

The Great Society, the Civil Rights Era, and Immigration Reform

Jim Pederson 01/20/2025

As a result of the lopsided Goldwater loss in '64, there was a two year window allowing for the Democratic Party to rapidly expand the role of the federal government in the area of social legislation. Strategically it was the point where Southern White Democrats were effectively replaced by a coalition of minorities and immigration changes along with expanded voting rights principally in the South significantly changed the demographics. It did take ten to fifteen years for the divorce of the Southern Democrats and the new Democratic Party to become finalized.

In assessing the anti-poverty programs the most common approach is to look at their impact as if they were implemented in an economy and society that was relatively constant during the time period in question. From this assumption, it's fairly straightforward to assess both intended and unintended outcomes. This period of time, however, was very dynamic so any final conclusions would need to consider this. There were other public policy changes during the same time that impacted the society and the economy and the most obvious of these was the Immigration Act of 1965 which opened up mass immigration that had been halted since 1924 and would have significantly impacted the data by the mid 70's and then increased at an increasing rate through chain migration. The gains made by the American workforce during that period were truly impressive even though the time spanned the Great Depression. According to a study published by James P. Smith and Finis R. Welch in the Journal of Economic Literature, covering 1940 to 1980, cited by Author Roy Beck:

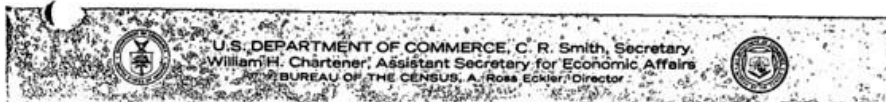
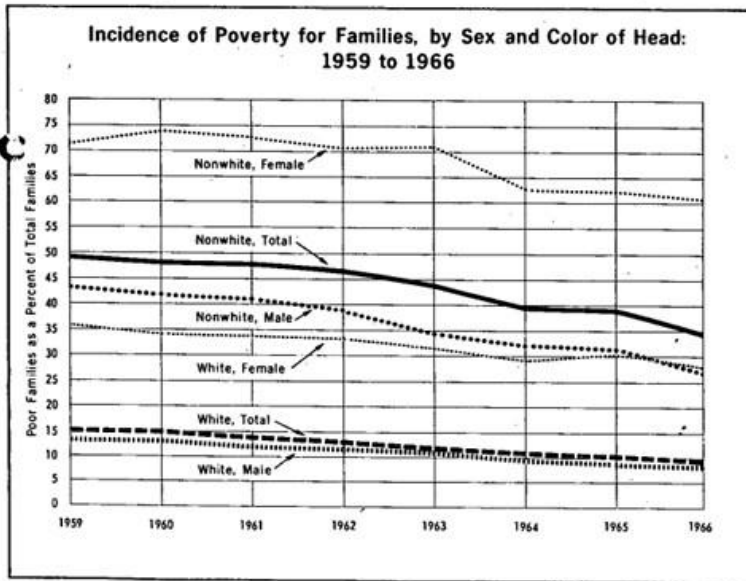
- Real income of White males expanded 2.5 times
- Incomes of Black males increased 4x narrowing the gap between races
- The Black middle Class grew from 22% to 71%
- The number of middle class African Americans more than tripled growing from 22% to nearly 75% (1 p. 12) (2)

The most rapid improvements shown in the study were prior to 1970. Prior to 1965 there was broad improvement in the working conditions, wages, and wealth of American workers that extended up and down the wage ladder. From 1950 to 1960 in particular all economic metrics that assessed individual living standards and conditions was improving rapidly. All of the Great Society legislation was implemented as the changes in immigration policy was also being enacted. (1 pp. 2-13)

We will look first at several of the key components of the Civil Rights era and the Great Society social programs taking them at face value as well intended social policy and assuming "*other things remained equal*". We will assess the baseline situation or perceived problem, the implemented solution, the outcome, and whether the outcome was acknowledged and the policies adapted following a natural feedback loop starting with the Economic Opportunity Act. Prior to declaring war on poverty, the number of people who lived below the official poverty line had been steadily declining since and was only about half of what it had been in 1950. In terms of dependency, the proportion of people who were

