

Federal Programs Have Hurt, Not Helped Poor Blacks: Author

COLUMBUS, Ohio -- The federal government's programs to help poor blacks have not only failed -- they have left many black families worse off than before.

The liberal social policies introduced in the 1960s, although well-intentioned, nearly destroyed traditional sources of help for Black families, such as mutual aid networks, said K. Sue Jewell, author of "Survival of the Black Family: The Institutional Impact of U.S. Social Policy."

Jewell argues in her book that the government replaced effective black institutions with government programs that inadvertently fostered dependence on government. They also helped break apart black two-parent families, she said. And while liberal social policy has not been as successful as many believe, conservative policy has fared no better.

"The government should have tried to enhance black institutions, but instead, it tried to replace them," said Jewell, a sociologist and assistant professor of Black Studies at Ohio State University.

"The tragedy is that this contributed to the destruction of black two-families."

Before the anti-poverty and welfare programs of the 1960s, black families were remarkably stable, Jewell said. In 1960, only one in five black families (22 percent) was headed by a woman. By 1980, two decades after the introduction of liberal social policy, nearly half (46 percent) of the black families were headed by women.

What caused this change? Jewell said that prior to the 1960s, there were informal groups that helped black families. "Mutual-aid networks" were groups of families that provided food, shelter, clothing and even parenting advice for their members. The black church was another institution that played an important role in helping black families.

These institutions "emphasized the importance of sharing and caring among families," Jewell said. "In fact, keeping black two-parent families intact was the primary objective of these self-help networks."

Through its social welfare programs, the federal government assumed the task of helping the economically disadvantaged that was once the role of the black church and the mutual aid networks, Jewell said. But the government has demonstrated little interest in protecting the structure and functions of the black family.

Some programs were unintentionally anti-family. Many welfare programs, for example, only provided benefits if the husband was absent, or focused benefits on women and children.

"If a black father is unable to provide for his family financially, he is seen as a liability and not an asset by social service agencies," Jewell said. "Regardless of why a black man is unemployed, he's often perceived as irresponsible or lazy."

Liberal social policy also was a factor in sparking a fundamental change in black culture and values, according to Jewell's book.

A major goal of liberal policy was to assimilate Blacks into white culture. As a result, blacks left behind their traditional values of "cooperative collectivism" and embraced the mainstream white values of "competitive individualism," Jewell said.

Cooperative collectivism emphasized the importance of helping each other, and was the underlying value behind mutual aid networks. But under competitive individualism, acquiring wealth and material goods became a more important concern.

"Blacks accepted American values that define self-worth in terms of economic well-being and the acquisition of material goods," Jewell said. "But blacks don't have the opportunities to fulfill these goals. They haven't been able to acquire the material symbols of success that go along with their new value system."

Liberal social policies raised the expectations of blacks, Jewell said. Prior to the 1960s, blacks didn't expect to succeed at the same rate of whites in America.

"After the civil rights movement, blacks were told there were no more barriers to their

success -- but in fact many of the barriers are still there," she said.

Blacks are now a part of companies and institutions that once excluded them, but they are rarely in decision-making positions.

"There's been an illusion of progress," she said.

Although the liberal social policies have not helped blacks as much as many believe, Jewell said she is not arguing for their elimination.

Many programs, such as educational grants and loans and those that focus on health and medical care, have been successful.

Her critique of liberal social

policies should also not be seen as an endorsement of the more conservative social policies of the Reagan administration, Jewell said. These policies "have

also hurt the structure of black families by increasing homelessness," she said.

Effective policies to help blacks should "build on the

strengths of black institutions and families" instead of trying to replace them, according to Jewell.

"It is difficult to think of a so-

cial policy that can improve the status of black families that doesn't use the existing resources in the Black community," she said.



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