10-1-1937

The Impact Of Urban Civilization Upon Negro Family Life

E. Franklin Frazier
Howard University

THE IMPACT OF URBAN CIVILIZATION
UPON NEGRO FAMILY LIFE*

E. Franklin Frazier
Howard University

*I*ntroduction. The urbanization of the Negro population during the present century has effected the most momentous change in the life of the Negro since his emancipation. During the first three decades of the century, nearly two and a half million Negroes moved from the rural South into the urban areas of the North and the South.[1] Public attention has been directed to the northward movements because they were dramatized by the mass migrations to northern industrial centers during the World War; whereas, the million or more Negroes who drifted into southern cities attracted little or no attention.[2] However, the shift from country to city in both the North and the South has been accompanied by profound changes in the Negro's behavior and general outlook on life. Because of the fudamental role of the family in social organization, the study of the Negro family offers the most fruitful approach to an understanding of these important changes in the social and cultural life of the Negro.

I. Although the great majority of Negroes who have migrated to urban areas have been simple peasant folk, the economic and cultural differences among the migrants as a whole have determined largely the kinds of accomodation which they have made to their new environment. Therefore, on the basis of a large body of documentary material we shall undertake first to describe four fairly distinct types of traditional patterns of family life found among the Negroes who make up communities in American cities.[3] There is first the maternal family pattern which is found in its purest and most primitive form in the rural South. By a maternal pattern of family organization we mean a family that is based primarily upon the affectional ties and common interests existing between the offspring and the mother who is the head of the family. As one would expect, many of these families owe their origin to illegitimacy, often involving several men. In such cases the man's or father's function generally ceases after impregnation; and if he continues to show interest in the woman and the offspring his contacts are casual and his contributions to the household are of the nature of gifts. But he has no authority in the family and the

---

* This article is an adaptation of a paper read before the annual meeting of the American Sociological Society at Chicago, Illinois, December 1936.

[1] Frank A. Ross, "Urbanization of the Negro," *Pub. Amer. Sociol. Soc.*, 26, 118.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 21. For literature on the movement of the Negro to northern cities one should consult Louise V. Kennedy, *The Negro Peasant Turns Cityward*, New York, 1930. This study lists books, articles, and editorials by 159 authors and organizations.

[3] A detailed discussion of these four types may be found in the author's "Traditions and Patterns of Negro Family Life in the United States," in *Race and Culture Contacts*, edited by E. B. Reuter, New York, 1934, pp. 191–207.

children may not even be aware of his relationship to them. This type of family pattern has existed since the days of slavery when the mother was the dominant and most stable element in the Negro family. Even after emancipation, which resulted in a general loosening of social bonds, the Negro mother continued in her accustomed role unless perchance the father acquired some interest in his family. The high rate of illegitimacy among southern Negroes represents family mores and folkways that have their roots in a natural maternal family organization that flourished during slavery.

The second type of family pattern shows many of the characteristics of the traditional family pattern of the American whites. In fact, the histories of the families of this type provide the source materials for studying the genesis of the traditional family type. It is possible to trace in the histories of some Negro families the actual process whereby the father's interest in the family became consolidated with the common interests of the various members of the family group of which he was the recognized head. In some cases traditions in these families go back to the time when the family was still in slavery. Where conditions were favorable to stable family life, the father's interest in his family was often bound up with his status among the slaves, as well as his trusted position in relation to the whites. The moralization of his behavior was further facilitated by incorporation into the household and church of his master or the Negro's own church. Under such circumstances the transition from serfdom to freedom did not result in a breakdown of family relations. In fact, when the father began working as a free man his authority was undisputed in his family. It has been upon such families that the development of the race as a whole in respect to character and culture has depended.

The third type of family pattern is sharply differentiated in regard to social heritage from the great mass of the Negro population. These families originated in the communities of free Negroes, usually of white and Negro and sometimes Indian ancestry, that existed in various parts of the country during pre-Civil War times. Many of these families not only achieved stability but also assumed an institutional character. The founders of these families inherited in some cases wealth from their white ancestors and generally showed the advantages of educational opportunities and white contacts. The families were as a rule patriarchal in organization with the female members playing roles similar to those of the slave-holding class in the ante-bellum South. Pride in white ancestry exercised considerable influence on their conception of themselves and their role in relation to the Negroes of unmixed blood and of slave origin. Many of the old established families in the North sprang from this group, families which were often forced to migrate before as well as after the Civil War in order to maintain their self-respect and secure advantages for their children.