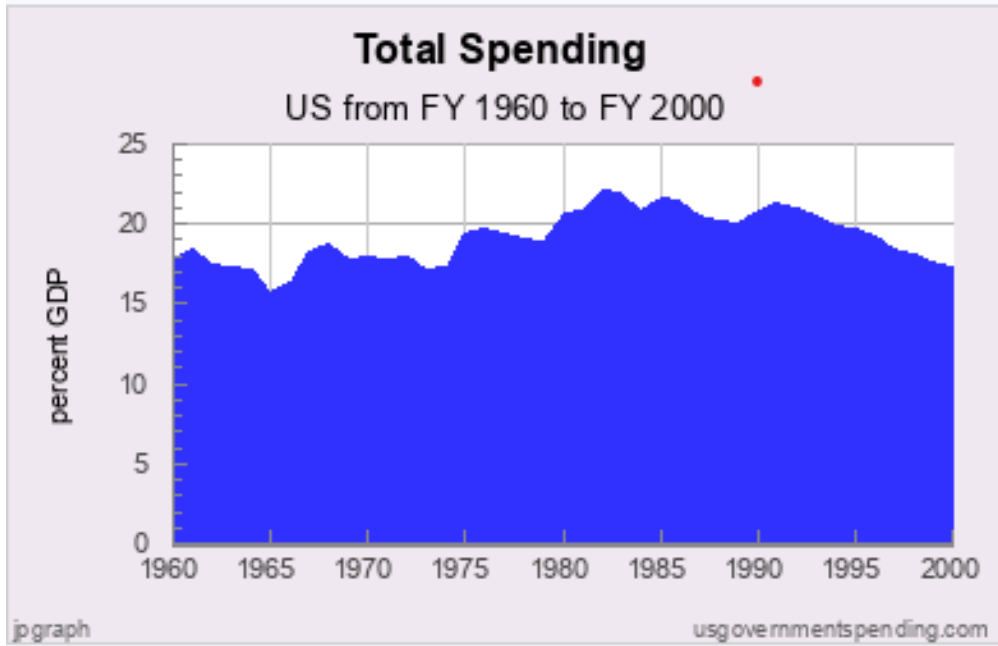
below the poverty level based on their income (without counting government benefits) declined by about one-third from 1950 to 1965. (3) After the War on Poverty was enacted though the improvement in poverty data correlated to the income transfer associated with these government measures. (4)

