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A truth buried in the ruins of Watts

By Kay S. Hymowitz, KAY S. HYMOWITZ is a contributing editor of the Manhattan Institute's City Journal, from whose latest issue this article is adapted.

FORTY YEARS AGO this week, South Los Angeles suffered one of the worst race riots in U.S. history, leaving 34 people dead, nearly 1,000 injured and 500 buildings burned and looted.

But the Watts riots, as the conflagration came to be known, are not the only racially significant anniversary worth recalling right now. It was also 40 years ago that Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report on the black family, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," came to public attention. In fact, the two events intersected in ways that complicate our understanding of ghetto problems decades later.

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In "The Negro Family," Moynihan, then an assistant secretary of Labor in the Johnson administration, warned that almost a quarter of black children were born to unmarried women — and that this rise in single-mother families was no harmless lifestyle choice. He argued that the married-couple family was "the basic socializing unit" and that its unraveling was the cause of a "tangle of pathology" infecting the ghetto, including high rates of delinquency, joblessness, school failure and male alienation, which he demonstrated in pages of disquieting charts and graphs.

Moynihan had written "The Negro Family" in the spring of 1965 as an internal report, but it was leaked to the press in August, only days before Watts exploded.

The timing proved to be as tragic as the riot violence itself. The televised images of the residents of South-Central L.A. burning down their own neighborhoods collided in the

public mind with Moynihan's analysis. Some wrongly concluded that the "tangle of pathology" was the administration's explanation for urban riots. They believed that this was a "blame the victim" approach and were offended that the administration would blame black lifestyles for problems in black neighborhoods.

Apprehensive about the fragile, though substantial, gains in black equality, civil rights leaders were determined to portray the violence as a measure of black despair over white injustice. Moynihan's theory complicated that message. Insinuating that Moynihan was racist, they savaged the report — and, more consequentially, its warning that the collapse of the married family would spell continued inequality for African Americans — and left it to smolder in the ruins of Watts.

That decision from racial moderates was bad enough. But with its war cry of "Burn, baby! Burn!" Watts drove out the nonconfrontational, assimilationist ethos of the early civil rights movement and ushered in the era of Black Power.

Feminist- and black pride-inspired thinkers of the late 1960s and early '70s went much further than simply accusing Moynihan of racism. They romanticized families headed by mothers as both liberated kinship groups and a vestige of authentic African traditions. They rejected the nuclear family as a white — read: toxic — hang-up.

"One must question the validity of the white, middle-class lifestyle from its very foundation because it has already proven itself to be decadent and unworthy of emulation," wrote Joyce Ladner in her 1972 book, "Tomorrow's Tomorrow." Ladner also edited a tome, titled "The Death of White Sociology," filled with essays by top black scholars who jeered at the social science that undergirded Moynihan's research.

As it happens, both sides got to put their theories to the test. By 1980, the out-of-wedlock birthrate among blacks rose to 56%. By 2000, more than two-thirds of black children were born to unmarried women; in inner-city areas such as Harlem or Watts, where the number was closer to 90%, marriage had become virtually extinct.

And how did the ghetto fare as a nuclear-family-free zone? Well, poverty, welfare dependency, crime, drug addiction, school failure all escalated. By the early 1980s, the condition of the ghetto was so critical that experts began to talk about an "underclass" whose characteristics, lo and behold, closely resembled Moynihan's "tangle

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of pathology."

Finally, by the middle of the 1990s, social scientists reached a consensus: Growing up with a single mother puts children at significant risk of poverty, school failure, teen pregnancy and a host of other ills.

Moynihan hadn't been racist; like prophets throughout history, he had the misfortune of simply being right.

Still, even today many people resist the now-established relationship between entrenched poverty and family structure. According to "The State of Black Los Angeles," the United Way/Urban League study published last month, close to 70% of the city's black children are born to unmarried mothers, a number similar to the rest of the nation. Yet feminist organizations, the National Assn. of Social Workers, the Children's Defense Fund and much of the black leadership continue to scowl whenever the subject of marriage comes up.

It can't help that a substantial majority of young Americans tell pollsters that they approve of having a child outside of marriage, or that hip-hop culture valorizes ghetto life; "cause nowadays it's like a badge of honor/to be a baby mama" go the words to the current hit "Baby Mama."

You'd think that 40 years of overdue equality would be long enough to learn the vital lesson of the Moynihan report.



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