

This article delineates the contribution of gender, race, ethnicity, marital, and parental status to the feminization of poverty. Its analysis of recent published and unpublished census data suggests that gender, race, and ethnicity strongly affect poverty rates. However, parenthood interacts with gender in such a way as to affect only women and to affect White women more than Blacks and Hispanics. By examining these sources of poverty separately, the authors articulate more clearly the forces that have generated rapid feminization of poverty. They also specify trends across White, Black, Puerto Rican, Mexican American, and other Hispanic populations as well as preschool and school-age children in female-householder families. The analysis takes into account a range of factors that have contributed significantly to women's poverty. It also evaluates competing arguments regarding public policies that best alleviate the problem.

The Feminization of Poverty in the United States

Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Family Factors*

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The feminization of poverty is a process by which the poverty population in the United States has become comprised increasingly of women, irrespective of race or age (see McLanahan, Sorensen, & Watson, 1989). Recent scholarship on the feminization of poverty examines gender, race, and family structure as contributing factors. Women have higher poverty rates than do men for two major reasons. First, their economic resources do not approach parity with those of men. Second, they are more likely to be single, custodial parents during their working lives and to be unmarried and living alone in their later years. Poverty is more likely to be a chronic

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problem among female-householder families (Devine, Plunkett, & Wright, 1992).

Minority women are disproportionately represented among the poor because of their minority status and a higher risk of single parenthood. The latter factor is especially important for Blacks and Puerto Ricans. Mexican American and other Hispanic (a combination of other Latin American and Caribbean cultures) women and children are more likely to live in two-parent households, which have lower, albeit substantial, rates of poverty. Minority status affects women's economic position in two ways. First, it limits their options for marriage or remarriage because of its effect on minority men. Second, it circumscribes their own achievement in the labor market.

Our analysis contributes to an understanding of female poverty in three primary ways. First, it compares the poverty rates for Blacks, Whites, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, and other Hispanics. This extends the previous literature on Black-White differences (e.g., Eggebeen & Lichter, 1991; McLanahan et al., 1989) and disaggregates Hispanic poverty (Aponte, 1991). Second, it analyzes poverty risk by gender, race, ethnicity, and family structure. Although it is well established that being female, a member of a minority race or ethnic group, and/or a single mother augment one's risk of being poor, it is important to understand the relative contributions of these factors. Recent analyses suggest that an interactive rather than an additive approach is necessary. Third, we delineate and critique extant policy debates regarding the best methods to eradicate poverty among women.

Analyses of recent data indicate that some Hispanic groups experience poverty at levels comparable to, if not greater than, those of Blacks. For example, the poverty rate for Puerto Ricans living in families now exceeds that of U.S. Blacks by an appreciable margin—41% compared to 31% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991e, p. 17; also see U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991a). Hispanic poverty is growing in part because of the increasing numbers of Hispanics in the United States. This population is expanding so rapidly that, in 20 years, Latinos are expected to outnumber Blacks as the largest minority group (Prud'Homme, 1991).

During recent decades, Blacks and Puerto Ricans experienced appreciable increases in unemployment (measured by the proportion of families with no earners). Labor market discrimination and persistent disadvantages associated with minority status may partly explain this trend, but it is doubtful that the causes of persistent poverty for Black and Puerto Rican families are identical (Tienda & Jensen, 1988). Although some poverty

research examines Hispanics, few studies compare poverty rates across Black, Hispanic, and White populations in the United States, especially as they affect women and children. Further, only unpublished data permit analysis of poverty rates among Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, and other Hispanics.

CAUSES OF FEMALE POVERTY

Single motherhood is perhaps the most important determinant of female poverty in the United States. Yet the process is cyclical: Poverty contributes to early and high fertility (Horowitz, 1983; Murdoch, 1980) whereas high fertility also increases poverty. And although adolescent childbearing is related to larger families, both of these factors are associated with poverty (Moore & Burt, 1982).

