

## The Black Family

Some of the most basic beliefs and assumptions about the black family are demonstrably fallacious. For example, it has been widely believed that black family names were the names of the slave masters who owned particular families. Such beliefs led a number of American blacks, during the 1960s especially, to repudiate those names as a legacy of slavery and give themselves new names—most famously boxing champion Cassius Clay renaming himself Muhammad Ali. Family names were in fact forbidden to blacks enslaved in the United States,<sup>24</sup> as family names were forbidden to other people in lowly positions in various other times and places—slaves in China and parts of the Middle East,<sup>25</sup> for example, and it was 1870 before common people in Japan were authorized to use surnames.<sup>26</sup> In Western civilization, ordinary people began to have surnames in the Middle Ages.<sup>27</sup> In many places and times, family names were considered necessary and appropriate only for the elite, who moved in wider circles—both geographically and socially—and whose families' prestige was important to take with them. Slaves in the United States secretly gave themselves surnames in order to maintain a sense of family but they did not use those surnames around whites. Years after emancipation, blacks born during the era of slavery remained reluctant to tell white people their full names.<sup>28</sup> The “slave names” fallacy is false not only because whites did not give slaves surnames but also because the names that blacks gave themselves were not simply the names of whoever owned them. During the era of slavery, it was common to choose other names. Otherwise, if all the families belonging to a given slave owner took his name, that would defeat the purpose of creating separate family identities. Ironically, when some blacks in the twentieth century began repudiating what they called “slave names,” they often took Arabic names, even though Arabs over the centuries had enslaved more Africans than Europeans had.<sup>29</sup> A fallacy with more substantial implications is that the current fatherless families so prevalent among contemporary blacks are a “legacy of slavery,” where families were not recognized. As with other social problems attributed to a “legacy of slavery,” this ignores the fact that the problem has become much worse among generations of blacks far removed from slavery than among generations closer to the era of slavery. Most black children were raised in two-parent homes, even under slavery, and for generations thereafter.<sup>30</sup> Freed blacks married, and marriage rates among blacks were slightly higher than among whites in the early twentieth century.<sup>31</sup> Blacks also had slightly higher rates of labor force participation than whites in every census from 1890 to 1950.<sup>32</sup> While 31 percent of black children were born to unmarried women in the early 1930s, that proportion rose to 77 percent by the early 1990s.<sup>33</sup> If unwed childbirth was “a legacy of slavery,” why was it so much less common among blacks who were two generations closer to the era of slavery? One sign of the breakdown of the nuclear family among blacks was that, by 1993, more than a million black children were being raised by their grandparents, about two-thirds as many as among whites, even though there are several times as many whites as blacks in the population of the United States.<sup>34</sup> When tragic retrogressions in all these respects became painfully apparent in the second half of the twentieth century, a “legacy of slavery” became a false explanation widely used, thereby avoiding confronting contemporary factors in contemporary problems. These retrogressions were not only dramatic in themselves, they had major impacts on other important individual and social results. For example, while most black children were still being raised in two-parent families as late as 1970, only one third were by 1995.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, much social pathology is highly correlated with the

