

POLICIES TO IMPROVE FAMILY STABILITY

Dr. Rashawn Ray

David M. Rubenstein Fellow, The Brookings Institution

Chair Lee, Vice Chair Beyer, and distinguished members of the Joint Economic Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify on “Improving Family Stability for the Wellbeing of American Children.” I am a David M. Rubenstein Fellow at The Brookings Institution. I am also an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland and the Executive Director of the Lab for Applied Social Science Research (LASSR). LASSR is a research center that regularly partners with government agencies, organizations, and corporations to conduct objective research evaluations and develop innovative research products such as our virtual reality work with law enforcement and incarcerated people.

My written testimony centers on addressing three important questions:

- 1) What does recent research tell us about trends in family formation and stability?
- 2) How should these trends be interpreted?
- 3) What are policies that can improve family stability?

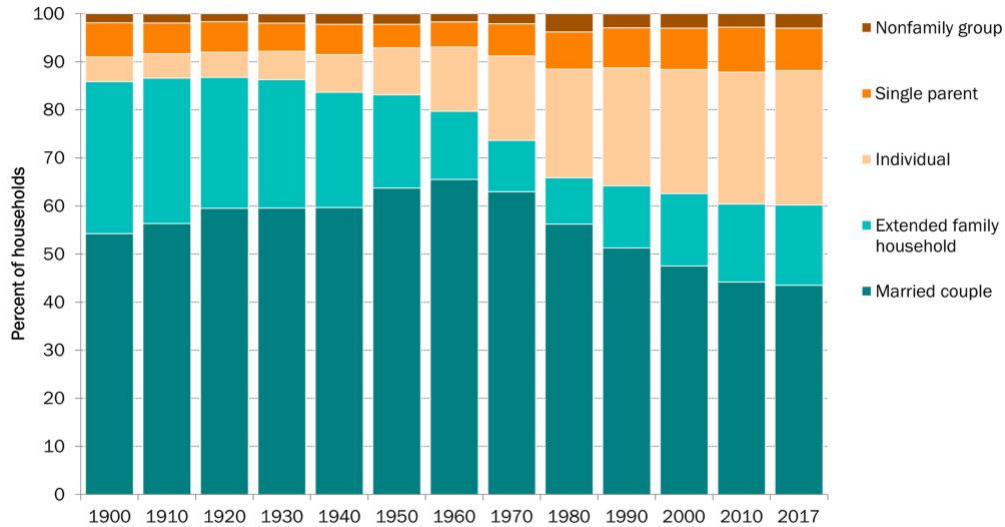
TRENDS IN FAMILY FORMATION

Figure 1 shows the distribution of household types from 1900 through 2017. In 1900, marriage represented slightly over 50% of households, peaking over 60% in the 1960s, and then decreasing to roughly 45% in 2017. When compared to 1900, single-parent households have only increased slightly. However, if 1960 is the comparison year, single-parent households have increased more dramatically. The percentage of households with an individual increased from about 5% in 1900 to roughly 30% in 2017. As young adults delay marriage for education and work, and older adults encounter divorce and the death of relationship partners, the households of one continue to be prominent in 21st century America. Yet, despite the high divorce rate, recent research by Cohen (2019) suggests that the divorce rate seems to finally be falling. Marriage is occurring later in life and the likelihood of staying married seems to be increasing among recently married couples.¹

A household type that is often not discussed is extended family arrangements. In 1900, extended family arrangements were about 30% of households and represented the second most prominent household type in the United States. This household type decreased into the 1980s but has grown since then. Similar to the issues facing Americans at the turn of the 20th century, families are pooling funds together to deal with stagnant wages, rising housing costs, and rising healthcare costs, illness, and elderly care. As of 2017, roughly 15% of households were composed of extended family members (many of whom are together out of necessity and not by choice).

¹ Cohen, Philip. 2019. “The Coming Divorce Decline.” *Socius* <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2378023119873497>>

Distribution of U.S. Household Types: 1900-2017



Source: PN Cohen calculations from U.S. Census data as compiled by IPUMS.org.

Figure 1: Distribution of Household Composition by Year

Source: Cohen, Philip. 2018. *The Family: Diversity, Inequality, and Social Change*. Norton: New York.