**THE EXTENT OF POVERTY IN THE UNITED STATES
1959 TO 1966**

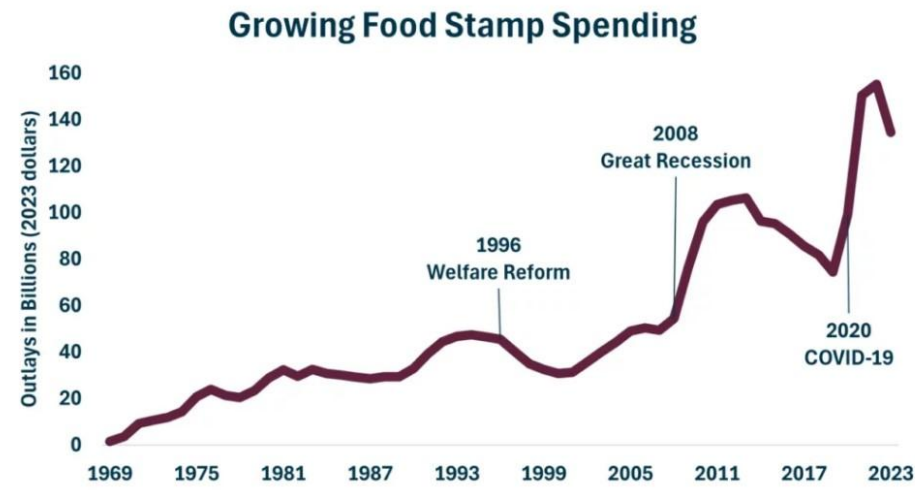


Economic Opportunity Act

Following the passage of the Economic Opportunity Act in 1964, which created the Office of Economic Opportunity, the percentage of people dependent upon the federal government to stay above the poverty line increased gradually, reversing a decade-long trend. Official poverty metrics continued to decline but only as a result of massive federal spending increases. The eligibility rules for Welfare, Unemployment, and Social Security continued to be loosened and benefits increased. More people received more and for longer periods which led to the number of people on public assistance doubling between 1960 and 1977. The amount spent on public housing rose nearly five-fold in a decade while food stamps increased tenfold. Many public housing projects were crime infested and became too dangerous to live in like the Pruitt-Igoe project in St. Louis which was demolished in 1972. Generally from 1960 to 1975 government spending on entitlements regardless of type raised 3x to 4x and this is consistent whether the federal government is considered by itself or whether all government expenditures are included. Meanwhile the level of government spending rose only slightly from app. 17% to 20% of GDP.

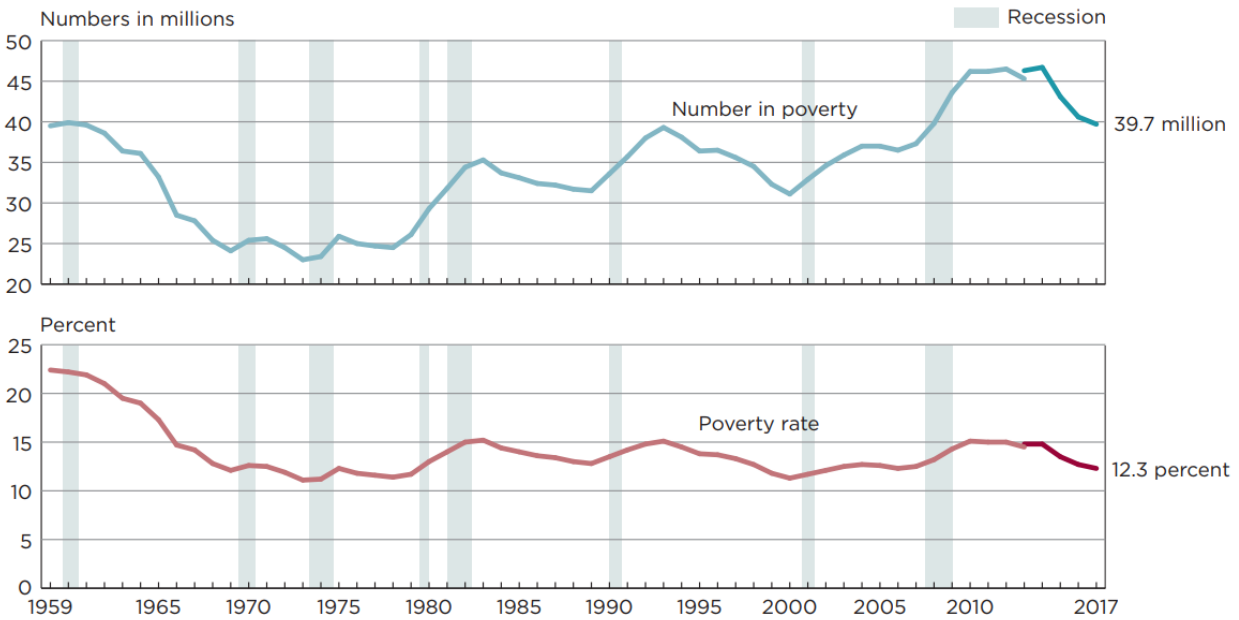


(5)



(6)

