

In the United States, nearly one in two Black children grow up without a father, and Black teenagers are more than twice as likely as their white peers to experience early pregnancy before adulthood. These patterns are not coincidences or mere independent choices, rather they are the legacies of historical racism and policy.

The structure of the family is a significant factor of an individual's emergence into adulthood, causing strong output on their emotional development and or economic mobility. The family is important, because it is who we spend our lives with as children, and the family determines who we become as adults.

Black American families and their structures have endured generations of disruption, trickling down to how they are impacted and represented in modern day. In the context of this research paper, Black American is reference to those of slavery descent in the United States. Since slavery, and its continuation into segregation, then forms of structural systemic racism such as forced separations, incarceration, and others, these barriers destabilized black familial structures, generational cycles that are still present. For many, Black Americans have grown in households without a present father. In 2021, 48% of Black children lived without a present father (Rambert 2021). A statistic that is declining, yet alarmingly disproportionately larger in comparison to other races. In 2022, 76% of White-alone, non-Hispanic children lived with two married parents (DOJ, 2023). Fatherhood is historically a concern for familial structures, parenting books dating centuries ago. Research demonstrates that absent father households contribute to various mental health patterns among its children, education attainment, self-worth, and future relationships with others (Hill et al., 2001; Douglas, 2023). Teen pregnancy is especially prevalent among fatherless households (Assini-Meytin et al., 2019; Barber et al., 2015). The intersection of early parenthood and absent fatherhood is a historical concern that has long lasting significant implications for Black

youth's emergence into adulthood. These instances lead to generational cycles, that are not merely independent or individual but reflect the deeper historical systemic barriers and inequalities that were inflicted on Black Americans. Structural forces such as economic marginalization or mass incarceration, contributed to the cycles of absent fathers within Black households (Rambert, 2021). Moreover, the stigmatization of mental health and how failing to educate and provide adequate mental health resources contributed to a cycle of absent fatherhood, such a life experience is not only psychological but as biological, as childhood trauma can influence an adult's future empathy and emotional connection with others. (Brown et al. 2020).

I hope to explore how generational patterns, historically inflicted, of early parenthood and absent fatherhood impact the emergence of Black youth into adulthood. How an upbringing in a fatherless household can have many implications in their future adulthood, socially, economically, and personally. Ultimately, I hope to discuss patterns of intergenerational trauma in Black American familial structures, and suggest how expansion of policy, and investment into support programs that provide mental health and supportive growth environments of destigmatization can lead to healing and stop generational curses.

Historical and modern systemic racial barrier legacies

In this section I will be discussing the foundation that paved the catalysts for the boom of absent fatherhood within Black America, and how historical structures, like slavery, are still impactful today. For years, single motherhood has emerged as one of the most significant concerns within the Black America, where in 2023, nearly half, 44.2% of black children lived with a single mother (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2023). To understand how and why absent

fatherhood and the destabilization of Black families came to be, we must acknowledge and recognize the legacies and implications that historical structures and systems left on Black Americans, specifically slavery and segregation. The influences of systemic policies have destabilized and destroyed the Black family model in the United States and their legacies continue to persist today, continuing generational cycles.

Absent fatherhood became a prevalent norm within Black American familial structures in the 1960s. Sources expressing the trope is first attributed to Daniel Patrick Moynihan, late U.S New York Senator, and his report, "The Negro Family: The Case of National Action" published in 1965. The controversial report claims that the main cause of the rising Black poverty was due to the deterioration of the Negro family, specifically blaming single Black mothers and the abandonment of Black fathers. His report is entirely misogynistic as he argues that Black matriarchy pushes the men out as Black men are shamed by the "strong" Black women.

Slavery dates to hundreds of years and has forced Black Americans to fall behind their white counterparts. Through slavery, Black families were initially weakened and destabilized as forced separations would disrupt the family model. Slaves were allowed to uphold and maintain a basic nuclear family model, constantly separated, fathers were robbed of their role and position within families, while mothers tend to remain with children, originally starting this notion, that Black mothers were the primary caretaker (Allred, 2019). The *partus sequitur ventrem* law, "That Which is Born Follows the Womb", was enacted in 1662 Virginia, legally declared that children followed the legal status of their mother and followed their mother, regardless of the father (Curvey 2025).