Figure 2 uses 1960 as a benchmark to show changes in family and work arrangements over the past 60 years. In 1960, 65% of households were composed of married parents where the father worked for pay outside of the home and the mother worked inside the home as the caregiver and house worker. In 2017, this arrangement only represented 21% of households. Though research shows that people’s attitudes have changed about women working outside of the home, this shift is much more than cultural. It is structural. Most American families cannot survive on one income. This has been the case for a majority of Black and poor households for decades as unemployment and underemployment faced by Black men have propelled Black women into the labor force in ways that was not the case for White women. Consequently, the percentage of families where the mother and father work outside of the home has increased over 100% since 1960 to represent 37% of all household types in 2017. The percentage of single-parent households has nearly tripled during this time. Not only has single-mother households increased from representing 8% of households in 1960 to representing 21% in 2017, but single-father households (about 1% in 1960) represented 5% of households in 2017.

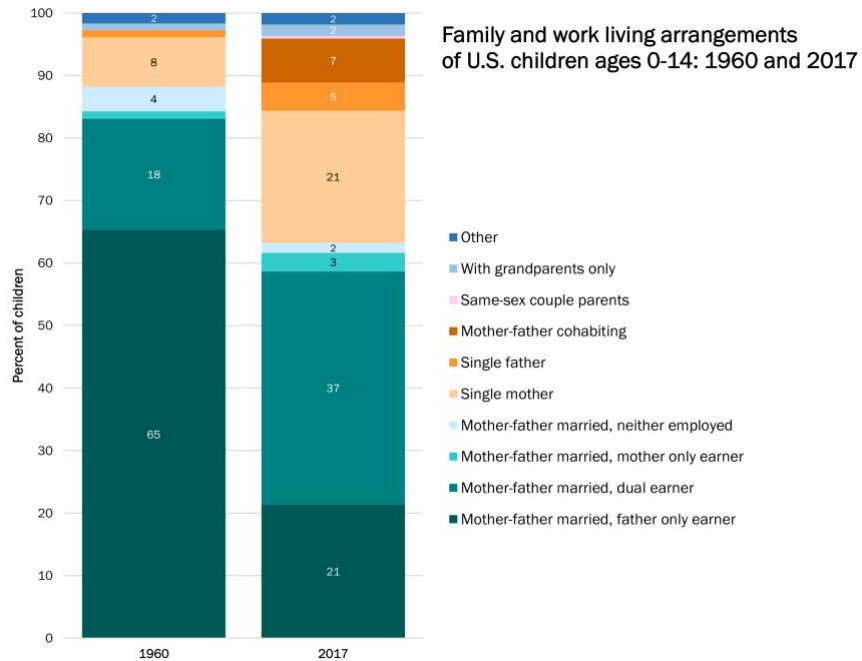


Figure 2: Family and Work Arrangements for Households with Children 14 and Under
 Source: Cohen, Philip. 2018. *The Family: Diversity, Inequality, and Social Change*. Norton: New York.