Figure 4.
Number in Poverty and Poverty Rate: 1959 to 2017

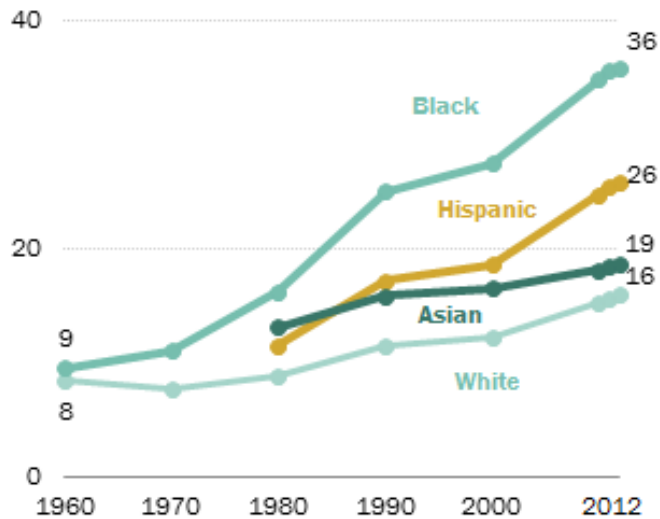


Note: The data for 2013 and beyond reflect the implementation of the redesigned income questions. The data points are placed at the midpoints of the respective years. For information on recessions, see Appendix A. For information on confidentiality protection, sampling error, nonsampling error, and definitions, see <www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/cps/techdocs/cpsmar18.pdf>.
 Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 1960 to 2018 Annual Social and Economic Supplements.

The cultural effect on the Black family was especially pronounced. Dr. Thomas Sowell observed, *“Despite the grand myth that black economic progress began or accelerated with the passage of the civil rights laws and “war on poverty” programs of the 1960’s, the cold fact is that the poverty rate among blacks fell from 87% in 1940 to 47% by 1960.”* (7) Starting during the Johnson administration there was a very deliberate attempt to recruit Blacks into the welfare system during a time when unemployment for Black men was generally around 4%. Prior to the War on Poverty, 80% of all black families had a man and a woman raising children (3). In the 1960’s there was a deliberate attempt to separate work from income (Cloward and Piven – Columbia University). This made the father redundant with the government. The nuclear family was defined as being Eurocentric while Christianity was demeaned and discouraged. By 1990 more than 25% of all black adults over 25 had never been married compared to less than 9% of whites. About 57% of Black children lived in one parent homes and 7.5% didn’t live with either parent. (8) (9)

Rising Share of Never-Married Adults, Growing Race Gap

% of adults ages 25 and older who have never been married



Note: Data on Hispanics and Asians prior to 1980 are not plotted given the small sample sizes.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of the 1960-2000 decennial census and 2010-2012 American Community Survey, Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS)

PEW RESEARCH CENTER



Black Women More Likely to be Married than White Women

...Until 1970, then...