Even after slavery, white Americans perpetuated familial separation by targeting Black men through sharecropping practices that pressured family departure to survive economically (Allred, 2019). The resulting absences were misinterpreted by society as cultural interests, rather than the direct consequences inflicted by racialized labor exploitation.

Moynihan himself, recognizes that racism has negatively impacts Black Americans and will continue to do so for generations to come, stating “the racist virus in the American blood stream still afflicts us: Negroes will encounter serious personal prejudice for at least another generation. Second, three centuries of sometimes unimaginable mistreatment have taken their toll on the Negro people” (U.S. Department of Labor, 1965). However, Moynihan captures the sentiment that the government executed in its policy, that Black America’s struggles could be traced to the failure of the Black nuclear family, failing to account for the systems that were in place to cause issues such as mass incarceration, slavery, segregation, and discrimination. This rhetoric was used to justify punitive incarceration and welfare policies that contributed and perpetuated more family separation and fatherhood absence.

The historical mass incarceration of the African American male in the 19th century is a catalyst for the consequence of absent fatherhood within the Black community. Black men were disproportionately imprisoned and that has had a forever damaging impact on the family model and generally African American men. Imprisonment not merely because of independent individual choices and behavior, but rather historical racially targeted policy, through tactics such as racially concentrated policing. After Emancipation, Southern states, where most Black Americans resided, implemented the Black Codes, that heavily criminalized everyday behaviors for Black people who

were just freed, already funneling Black men into a continuation of slavery (HISTORY.com Editors, 2010). This early period of aggressive punishment set a foundation for future approach to the Black community, especially the men. “Since the 1970s, African American male incarceration rates have increased beyond that of any other nation in the world. This rate increases harms the African American family and community, damages the family ties, and negatively affects family relations and a man's sense of masculinity” (Cross, 2021). Racial practices such as minimum sentences, three-strike laws, unfair policing in communities, 100:1 sentencing and other drug punishments during the War on Drugs disproportionately targeted Black communities and significantly caused the mass incarceration during this period. (Sentencing Project, 2023). The rise of incarceration directly negatively destroyed the Black family stability as it decreased fathers in households, leading to negative consequences for the family. Once the father is released, he then has a criminal record, which negatively affects his ability to obtain employment, and the cycle will repeat itself (Rambert, 2021). Moreover, states reflected a “man-in-the-house” law, which denied families welfare assistance if there was a father present, even if they were still low-income. (Cross, 2021). Given the significant economic disparity because of slavery, it was structurally impossible for many low-income Black fathers to stay present within their families, if welfare policies rewarded those without, therefore encouraging Black men to leave, so their children can obtain support. Forcing mothers to choose between keeping their partner and father of their children present or receive financial support for their children to eat and have a roof over their head.

The historical racialized forces of slavery, segregation, mass incarceration, and welfare policies created pressures that encouraged lack of family structure and destabilization in Black families. While the historical policy and systems have influenced the cycles we see today, modern

conditions and experiences shaped by cultural attitudes, socioeconomic and community environments, influence fatherhood in Black Communities, especially in the face of teen pregnancy.

Developmental Impacts of Father Absence in Childhood

In this section I will be discussing how absent fatherhood can have negative effects on the cognitive development of children. The absence of a father during childhood has various developmental impacts in various aspects of an adolescent, ranging from emotional or cognitive development to educational attainment and behavior, or gender consequences that lead to teen pregnancy.

Research increasingly demonstrates that instability with family structure, lead to persistent negative behavior and psychological impacts in youth. Children without fathers are more consistent with stress and cannot process stress or stressful situations as well (Hill et al., 2001). Children's identity and psychosocial development and the ability to handle emotional distress are heavily impacted when the father is not present within the home and only dealing with their mother (Cross, 2021). A study examined among Black youth used interviews of Black adolescents and adults who grew up without a father present, where emotional and behavioral outcomes were evaluated. This qualitative study identified emotional themes such as loneliness, resentment, anger, or a disrupted sense of identity in the children. These emotions influenced their actions and behaviors through adolescences, reflective of the psychological impact of an upbringing without paternal involvement. Fathers contribute significantly to their child's emotional growth and security, uniquely different from their mother, and when said father is absent or uninvolved, studies

show that children are less likely to have health emotion regulation, trust in others, and antisocial behaviors (Lamb, 2010). While this is not empirical, I have a personal anecdote, my half-brother, who lived 10 years without his father. He is a product of such and has always reflected an erratic and guarded individual. Father absence creates emotional wounds that create tangible developmental cognitive consequences in youth that later translate into adulthood. Children are more likely to involve themselves in harmful and risk-taking behaviors (Cross, 2021).