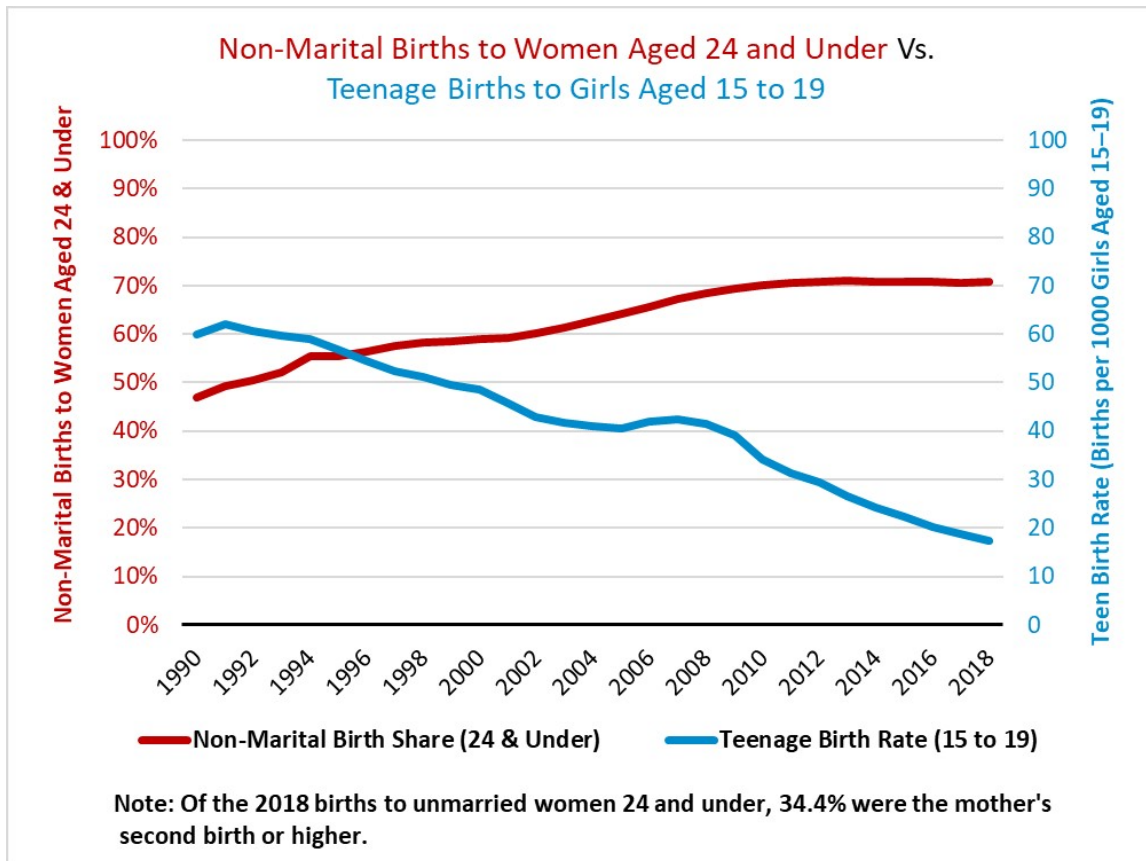
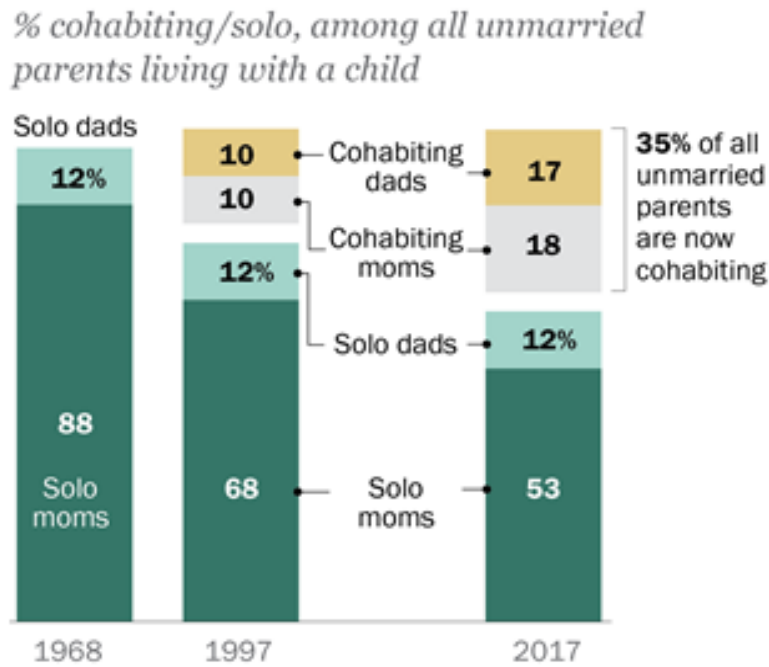


Figure 3: Non-Marital Births for Women Age 24 and Under v. Girls Age 15-19
 Source: Ian Rowe. American Enterprise Institute

Figure 3 shows the non-marital birth rate for teenage girls and young women. Concerning non-marital births, the birth rate among teenage girls decreased from about 60 in the early 1990s to less than 20 in 2018. However, the percentage of non-marital births attributed to young adult women has substantially increased.