Education is another contributing factor. About 63% of all female householders with children under the age of 18 years do not complete high school (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1991e, p. 85). And because of lower socioeconomic status, many racial and ethnic minorities receive less education than do Whites (Almquist, 1984). Race is also more influential than gender in determining the quality of education because urban ghettos, for example, provide limited incentives to minorities to finish high school. The poor quality of education, together with its limited financial utility, often discourages ghetto youth from completing school (Mare & Winship, 1988).

Other predictors of female poverty include unemployment, divorce, loss of higher-paying manufacturing jobs, domestic responsibilities including child and elder care (and the lack of affordable child care), and lower wages (Ehrenreich & Stallard, 1982; J. B. Wilson, 1987; Zopf, 1989). According to Scott (1984), women's poverty has two sources: (a) their unpaid responsibilities for raising children and other family labor and (b) sex discrimination. Approximately one-fifth of unemployed women are jobless due to lack of child care (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1983). Further, 10.5% of female householders were unemployed in 1985 compared with 5.6% of married women.

This is particularly problematic for children because child custody is overwhelmingly awarded to the mother in divorce settlements (Gerson, 1985). In addition, divorced women are disadvantaged if their former husbands provide insufficient child support. Indeed, three-fourths of all women with children receive no child support or only part of the amount

due. Only one in five poor women with children receive child support; of the 35% of women awarded child support, fully one in three do not receive anything (J. B. Wilson, 1987).

Lower wages, often due to occupational segregation, discrimination, and insufficient work hours, are major contributors to poverty among women (J. B. Wilson, 1987). Females are concentrated in the secondary sector of the labor force, which consists of low-paying jobs. Half of all women are concentrated in only 20 of the 420 job classifications (Sidel, 1986). Most newly created jobs are in the lower-paying service sector and are occupied mainly by women (Smith, 1986). Notwithstanding the role of unemployment in sustaining poverty, employment is not always the solution. Women's income has been affected by the loss of many mid-level jobs, by an increase in service-sector jobs, and by corporate expansion overseas (Ehrenreich & Stallard, 1982).

Demographic trends in marriage, divorce, and family formation also explain a great deal of female poverty (Gerson, 1985). The rising age of first marriage, the substantial increase in lifetime singleness, and increased divorce (especially for younger women) may contribute to the feminization of poverty, especially for women with children. More and more women choose or find themselves in living arrangements other than legal marriage, thus having to forego the financial benefits that often accrue from marriage.

Men's exit from marriage (Ehrenreich, 1983) often results from their inability to provide economically for their family and/or a lower commitment orientation. The decline in the family wage system has hurt women who had relied heavily on their husbands' income. Further, high male unemployment in many low-income Black neighborhoods has resulted in a very small pool of marriageable men. In Chicago, for example, an employed male is twice as likely as an unemployed male to marry the mother of his children. The higher the mother's educational attainment, the greater the likelihood of marriage for low-income couples after the birth of a child (W. J. Wilson, 1987). In addition, many women suddenly become poor after leaving husbands who battered them. These women cannot risk seeking child support because they fear harm will befall them (Sidel, 1986).

RACE AND ETHNIC DIFFERENCES

Scholars explaining minority women's poverty have highlighted several factors. The disadvantages of minority women are often measured in

terms of individual characteristics such as education, labor force participation, unemployment, and income. For example, Black women, because of their minority status, often have less education, earlier entry into the labor force, and more unemployment than do White women. In addition, they are more likely to have lower status and lower-paying jobs due to a labor market segregated by gender (Jacobs, 1989).

Residence within urban poverty areas, which disproportionately affects racial minorities, is a second factor associated with minority women's poverty. Blacks and Hispanics are much more likely than Whites to live in urban census tracts (34%, 32%, and 14%, respectively) where at least 20% of the households are poor (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991e, p. 54). The negative impact of ghetto residence stems from low socioeconomic status and racial discrimination, which in turn make it difficult to leave. Racial discrimination impacts poor Blacks more than it does middle-class Blacks. The latter have been able to leave the ghetto but have taken with them their resources and networks of information, especially those regarding job opportunities (W. J. Wilson, 1987).

