

Session 2: Family background, family structure, and poverty

The problem of poverty requires attention to employment, wages, and the development of skills necessary for productive participation in the labor force rather than hand-wringing about the decline of the family.

Mary Jo Bane

The available evidence justifies renewed scholarly and public policy attention to the connection between the disintegration of poor families and black male prospects for stable employment.

William Julius Wilson and Kathryn Neckerman

Women and children in poverty are the source of increasing national concern as the number of families headed by single mothers continues to grow. The papers in this session explored the implications of that growth, each emphasizing the causal significance of labor market factors.

Households and poverty

Mary Jo Bane examined the extent to which increases in poverty rates can be attributed to the changes in family structure resulting from increased marital breakup, more births to unmarried women, and independent living by elderly women, all leading to a shift toward households headed by women.

Census data (see Table 3) underscore the fact that female-headed households and persons living independently are disproportionately represented among the poor. In 1979, three-fourths of the American population lived in families headed by men, but only 40 percent of the poor did so. About 37 percent of those below the poverty line lived in families headed by women, and elderly and nonelderly women living alone constituted another 15 percent of the poor. These households of single women and single mothers thus represent over half of the total poverty population.

Moreover, the composition of the population over the past twenty years has shifted toward these household types at high risk of poverty. While the proportion of married-couple families, a group with relatively low poverty rates, has declined, the share of single-mother families and individuals living alone almost doubled from 1959 to 1979. Household composition among blacks has changed more rapidly than among whites. The proportion of blacks living in families headed by women rose from 19 percent in 1959 to 37 percent in 1983; the comparable increase for whites was from 7 to 10 percent. These and other racial differences were a major point emphasized in both papers in this session of the conference.

To what extent has this change in household structure accounted for increases in poverty in the United States? To

provide one answer, Bane used a counterfactual: if the household composition of the population had remained as it was in 1959, and the 1979 poverty rates by household type had prevailed, the overall poverty rate in the latter year would have been 9.7 rather than 11.6 percent (a decline of 16 percent).

Single parenthood: Cause or accompaniment of poverty?

But what if the people who lived in poor female-headed families in 1979 would have been poor even if they had lived in husband-wife families? If that were true, then the poor over the years have merely been “reshuffled” into different household populations. In other words, one cannot conclude from the data cited above that poverty is *caused* by the formation of female-headed households. For an accurate interpretation, we need information on individuals as they move from one family or household structure to another. Bane therefore analyzed longitudinal data drawn from the Michigan Panel Study of Income Dynamics. Examining the income status of individuals who moved into female-headed and single-person households, she found that the majority of whites and about half of the blacks who made that transition were not poor in the year after they did so, and most of those not poor afterward had not been poor in the year preceding the transition.

Among those who were poor in the first year after the transition, the pattern was quite different for whites and blacks. Three-quarters of the whites became poor when that transition took place; but two-thirds of the blacks were already poor when they made the transition. The author drew the following conclusion:

Though there has been a dramatic, and shocking, increase in female-headed households among blacks, and an equally dramatic “feminization” of black poverty, one cannot conclude that much of the poverty could have been avoided had families only stayed together. The serious problems in the black community appear to be intertwined, as Wilson and Neckerman [the authors of the next paper] point out, rather than stemming primarily from family breakups (p. 39).

Poverty and family structure

William Julius Wilson and Kathryn Neckerman began with data from the 1940 Census, the first to provide detailed information on family structure. Although families headed by single women were then more prevalent among blacks than among whites, most black households with children were headed by men. Even in urban areas, three-quarters of black families were married-couple households. And most