We come finally to the fourth class of families who have been relatively isolated from the main currents of Negro life. These families originated in isolated communities of persons of Negro, white and Indian ancestry, and branches and remnants of these families may still be found in these communities, which are located in Alabama, North Carolina, Ohio, New Jersey, and New York. They are not a homogeneous group but are classified together because they show certain common characteristics. Usually they regard themselves as a distinct race from the Negroes and show in their behavior the clannishness of an isolated group. Their family organization is sternly patriarchal and is usually closely tied up with the religious organization of the community. Negro families that have their roots in such communities generally show in their behavior the influence of their peculiar cultural heritage.

II. Before considering the significance of these various patterns of family life in the accommodations which the Negro family has made to the urban environment, let us turn our attention to the sex behavior and familial life of the thousands of solitary men and women who have found their way into the towns and cities of the North and South. It is necessary to distinguish this group from the great body of black migrants, because their attitudes towards sex and family life have resulted from their mobility and emancipation from the most elementary forms of social control. Such a group of men and women have formed a part of the Negro population since the confusion and disorder following the Civil War. Although after emancipation the great mass of the Negro population settled down under a modified form of the plantation system, a fairly large number of Negro men and to a less extent Negro women continued to wander about in search of work and new experience. The size and character of this migratory element has been continually affected by the condition of southern agriculture and industry. On the other hand, when mass migrations were set in motion by demands of northern industries during and following the World War, many unattached men and women were among the migrants.

When the present economic crisis disrupted the economic life of the rural South, as well as that of industrial areas, the number of these unattached migrants was greatly augmented. A study by the Works Progress Administration showed that for the country as a whole, unattached Negro transients constituted 7 to 12 percent of the total during the nine-month period, August 1934 through April 1935.[4] In Chicago, during the first six months of 1934, 1,712 of the 10,962 unattached persons registered with the Cook County Bureau for Transients were Negro men and women. In the Harlem area of New York City, during the period from December 1931 to January 1936, there were 7,560 unattached Negro men registered

---

[4] *The Transient Unemployed.* Research Monograph III, Washington, 1935, p. 33.

with the Emergency Relief Bureau.[5] However, these figures include only those unattached Negro men and women who have sought relief; they leave out of account the thousands of roving men and homeless women who support themselves by both lawful and unlawful means.

Although we can not describe in detail the various types of sexual unions which these migratory men and women form in the course of their wanderings from city to city, we may safely draw some conclusions concerning the general character of their sex behavior and mating. In a sense, one may say that the "Blues," those distinctive creations of the black troubadours in our industrial civilization, epitomize the sex and family behavior of this class. In these songs the homeless, wandering, intermittent black workers sing of their disappointments and disillusionment in the city. An oft-repeated cause of this disillusionment is the uncertainty and instability of romantic love, if one might apply the term to the emotions of these migratory men and women. Yet, in a very real sense, one might say that in these songs one can discover the origin of romantic sentiments among the great masses of the Negro population. These songs record the spontaneous responses of strange men and women to each other in an unfamiliar environment. More important still, they reveal an awakening imagination that furnishes a sharp contrast to the unromantic matings of Negroes in the isolated peasant communities of the rural South.

It is not our purpose to give the impression that the "Blues" furnish historical data on the sex and familial behavior of this migratory group. Through life history documents we have been able to distill from these songs their true significance. We find that in many cases these men begin their migratory careers by going first to nearby sawmills or turpentine camps, in order to supplement the landlord's allowances to their families. In fact, if one goes to one of the "quarters" near a sawmill in the South, one may find these foot-loose men and women living out the stories of their loves and disappointments which have become fixed in the "Blues." On the whole, their sexual unions and matings are characterized by impulsive behavior. However, just as their natural impulses urge them to all forms of anti-social behavior, spontaneous sympathy and tender emotions create the temporary unions which these men and women often form. In this connection one should not overlook the fact that a recurring theme of these songs is the longing for the intimate association of kinfolk, or wife and children, who have been left behind. Although the temporary unions which these men and women form are often characterized by fighting and quarreling, they supply a need which these wanderers feel for warm and intimate human association.

