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THE OTHER AMERICA: AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN LIVING IN POVERTY

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Abstract: The economic injustice of poverty continues to influence the discrimination and inequality of women rights across the nation, specifically African American women. The United States Census Bureau reports the current poverty rate of America is 15.9 percent. Of that percentage, the top ten states with the highest poverty rate included seven southern states. According to the 2013 American Community Survey, 48,810,868 people live below the current economic indicator of poverty; hence the need to confront the prejudices that plague the African American woman demographic. According to a study published in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* about African American mothers in poverty deep Chicago neighborhoods, "... households headed by never-married mothers experience more persistent poverty and longer spells of welfare receipt than do other types of mother-only households" (Franklin, Smith, McMiller, 1995). Even though the study is decades old, today's U.S. Census report, the federal minimum wage and U.S. poverty rate all support those findings. At this time, the federal minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour. Before taxes and other deductions, an African American woman head of household can earn \$217.50 for a 30-hour work-week or \$11,310 annually working for the federal minimum wage. This paper will look at the Top 10 States with the highest poverty rates as reported in the U.S. Census and analyze how African American women are living in poverty in America. More specifically, it will also review the economic conditions of African American women who reportedly struggle financially to sustain income in order to live in what is considered by the United States Census Bureau "sufficient" economic conditions.

Keywords: African American women; poverty; America; inequality; wages; women; poverty rate; minimum wage

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The economic injustice of poverty continues to influence the discrimination and inequality of women's rights across the nation, specifically African American women. The United States Census Bureau reports the current poverty rate of America is 15.9 percent. Of that percentage, the Top Ten States with the highest poverty rates included seven southern states. According to the 2013 American Community Survey, 48,810,868 people lived below the current economic indicator of poverty; hence the need to confront the prejudices that plague the African American woman demographic.

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those findings. At this time, the federal minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour. Before taxes and other deductions, an African American woman head of household can earn \$217.50 for a 30-hour work-week or \$11,310 annually working for the federal minimum wage.

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Economic Injustice

Concerns about discrimination in labor markets have long motivated economists to compare labor market outcomes—wages in particular—between members of different groups (McHenry & McInerney, 2014). More recently, however, several studies document higher wages among black women—relative to white—with similar characteristics (McHenry, & McInerney, 2014). First, in the previous literature, the most consistent evidence of a black wage premium is among highly educated women (Fisher & Houseworth, 2012; Black et al., 2008). We estimate wage gaps separately by education level and find no evidence of black wage premiums, even among highly educated women (McHenry & McInerney, 2014).

To the extent that occupational sorting differs by race due to discrimination against black women, wage gaps conditional on occupation understate discrimination against black women (Blau & Ferber, 1987). Equivalently, black women’s conditional wages should be high relative to white women’s wages, but our estimates that control for occupation again show little significant difference between black and white women’s conditional wages (McHenry & McInerney, 2014). Many times black women and their white colleagues do the same job however the pay is still unequal. Because, on average, white women have more years of work experience than black women, we expect blacks will appear to perform even better, relative to whites, when we control actual labor market experience (McHenry & McInerney, 2014). Failing to account for selection out of work would result in blacks appearing to perform better than whites if black women with low potential wages are more likely to select out of work than white women and if white women with high potential wages choose not to work more frequently than black women. (McHenry & McInerney, 2014).

Among K-12 teachers, Black females earn 7% more than White females at the median (Fisher & Houseworth, 2012). Differences in opportunities for education and marriage between White and Black women may explain why highly educated Black females earn on par with highly educated White females (Fisher & Houseworth, 2012). Blacks in married couple families also are more likely to be middle-class, and hence are less likely to live in ghettos, more likely to be well

educated, and more likely to take advantage of affirmative action programs. Why then are they more than twice as likely as married couple whites to be poor? (Shulman, 1990). More recent research continues to show that blacks are still more likely to live below the poverty level as opposed to whites.

