



Wasn't Always This Way

Academics and public intellectuals, who should know better, attempt to explain the highly visible and publicized pathology witnessed in cities such as Baltimore, Detroit, Chicago, Ferguson and others as a legacy of slavery. The argument is made that the problems encountered by many black Americans are rooted in white racism, greed and income inequality. They are able to get away with these untruths because most people believe that what is seen today has always been. A bit of history would belie such a vision.



It would be foolhardy to argue that slavery has had no effect or that racial discrimination, greed and income inequality are nonexistent. The relevant question is: How much of what we see today can be explained by slavery, discrimination, greed and income inequality? The answer to this question is vital for public policy and resource allocation, a matter that I shall return to later.

Let's examine a few of the most crippling problems in the black community. Chief among them is the breakdown of the black family. Actually, "breakdown" is the wrong word; the black family doesn't form in the first place. As late as 1950, female-headed households were only 18 percent of the black population. Today it's close to 70 percent. In the late 1800s, there were only slight differences between the black family structure and those of other ethnic groups. In New York City in 1925, 85 percent of kin-related black households were two-parent households. In 1938, 11 percent of black children were born to single mothers; today it is close to 75 percent. In some cities and neighborhoods, the percentage of out-of-wedlock births is over 80.

Faced with the evidence that black families were healthier at a time when blacks were just a generation or two out of slavery, at a time when there was far greater racial discrimination and there were far fewer opportunities, how much credence can be given to the legacy-of-slavery argument to explain today's weak family structure? Does the effect of a legacy of slavery somehow skip five generations?

Female-headed households, whether black or white, are a ticket for dependency and all of its associated problems. One of the best-kept secrets is the fact that the poverty rate among black married couples has been in single digits since 1994.

Another devastating problem for blacks is the high unemployment rate in general, but particularly among black youth. Nationally, black youth unemployment is nearly 40 percent. In some cities, it is over 60 percent. But high black youth unemployment is entirely new. In 1948, the unemployment rate for black teens was slightly less than that of their white counterparts — 9.4 percent compared with 10.2. During that same period, black youths were either just as active in the labor force or more so than white youths. Today black teen labor force participation is a fraction of that of whites. Even during the early 1900s, black males were either just as active in the labor market as whites or more so.

So what explains the employment statistics of yesteryear compared with those of today? Would one



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argue that the reason that black teens had a lower unemployment rate and higher labor force participation rate than whites was that there was less racial discrimination in the 1940s than there is today? Would one argue that blacks had greater skills than whites in earlier periods? Whatever explains the differences, racial discrimination is not part of the answer.

I have only addressed three major problems confronting a large segment of the black community — family structure, illegitimacy and unemployment. Which one of them can be tackled by expending resources on what white people are doing or not doing? The weak family structure and illegitimacy are devastating problems, but they are not civil rights problems and have nothing to do with racial discrimination. The black unemployment problem is different. Much of it is the result of the labor market's having been rigged by powerful vested interests aided, perhaps unwittingly, by much of the black political structure.

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