absence of a father, both among blacks and whites, but the magnitude of the problem is greater among blacks because fathers are missing more often in black families. While, in the late twentieth century, an absolute majority of those black families with no husband present lived in poverty, more than four-fifths of black husband-wife families did not.<sup>36</sup> From 1994 on into the twenty-first century, the poverty rate among black husband-wife families was below 10 percent.<sup>37</sup> It is obviously not simply the act of getting married which drastically reduces the poverty rate and infant mortality rate among blacks, or among other groups, but the values and behavior patterns which lead to marriage and which have a wider impact on many other things.<sup>38</sup> Culture As already noted, races can differ for reasons that are not racial, because people inherit cultures as well as genes. So long as one generation raises the next, it could hardly be otherwise. Many of the social or cultural differences between American blacks and American whites nationwide today were in antebellum times pointed out as differences between white Southerners and white Northerners. These include ways of talking, rates of crime and violence, children born out of wedlock, educational attainment, and economic initiative or lack thereof.<sup>39</sup> While only about one-third of the antebellum white population of the United States lived in the South, at least 90 percent of American blacks lived in the South on into the twentieth century. In short, the great majority of blacks lived in a region with a culture that proved to be less productive and less peaceful for its inhabitants in general. Moreover, opportunities to move beyond that culture were more restricted for blacks. While that culture was regional, both blacks and whites took the Southern culture with them when they moved out of the South. As one small but significant example, when the movement for creating public schools swept across the United States in the 1830s and 1840s, not only was that movement more successful in creating public schools in the North than in the South, those parts of Northern states like Ohio, Indiana and Illinois that were settled by white Southerners were the slowest to establish public schools.<sup>40</sup> The legacy of the Southern culture is more readily documented in the behavior of later generations than is the legacy of slavery, which some distinguished nineteenth century writers said explained the behavior of antebellum Southern whites,<sup>41</sup> and which later writers said explained the behavior of blacks. In reality, the regional culture of the South existed in particular regions of Britain in centuries past, regions where people destined to settle in the American South exhibited the same behavior patterns before they immigrated to the South.<sup>42</sup> They were called “crackers” and “rednecks” before they crossed the Atlantic—and before they ever saw a slave. As a well-known Southern historian said, “We do not live in the past, but the past in us.”<sup>43</sup> Educational and intellectual performance is a readily documented area where the persistence of culture can be tested. As late as the First World War, white soldiers from various Southern states scored lower on mental tests than black soldiers from various Northern states.<sup>44</sup> Not only did black soldiers have the advantage of better schools in the North, they also had an opportunity for the Southern culture to begin to erode in their new surroundings. Over the years, much has been made of the fact that blacks score lower than whites nationwide on mental tests. From this, some observers have concluded that this is due to a racial difference and others have concluded that this is due to some deficiency or bias in the tests. But neither explanation would account for white Southerners’ mental test scores in the First World War. Whatever the sources of the lower educational or intellectual attainments among blacks, there are major economic and social consequences of such differences. For many years, blacks received a lesser quantity and lower quality of education in the Southern schools that most attended. But, even

after the quantity gap was eliminated by the late twentieth century, the qualitative gap remained large. The test scores of black seventeen-year-olds in a variety of academic subjects were the same as the scores of whites several years younger.<sup>45</sup> That is obviously not a basis for expecting equal results in an economy increasingly dependent on mental skills.