Poverty in America

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), poverty is determined by the income before taxes for a family of two adults and two children but does not include capital gains or noncash benefits such as food stamps, Medicaid or public housing. The Top Ten States with the highest Poverty rates include:

- Mississippi
- Arkansas
- Kentucky
- Louisiana
- New Mexico
- West Virginia
- Oklahoma
- Texas
- Alabama
- South Carolina

According to the 2014 U.S. Census Figures, there were 318,857,056 people living in the U.S. The population's racial breakdown includes (State Rankings Statistical Abstract of the United States: Persons Below Poverty Level, 2008):

- | | |
|--|-------|
| • White | 62.6% |
| • Hispanic/Latino | 17.1% |
| • Black/African American | 13.2% |
| • Asian | 5.3% |
| • Two or more races | 2.4% |
| • American Indian & Alaskan Native | 1.2% |
| • Native Hawaiian & Other Pacific Islander | 0.2% |

Overall, 50.8 percent of the total population is female (USA QuickFacts). The median annual earnings of females 15 or older who worked year-round and full time in 2013 was \$39,157. The median annual earnings of males who worked year-round and full time were \$50,033. This essentially means that for every dollar a male makes, a woman probably will make about 78 cents. Meanwhile, the annual median income for African American households was \$34,598 while the nation's median household income was \$51,939.

Poverty in the African American Community

According to the U.S. Census Population Survey for 2012 and 2013, the latest figures available, 15% of the people surveyed were living below the poverty level in 2012 and it dropped to 14.5% in 2013. For the same years, the number of females living in poverty in the U.S. dropped from 16.3% to 15.8% while the number of males living in poverty dropped from 13.6% to 13%. In all age groups, females have a higher percentage who are living in poverty, according to the "Poverty Rates by Age and Sex: 2013." The age groups are divided into three categories: 65 and older, 18-64 and under 18. Almost as many males (19.8%) under age 18 are living in poverty as females (20%). The poverty gap widens the older the people are. About 11.8% of males 18-64 years old live in poverty and 15.3% females. Males 65 years old and older have a 6.8% poverty rate and females have an 11.6% rate (U.S. Census Facts). When the number of people living below poverty was divided by race for those years, all people but Blacks saw decreases in the numbers. As shown in the bullets below in the People in Poverty by Selected Characteristics (2012 and 2013) chart, we see the evidence of this fact.

	<u>2012</u>	<u>2013</u>
• White	9.7%	9.6%
• Black	27.2%	27.2%
• Asian	11.7%	10.5%
• Hispanic	25.6%	23.5%

Meanwhile, poverty has not been an anomaly for African Americans. In 1959, more than half of all African American families (54.9%) and 70 percent of African American families headed by single females, were living in poverty. Those numbers took their biggest drops in 2000 when 38.6% of all African American families and 21.2% of African American families headed by single females were in poverty. Since then the poverty rates have slowly increased. People living below poverty in the U.S. showed a small decrease from 15% in 2012 to 14.5% in 2013. Reportedly, this was the first decrease in the poverty rate since 2006. When the surveyed population was divided into regions, the South consistently had the highest percentage of people living below poverty but all regions showed a decrease in the overall percentage. (These statistics would provide a basis for a future study about people living in and below poverty in America.) In fact, according to the census table on "People in Poverty," the poverty rate decreased slightly from 2012 to 2013.

	<u>2012</u>	<u>2013</u>
• West	15.1%	14.7%
• Northeast	13.6%	12.7%
• South	16.5%	16.1%
• Midwest	13.3%	12.9%

The latest available U.S. Census statistics about “Black Persons By Poverty Status By State” are from 1999. Though the calculations are almost two decades old, they are revealing about the poverty pockets in the United States. According to the table, the highest percentage of Blacks living in poverty was in the Midwest with 26%. The South was second with 25.5%, the Northeast was next with 23.7% and the West in last place with 21.5%.

- 52% of Black population = Female
- 48% of Black population = Male
- Average age of Black females = 35 years old
- Average age of All females = 39 years old

Black women are the head of 29% of all Black households, which is more than twice the rate of all women at 13%. Only 33% of Black women who gave birth were married, which is almost the opposite for all women at 64%. Forty-eight percent of Black women have never been married while 30% of all women in America have never been married.

