



“Summary of article by William A. Darity, Jr. and Samuel L. Myers, Jr.:  
The Marginalization of Black Men: Impact on Family Structure” in  
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## **“Summary of article by William A. Darity, Jr. and Samuel L. Myers, Jr.: The Marginalization of Black Men: Impact on Family Structure”**

The book chapter summarized here jointly analyzes two trends which are of great concern to analysts of inequality: the marginalization, or unwantedness to society, of black men, and the growth in black female-headed families. The authors compare competing explanations for the increase in female headed families. A structural explanation incorporates changing socio-economic circumstances for black men which are likely to have a bearing on the formation of black families. Behavioral models claim that welfare policy offers incentives to single mothers to remain unmarried. The evidence discussed below favors a structural explanation.

The authors develop a chain of association between deteriorating economic circumstances for young black men, increased participation in illegal and violent activity, involvement in the criminal justice system, increased mortality, and a reduction in the numbers of young black men capable of forming and supporting families. They then examine the sensitivity (elasticity) of the incidence of female-headed families to changes in structural and behavioral variables.

### **Marginalization of Young Black Men**

Young black men in the U.S. are in crisis. "Black males are withdrawing from many productive spheres of the economy: arrests, increasingly for drug-related crimes, serve to drain off large pools of black males unwanted in the industrial era." [143] High rates of homicide, often by other young black men, further reduce their numbers.

Since the late 1970s, the economic position of young black men has declined rapidly. In 1979, median weekly earnings for black men aged 16-24 working year-round full time were \$167, which came to 57 % of the comparable \$291 median for all men. By 1987 the ratio dropped to 49 %: \$214 per week for young black men, compared to \$433 for all men. Earnings for young black men with less than a high school education fell off drastically in comparison to white men of similar age and education. In 1970, poorly educated young black men earned \$1.11 for every dollar earned by comparable white men. By 1988, these black men earned only 35 cents for every dollar earned by similar white men.

“With legitimate work becoming less and less a viable option for economic survival, crime and illegal entrepreneurial pursuits have become more and more viable alternatives.” [146] Falling drug prices and easy access to crack cocaine in the 1980s also drew many young black men into illegal behavior. Drug-related activity led to an upsurge in violence, homicide rates and imprisonment.

The prison population quadrupled between 1970 and the late 1980s. At the same time, the proportion of blacks in the prison population grew. Arrests for drug-related offenses among blacks rose from 100,000 in 1980 to 350,000 in 1988; from under 6% of all arrests in 1980 to over 11% in 1988. In comparison, among whites, drug arrests rose from under 6% to just over 7%.

Homicide rates for young black men remained nearly stable from the 1950s through the early 1980s at around 60 per 100,000 in the 15-25 age group. By 1988, homicides rose to 102 per 100,000 black men aged 15-24, accounting for 46% of all mortality for this age group.

Compared to childhood years (5-14), adolescence and young adulthood are dangerous times for young black men, and they became even more dangerous in the late 1980s. From 1970 to 1980, mortality rates for 15-24 year olds were about 4.5 times the rate for the younger group. In 1988, the rate for the 15-24 age group was 5.3 times the rate for black male children. In general, the age-adjusted death rate for black women is lower and has been dropping much faster than the comparable rate for black men. This trend implies a decrease in the relative supply of men.

### **Impact on Family Structure**

In 1967, 27 percent of black families were headed by a woman; by 1991, the proportion had grown to 46 percent. Structural theorists attribute this to the marginalization of young black men and the increasing gap between mortality rates for black men and black women, trends which diminish black women's prospects for marriage. Behavioral theorists claim that the increase in female headed families results from perverse incentives furnished by the welfare system which encourage black women to have children out of wedlock.

It is not easy to compare and evaluate these two explanations. Complex relationships and feedback effects between structural elements are difficult to disentangle. For example, as other researchers have pointed out, the ratio of unmarried men to unmarried women may not be useful for understanding family structure because unemployed men may not be desirable candidates for marriage. (For this reason the authors include only those unmarried men who are employed, looking for work or in school in the marriageable pool.) Illegal or violent activity may involve men who are not marriageable to begin with. Education has ambiguous effects on marriage prospects because higher education increases the probability that a man will be in the labor force, but decreases the probability that he will remain unmarried. However, higher education increases the probability that a black woman will be unmarried.

Despite these difficulties, it is possible to analyze the effect of changes in the condition of marginality, specifically the probability of being murdered or imprisoned, on the ratio of marriageable black men to unmarried black women. The effect of changes in this sex ratio on the structure of the black family can then be evaluated and compared to the effect of changes in welfare benefits.

### **Elasticity Analyses**

Using data from the Current Population Survey (CPS) for March 1976 and March 1985, the authors calculate the Darity-Myers sex ratios of marriageable men to unmarried women. The ratios are generally well below 1.0; the lower the ratio, the worse the prospects for women finding husbands. Overall, changes in the ratio of mortality rates for black men to black women have negligible effects on the Darity-Myers sex ratio; however, for young, less educated, urban blacks, increases in the mortality ratio lead to a sharp drop in the sex ratio.

In earlier research, the authors demonstrated that “Black males are considerably more likely to be out of school, out of the labor force and not married when imprisonment and homicide rates are high.” [164] Their estimate is that the proportion of black men who fall into this “unmarriageable” category rises by 1.4 percent for a 1 percent increase in homicide, and by 0.5 percent for a 1 percent increase in incarceration. Education and age also influence the marginalization process, but this may reflect cohort rather than maturation effects. Older cohorts passed through adolescence and young adulthood in years when homicide and incarceration rates were lower. Less educated black men in today’s younger generation “may never survive to become the fathers and heads of families tomorrow.” [165]

### **Behavioral Explanations**

Changes in the supply of marriageable men do not translate directly into changes in the proportion of female-headed families. For blacks in 1985, a one percent drop in the Darity-Myers sex ratio was associated with a 0.16 percent increase in female-headed families among 20-year-olds; the same effect was only 0.05 percent among 30-year-olds. As a result of a complex series of calculations like these, the estimated aggregate effect of a one percent increase in the homicide rate is a 0.09 percent increase in female-headed families; the corresponding effect for incarceration is 0.03 percent.

These estimates, arising from the structural theory, may finally be compared to the effects of welfare on family structure, the foundation of the behavioral theory. There is a positive relationship between welfare payments and female-headed families, as hypothesized by the behavioralists. In various specifications of this relationship, a one percent increase in welfare payments causes an increase in female-headed families of .10 percent or less (again for blacks in 1985) - coincidentally similar to the effect of homicides.

Unlike the structural factors, however, the effect of welfare payments points in the wrong direction. From 1976 to 1985, the real value of welfare payments to a typical black family fell by 25 percent; this should have caused a drop in female-headed households of more than 2 percent, according to the behavioral theory. In fact, the proportion of black families that were female-headed rose by more than 20 percent (i.e., from 36 percent to 44 percent.).

Clearly other circumstances overwhelmed the welfare effect. By raising the probability that a black man will be a poor marriage prospect, higher homicide and incarceration rates influence the incidence of female-headed families. The overall impacts are small, but become much larger when young black families - “the source of future parenting in the black community”[171] - are considered. There is grave possibility of devastating consequences for the black community.