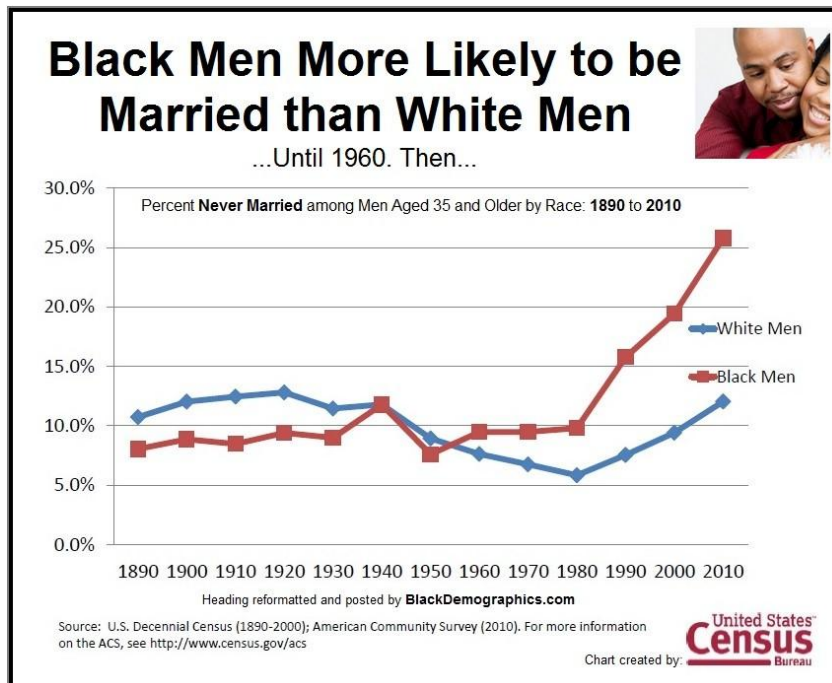


Heading reformatted and posted by BlackDemographics.com

Source: U.S. Decennial Census (1890-2000); American Community Survey (2010). For more information on the ACS, see <http://www.census.gov/acs>

United States
Census
Bureau

Chart created by:



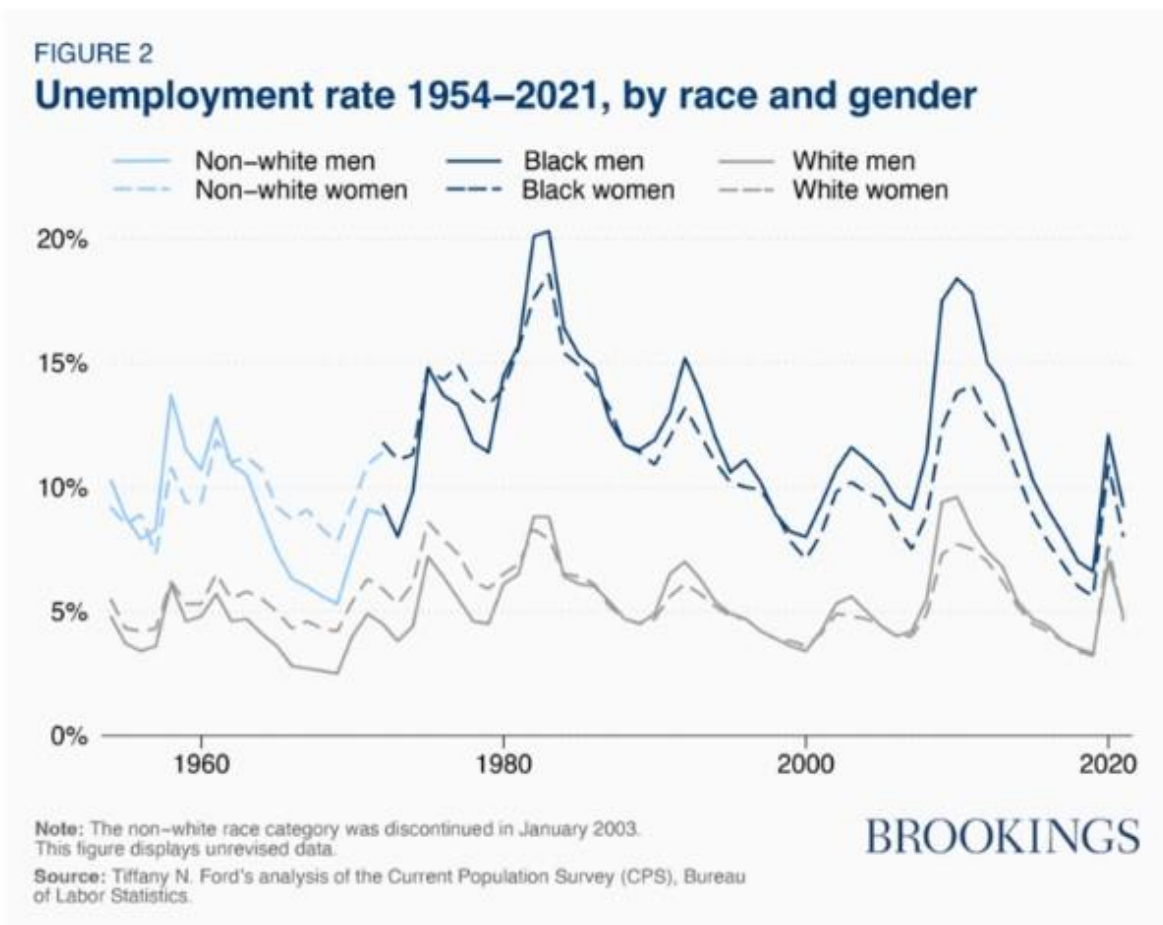
By 1992 the official poverty rate began to rise leaving a larger number of people in poverty, even after government transfers, than there were in 1964. Following the roll out of the Economic Opportunity Act, poverty decreased initially and then worsened and stabilized (4), dependency increased dramatically and became institutionalized and multi-generational, a large government bureaucracy was created and has been maintained, cultural breakdown ensued including breakdown of the nuclear family, and no significant acknowledgements, adjustments, or adaptations to policies were made or implemented. It still could be argued, however, that there would have been an increase in the number of people in poverty without it.