Meanwhile, the relationship of race and socioeconomic status (SES) to health disparities and cumulative health disadvantages over the life course has been the focus of a large body of research and several comprehensive reviews (House, 2001; Zarit, Pearlin, & Hendricks, 2005). Poverty at each time point was related to functional status at later ages, but there appeared to be important underlying patterns that point-in-time measures did not reveal. Poverty at T3 overrode the effects of poverty at earlier points on later life health when they were considered together. If jobs and earnings become more unstable, or public assistance less accessible, then the within-year variability in income will rise, potentially offsetting the gains in average income. Indeed, a recent study by Christopher Bollinger and James P. Ziliak (2007) suggests that income volatility has increased among single-mother families since the mid-1990s (Card & Blank, 2008). However, equally educated blacks and whites experience large differences in the probability of employment. The key issue in income differences would thus appear to be differences in the ability of blacks and whites to get jobs in the first place (Shulman, 1990). Finally, the low relative wage of black females is more a result of their gender than of their race (Borjas, 1983). Changing trends in family formation patterns have captured national attention. African-American households are increasingly headed by never married women. This trend is problematic in that households headed by never-married mothers experience more persistent poverty and longer spells of welfare receipt than do other types of mother-only households (Franklin, Smith, & McMiller, 1995). Powerful controlling images perpetuate misguided messages about impoverished African-American women that contribute to the oppression these women endure (Windsor, Dunlap, & Golub, 2011). The stigma of the mammy and the welfare queen were a constant reminder of the low value larger society attaches to impoverished African-American women (Windsor, Dunlap, & Golub, 2011). White married females who are not employed cause observed wages for White women to be biased downward. Black women who are

not employed are more likely to be single mothers, and receiving welfare may be a better option than working (Fisher & Houseworth, 2012). Poverty can rise with the formation of female-headed households since one income earner is less likely to avoid family poverty than two income earners; low human capital can translate into low incomes and thus higher poverty rates; discrimination and the lack of opportunity reduce incomes and thus increase the probability of falling below the poverty line; and welfare dependency can result in work disincentives that sustain poverty (Shulman, 1990). Yet the poverty rate among black families has remained consistently more than triple that of white families, so that by 1987, five years into the Reagan expansion, nearly one-third of all black families and nearly one-half of all black children lived below the poverty line (Shulman, 1990). Reynolds Farley, for example, states that the rise in female-headed households “kept the poverty rate high in the 1970s and helps explain why, in a time of racial progress, the income of black families did not catch up with that of whites” [Farley, 1984:169]. Indeed, median black family income was 56.1 percent of white family income in 1987, down from 57.1 percent in 1977 and 59.2 percent in 1967, while black female-headed families rose from 27.7 percent of all black families in 1967, to 39.2 percent in 1977 and to 42.8 percent in 1987 (Shulman, 1990).

Women Single Head of Household

Research on older African-American women has focused on their strengths when confronting hardship (Carter, 1982; Davis, 1990), such as coping with poverty, or the emotional impact on women acting as sole caregivers for grandchildren and great grandchildren (Minkler & Roe, 1993). Policy reforms and labor market changes over the 1990s had a profound effect on families headed by single women (Card & Blank, 2008). Households headed by females have increased dramatically in the past three decades (Jarrett, 1998). Earnings and income among single mothers rose, while poverty rates declined. By 2000, the poverty rate among families headed by single women had fallen to 25 percent, far below the 33 percent rate at the start of the 1990s (Card & Blank, 2008). In 1990, 28.8 percent of women who were single heads entered a spell of poverty in the 25-month period between the fifth and twenty-ninth interview month of the Survey of Income and Program Participation. By 2001, the incidence rate among single women had increased to 37.8 percent (Card & Blank, 2008). One reason is that white female-headed households had also become more pervasive, rising from 8.9 percent of all white families in 1967 to 11.5 percent in 1977 and to 12.9 percent in 1987 (Shulman, 1990). The popular theory that black poverty has been sustained by the increase in female-headed households is therefore difficult to support or refute in a head-on manner, although it is almost certainly the case that it is an incomplete explanation at best. This article pursues a less ambitious line of inquiry, but one that holds out some hope for disentangling the lines of causality (Shulman, 1990). Female headship among black families long has been more pronounced in the United States in comparison with other ethnic groups. The black female householder rate has