This problem of inadequate networks and local resources is also a rural phenomenon. White women in rural areas of the United States such as Appalachia (Erikson, 1976) also live in impoverished and isolated economic communities. These circumstances help maintain poverty among Mexican Americans as well due to their higher rural concentrations (10%) relative to those of Puerto Ricans (5%), Cubans (4%), and Hispanics of Central and South American origin (3%) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991c, pp. 16-17). Rural residence is associated with limited employment, education, and access to health and other services.

Whereas all women would benefit from better access to high-paying jobs and more economic leverage, minority women are in greater need of economic opportunities because resources in their communities are more limited. Female minority householders are about twice as likely as their White counterparts to live in central cities. In 1990, 62% of Black and Hispanic female householders were living in central cities, compared with only 32% of White female householders (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991e, pp. 28, 54).

Patterns of family formation also vary by race and ethnicity. Of fathers who conceived their first child outside of marriage, only 29% of Blacks and 27% of Puerto Ricans married the mother of the child within 3 years, compared with 62% of Mexican Americans and 74% of non-Hispanic Whites who did so. Black males' relatively poor education and employment contribute to their lower attractiveness as marriage partners

and partially explain differences in family structure across race and ethnic groups (Jaynes & Williams, 1989; W. J. Wilson, 1987). Black men also have higher mortality rates, a greater likelihood of being incarcerated or murdered, and more substance abuse. These factors further contribute to female-householder families and female poverty (Sidel, 1986).

The underlying causes of single parenthood also vary by race. White female householders are more likely to become poor due to marital disruption. Black and Puerto Rican female householders, on the other hand, more typically live below the poverty line because of extramarital childbearing (Jaynes & Williams, 1989). Black women are four times more likely than White women to have a child outside of marriage. Black women also have a higher divorce rate and lower remarriage rate than do White women and are more likely to remain single, partly because of Black men's lower income (Zopf, 1989). Only 32% of separated and divorced Black women, compared with 72% of non-Hispanic Whites, remarry within 10 years (Sweet & Bumpass, 1987). Separated Black women spend an average of 7 years apart from their husbands before they reconcile or divorce whereas White women spend about 1 year apart from their husbands before they do so.

Thus the absence of a second income-earning adult impedes the long- and short-term well-being of minority women and children. White women, although faced with the twin jeopardies of family obligations and gender barriers in the workplace, have greater chances for relief from poverty due to their greater access to good jobs and to the financial resources of employed men. Among divorced women with children, Whites are more likely than Blacks to receive child support (Cassetty, 1978) and other assets, especially home ownership and retirement benefits, as part of a marriage settlement (Bould, 1983). More important, however, is their higher probability of forming a new marriage with an employed man, thereby reducing their poverty risk drastically (Cherlin, 1992).

All of these factors result in the present situation in which a larger proportion of Black women must depend exclusively on their own financial resources. We are in the midst of a long-term decline in the proportion of Black men, particularly young Black men, who are in a position to support a family (Franklin, 1992; Zinn, 1989). Black high school graduates aged 25 to 34 years were earning less in 1984 than were Black high school dropouts in 1969 (Duncan & Hoffman, 1990, 1991). Black and Puerto Rican men have been especially hurt by deindustrialization in the Northeast and Upper Midwest "Rustbelt" (Smith, 1988). Minorities in the Sunbelt, Cubans in Florida, and Mexican Americans in the Southwest were less affected by these economic changes.

Hispanics and Blacks in the Northeast and Midwest suffered due to a decline in manufacturing jobs, which has reduced good employment opportunities in many urban areas. Large numbers of Black men are losing their toehold in the manufacturing sector. The massive displacement of Puerto Rican workers from declining textile and garment industries in the Northeast during the 1970s catalyzed a return migration process that disrupted families and contributed to a rapid increase in families headed by women (Sandefur & Tienda, 1988). It has probably influenced the increase of female-householder families in the formerly male-dominated "migratory stream" of Hispanics (Vega, 1991).

