

# Still Spiraling Down: The State of America 30 Years after the Publication of 'Defining Deviancy Down'

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Daniel Patrick Moynihan's essay, "Defining Deviancy Down," was published in the 1993-1994 winter edition of *The American Scholar*.<sup>1</sup>

It was scholarly, accurate, prescient, courageous, politically incorrect, and subsequently ignored by policy makers, "social justice" activists, media, the intelligentsia, and the many organizations that depend on socioeconomic problems remaining unsolved.

Incalculable human misery and social upheaval have resulted from the essay being ignored.

Moynihan was a social scientist at the U.S. Department of Labor and became an assistant secretary of the department under President Lyndon Johnson, before going on to become a U.S. Senator (D, N.Y.). Considering how far left the Democrat Party has moved, he probably would be seen as a right winger today.

He is most remembered for his controversial paper of 1965, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action."<sup>2</sup> He warned of the terrible socioeconomic consequences of the rise in single-parent families in Black communities and advocated for public policies that would stop the trend instead of accelerating it.

He is less remembered for a book that he coauthored with Nathan Glazer, a book that was first published in 1963 and updated and republished in 1970: *Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*.<sup>3</sup> As the book made clear, all of these groups were at one time seen as disadvantaged minorities, and, as I have written many times, my ethnic/racial group of Italians was seen as non-White.

Now, through some sort of social and epidermal alchemy, Italians are seen as not only White but also racist, privileged, and responsible for colonialism and slavery. To paraphrase Santayana, those who don't know history make fools out of themselves with such new and ignorant stereotypes—and some of the fools become highly paid directors of "diversity and inclusion."

In the introduction of the second edition of *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Moynihan wrote a prescient statement that especially resonates today: "In 1969, we seem to be moving to a new set of categories, black and white, and that is ominous. On the horizon stand the fantastic categories of the 'Third World,' in which all the colors, Black, Brown, Yellow, and Red . . . are the favored terms for Negro, Mexican-American and Puerto Rican, Chinese and Japanese, and American Indian."<sup>4</sup>

He referred to this as "a biologically and humanly monstrous naming," a naming that was "being used to divide the nation into the oppressed and the oppressing Whites." He wrote these prescient words 55 years ago.

## Defining Deviancy Down

What Moynihan meant by the phrase "defining deviancy down" in his essay of 30 years ago, was that Americans have become accustomed to alarming levels of crime and destructive behavior, due to redefining what is normal. Today, we are even more accustomed to social pathologies.

Take homelessness. The word "homeless" has been replaced with the euphemism "unsheltered," as if the use of a supposedly kinder and gentler word will somehow reduce the staggering number of human beings living and dying on the street like animals in American cities.

Moynihan warned then about increasing homelessness. He traced much of the problem to a movement that began in the early 1960s to deinstitutionalize people with mental disorders; that is, to release them from mental hospitals. In place of mental hospitals, the National Institute of Mental Health recommended the building of 2,000 community-based mental health centers, or one per 100,000 population. President John F. Kennedy endorsed the idea and signed the Community Mental Health Centers Act on October 31, 1963. He gave the signing pen to Moynihan.<sup>5</sup>

The goal was never reached, however. Construction funds were made available for only 482 of the centers, not the 2,000 that had been recommended. Soon after, the program would be forgotten and left unfunded while mental hospitals continued to be emptied. For example, in 1955, in New York State, there were 93,314 adult residents of mental hospitals; but by 1992, there were only 11,363.

Moynihan wrote:

Professor Fred Siegel of Cooper Union observes: "In the great wave of moral deregulation that began in the mid-1960s, the poor and the insane were freed from the fetters of middle-class mores." They might henceforth sleep in doorways as often as they chose. The problem of the homeless appeared characteristically defined as persons who lacked "affordable housing."

Another very serious social problem had become normalized and unaddressed when Moynihan wrote "Defining Deviancy Down," namely, the high percentage of broken homes and single-parent households. He had predicted the problem 29 years earlier in "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action."<sup>2</sup> In the intervening years, the problem had metastasized in not only Black families but also to White families, although to a much lesser degree in White families.

The evidence is overwhelming that behavioral issues, poor grades, medical problems, and crime have increased in lockstep with the increase in single-parent families, especially fatherless ones.

The above statement needs to be modified, in order to avoid being pilloried as insensitive and judgmental. Many children who grow up without two parents in the house do just fine in life, and many successful people have come from single-parent families, including Presidents of the U.S. Moreover, being a single parent does not warrant the wearing of a scarlet letter or being committed to a home for unwed mothers, as was the case long ago. Nor is it good for a parent or a child for a parent to stay in an abusive relationship.

While the above caveats are true, it's also true that American society is reaping the destructive effects of decades of cultural rot, in which time-tested norms and traditions regarding marriage and child-rearing have been discarded for avant-garde notions of "self-fulfillment" and "self-actualization." This dramatic shift has been enabled by government policies, reinforced by pop culture, and blessed by the intelligentsia, who denigrate monogamy and marriage as bourgeois artifacts while embracing those artifacts in their own lives.