Figure 4 shows the percentage of unwed parents living in different family arrangements. In 1968, nearly 90% of unwed parents were in single-mother households. Over the past 50 years or so, this percentage has decreased to about half of the households for unwed parents. In 2017, 35% of unmarried parents were in cohabiting households.

Figure 5 shows father participation with their children by race. Defying stereotypes about deadbeat dads, Black men, compared to men in other racial groups, are more likely to bathe children, play and read to their children, take children to activities, help with homework, and talk with children about their day. And, Black men are much more likely to be involved in their children’s lives when not living with their children than White or Latino fathers. Still, this is not enough and fathers need to continue to increase their participation as caregivers and house workers within the home.



Note: "Parents" are all U.S. parents living with at least one child younger than 18. Data regarding cohabitation available since 1997 only. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.
 Source: Pew Research Center analysis of Current Population Survey March Supplement (IPUMS).
 "The Changing Profile of Unmarried Parents"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 4: Family Composition of Unmarried Parents
 Source: Livingston, Gretchen. 2018. "The Changing Profiles of Unmarried Parents." Pew Research Center.
<https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2018/04/25/the-changing-profile-of-unmarried-parents/>

Being an involved dad

By most measures, black fathers are just as involved with their children as other dads in similar living situations — or more so — according to a new report by the National Center for Health Statistics.

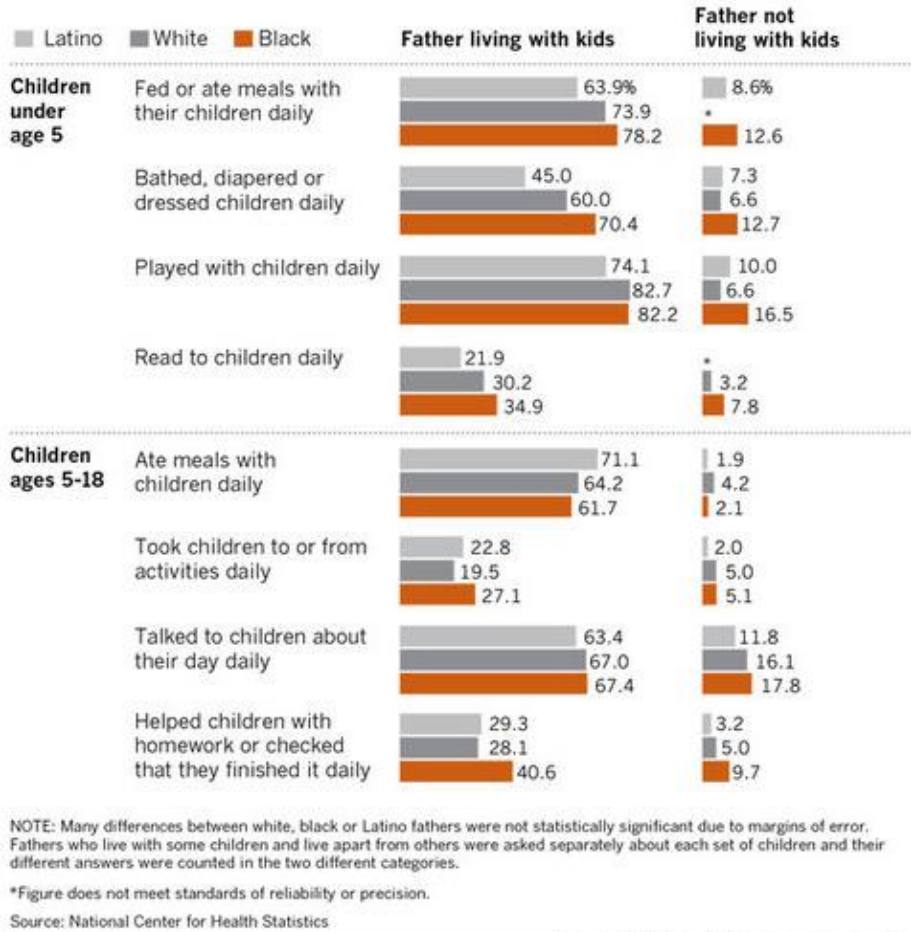


Figure 5: Father Participation with Children by Race
Source: National Center for Health Statistics

INTERPRETING TRENDS IN FAMILY FORMATION

In order to understand trends in family formation, they must be interpreted through a lens that properly takes into account the disparities of the lives of families across race and social class. This is what Dr. Pamela Braboy Jackson and I did in our recent book *How Families Matter: The Simply Complicated Intersections of Race, Gender, and Work*. Jackson and I collected data from 46 Black, White, and Mexican-American families living in middle America. We wanted to know how family formation and life experiences shape how people define and understand family.