FAMILY STRUCTURE

Although children place greater financial burdens on families, they also reduce the number of hours a parent can work without incurring child-care costs. Much of the gender difference in household income of single adults aged 25 to 64 may be due to differences in parental responsibilities (McLanahan et al., 1989). Female householders employed year-round, full-time have a 6% chance of poverty if White, 11% if Black, and 14% if Hispanic (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991e, pp. 98-101). They are somewhat disadvantaged, however, in comparison with married-couple families. Poverty rates for persons in married-couple families who are employed year-round, full-time are 2% for Whites, 4% for Blacks, and 7% for Hispanics (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991e, pp. 99-101).

Thus, irrespective of race, married couples are more likely to escape poverty. Poverty for children in female-householder families relative to married-couple families is about five times higher for Whites; 3½ times higher for Blacks, Puerto Ricans, and other Hispanics; and twice as high for Mexican Americans. (The poverty rate for householders alone is not available for ethnic groups.) Even when husbands did not work at all, their poverty rate was significantly lower than that of non-employed female householders with children under age 6 (see Table 3). This pattern is maintained for full-time, year-round and part-time or part-year workers as well.

This discrepancy may be explained partially by men's higher wages and/or access to unemployment insurance. Further, when there are two parents, one parent can be available for child care. Female poverty, particularly for working-age women, is largely the result of responsibility for minor children without regular access to financial resources from an adequate job—either their own or that of a current or former husband.

TABLE 1
Poverty Risk, by Gender and Minority Status:
Single-Parent Householders With Related Children
Under Age 18 and Unrelated Persons Under Age 65

	<i>Householders</i>	<i>Unrelated Persons</i>
White		
Men	16.0% (167)	15.0% (1,841)
Women	37.9% (1,814)	20.2% (1,961)
Black		
Men	27.3% (73)	27.1% (540)
Women	56.1% (1,513)	33.6% (447)
Hispanic		
Men	28.1% (48)	28.9% (376)
Women	58.2% (536)	39.9% (273)

NOTE: Persons of Hispanic origin may be either Black or White. All numbers in parentheses are in thousands.

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1991e, pp. 21-23, 29).

POVERTY RATES BY RACE, ETHNICITY, AND HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURE

Recent census data support these claims regarding female poverty. A large proportion of the poor live in female-householder families—74% of poor Puerto Ricans, 61% of poor Blacks, 31% of poor Mexican Americans, and 28% of poor Whites (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991a; 1991e, pp. 16-17). In addition, 60% of all poor families with children under age 18 have female householders (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1991e, p. 20).

RACE AND ETHNIC DIFFERENCES

Table 1 shows race, ethnic, and gender differences in poverty risk. Black and Hispanic householders of both sexes and men and women living alone or with nonrelatives have considerably higher poverty rates than do Whites. However, the impact of minority status on women's poverty

varies across groups. The risk of poverty for children under age 18 in female-householder families is highest for Puerto Ricans (83%), second highest for other Hispanics (67%), third highest for Blacks (65%), fourth highest for Mexican Americans (62%), and lowest for Whites (46%) (see Table 2). Because children's poverty in these families is nearly a third lower for Whites than it is for the most advantaged minority group (Mexican Americans), minority status contributes substantially to poverty.

Black and Puerto Rican children are at risk because they are much more likely than Mexican American and White children to live in female-householder families (55%, 53%, 20%, and 15%, respectively; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991a, 1991d, pp. 25, 28). Also note that the lower Mexican American poverty rate for children in female-householder families is not sustained across family types. Poverty among children in married-couple families is higher for Mexican Americans (29%) than it is for other race and ethnic groups.

