

The oft-repeated tropes about the breakdown of the black family can be traced, in large part, to a 1965 Department of Labor report called [*The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*](#), also known as the Moynihan Report. With then-Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan as the principal author, the report tied the decline of the nuclear family within the black community social pathology, increasing welfare dependency and chronic poverty. Sociologist Herbert Gans offers a critique of The Moynihan Report in the Fall 2011 issue of the [*Du Bois Review*](#).

According to the abstract, "The Moynihan Report of 1965 will soon be fifty years old, and some social scientists now venerate it as a sterling application of social science data and analysis by the federal government. This author, who was directly involved in events connected with the release of the Report, does not agree; this article examines the shortcomings of the Report."

Below is an excerpt of Gans' analysis:

Moynihan's initial knowledge of research about the Black community appears to have come from the work of Nathan Glazer (1963), who had begun his own discussion of the Negro family in *Beyond the Melting Pot* with observations on the female-headed family, illegitimacy, child abandonment, and related problems. For his observations on the harshness of American slavery, Moynihan drew from Glazer's (1963) recently written introduction to Stanley Elkins' *Slavery*. Beyond that, the Report included only brief quotations from the work of Franklin Frazier, Kenneth Clark, Thomas Pettigrew, Margaret Mead, and a few other social scientists.

In later years, some of Moynihan's writing appeared in academic books and journals, and he came to know and work with many important social scientists. Still, in 2000 his biographer and friend, Godfrey Hodgson, wrote: "He thinks anecdotally. He thinks in narrative ... He is an intellectual ... but not an academic" (page 23). As quoted in Weisman (2010), Moynihan himself once wrote in the same vein, "I do not have the stamina for a professor. I can't study like that ... " (page 12).

In any case, the Report was flawed in a number of ways. First, Moynihan could even then have been criticized for failing to look at studies of the poor Black family and community other than those by Frazier (1939) and Clark (1965). For example, he might have quoted from Drake and Cayton's (1945) *Black Metropolis* which, in a few pages, offers a more comprehensive and balanced analysis of the situation of poor Black families.

Further, as an Assistant Secretary of Labor, Moynihan should have been able to obtain more recent analyses from the Black sociologists, most of them directly or indirectly connected with Howard University in Washington D.C., who were then studying and writing about the

Black community.

Second, and more seriously, Moynihan apparently looked at the poor Black population with a belief system which viewed any family form that did not include a two-parent nuclear unit as unstable and pathological. Moynihan must have known or could have found out that stability and family structure were not perfectly correlated, and that a two-parent family could be unstable and a single-parent one, stable.

Moynihan was aware that jobless Black men were not good candidates for marriage but he was seemingly blind to the effects of socioeconomic class on family structure. As a result, he failed to see that poor people lacked many of the material and nonmaterial resources that make a two-parent family possible, and that for poor Blacks, the single parent family was sometimes the only solution. He also did not consider the ways in which it was adaptive and in fact provided a modicum of stability for a population living under conditions of high economic instability.

Although little research had been done on the single-parent family when Moynihan wrote the Report, Black family researchers would also have been able to tell him that single-parent families were not necessarily single-parent households, and might have included a female grandparent or other relative. In addition, unmarried mothers often had some help from the fathers of their children and were surrounded by a familial support network.

Moynihan could also have learned that the single-parent family was found in most societies in which large numbers of males were unemployed or underemployed. He must have known from his writings on the Irish that during economic crises husbands leave or are often pushed out of two-parent families. By describing a family structure that could be found in many economies suffering from male joblessness as pathological, Moynihan was in fact defining deviance up.

Moreover, Moynihan did not seem to know that the children of single mothers were considered statistically normal and socially acceptable in the poor Black community. Instead, Moynihan viewed their legal status through the lens of White mainstream respectability, and saw it as an indicator of both family instability and pathology.