42	49	59	59
Affluent	3	4	6	9	11

Source: Computations from decennial census data prepared by James P. Smith, “Poverty and the Family,” (2004), p. 143. “Poor” and “middle class” are distinguished by the 1963 poverty threshold, adjusted for annual inflation and also adjusted by 0.5 percent for every 1 percent growth in real income. The “affluent” threshold marks the 75th percentile of white families in 1963, adjusted for both annual inflation and real income growth. “Real income growth” tracks changes in median white-family income.

Chart 5: Income-Group Distribution by Household Type (Percentages)

	1950 Married- parent	1950 Unwed mother	1960 Married- parent	1960 Unwed mother
White Families				
Poor	17	42	10	34
Middle Class	52	40	64	52
Affluent	31	18	26	14
Black Families				
Poor	49	76	39	69
Middle Class	44	21	54	29
Affluent	7	3	7	2

Source: Census-data computations by Smith, “Poverty and the Family,” (2004), p. 149.

fulfilled the aspirations of the “New Negro” icon that had emerged in the 1920s: no longer content to subsist as a second-class citizen and confident that American prosperity could be grasped by blacks as well as whites. By mid century, a second generation was coming of age, culturally primed to put to “death . . . white power *inside the black community*.”³² As blacks developed their own vision for America—a society integrated for equal opportunity, rather than segregated for perpetual inequality—they organized themselves around middle-class leaders, including Alabama State College professor Jo Ann Robinson and Montgomery minister Martin Luther King Jr. Robinson led a mimeograph campaign and King provided oratorical leadership for forty thousand black commuters (plus twelve thousand whites) who walked or shared their cars for an entire year in defiance of the segregated seating of the city’s bus service. It mattered, too, that the boycott’s poster child, Rosa Parks, was a *middle-class wife*—of virtuous character, married to a civil-rights leader, respectfully employed as a seamstress. When an unmarried, pregnant black teen had similarly refused to yield her seat to a white rider earlier that year, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chose not to mobilize.³³ Of Parks, however, King could say:

Mrs. Rosa Parks is a fine person. And since it had to happen I’m happy it happened to a person like Mrs. Parks, for nobody can doubt the boundless outreach of her integrity. Nobody can doubt the height of her character.³⁴

Following the success of the 1955–56 boycott, King corralled other middle-class leaders into the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which in time would coordinate successful reform initiatives throughout the American south and even in the nation’s capital.

32. Jack Bloom, “The Defeat of White Power and the Emergence of the ‘New Negro’ in the South,” in *The Civil Rights Movement*, edited by Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), p. 144–65, quoting 146.

33. Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954–1965* (New York: Penguin, 1987), p. 63.

34. Martin Luther King Jr., “Speech by Martin Luther King, Jr. at Holt St. Baptist Church,” in *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*, edited by Claborne Carson et al. (New York: Penguin, 1991), pp. 48–51, quoting 49.

His message during the 1963 March on Washington envisioned a new political climate in which American families of all races could fulfill their dreams together. King deftly translated the white, middle-class sentimental literature of nineteenth-century family life for a new era of racial integration:

We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity. . . . I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. . . . One day, right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.³⁵

Black preachers were not the only people to shape public opinion during the civil-rights movement. The black press also played an important role, as when *Jet* magazine published the grotesque picture of Emmett Till's disfigured corpse in 1955. Till, a fourteen-year-old Chicago boy, had transgressed the color line when whistling at a white female store clerk during a visit to Mississippi. The clerk's husband and brother-in-law summarily lynched him. Although a typically southern miscarriage of justice resulted in acquittals for both men, *Jet* magazine drew white sympathy in the North and galvanized black resistance to oppression in the South.³⁶

Emboldened by the courage of preachers and journalists, black college students also began to take action. A February 1960 sit-in at a Woolworth's department store began with four black freshmen, but grew to include 90 percent of the student body at North Carolina A & T; their example spread like wildfire, involving, by year's end, seventy thousand students throughout all southern states except Mississippi. Just when college was becoming a mark of middle-class identity for whites, blacks sought, through student activism, to become part of that same middle class. The Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which

35. Martin Luther King Jr., *I Have A Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, edited by James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), pp. 104–105.

36. Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, pp. 38–57.

organized the sit-ins, united blacks and whites, northerners and southerners, into a new generation of racially integrated Americans. U.S. Air Force veteran James Meredith similarly leveraged his middle-class, meritocratic status for entrance as the first African-American student at the University of Mississippi in October 1962. Both working-class whites, who rioted on the scene, and upper-class whites, who negotiated by phone from the comfort of their offices in Jackson and Washington, D.C., ultimately capitulated to the integration of blacks and whites within the middle-class university.³⁷

Meredith revealed the heightened aspirations of the new black middle class. Each of the “Little Rock Nine” who integrated Central High School in 1957 also attended college. Their success at Little Rock can be attributed to the coordination of Daisy Bates, a middle-class African American who headed the Alabama office of the NAACP and was married to a leading black journalist, L.C. Bates.³⁸ Integration at Little Rock marked an important test of the U.S. Supreme Court's authority to invalidate local school segregation in the landmark decision *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). The NAACP had won a series of strategic cases during the 1930s and 1940s that culminated in *Brown*. The pre-*Brown* cases focused on graduate schools, urging that the gatekeepers for professional careers open university doors to all qualified applicants on an equal basis.³⁹ Those victories for the upper-middle class had laid the foundation for the broader success of the civil-rights movement, both in the courts and on the streets.

The Collapse of American Prosperity

In the late 1960s, the civil-rights movement fell into disarray. The decline may be explained largely by a displacement of leadership from middle-class, family-oriented institutions, such as King's cadre of Baptist churches. Who took over the reigns? Primarily two groups, each with its

37. William Doyle, *An American Insurrection: The Battle of Oxford, Mississippi, 1962* (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

38. Bruce J. Dierenfield, *The Civil Rights Movement*, rev. ed. (Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2008), pp. 34, 40.

39. Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, pp. 5–35; Waldo E. Martin, “Shades of *Brown*: Black Freedom, White Supremacy, and the Law,” in *The Civil Rights Movement*, pp. 61–82.

own agenda: white elites in Washington who advocated politically expedient reforms that exasperated existing weaknesses in lower-class family structures, and grass-roots African Americans who also pursued social transformation apart from familial moorings.

In Washington, the War on Poverty adopted a strategy about as ineffective as the tactics deployed in Vietnam. President Lyndon Johnson championed community action programs and expanded welfare services, while not properly attending to the relationship that Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan had identified between family stability and economic mobility. Moynihan discovered a strong correlation ($r = 0.91$) between “male Negro unemployment and the number of new AFDC cases” for the period 1948–1962 (ADC was renamed Aid to *Families* with Dependent Children in 1962). Moynihan identified female-headed households as the ones at highest risk for poverty and therefore urged that the emerging cycle of welfare dependency be broken by government intervention that would promote male employment with family wages: “The programs of the Federal government bearing on this objective shall be designed to have the effect, directly or indirectly, of enhancing the stability and resources of the Negro American family.”⁴⁰ In Moynihan’s vision, “Men need jobs, families need fathers, communities need independence.”⁴¹

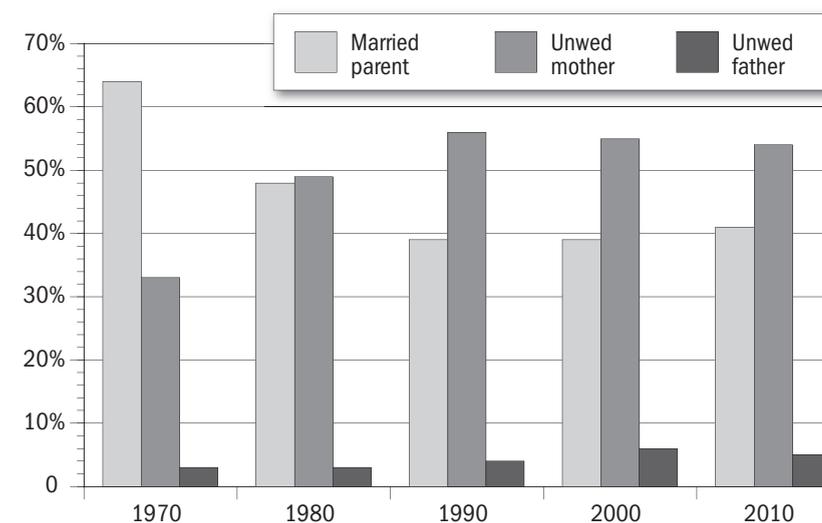
But the 1965 Moynihan Report became a political hot potato by the year’s end. As the Watts riots in Los Angeles nudged policy makers toward a conviction that institutionalized racism was the cause of black poverty, Moynihan was castigated as a “blame the victim” propagandist for impugning family structure.⁴² Welfare reforms of the 1960s, rather than approximating victory in the War on Poverty, discouraged marriage and encouraged out-of-wedlock pregnancies—reinforcing precisely the conditions that Moynihan warned would create an inter-generational

40. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” (1965), in *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*, edited by William L. Yancey (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1967), pp. 47–48.

41. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “Poverty and Progress,” *American Scholar* 33 (Autumn 1964): 596, as quoted in Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880–1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), pp. 155.

42. Scott, *Contempt and Pity*, pp. 156–59.

Chart 6: Distribution of Black Families with Children



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States*.

cycle of poverty. Tragically, fatherless households became statistically normative for African-American communities within a single generation; no other change has contributed so decisively to the erosion of the black middle class—the bedrock upon which the civil-rights movement once had stood its tallest.

Meanwhile, grass-roots activists within the black community also lost their middle-class, family-centered foundation. As the men and women in SNCC grew up, they did not harmonize their interests through marriage as had their mentors in the SCLC. Instead, the two sexes vied for power amid the emerging feminist movement, even as slogans of “black power” drove a wedge between blacks and whites within SNCC.⁴³ Alternative organizations, such as the Black Panther Party and Students for a Democratic Society, failed to win the respect of middle-class whites

43. Dennis J. Urban Jr., “The Women of SNCC: Struggle, Sexism, and the Emergence of Feminist Consciousness, 1960–66,” *International Social Science Review* 77.3–4 (2002): 185–90; Clayborne Carson, “Internal Conflicts in SNCC,” in *The Civil Rights Movement* pp. 227–41.

and often rejected core middle-class values: marriage, entrepreneurship, and republican government.⁴⁴ Seeking to understand the recurrent outbreaks of race riots, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders declared in February 1968 that America was “moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.”⁴⁵

The following month witnessed the dying gasp of family-wage activism. Sanitation workers in Memphis organized a strike to protest low wages and racial discrimination. Forty percent of black sanitation workers qualified for welfare, despite the fact that many worked second jobs. The strikers adopted “I *am* a Man” as their slogan, displaying this statement in bold letters on signs across their chests. Bolstering their effort, Martin Luther King cried out, “We are tired of our men being emasculated so that our wives and daughters have to go out and work in the white lady’s kitchen, leaving us unable to be with our children and give them the time and attention that they need.”⁴⁶ Although the workers won some concessions, the nationwide Poor People’s Campaign disintegrated after King’s assassination in April.

The Johnson administration already had diverted the reform impulse of the Moynihan Report away from the concrete realities of family responsibility toward abstract categories of economic inequality. Executive Order 11246, issued in September 1965, launched an “affirmative action” policy aimed at improving the lot of minorities, but without any concern for the manner in which family structure impacts economic well-being.⁴⁷ As liberals and conservatives debated affirmative action during the following decades, they concentrated upon the policy’s ability to “level the playing field” for ethnic minorities and women compared to its tendency to establish “reverse discrimination” against whites and

44. Mumia Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom: A Life in the Black Panther Party* (Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press, 2004); Geoff Bailey, “The Rise and Fall of SDS,” *International Socialist Review* No. 31 (September–October 2003), <<http://www.isreview.org/issues/31/sds.shtml>>.

45. Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (February 1968), quoted in Darlene Clark Cline, “Two Societies (1965–1968),” in *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader*, edited by Claborne Carson et al., pp. 288–91 at 291.

46. Steve Estes, *I Am a Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p. 138.

47. Executive Order 11246, sec. 202 (September 24, 1965), <<http://www.dol.gov/ofccp/regs/statutes/eo11246.htm>>.

men.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, both sides were asking the wrong question.

Too often what has been lost in discussions of economic inequality is that the persons whose lives hang in the balance do not merely belong to a particular race or gender; they belong more fundamentally to one another. They are fathers and mothers, sons and daughters. The greatest economic disparities persist not between the sexes, nor between racial groups, as real as those disparities have been. The deepest gulf that separates poverty from prosperity in America lies between children who are raised in married households and children who are not. Initiatives to reduce poverty and strengthen the middle class must, therefore, be concerned with the loyalty husbands and wives show to one another and the responsibilities that they jointly exercise for their children.

Dr. MacPherson, who teaches American history at Bethany Lutheran College in Mankato, Minnesota, is founding president of the Hausvater Project (<www.hausvater.org>), which promotes the natural law of the family.

48. Paul M. Kellstedt, “Media Framing and the Dynamics of Racial Policy Preferences,” *American Journal of Political Science* 44.2 (April 2000): 239–55.