The instability of a single parent household holds a significant impact on the pursuit or attainment of education. Research demonstrates that youth in single mother households are less likely to attain higher levels of education (Aquillino, 1996). Not only due to emotional and cognitive development consequences, but also due to socioeconomic conditions that limit access to resources that encourage good academic performance and higher education.

A single mother household means a single income; therefore, a child's mother is working more than the usual 40-hour week to sustain her entire family. Being low-income and not having a present role model or parent to look up to because of work and money restraints, encourages these youth to seek out community wherever they find it. However, there are gender specific consequences for either girls or boys. Black boys are likely to seek out a male role model in their community, especially through gangs. This is why the "corner store" is such a monumental location in the Black community. "Boys without fathers' struggle with emotional regulation, identity formation, and modeling of manhood, leaving 'gaps' that mothers or other relatives may not be able to fill" (Cross, 2021). The development within boys not having access to that father figure can be seen in high levels of anger, aggression, or a difficulty in controlling impulsive

behaviors Father absence disrupts masculinity development, as the lack of that role of a male causes confusion of what a man is supposed to reflect, having only external outsiders to look after. However, these external role models' young Black boys seek and flock towards are usually not healthy, and do not actually care for them in a way a father would. Generally, youth without significantly involved parental figures are likely to involve in risky early sexual behaviors. (Douglas, 2023). Girls may seek out community from joining motherhood themselves.

Cultural and Environmental Influences on Teen Pregnancy

In this section I will be explaining the environmental influences and context on how teen pregnancy may come to be, and that contributes to the cycle of absent fatherhood. Research demonstrates that teen pregnancy among Black youth is not a representation of individual or an independent decision but a patterned response to social environments reflective of socioeconomics, father absence, and intergenerational inequalities. The choice to join parenthood early as an adolescent or young adult before marriage is not an individual choice independent from the structural conditions that influence early parenthood. Teen parents are more likely to represent a low-income background, coming from communities stricken with poverty, lack of resources, and limited educational opportunities and access. Black men are significantly more likely than their White counterparts to live in a low-income family during their adolescence as they are more likely to have one source of income, their mother (Assini-Meyti et al., 2015). As mentioned before, the lack of a supervising force like a parent due to work, and the lack of access to safe spaces and resources create the desire for community wherever they can get it. The conditions within adolescence such as trauma from poverty and family instability all contribute to the allure to gang

violence. The desire for belonging and search for masculinity explains part of the higher risk of teen pregnancy and early risky sexual behaviors as structural supports and guidance are absent (FFT, 2018). Teen pregnancy holds a strong influence on intergenerational cycles, as Black children are more prone to grow up in low-income and single mother households, reflecting these conditions can create cycles and persist through generations. 16.8% of African American teen fathers were likely to reside with their child than White (62.6%) fathers (Assini-Meytin et al., 2019). This lack of involvement from young Black fathers sets the foundation for the factors of the child's development that mirror the same conditions that contributed to the teen pregnancy initially.

Single mothers are more likely to not attain higher education or finish high school. Exposure to the behaviors of early sexual interactions, or lower educational attainment encourages youth to repeat and mirror what they know (Barber et al., 2015). It is important to recognize the cultural attitudes that are held within the African American community to understand why there may be an overall acceptance towards teen pregnancy and single motherhood, despite their being tangible consequences. Black women are more likely to approach and perceive pregnancy more positively, associating that pregnancy would reduce that feeling of abandonment by either a partner or their lack of involved parental figures. (Barber et al., 2015). In systems of poverty and low educational attainment, children in these environments are viewed as attainable, valued, and therefore sought out. This is why a controversial trope on social media arises, the Black community celebrates heavily of baby showers, rather opposed to weddings. However, this cannot be separated from the structural inequalities that created that emphasis. The lack of a father in households directly hurts the ability to regulate emotions in both young Black boys and girls. As a result, in heterosexual