Glaring contradictions now abound. Society rightly tries to stop children from smoking or riding a bicycle without a helmet, but at the same time tolerates children being caught in the crossfire between gangs of fatherless thugs in inner cities, children being

abused by the Lotharios who take turns shacking up with Mom, toddlers being hospitalized for a drug overdose after swallowing Mom's narcotics, babies being born with narcotics in their system, and students being poorly educated in schools overrun with disciplinary problems and an attitude that learning is for sissies or is a "White" thing.

Social scientists deal with averages, normal distributions, standard deviations, correlation coefficients, and cause and effect. They focus on society or communities at large, not on individual cases or exceptions. As such, they can appear heartless.

Of course, individuals suffer when social pathologies spread across a community. As Moynihan wrote:

From the wild Irish slums of the nineteenth-century Eastern seaboard to the riot-torn suburbs of Los Angeles, there is one unmistakable lesson in American history: a community that allows a large number of young men to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, never acquiring any set of rational expectations about the future—that community asks for and gets chaos. Crime, violence, unrest, unrestrained lashing out at the whole social structure—that is not only to be expected, it is very near to inevitable.<sup>2</sup>

Moynihan also mentioned studies by the Progressive Policy Institute, showing that the relationship between single-parent households and crime is much stronger than the relationship between race or poverty and crime.

Then there are the effects on learning. The higher the incidence of single-parent households in a community or school district, the lower the academic results and the higher the disciplinary problems. Moynihan referenced a 1992 study, "America's Smallest School: The Family." The study made the case that a parent-pupil ratio is a better predictor than other ratios of how students in a given school will perform academically. It's a better predictor than the ratio of teachers to students or the ratio of school spending to students.

This would explain why certain Asian nationalities have low crime and high academic results in spite of being poor: They have a low percentage of one-parent families—just as Whites and Blacks used to have.

The most troubling aspect of all this to Moynihan was the acceptance by government and society that the social pathologies were normal and not a calamity. The attitude seemed to be, in his time and today, that nothing can be done about the root problem of single-parent families. Even more damning, there are huge numbers of bureaucrats, nonprofit organizations, for-profit businesses, school districts, counselors, teacher unions, and many others whose funding, revenue, or livelihood depend on the problem not being solved.

I'll close below with my own thoughts on what has been wrought by the failure to address the root problem.

### Failing to Address the Root Problem

You probably know the story of how cars used to be made in America until the Japanese gave the auto industry a rude awakening. Quality problems were ignored throughout the manufacturing and assembly processes. They were passed unfixed from one operation to the next, accumulating in numbers along the way and generating rework and waste, until the final product, a finished car, was shipped with defects to dealers—where some of the defects were fixed—and then sold with the remaining defects to customers.

Tragically and immorally, we're doing something similar with human beings.

Tens of millions of Whites, Latinos, and others also suffer from the root problem of widespread single parenthood, but the problem is the most serious with Blacks, and Blacks in particular suffer from paternalism and the racism of low expectations.

The process begins with the fallacy that the high percentage of Black single-parent families is due almost entirely to the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow. That fallacy has been debunked by Thomas Sowell and others with statistics showing that the percentage of single parenting was much lower prior to the advent of the War on Poverty in the sixties.<sup>6</sup>

As mentioned above, a high crime rate is one of the downstream problems caused by a high percentage of single-parent families. High crime in turn has caused high arrest rates for Blacks, which in turn has generated claims of racism, which in turn have led to demands to defund the police and to cut back on prosecutions, which in turn, in a vicious circle, have increased the crime rate in Black communities. The high crime rate also has resulted in businesses, including supermarkets, vacating crime-ridden communities, thus leaving so-called food deserts behind and adding to the problem of obesity and diabetes as residents consume junk food from fast-food outlets and convenience stores.

Learning and behavioral problems in schools are other downstream problems emanating from a high percentage of single-parent families. As with crime, the behavioral problems lead to claims that Black students are being disciplined more than other races because of racism, which in turn leads to backing off on discipline, which in turn leads to an increase in misbehavior, classroom disruptions, or worse.

Poor grades are also blamed on racism, which in turn leads to grade inflation and such demands as eliminating algebra in grade school for kids who do well in math, because this supposedly discriminates against Blacks. A similar lowering of standards occurs in high school, and then in admissions to college, and then, under the doctrines of "diversity, equity and inclusion," in hiring for jobs in government and industry.

The result is that Blacks end up in positions for which they are not qualified, while very well-qualified Blacks have to overcome an unwarranted stigma that they got their job through affirmative action and not merit.

At the same time, because American K-12 students rank poorly on international tests in math and reading, there is an incessant demand for increased K-12 spending, smaller class sizes, the latest technology in the classroom, and the pedagogical fad of the day. There is not a similar demand to do something about the root problem.

In fact, the problem hasn't even come up in the current presidential race.

And that's why American society is still spiraling down.

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