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November 20, 2002

Family Secrets

Airing the "family's" dirty laundry in public can qualify one for less-than-flattering descriptions. That's particularly applicable to a black person, and even more so when he questions the civil rights gospel that the problems black people encounter are rooted in racial discrimination and a legacy of slavery.

To argue that most of the problems black people confront today have little or nothing to do with racial discrimination risks being labeled everything but a child of God, not to mention accusations of having "sold out" and "letting white people off the hook." One need not deny the existence of racial discrimination to ask the policy-relevant question: How much of what we see can be explained by discrimination?

The black illegitimacy rate is close to 70 percent. Less than 40 percent of black children live in two-parent families. This produces devastating socioeconomic consequences, but is it caused by racial discrimination? Or, might it be a legacy of slavery? In the early 1900s, black illegitimacy was a tiny fraction of today's rate. Roughly 75 percent, and in New York City 85 percent, of black children lived in two-parent households. The fact of lower illegitimacy and more intact families, at a time when blacks were much closer to slavery and faced greater discrimination, suggests that today's unprecedented illegitimacy and weak family structure has nothing to do with discrimination and slavery. It's explained better by promiscuity and irresponsibility, and as such it's not a civil rights problem.

To point out that black people are the primary victims of violent crimes is OK. Some of the statistics are staggering. FBI reports on arrest data show that blacks committed half of all homicides, nearly half of rapes, 59 percent of robberies and 38 percent of aggravated assaults. Suggestions about causes and solutions can get you into trouble.

It's clear sailing if you argue that the high crime rate is caused by poverty and discrimination, and the way to get rid of crime is to eliminate these root causes. But there's a problem with that theory. It doesn't explain why black communities were far safer in earlier times, such as in the '20s, '30s and '40s, at a time of far greater poverty and discrimination, and fewer opportunities. Crime imposes

devastating economic and personal costs on many black neighborhoods, but it's not a civil rights problem. The high crime rate represents political choices made by black politicians, civil rights organizations and many black citizens to tolerate criminals.

Another family secret is that black academic achievement is a national disgrace. Many youngsters who manage to complete high school do so not being able to perform at the eighth- and ninth-grade levels. Standards that others have to meet for employment or college admittance which many blacks cannot meet are labeled racist. Demands are made to lower standards using face-saving euphemisms such as affirmative action, diversity and multiculturalism.

The standard civil rights vision of the solution to these problems for blacks is to vote more Democrats into federal, state and local offices, and to elect more blacks to city mayorships and city councils. That theory suggests that cities run by Democrats and black politicians must be the very cities where illegitimacy and violent crimes are the lowest and black academic achievement is the highest -- cities such as Washington, D.C., Detroit, Philadelphia, Newark and East St. Louis. In these cities, blacks hold mayorships and have representation on city councils. That's a nice theory, but the result is the exact opposite.

In medicine, misdiagnosis leading to mistreatment and further injury can lead to malpractice suits. Unfortunately, in politics, misdiagnosis, mistreatment and further injury lead to re-election.

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