If the sawmill closes or the man feels the "itch" to travel, or some "Black Ulysses" from the outside world lures him by stories of a more

---

[5] From the records of the Unattached and Transient Division.

exciting existence or a tale of fabulous wages in a nearby city, he takes to the road. In some cases, the girl may follow to the next city; but in the end she loses her temporary lover. During the course of their wanderings, these men may pick up lonely Negro women in domestic service who gratify their sexual longings and provide them with temporary lodging and food. While these men are acquiring sophistication in the ways of the city, they are becoming thoroughly individuated men. By the time they reach Chicago, Detroit, or New York, they have learned how to survive without labor. Some of them have acquired the art of exploiting women for their support. Girls who have run away from their homes in the South and sought adventure in these large cities often become, in spite of their callousness and boasted toughness, the tools of these men. However, these same women sometimes during their sentimental reflections disclose a hidden longing for the security and affection of their families, or betray an abiding attachment to an illegitimate child that they have left with a parent or relative during their wanderings.

III. From this migratory group of men and women, we turn now to the great mass of the Negro migrants who have come to the city in family groups or in remnants of family groups. This movement was at its peak during the World War when not only whole families but entire communities picked up their meagre possessions and joined the flight from the semifeudal conditions of the South to the modern industrial centers of the North. One can get some notion of the volume of the tide of black humanity that overwhelmed the comparatively small Negro communities in northern cities by considering the increases in the Negro population of the four principal cities to which these migrants were attracted. Between 1910 and 1920, the Negro population of Detroit increased 611.3 percent; that of Chicago 148.2 percent; that of the Borough of Manhattan in New York City 80.3 percent; and that of Philadelphia 58.9 percent. The immediate effect of the inundation of Negro communities in northern cities was conflict with the white population in contiguous areas. However, the subsequent expansion of the Negro communities proceeded in accordance with the natural growth of these cities.

What especially interests us in regard to the expansion of these Negro communities is that, through selection, various elements of the population have become segregated, thus causing the spatial organization of these communities to reflect their economic and cultural organization. In the case of Chicago, it was possible to divide the Negro community into seven zones of about a mile in length indicating its southward expansion along and parallel to one of the arterial highways radiating from the center of the city.[6] The selection which had taken place during the expansion of

---

[6] See the author's *The Negro Family in Chicago*, Chicago, 1932, chap. 6, for detailed information on the character of these zones as well as the method used in defining them.

the Negro population was indicated by the decline in the percentage of southern-born Negroes and illiteracy, the decrease in the proportion of persons engaged in unskilled labor and domestic service and the percentage of women employed, and a corresponding increase in the percentage of mulattoes in the population and of persons in professional and public service in the successive zones. A similar selection was found in the Harlem Negro community in New York City. However, whereas the Chicago Negro community in its expansion has cut across the concentric zones of the larger community and shows the impress of the larger community, the Harlem Negro community has expanded radially from the area where Negroes first settled and has assumed the same pattern of zones as a self-contained city.[7]

When the Negro family is studied in relation to the economic and cultural organization of these communities, we are able to obtain a rough measure, at least, of the Negro's success in the struggle to support himself or family and attain a normal family life. Therefore, let us consider first the question of family dependency. From the records of the United Charities it appears that under normal conditions between eight and nine percent of the families in the poorer areas of Chicago are dependent upon charity. However, the rate of family dependency showed a progressive decline in the successive zones marking the expansion of the community. In the seventh zone only one percent of the families were dependent.[8] Although we do not possess comparable data for Harlem, we know that prior to the crash in 1929 between 25 and 30 percent of the "under care" families handled by the Charity Organization Society in an area in New York City including a part of Harlem were Negro cases. The present economic crisis has tended to emphasize the precarious economic situation of a large percentage of Negro families in our cities. According to the 1933 report of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, as high as 85 percent of the Negro families in some cities were receiving relief. The percentage of Negro families receiving relief was highest in such highly industrialized areas as Toledo, Akron, and Pittsburgh, where large numbers of Negroes are employed in unskilled labor; the percentage in Chicago and New York was around 46 percent and 30 percent respectively.

In the case of the Harlem community, we are able to study the incidence of relief in relation to the spatial organization of the Negro area. During the first week of September 1935, there were 24,292 Negro families on Home Relief, this being 43.2 percent of the 56,137 Negro families in this area. However, the incidence of relief varied considerably in the zones marking the outward expansion of the community from its center. The percentage of families receiving relief declined rapidly from 70.9 percent

---

[7] See the author's article, "Negro Harlem: An Ecological Study," *Amer. Jour. Sociol.*, July 1937.