Puerto Rican children in female-householder families are the most impoverished group (83%), and they are the second poorest group in married-couple families (25%) (see Table 2). According to the New York State Advisory Committee for Hispanic Affairs and the Association of Puerto Rican Executive Directors, Puerto Ricans are the poorest minority group in New York (Rohter, 1985). The percentage of Puerto Rican female-householder families has risen steadily during recent decades, from 16% in 1960 to 25% in 1970 and to 39% in 1990 (Sandefur & Tienda, 1988; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991b).

Twin interacting liabilities facing Puerto Ricans are their low education and residence in the Northeast (Sandefur & Tienda, 1988). Young Puerto Rican fathers are more likely to drop out of school than are young Black fathers (Sullivan, 1989). The typical young Puerto Rican comes from a family in which neither parent completed high school, in contrast to less than one-quarter of non-Hispanic Whites who come from such families. The median family income for Puerto Ricans is less than half the median family income for Whites (Bean & Tienda, 1987; Tienda & Jensen, 1988).

Further, a job market that emphasizes English literacy in low-wage, service-sector jobs deters labor force participation even among women with school-age children. Many Puerto Rican women are also likely to suffer race discrimination because of their African descent. It is possible that Puerto Ricans in the United States encounter more discrimination than do other Hispanics because they are more likely to be perceived as having African descent (Rodriguez, 1989).

TABLE 2
Poverty Risk for Related Children Under Age 18, by Minority Status and Household Type

	<i>White</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>Puerto Rican</i>	<i>Mexican American</i>	<i>Other Hispanics</i>
Female-householder families					
Children aged 6-17 years	39.4% (2,132)	60.1% (2,072)	82.1% (242)	58.5% (395)	59.9% (178)
Children under age 6 years	60.4% (1,465)	72.6% (1,471)	83.8% (139)	70.8% (220)	80.0% (140)
Total children under age 18 years	45.9% (3,597)	64.7% (3,543)	82.7% (382)	62.4% (615)	67.2% (317)
Married-couple families					
Total children under age 18 years	9.2% (3,824)	18.1% (734)	24.5% (92)	28.5% (1,056)	19.9% (202)

NOTE: Persons of Hispanic origin may be either Black or White. All numbers in parentheses are in thousands.
 SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1991e, pp. 26, 28), U.S. Bureau of the Census (1991a).

HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURE

In light of these findings, it is important to examine the impact of household structure (i.e., gender, marital, and parental status across race and ethnic groups) on poverty. Gender has both direct and indirect effects. It works indirectly because custodial parenthood is assumed disproportionately by women. Although children add an economic burden to all households, this burden is often overwhelming for a female householder without a partner.

Table 1 shows that a White female householder with related children under age 18 has a poverty risk of 38%; her Black counterpart has a risk of 56%, and a Hispanic woman in the same category has an even greater risk (58%). But, for male householders, the poverty rate is less than half the female rate across race and ethnic groups. White male householders have a poverty rate of only 16%, Black males 27%, and Hispanic males 28%. Clearly, the presence of children poses a greater risk of poverty for women than it does for men.

This situation is confirmed further by comparing men's and women's poverty for householders and persons living alone or with nonrelatives (see Table 1). Although poverty for single White women is 20%, this climbs to 38% for householders. For Black and Hispanic single women, poverty is 34% and 40% compared with 56% and 58% for Black and Hispanic householders, respectively. Controlling for race and ethnicity, however, poverty among single men (15% for Whites, 27% for Blacks, and 29% for Hispanics) is essentially the same as it is among their householder counterparts. Thus structural forces that favor males appear to shelter their children from poverty. Single custodial fathers, unlike mothers, can support themselves and their children above the poverty line.

The poverty rate for female-householder families is highest among families with preschool children—families that are most likely to be affected by a lack of adequate day care. Poverty rates for children under age 6 in White female-householder families are 21% higher than they are for their school-age counterparts (see Table 2). Because child support payments tend to diminish following a divorce, there is no reason to expect that this difference is due to differential child support payments.