Rather than the bleak assessment of family that is commonly purported, we found something different among the families in our study. First, we found that the way people interpret family

was different across race. As Figure 6 below shows, Black Americans were more likely than White and Mexican-Americans to include grandparents and extended kin as part of their family. Blacks and Whites were more likely than Mexican-Americans to include siblings. These findings are not simply about who is considered family. They speak to the ways that people are involved in our daily lives and how our structural locations in society vary. For example, we found that Black children and young adults, compared to Whites, were more likely to live with their grandparents. Blacks are more likely to assist financially across generations and Latinos are more likely to live in extended family households. These are not cultural family arrangements as much as they are structural survival strategies in an economic market that has rarely provided them with opportunities to live in autonomous, self-sufficient households.

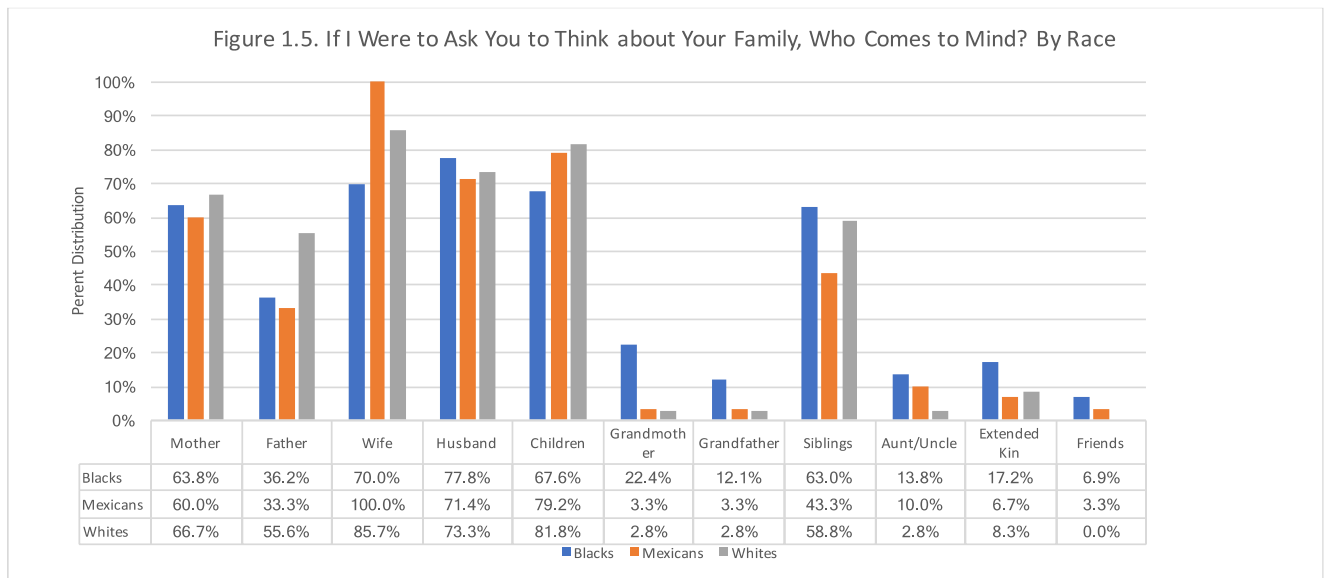


Figure 6: Racial Differences in Responses to Who is Considered Family
 Source: Jackson, Pamela Braboy and Rashawn Ray. 2018. *How Families Matter: Simply Complicated Intersections of Race, Gender, and Work*. Lexington Books: Lanham, MD