consistently hovered at slightly more than triple that of the white rate over this period; yet the ratio would have had to secularly increase in order to offset the legal, educational, and attitudinal changes that would otherwise tend to raise the ratio of black-to-white family incomes over time (Shulman, 1990). If blacks and whites had the same distribution of family types, most of the black-white differential in poverty rates would remain, in part because blacks face much higher poverty rates within family types, and in part because the formation of black female-headed households largely represents a reshuffling of the already poor between household types, rather than the creation of newly poor households [Bane, 1986] (Shulman, 1990). Finally, the causes of poverty are interactive and hence difficult to empirically separate out (Shulman, 1990). Female-headed households may increase as human capital drops (since the opportunity cost of child rearing will fall), as economic opportunities diminish (which can reduce the pool of eligible men, or reduce the male-female income gap and thus the monetary incentive for a woman to marry), as welfare reciprocity increases (reducing the cost of child bearing and rearing) and as poverty increases (as contraception and abortion become more difficult to obtain, or to offset low self-esteem) (Shulman, 1990). Despite recessionary periods and the sharp increase in female-headed families during the 1970s, the poverty rate of black children in the United States declined from 42.2 percent in 1969 to 37.9 percent in 1979 (Rexroat, 1989).

Portrayal of the African American Woman

The African American women's lived experiences illustrate the complex relationship between the multiple ways in which different people respond to severe distress at different settings and at different times. The mammy image can be traced back to the 1800s when slave traders attempted to hide the cruel reality of slavery by presenting it as a paternalistic system in which slaves and slave owners loved and took care of each other. Stories and pictures of happy and caring slave women and their masters hugging and smiling became prevalent and black care takers were called mammies (McElya, 2007). At the macro level, controlling images help justify the prejudice that biases social policy, thwarts opportunity, and taints daily interactions. Thus, fighting the public use of controlling images and their impact on impoverished African-American's lives presents a powerful mechanism for building social justice (Windsor, Dunlap, & Golub, 2011). For White women, marriage patterns are reversed: White women with less education have higher marriage rates (Franklin, Smith, & McMiller, 1995). The current cohort of African American female heads is younger, have never been married, and have children outside of wedlock (Jarrett, 1998). Blacks are more likely than whites to live in urban areas, and the costs of living are higher in the urban area (McHenry & McInerney, 2014). Whether the transmission of values is a direct result of socialization is not clear in these recent studies.

Conclusion

Impoverished African–American women have endured a long history of interlocking oppressions at the intersection of sexism, racism, and classism (Alfred & Chlup, 2009; Clark, 1993; Collins, 1998; Hooks, 2005; Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2008; Windsor et al., 2010). Differences in opportunities affect an individual's decision to obtain higher levels of education, occupation choice, and the decision to marry, which in turn, affect wages (Fisher & Houseworth, 2012). The logical extension of this argument, however, is that poor women are more likely to grow up in single-parent homes and bear children early; this cycle of poverty is then reproduced in the next generation (Franklin, Smith, & McMiller, 1995). We have seen that education, employment, and occupation explain most of the poverty gap, and that the explanatory importance of education falls considerably when 1987 is compared to 1974. This change follows arithmetically from the fact that the educational gap narrowed more rapidly than the poverty gap from 1974 to 1987 (Shulman, 1990). Poor persons living in high-poverty neighborhoods face numerous and interconnected social problems, including substandard housing, educational failure, inadequate medical, and dental care, hunger, poor nutrition, drug abuse, crime, family stress, violence, and despair (Windsor, Dunlap, & Golub, 2011). The Other America, the one in which many refuse to acknowledge, perpetuates a vicious cycle of poverty; specifically in single family, African American women households. Until we acknowledge the obvious injustice, correcting the problem is impossible. Bringing awareness to issues like this is only part of the solution, we must seek out necessary solutions to close the poverty gap for one united America.

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