It is more plausible that as children get older, more women can enter the labor force (Jencks, 1992). This, in turn, can substantially reduce poverty, particularly for year-round, full-time workers (see Table 3). Because White women's educational attainment is relatively high and they do not face racism, they are more likely than Black and Hispanic women

TABLE 3
Poverty Risk, by Employment Status, for Husbands
in Married-Couple Families and Female Householders
With Children Under Age 6 Years

	<i>Full-Time, Year-Round</i>	<i>Part-Time or Part-Year</i>	<i>Not Employed</i>
Husbands	4.6% (446)	23.3% (515)	55.5% (234)
Female householders	13.3% (130)	67.6% (769)	89.0% (1,126)

NOTE: All numbers in parentheses are in thousands.

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1991e, p. 98).

to find and keep good jobs. However, the 39% poverty rate (see Table 2) for older White children demonstrates that White female householders still face a substantial poverty risk. They are about twice as likely to be poor as are White women without minor children (see Table 1).

Preschool children in female-householder families may have the highest risk of poverty because their mothers must go on welfare, thereby eliminating the need for child care or a job with medical benefits. The need for child care plays a critical role in maintaining poverty because single mothers usually cannot afford unsubsidized day care. As Table 2 shows, poverty rates for Black, White, and Hispanic women with children under age 6 are more similar than they are for their counterparts with older children. Given that 60% (for Whites) is the *lowest* poverty rate for single mothers with preschool children, one may conclude that all women with preschool children are more likely than not to be poor.

However, interethnic comparisons reveal that Puerto Rican women with only school-age children are as likely to be poor as are those with preschool children. Less than one-fifth of either group is above the poverty line (see Table 2). By contrast, the poverty rate for White and other Hispanic female householders drops about 20% when they have *only* school-age children. This reduction in poverty among other Hispanics and Whites probably reflects their success in the labor market after their children enter school.

Similarly, poverty among Black and Mexican American women is somewhat lower (by 11% to 13%) if their children are in school. These women may be more likely than Puerto Ricans to enter the labor force. Black mothers have a long tradition of employment whereas many married

and single Mexican American mothers entered the labor force more recently (Williams, 1990). The latter probably responded to expanding job opportunities in the Sunbelt. Even though these industries tended to offer lower wages, they required less knowledge of English.

DISCUSSION

This article examines the contributions of gender, race, ethnicity, and marital and parental statuses to the feminization of poverty. Our analysis of census data reveals that both race and gender strongly affect poverty rates. Gender and race interact with parenthood such that only women are affected, especially White women. Feminization of poverty is stimulated largely by high rates of single parenthood.

Poverty is most feminized among Puerto Ricans (74% of poor Puerto Ricans live in female-householder families) because these women are most likely to become householders and to stay out of the labor force (Carrasquillo, 1994). Poverty is also highly feminized among Blacks (61% of poor Blacks reside in female-householder families). These families may benefit from a lesser need for formal child care due to interhousehold exchanges. For example, at all income levels, Black grandparents are more involved than are White grandparents in their grandchildren's lives (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1986).

Poverty is least feminized among Mexican Americans (31%) and Whites (28%). For Mexican American children, poverty tends to be more concentrated in married-couple households (63% of poor children) than it is in female-headed households (37% of poor children). Low divorce rates have not alleviated their poverty. Further, in spite of a tradition of mothers staying at home (Williams, 1990), Mexican American married and unmarried women have rapidly taken advantage of opportunities in Sunbelt labor markets for low-wage factory jobs (Zavella, 1987). Notwithstanding women's market labor, high levels of poverty persist.

Although poverty is relatively low among White married-couple families (6%), more than 9 million such families are poor. In addition, more than half of poor White children live in married-couple families. Thus marriage has not solved the poverty problem for either minority or nonminority families. By contrast, poverty among White female-householder families is a more temporary status and is likely to be alleviated by remarriage or entry into full-time employment after children enter school.