[8] See *The Negro Family in Chicago*, pp. 150 ff.

in the central zone to 28.4 percent in the outermost zone. This is of special interest because, although in some areas of the peripheral zone were found some of the poorest Negro families in the entire community, the incidence in these areas did not vary greatly from the average for the zone as a whole. The only explanation that occurs to us is that the family groups that tended to be segregated in the peripheral zones were better able to meet collectively the economic crisis than the single, unattached, separated and widowed men and women who tended to congregate in the center of the community. This selection was shown in the marital status of the population in the various zones. The percentage of single men declined in the successive zones outward from 42.6 to 31.1 percent and that of single women from 30.9 to 23.5 percent. On the other hand, the proportion of men and women married increased from about 50 percent each to 64 percent for the men and to 60 percent for the women.[9] A similar tendency was discovered in the case of the Negro community in Chicago.[10]

The selection and segregation of the population with reference to marital status coincides with other processes of organization and disorganization of Negro family life in the city. In Chicago, home ownership was closely correlated with family stability, whereas, in Harlem, with its apartments and multiple dwellings, it was not significant. Similarly, the relationship between family organization and disorganization and the spatial organization of the Negro community was more evident in Chicago with its relatively simple pattern than in Harlem with its more complex pattern. For example, the desertion and non-support rates declined regularly from two and a half percent of the total families in the poorer zone near the Chicago loop to less than one half of one percent in the outermost zone. Although a similar tendency in regard to desertions was discernible in the Harlem Negro community, the various zones did not show the same degree of cultural homogeneity as the Chicago zones. Thus, in Chicago the delinquency rate declined from 42.8 percent in the zone of considerable family and community disorganization near the center of the city to 1.4 percent in the outermost zone of stable family life and home ownership. However, in Harlem, no such decline in the successive zones of population expansion was discernible in regard to juvenile delinquency. It would require a more intimate study of the character and culture of the various zones in order to determine the relationship between community factors and juvenile delinquency. Nevertheless, it is apparent that as a result of competition, various elements of the Negro population in both cities are selected and segregated in a way which enables the student to get some measure of the processes of organization and disorganization.

This is seen most clearly in regard to the question of the survival of the

---

[9] See "Negro Harlem: An Ecological Study," *loc. cit.*
[10] See *The Negro Family in Chicago*, chap. 7.

Negro in the city. The low fertility of Negro women in cities has been shown in a number of studies. According to Thompson and Whelpton, Negroes in large cities, including Chicago and New York, "were not maintaining their numbers on a permanent basis in either 1920 or 1928."[11] Lately, Clyde Kiser has found that the fertility of Negro women in a health area in New York was lower than that of white women of similar and higher occupational status in several urban communities.[12] However, if we study the fertility of Negro women in relation to the organization of the Negro community, some important facts are revealed. For example, in Chicago in 1920, the highest ratio of children under five to women of child-bearing age, i.e., 15 to 44, was found in the two peripheral zones, or the areas of stable family life and home ownership. The ratio was higher in these zones than in the zones where the poorer migrant families settled and almost twice as high as the ratio in the bright light area with its cabarets, saloons, and houses of prostitution.[13]

Harlem offers even more striking evidence of the influence of selective factors on the survival of the Negro in the city. In 1920, the ratio of children under 5 to 1,000 women 20 to 44 years of age increased in the successive zones outward from the center of the community from 109 in the first to 274 in the fifth, with a slight variation in the fourth. However, in 1930, the ratio of children increased regularly from 115 in the first to 462 in the outermost zone. This latter figure is about the same as the ratio in towns with from 2,500 to 10,000 population. Differential survival rates were revealed also in the ratio of deaths to births in 1930 in the various zones. In the central zone, the population was dying out, there being 112 deaths to each 100 births. However, the ratio of deaths to births declined in the successive zones until it reached less than 50 to 100 in the areas near the periphery of the community. Looking at the situation from the standpoint of births alone, we find that in 1930 there was one child born to each 25 women, 20 to 44 years of age, in the central zone. From this zone outward, the number of women of child-bearing age per child born declined regularly until it reached eight in the outermost zone. Thus the survival of the Negro in the city seems to be influenced by the same selective factors which determine the spatial organization and social structure of the Negro community.

Let us return now to the four traditional patterns of family life described above and consider them in relation to the selective process at work in these communities. The first or maternal type of family offers little resistance to the disintegrating forces in the urban environment. Because of their poverty, these families are forced to seek homes in the poorer sections of the Negro community. Moreover, since these families are supported

---

[11] Warren S. Thompson and P. K. Whelpton, *Population Trends in the United States*, New York, 1933, p. 280.

[12] Clyde V. Kiser, "Fertility of Harlem Negroes," The Milbank Memorial Fund *Quarterly*, 13, July, 1935, 273–285.