Second, we found that the traditional family arrangement of a father working outside of the home and a mother staying home with the kids seems to be reserved for very high earners. Middle-income and low-income families simply cannot afford this lifestyle choice. Third, we found that parents do not really “balance” work and family. Rather, they “juggle” their various responsibilities and frequently pray they do not drop or break anything.² Fourth, parents’ ability to manage family and work life is contingent upon structural forms of economic (e.g., income, autonomy, flexible work hours) and social capital (e.g., social support and networks). Flexible work hours and job autonomy allow many working professionals to play a “chess game” to make daily and weekly decisions about childcare, housework, and family activities. Working class parents, on the other hand, are more likely to play “checkers” and have little choice in the pursuit

² Ray, Rashawn and Pamela Braboy Jackson. 2013. “Complexity Begets Complexity: An Intersectional Approach to Work-Family Balance among Black, White, and Mexican- American Adults.” Pp. 243-264 In Marla Kholman, Dana Krieg, and Bette Dickerson (Eds), *Notions of Family: Intersectional Perspectives, Advances in Gender Research, Vol. 17*. Bingley, UK: Emerald.

to juggle work and family life. Interestingly, single parents were some of the savviest people in our study. The way they worked to make ends meet and show up for childhood activities is admirable. Unfortunately, many single-parents simply do not have the resources to keep up long-term, especially if they are trying to pursue more education, work toward a credential for higher pay, or obtain a part-time job to get out of debt or save for their children's college.

Overall, families are surviving, but they are floundering. Resources and safety nets that were available in the 1940s, 1960s, and 1980s simply do not exist in 21st century America for a majority of families.

POLICIES TO STABILIZE FAMILIES

How can policies be used to improve family stability? My research suggests focusing on a living wage, high-quality jobs with family-friendly benefits, and affordable childcare.

- **Living Wage**

There needs to be a living wage so people can live. According to a Joint Economic Committee report, minimum wage is nearly \$3 less in today's dollars than its peak of 1968.³ The minimum wage is simply too low. People cannot live on this. Across race, these disparities are even worse as Black households earned about 60 cents on the dollar relative to White households in 2018. It is often easy to say that these disparities are due to racism, which is not necessarily false. Yet, I think there is a better interpretation more suitable for how we think about public and social policy. It mostly centers on where jobs are located. I say more below.

- **High-Quality Jobs with Family-friendly Benefits**

Families need earners with high-quality jobs. Though low-unemployment across racial groups is a positive step, many of the jobs being created are not high-quality jobs that allow people to adequately provide for their families. People need jobs with family-friendly benefits that include child leave policies and paid, flexible sick leave policies. Working Americans should not have to get a payday loan to pay for the doctor when their kid gets the flu or accidentally breaks their arm on the playground. Equitable policies must help to stop penalizing parents who want to be with their children when they are sick.

People living in areas with low-job growth face wage stagnation and unstable benefits packages. Blacks are more likely to live in or around areas with low job growth rates. Some of these cities including Detroit, Cleveland, and Baltimore are impacted by the historical and current legacy of redlining and restrictive covenants. Blacks are most likely to be in occupations set for to technical displacement (production, food service, retail, and clerical work). Based on job growth potential, Black men are underrepresented in the best 15 occupations and overrepresented in the bottom 15 occupations for men. Education and health professions, two occupations most resistant to technical

³ Joint Economic Committee. 2020. The U.S. Economy by the Numbers—December 6, 2019. <https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/ff46c280-58a4-4246-a821-6bc1faf2f446/usebtn-december-for-online-printing.pdf>

displacement, should be a focus of vocational and technical training in predominately Black communities.

All of this is important because men find their identity in family via work. When work disappears, so does their identity within the family.⁴ Though I think we need to expand how men view their familial identities, this is where we are. There is a mismatch between how boys are socialized and what they are capable of achieving in 21st century America, especially if you are Black, poor, and/or rural.

- **Affordable Childcare**

Families need affordable childcare. I recently seen this firsthand. Over the past few years, I worked on a project with Black Onyx Management. We conducted a welcomeness study for Kosciusko County, Indiana, which is essentially the orthopedic capital of the country.⁵ Kosciusko County is predominately White and rural. Some of the findings about their struggles with childcare were saddening. Nearly 25% of parents reported that either them or their spouse left a job because of childcare issues. People making about \$45,000 a year, compared to people making over \$100,000, were about 75% more likely to report that paying for childcare was difficult. Below are some of the common responses we received from the over 2,000 people who participated in the study.