THE ROLE OF MARRIAGE

Most analysts agree that low marriage rates and high divorce rates contribute to the feminization of poverty. If all parents were married, poverty would be more equally distributed between men and women. However, some suggest a stronger causal link. Novak (1987), for instance, posits that if a lasting marriage were the almost universal choice and if young persons postponed childbearing until they had completed school, married, and established themselves in adequate employment, then dependency would fall. Eggebeen and Lichter (1991) similarly attempt to demonstrate that changing patterns of family formation have resulted in increased child poverty. They claim that changes in Black family structure from 1960 to 1988 resulted in more poverty for Black children relative to White children. This kind of argument has resulted in Smith's (1988) conclusion that decreasing racial inequality and improving the economic status of Black children require changing marriage patterns more than changing employment patterns. Yet Stern (1993) provides evidence that a woman who divorces or separates from her chronically jobless husband and enters the labor force will hardly change her poverty risk at all.

Policies that advocate marriage for female householders are questionable from a practical as well as from a humanist and feminist perspective. Eggebeen and Lichter (1991), for instance, do not discuss the fact that many of the currently unmarried men who comprise the eligible marriage market for these women are unemployed and/or homeless. These nonincarcerated men would have difficulty supporting children above the poverty line. Therefore, urging women with children to get married is not a viable solution despite its popularity among the profamily lobby in the nation's capital. Further, given the positive relationship between male unemployment and family violence, pressuring poor and unemployed men into marriage could result in increased wife and child abuse rather than in decreased poverty.

White women have greater opportunities to escape poverty through remarriage because proportionately fewer White men are poor, homeless, unemployed, or incarcerated. These remarriages are typically accompanied by increases in family income. Caution is indicated, however, by children's lower rates of educational achievement in stepfamilies compared with those in two-parent families of a similar socioeconomic status. Adding a wage-earning stepfather may create other family problems even though it improves the financial standing of the mother and children (McLanahan et al., 1989).

The debate over marriage as a solution to children's poverty focuses disproportionately on Blacks (see Smith, 1988). Concern with Black marriage and sexuality has a long academic tradition in the United States. Yet if one considers other impoverished minority groups such as Mexican Americans, for which nearly two-thirds of poor children live in married-couple families, there is a clear need for a broader policy focus. Even the majority of poor White children live in married-couple families.

Despite the rapidly increasing proportion of Black children living in female-householder families from 1960 to 1980, poverty among Black children decreased dramatically from 66% in 1960 to 37% in 1980 (Eggebeen & Lichter, 1991). The only increase in Black and White children's poverty occurred between 1980 and 1988 and was probably influenced by the reduction in welfare benefits and wages. Welfare payments fell to levels significantly below the poverty level even in states such as New York that have had relatively high welfare payments.

Wages for unskilled and semiskilled workers also declined, especially among high school graduates. Blank (1991) demonstrates conclusively that falling wages during the 1980s, following a period of rising wages, was the single most important cause of increased poverty. Changes in family structure from 1980 to 1988 accounted for less than 5% of the increase in poverty.

Therefore, from a policy standpoint, the elimination of poverty is a more sensible goal than is the defeminization of poverty. The rates of child poverty in the United States are the highest in the industrialized world (Smeeding, Torrey, & Rein, 1986). Although good jobs are critical for the economic self-sufficiency of both women and men, a reduction in children's poverty requires us to focus attention on women. If policy efforts are directed toward increasing marriage and remarriage rates, they are likely to fail or to increase wife and child abuse. On the other hand, if these efforts are directed toward providing child care, medical benefits, and jobs that provide a living wage, they have a greater chance of success.

It may be appropriate to move beyond the moralistic statements of Dan Quayle (Morrow, 1992) and the narrow statistical vision of "let's go back to the 1960s" family structure. There are many dedicated parents—both married and unmarried—who desperately need assistance in providing adequate food, shelter, medical care, and education for their children. These unmet needs, couched within their diverse social and familial contexts, may provide the stimulus for specific policy proposals with regard to job creation, health care reform, and expansion of child care in the Clinton administration.

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