[13] See *The Negro Family in Chicago*, pp. 136–144.

solely by the mother who is generally employed in domestic service or at unskilled labor, they easily slip into the ranks of those dependent upon charity. The children suffer not only from the lack of parental control but are subjected to the vicious environment of disorganized areas. Consequently, many of the boys become members of delinquent gangs, while the girls are guilty of sex delinquency, which often leads to unmarried motherhood.

In these same areas may be found the poorer families of the paternal type. In these families, as well as those of the maternal type, a large percentage of the mothers are forced to be wage earners. Whether they maintain their paternal organization depends upon a number of factors, including the vitality of family traditions, the security and regularity of employment of the father, the development of common interests, and the degree to which these families are integrated into the institutions of the Negro community. But, it often happens that the father's interest in his family rests upon some immediate interest, or is based upon mere sympathy and habit. Under such circumstances, if the father loses his job or if he develops new interests in the urban environment that are antagonistic to the common interests of his family, he may easily join the ranks of the large number of Negro deserters. In this connection, it should be pointed out that the families inhabiting these blighted areas are free from the censure of public opinion, as well as other types of communal control. On the other hand, those families that succeed in maintaining a community of interest or develop new ambitions for their children generally move, if their economic resources permit, towards the periphery of the Negro community. Their movement at first may be just beyond the area of extreme deterioration and poverty.

It may take another generation for these families to reach the periphery of the Negro community where one finds the families of the third type— those having a background of several generations of stable family life and firmly rooted traditions. It was old mulatto families of the third type who sometimes fled before the onrush of the uncouth Negroes from the South to areas beyond the borders of the Negro community. But as a rule they sought the periphery of the Negro community as is shown in the case of the seventh zone in Chicago, where half of the inhabitants were mulattoes.[14] Then, too, sometimes these old established families have isolated themselves and have regarded with mixed feelings of contempt and envy the rise of the ambitious elements in the lower and, on the whole, darker elements in the Negro population. But, just as in the rigorous competitive life of the northern city, the poor and illiterate Negroes with no other resources but their folk culture are ground down by disease, vice, and poverty, those possessing intelligence and skill and a fund of family traditions find a chance to rise beyond the caste restrictions of the South. Thus, there has

---

[14] See *The Negro Family in Chicago*, pp. 101–105.

come into existence in these cities a fairly large middle-class element comprised of the more ambitious elements of the second type of families and representatives of the third type with a few descendants of the fourth type of families. Their pattern of family life approaches that of the white middle class. It is the emergence of this class which accounts largely for those orderly and stable areas on the periphery of the Negro communities in our cities. In between such areas and the areas of extreme deterioration where family disorganization is highest, there are areas of a mixed character in which the more stable and better paid industrial workers find homes.

In view of the process described here, it is not surprising that in the area occupied by the middle-class families, there may be on the average more children, as for example in Chicago, than in the areas of extreme poverty and family disorganization. In the case of the Harlem community which resembles in its spatial organization a self-contained city, relatively large family groups of working class as well as middle class status tend to become segregated on the periphery, though they occupy different areas. In the center of the Harlem community, which is essentially a non-family area, one may find the emancipated from all classes and elements.

IV. Our discussion points to a number of conclusions which may be stated briefly as follows. First, it seems inevitable that, as long as the bankrupt and semifeudal agricultural system in the South continues to throw off men and women who lose the restraints imposed by a simple folk culture, there will be a class of roving Negroes who will live a lawless sex and quasi-family life. Secondly, the great mass of migrants who, as a rule, manage to preserve remnants of their family organization must face in the competitive life of the city a severe struggle for survival and, at the same time, be subjected to the disintegrating forces in the urban environment. The fate and fortunes of these families will depend upon both their economic and their cultural resources. Many of the poorer families that are held together solely by the affectional ties between mother and children, will be ground down by poverty and the children will be scattered and are likely to become delinquent. Those families in which the father's interest rests upon no firmer basis than some passing attachment, or mere sympathy and habit, may suffer a similar fate. But, if such families succeed in becoming integrated into the institutional life of the community and have sufficient income to avoid dependence upon charity, they may achieve a fair degree of stabilization. On the other hand, the economically better situated families, in which the father's interest is supported by tradition and tied up with the common interests of the family, may resist the disintegrating effects of the city and some of the children will enter the middle class. The traditions of these families will become merged with the traditions of mulatto families, many of free origin, who once formed an upper social class. The economic and cultural organization of the Negro community which emerges as the result of competition indicates the selective influence of the urban environment on these various family heritages.