relationships, Black girls are common victims of domestic abuse through coercion or lack of control in their intimate relationships, directly increase the risk of early pregnancy as it dismisses their ability to control sexual interactions and the use of contraception (Barber et al., 2015). Violence is prevalent and normalized in low-income communities, causing children to be accustomed to it and grow up to repeat and mirror those violent behaviors, especially in Black men. Research argues that children in these environments are exposed to dangerous or the “real-world” too soon and forced to lose their innocence at a young age. This accelerated force into adulthood, otherwise referred to as adultification, commonly seen in Black youth, socializes youth into assuming caregiver responsibilities. Motherhood becomes an achievable success, especially in environments where education is not seen as attainable, while for Black boys who struggle with masculinity, having sex young is rewarded (Barber et al., 2015). Altogether, the cultural pressures equipped with socioeconomic limitations and familial instability not only explain how teen pregnancy occurs, but why it persists across generations. The developmental consequences rooted in teen pregnancy and father absence ultimately contribute to how black youth emerge and live within adulthood.

Emotional and Intergenerational Consequences in Adulthood

In this section I will be analyzing research that shows how growing up in a single mother household impacts children in everyday aspects of adulthood. Growing up in a single mother household lead to various developmental consequences in adults, regarding emotional and relationship troubles. In low-income communities, especially those predominately Black, mental health support services are already strain and not supported. Mental health disparities in Black America can emphasize

the psychological consequences of family instability in childhood. Many Black youth enter adulthood with unresolved childhood trauma and internalized emotions such as shame or chronic symptoms of depression (Pederson, 2023). Conditions that because of cultural stigmas around mental health in the Black community are not deemed as important and therefore present in how adults approach everyday situations in adulthood. These emotional unaddressed wounds are then passed down to their children (Pederson, 2023). A longitudinal study finds that childhood father absence in youth is associated closely with a higher likeliness to have depression (Culpin et al., 2022). Emotional repression is a common theme especially in Black boys who struggle heavily with masculinity, as expressing sadness or vulnerability is viewed as weakness (Cross, 2021). Not being able to trust others in relationships translates into adulthood, many Black men express how the lack of an involved father has taught them to not rely on others, contributing to chronic mistrust and emotional distancing in all personal relationships (Pederson, 2023). Friendships and intimate relationships are heavily impacted from the lack of father figure as a child. Early exposure to unstable family structures is associated with lower-quality romantic relationships as being adults are unable to properly approach stressful situations, reflect strong insecurity and avoidance. Insecurity is rampant among Black women without present fathers as children, which leaves a gateway for emotional abuse and trouble obtaining healthy relationships as an adult woman (Brown et al., 2020). Childhood holds strong influence in the ability to maintain relationships and challenges with intimacy. Equipped with a multitude of factors, all point to various outcomes in adulthood, such as educational attainment and socioeconomic status as an adult. Black adults see lower incomes, less educational achievements, which ultimately impact the quality of life for these adults.

Children in these traumatic instances develop a biological consequence that numbs the ability to process and express empathy. Life isn't all sunshine and rainbows, expecting that a child who grew up without a father would be present for their child, however, the cycles persist because children in these instances developed high levels of OXTR methylation. OXTR methylation is an epigenetic modification of the oxytocin receptor gene, which is responsible for hormonal effects on socialization, bonding, attachment, and trust (Brown et al., 2020). Elevated levels of the OXTR gene causes Black fathers who have dealt with abandonment to also have difficulties engaging with their young children. Cycles persist because Black men are more likely to not involved in their own children lives imply because of their own emotional damage and history (Brown et al., 2020).

Interventions and Pathways to Healing

In this section, I will discuss the methodologies that can be used and why to support healing in Black America. Childhood trauma unsolved can trickle for generations which is why it is important to introduce interventions and pathways to address systemic inequalities and provide healing for affecting Black youth to stop future generational curses. It is important to address Black low-income communities and provide policy-based solutions that recognize the cultural stigmas and attitudes around teen pregnancy, fatherhood, and mental health.