## Crime and Violence

The history of crime and violence among blacks contradicts many widespread beliefs about the causes of that crime and violence. Poverty, unemployment, and racial discrimination are frequently listed among the prime “root causes” of riots and other criminality among blacks. Many are so convinced of this that they see no reason to examine the factual historical record. Crime among black Americans, like crime among white Americans, was declining for years prior to the decade of the 1960s, with its landmark civil rights laws and its “war on poverty” programs. But it was during the 1960s that crime rates began skyrocketing among both blacks and whites, and it was precisely after the historic civil rights laws were passed that blacks began rioting in cities across the country. Within days of the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the first of hundreds of riots that would rack cities across the country over the next four years began in the black neighborhood of Los Angeles known as Watts. These riots did not begin where blacks were poorest or most oppressed, which was still the South. Indeed, Southern cities seldom suffered the riots that struck many Northern cities and devastated many black neighborhoods in those cities.<sup>46</sup> Thirty four people died in the Watts riots but 43 were killed when blacks rioted in Detroit two years later. Although Detroit had the worst of the riots that struck virtually every Northern city during the latter part of the 1960s, the poverty rate among Detroit’s black population was only half of that of blacks nationwide, its homeownership rate among blacks was the highest in the country, and its unemployment rate was 3.4 percent—lower than that among whites nationwide.<sup>47</sup> Detroit did not have a massive riot because it was an economic disaster area. It became an economic disaster area after the riots, as did black neighborhoods in many other cities across the country. Moreover, riot-torn neighborhoods in these cities remained disaster areas for decades thereafter, as businesses became reluctant to locate there, reducing access to both jobs and places to shop, and both black and white middle class people left for the suburbs. Whatever the causes of these waves of riots, whether as background factors or as immediate precipitating incidents, they were clearly not the factors that have been repeated endlessly but fallaciously. The worst ghetto riots occurred precisely at those times and places where the things that were supposed to prevent riots were most prevalent, including officials promoting welfare state policies and restraining the police. Conversely, riots were least destructive, and sometimes non-existent, in places and times where officials took an opposite view. As already noted, Southern cities were far less often struck by urban riots. Among Northern cities, Chicago was one of the cities least affected by ghetto riots. It had no such riots in 1967. The following year, when riots swept across the country in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Chicago’s Mayor Richard J. Daley issued a highly publicized “shoot to kill” order to his police that was denounced by many, but deaths from riots in Chicago were a fraction of what they were in cities like Detroit where more humane and sympathetic expressions were used and the police were restrained. Nationally, the most and worst urban ghetto riots occurred during the Johnson administration but there was not one major urban riot during the entire eight

years of the Reagan administration. Yet such hard facts did not make a dent in fashionable beliefs, then or now. Both politicians and activists have a vested interest in racial fallacies, which attribute the advancement of blacks to politicians and activists, and blame others for the retrogressions.

## ECONOMICS

Gross income differences between groups can easily lead to fallacious conclusions if various demographic, educational, and other differences are ignored. Unfortunately, many racial comparisons are like comparisons of apples and oranges, since races differ in many ways besides race. They differ not only in age and family size but also in education and in the proportion of their respective populations that are working, among other differences. As with comparisons of women and men, comparing truly comparable individuals of different races often produces very different results from gross intergroup comparisons. Gross comparisons of racial and ethnic groups are only a starting point in the process of trying to understand the factors at work in producing differences in incomes and occupations at a given time, as well as changes over time. The U. S. census in 2000 showed that the median earnings of blacks was \$27,264 in 1999, compared to a national average of \$32,098, so that blacks as individuals earned 85 percent of what Americans in general earned. As families, however, blacks earned only 66 percent of the national average for families. That is because the average black family has fewer people than American families in general, since a higher proportion of black families lack fathers. When comparing black married couples with other married couples, however, blacks earned 88 percent of the national average for married couples—\$50,690, compared to a national average of \$57,345.48 Among Asian Americans, the 2000 census showed that their median individual earnings exceeded the national average—\$40,650 for Asian American men compared to \$37,057 for all American men. As individuals, Asian Americans earned 10 percent more than the national average. As families, they earned 19 percent more—\$59,324, compared to a national average of \$50,046.49 Part of this is due to the fact that Asian American families tend to include fathers more often than the families of Americans in general.<sup>50</sup> With Asian Americans as with blacks, their incomes have not always been as high—relative to the national average—as today. With both, assessing the role of racial discrimination involves a consideration of history as well as economics. For perspective, we also need to consider racial and ethnic groups in other countries. In Malaysia, for example, the Malay majority averaged less than half the income of the Chinese minority throughout the last quarter of the twentieth century, even though the Chinese were in no position to discriminate against the Malays, and in fact there were widespread government programs giving preferential treatment to Malays. In Sri Lanka, the Tamil minority likewise had higher incomes than the country's majority population, the Sinhalese, until laws and policies severely discriminating against the Tamils, beginning in the 1950s, enabled the Sinhalese to overtake the Tamils in income by 1973.<sup>51</sup> In general, discrimination must take its place among the various other factors behind intergroup economic differences. How much of a factor can vary from group to group, from country to country, and from one time period to another.