Table 3
Household Composition of the Population and of the Poor, by Race, 1979

	All Races		Whites		Blacks	
	Total Population	Poor Population	Total Population	Poor Population	Total Population	Poor Population*
<i>In families headed by men</i>	75.9%	41.2%	78.9%	47.8%	52.8%	24.8%
Children	23.2	17.0	23.5	19.3	18.1	10.7
Nonelderly adults	46.2	19.7	48.5	23.2	30.7	11.3
Elderly	6.5	4.5	6.9	5.3	4.0	2.8
<i>In families headed by women</i>	12.3	36.5	9.1	25.8	35.0	60.6
Children	5.3	21.9	3.6	15.5	17.9	36.1
Nonelderly adults	6.1	13.7	4.7	9.6	15.7	23.1
Elderly	0.9	0.9	0.8	0.7	1.4	1.4
<i>Nonelderly adults living alone</i>	8.3	13.4	8.1	15.2	9.7	9.6
Men	4.5	6.0	4.4	6.6	5.7	4.7
Women	3.8	7.4	3.7	8.6	4.0	4.9
<i>Elderly persons living alone</i>	3.6	9.0	3.8	11.1	2.6	5.0
Men	0.8	1.7	0.8	1.9	0.8	1.2
Women	2.8	7.3	3.0	9.2	1.8	3.8
<i>Total†</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Mary Jo Bane, "Household Composition and Poverty: Which Comes First?" Institute for Research on Poverty, Conference Paper, revised January 1985, Table 1. Data from U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, P-60, No. 130, "Characteristics of the Populations below the Poverty Level: 1979" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1981).

*Defined by household income after receipt of cash transfers.

†Columns do not always sum to 100 percent owing to rounding.

single mothers, black or white, were widows. The next forty years transformed that picture. In 1983, 42 percent of black families were headed by women; the comparable figure for whites was 12 percent.

Wilson and Neckerman examined changes in fertility, out-of-wedlock births, and the age structure of the population. Over the last 30 years the ratio of out-of-wedlock births to all births has risen dramatically, especially among blacks, yet fertility rates, even among teenagers, have fallen. The explanation for this apparent contradiction is that fertility rates among married women, and the percentage of women married and living with their husbands, have both declined significantly, owing to increases in separation and divorces and in the percentage of women who never marry.

Linked with these trends is the changing age structure. The baby boom resulted in a rising proportion, within the total population, of women in the age group 15 to 24, producing a larger fraction of births among young women and inflating

the proportion of all births outside marriage. Blacks are more likely than whites to delay first marriage; if married and divorced, they are less likely to remarry. The net result of all these trends was that the decade 1970-80 saw a 41 percent increase in the number of black children growing up in fatherless families.

Whatever their marital history, single women with children are now far more likely than married-couple families to be poor, as Bane's paper demonstrated, and to be poor for longer periods of time. Being a solo mother is closely connected to poverty and dependency. Wilson and Neckerman examined the same question asked by Ellwood and Summers: Are welfare policies to blame for the dependency of those families? They reached the same conclusion: that welfare policies cannot be held responsible either for the decline of intact families or for the rise of illegitimate births among the poor—welfare benefits have fallen, while illegitimacy ratios have risen. What the authors did find, however, was a strong association with the jobless rate among black men.

The “marriageable pool”

The authors emphasized the point that “black women, especially young black women, are facing a shrinking pool of ‘marriageable’ (that is, economically stable) men” (p. 32). In 1940 the labor force participation rate was somewhat higher among black men than among white men (83.7 vs. 82.5 percent), as it had been historically; by 1980 it had fallen to 66.7 percent for blacks and 76.1 for whites. This overall decline masks much sharper differences among younger groups. White men of prime working age, 25 to 54, experienced either no decline or an increase in work activity over those years, but the rates for comparable black men descended steadily. Among male teenagers aged 16–19, the labor force participation of whites rose from 46.4 to 55.5 percent between 1940 and 1980, while for blacks it fell from

59.5 to 36.5 percent. Although the occupational status of employed black men has increased, the percentage of white collar workers among them having increased from 5 to 27 percent over the years 1940 to 1983, the fraction of black men who are employed has dropped from 4 out of 5 in 1930 to only 1 out of 2 in 1983.

Wilson and Neckerman constructed an index of the ratio of employed civilian men to women of the same race and age group, which they term an index of the “male marriageable pool.” Among blacks aged 18 to 24, that pool has decreased in size since the 1960s; among white men of the same age, however, it grew (see Figure 1). For men aged 25 to 54 it shrank for both races, but more so among blacks.