“I am retired raising my 2-year-old grandson. Affordable childcare is non-existent in this county.”

“I am a stay at home dad because I got in a wreck and ended up switching roles with my wife. We do not make enough money to keep up with normal bills. I also don’t see it being worth it to have my kids get childcare and me get a job. The type of job I can get would not bring in enough money to make our younger children being watched by a stranger worth it after paying for the childcare.”

“Lack of affordable and quality childcare in this area make it extremely difficult for both parents to work, resulting in more families having to depend on food stamps, Medicaid, and other government programs. If you are wealthy or known, you have more opportunities, as opposed to those who are in lower or working classes.”

“I think childcare is too expensive. I make good money but can’t afford to live on my own with a child.”

“When moving here from Fort Wayne a few years ago, I was appalled at the gap between the money from industry in this community against the lack of high quality AFFORDABLE childcare options and pre-k options. We must have more options for working parents. This community has a glaring gap in childcare. It’s a real struggle.”

⁴ Ray, Rashawn. 2008. “The Professional Allowance: How Socioeconomic Characteristics Allow Some Men to Fulfill Family Role Expectations Better than Other Men.” *The International Journal of Sociology of the Family: Special Issue on Intersectionality*. 34(2): 327-351.

⁵ Black Onyx Management. 2019. “Kosciusko County Welcomeness Study.” Orthoworx.

I want to reiterate that these are people living in middle America where the cost of living is relatively low. Imagine what it is like living in cities today. I honestly do not know how families are making it.

MY FAMILY STORY

I would be remiss if I did not end my testimony with my own family story. As a researcher, rarely do I make myself salient in the process. However, given the topic, I think my own biography is relevant. I grew-up in a single parent household and have never seen my biological father before. I am now happily married to my high school sweetheart with two smart and talented boys. How did I get here?

While in the Army, my mom, Joslyn Talley, got pregnant by a Sergeant on her base. She had a decision to make. Should she have an abortion, get out of the military to raise her child, or allow her parents to adopt her child? My mom decided to be honorably discharged and raise me. Considering my mom was admitted to West Point, her decision was even more consequential. Indeed, her admission to West Point as a Black woman in the late 1970s was remarkable. As the daughter of a 21-year veteran who served in two wars and received the Purple Heart and Bronze Star, it was even more noteworthy.

When I was a child, my mother put herself through nursing school to become a Registered Nurse. As an infant, we were on welfare and lived in subsidized housing. With childcare and financial support from my grandparents and aunt, my mom made sure that I was always with family when she was working nights and studying. When I was in elementary school, my mother worked a full-time job and two part-time jobs to make ends meet. When I graduated from college, my mom told me that she cried when I made all-stars in baseball because she did not know how she would pay for it or attend the games. Interestingly, I never remember my mom missing a game or important school event. She may have come late or left early, but she was always there. I do not know how she did it.

We also experienced a lot of housing instability. My mom and I moved 14 times by my 18th birthday. She was constantly searching for proficient schools for me to attend. With the Majority to Minority bussing program in Atlanta, I was able to attend a school that many of my neighborhood friends could only dream about. It had a gifted program and I was fortunate to be admitted. The neighborhood school that I was zoned for did not have enough books or adequate heating, air, or lighting. The student-teacher ratio was astronomical and it was predominately Black.

Since my mom was a nurse, I was able to socialize with physicians regularly. I shadowed them and went to lunch with them. And though my life was different than the physicians' children, I gained access to a form of social and cultural capital that my neighborhood friends did not have. I graduated high school toward the top of my class, attended the University of Memphis on a full academic scholarship, and then attended graduate school at Indiana University to obtain my PhD in sociology. During graduate school, I was awarded fellowships from the National Science Foundation, National Institute of Mental Health, and the American Sociological Association.

Altogether, I am the epitome of the success sequence. My mother was not. Yet, she is a remarkable woman. And, she had resources that helped her raise her son. The policies that I discussed in this testimony will allow working parents the ability to help their children achieve the American Dream and save federal and state government funding by decreasing the likelihood of future generations being in poverty.