Children spend majority of their formative years in school, so introducing a stronger foundation in education settings can improve outcomes for youth with one parent, especially if their parent works heavy hours. Introducing resources and structured activities and opportunities for Black youth

allows them to find a safe community rather than seeking community in dangerous or violent outlets. Within our schools, we should allow for healthy opportunities and accessibility to mental health support. As sources and research demonstrates, Black youth enter adulthood with many unsolved and unpacked mental health concerns and providing them a platform free of community judgement is important and beneficial. (Pederson, 2023). Findings suggest that Black teen fathers, that are equally disadvantaged than Whites and Latinos in their adolescence still experience a greater and disproportionate accumulation of disadvantages into their adulthood (Assini-Meytin et al., 2019). Intervention programs that are introduced or implemented to solve these concerns need to account for the contextual surroundings of the broader social landscape and institutions (Assini-Meytin et al., 2019).

Application

As evidenced by research, fatherhood absence and teen pregnancy among have strong life-long tangible and emotional impacts on Black youth and into their adulthood. Sources suggest and prove that early-life conditions heavily influence and dictate adult outcomes, shaping emotional biological developments, education and employment attainment, and relationship maintenance. The choice to partake in teenage pregnancy or child abandonment is not as simple as an individual choice but an outcome from the social and structural pressures within their upbringing and environment. An effective method supported by research is school-based programs that guide youth to deal with emotions in a healthy manner. Pederson claimed that Black youth enter adulthood withholding years of unprocessed emotional repression, and dealing with that during school time can be proven to be beneficial.

Father absence support groups and identity-affirming programming to help with masculinity in young Black boys would provide catalysts for processing the emotional wounds that their family instability causes, which then helps build trust in others, and avoid risky and dangerous behaviors. (Brown et al., 2020). Male mentorship programs are especially beneficial as well. For instance, 100 Black Men is a national nonprofit organization that provides mentorship to aid in educational and economic empowerment. Black boys need role models, especially in healthy masculinity manners, rather than seeking guidance in a place that may be dangerous or harmful. Programs like 100 Black Men and My Brother's Keeper of the Obama Foundation address cycles caused by father absence and work to dissuade gang recruitment and emotional repression. However, to ensure these programs are beneficial and make significant tangible impacts, we need to invest in and promote them within Black low-income communities. On the mention of investment into programs, well-rounded and targeted interventions must be backed by policy. Policy-based supports such as expanded childcare subsidies and access to higher education for single mothers, which allows mothers to be more present within their child's lives, providing as much parental support as possible. Programs that keep young teen Black fathers out of the criminal justice system and allows for proper rehabilitation so future employment can still be obtained allowing for them to continue to support their children, financially and emotionally well. As mentioned, Black teen fathers face more disadvantaged against White and Latino fathers, so we must account for environmental contexts to properly support and break cycles (Assini-Meytin et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Circumstances of teen pregnancy and absent fatherhood can have negative consequences on Black youth as they emerge into their adulthood. Family instability at a young age can have biological impacts on a person's cognitive development which translates into how they approach stressful situations, deal with relationships as an adult, or view themselves. These children fail to reflect healthy emotional regulation, and rather, repress their emotions, and are more associated with risks of aggression and depression in the future. Adults face insecurity in how they view themselves and have complications with trusting others. These factors that are a product of father absence will lead to risky behaviors, and a struggle in maintaining friendships and healthy intimate partners. These cycles are hard to break because to do so, individuals must process their upbringings through psychiatry processes, such as mental health therapy. However, as research demonstrated, mental health has a cultural stigma in Black American communities and is often dismissed as mental health is perceived as a weakness or vulnerability. To move forward and break these generational curses, we must continue to promote and invest in mental health services in our low-income communities and schools. While one cannot control that their mother is a teen mom, or their father is absent, they can be given the resources to deal with their trauma and prevent these cycles from reoccurring and experience a health adulthood. Having a child is beautiful, however, we must support our children in protective upbringings, and that starts with supporting our child bearers. Interrupting these cycles requires investment and interventions that recognize the historical conditions that created modern day outcomes; doing so will allow Black youth to become healthy thriving adults.

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