In combination, these economic indicators tell us that fewer black men, especially young black men, are in a position to support a family, and it therefore does not seem surprising that black women are more likely than their white counterparts to delay marriage and are less likely to remarry.

Whereas the relationship between the levels of welfare benefits and the number of AFDC cases has not held steady over the years, Wilson and Neckerman find a continuing positive relationship between black male joblessness and welfare dependency of women. Their own evidence and that of others cited in the paper led the authors to conclude that there is “a compelling case for once again placing the problem of black joblessness as a top priority item in public policy agendas designed to enhance the status of families” (p. 34).

Remarks of the discussants

June O’Neill suggested that one factor behind the increasing number of black single mothers might be the rising earnings ratio of black women to black men. She also stressed the need to probe more deeply into the causes of black male unemployment, especially in the context of schooling deficiencies and other human capital factors.

Lee Rainwater pointed out that the two papers covered different ground but conveyed a similar message: both found an important difference between blacks and whites in the dynamics of the growing numbers of single-mother families. Bane’s research indicates that the poverty of white women who head their own households seems to reflect individual choices about willingness to go it alone, at least temporarily. Wilson and Neckerman emphasized the fact that 70 percent of white female-headed households are not poor, and in any case a majority of whites remarry, a major route out of poverty. “Among blacks,” Rainwater stated, “the feminization of poverty must be understood as a product of the deepening destructiveness of class and racist forces, particularly as they have had the effect of further marginalizing black youth in both school and labor market.”■

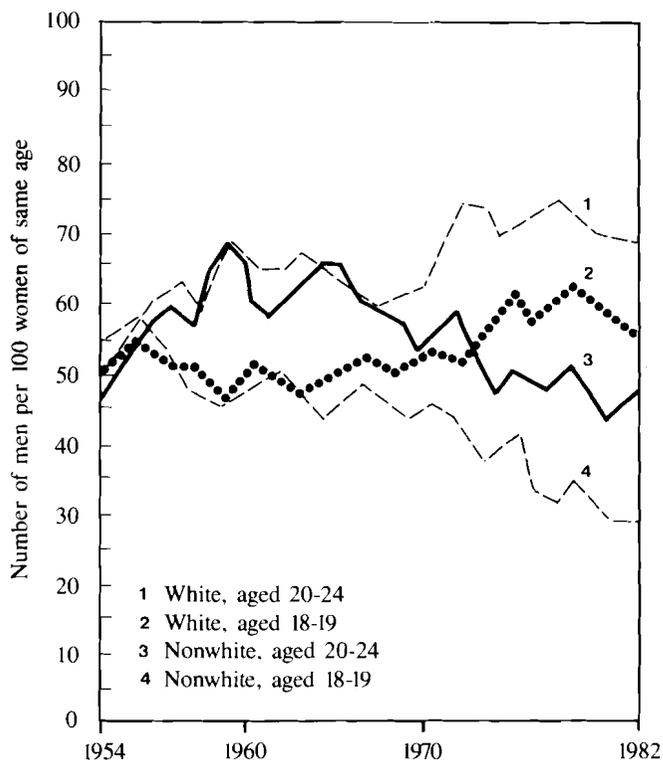


Figure 1. The “Marriageable Pool”: Employed Young Civilian Men per 100 Women of Same Age and Race, 1954–82

Source: William Julius Wilson and Kathryn Neckerman, “Poverty and Family Structure: The Widening Gap between Evidence and Public Policy Issues,” Institute for Research on Poverty, Conference Paper, revised February 1985, Figures 3 and 4. Data on men are from publications of the Bureau of Labor Statistics (*Handbook of Labor Statistics*, 1980, and *Employment and Earnings*, January 1984); on women, from publications of the Bureau of the Census (*Current Population Reports*, Series P-25, “Estimates of the Population of the United States by Age, Sex, and Race,” 1965, 1978, 1983).