Civil Rights Act

Moving on to the Civil Rights Act, this act prohibited segregation not only in public facilities but also in private establishments catering to the public such as hotels and eating places. It further prohibited discrimination in private employment based on race, creed, sex or national origin. It extended federal authority over private behavior and to do this, the constitutional authority was tied not to the 14th Amendment but to the Commerce Clause of the constitution. In looking at this act the strong tendency is to address it in the context of whether someone agrees that this is a good or moral idea but deeper analysis would question its constitutionality and even practicality in terms of enforcement. The Civil Rights Act effectively put the federal government in a position of assessing the motives and decision making process in private employment and overrode freedom of association. It is also important to note here that if someone makes economic decisions based on unrelated factors like those prohibited by the Civil Rights Act, there is an inherent economic penalty imposed by the free market.

Did the Civil Rights Act improve Black employment? Again African –American historian and commentator Thomas Sowell doesn't think so. In the decade prior to the passage of the act, Black representation in professional, technical, and other high level positions had more than doubled and in

the 1940's when there was no civil rights movement the increase was even greater. Sowell observed *"The Civil Rights Act represented no acceleration in trends that had been going on for many years"* (10 pp. 205-8). Walter E. Williams further observed, *"In every census from 1890 to 1954, blacks were either just as active as or more so than whites in the labor market. During that earlier period, black teen unemployment was roughly equal to or less than white teen unemployment. As early as 1900, the duration of black unemployment was 15 percent shorter than that of whites; today it's about 30 percent longer"* (3). Affirmative action, which started in 1971 under Nixon, did result in some improvement for Blacks on the upper end of the earning spectrum but those at the other end just lagged further behind. Because motive cannot be clearly determined, this bill was destined to take turns that couldn't be fully foreseen in the court system and within the government bureaucracy, again making the central government increasingly powerful and arbitrary.



School Desegregation / Bussing

School desegregation evolved over a longer period of time but didn't turn out any better. In 1896 the Plessey vs. Ferguson had established the legal precedent of *"separate but equal"* and this was made during the generation that passed the 14th Amendment so it couldn't be overturned based simply on a consistent reading of that amendment. The Brown vs. the Board of Education Topeka Kansas Supreme

Court decision in 1954 was based on sociology as opposed to educational performance featuring a doll study that indicated Black girls would rather play with white dolls which was thought to indicate decreased self-esteem. This led to overturning a precedent in the Plessey case on the grounds that the justices who decided the Plessey case were not enlightened by modern sociology (10). The sociologist that presented this study, Kenneth Clark, also knew but didn't state that similar studies in integrated schools were even more likely to choose the white doll. This also assumes that high self-esteem and academic performance are positively correlated which likewise isn't true. Nonetheless the Supreme Court decision was unanimous and directed that schools should integrate at "*all deliberate speed*". (10 pp. 195-98)

At the time there were public school districts that required racial segregation and these were in the South including the upper South. Districts that prohibited segregation were primarily in the Northeast and other areas were either not addressed or mixed. Schools could be segregated by law or simply based on neighborhood demographics. In the northeast, neighborhoods tended to be naturally segregated. Not all black leaders and commentators actually favored desegregation. Author Zora Neale Hurston described the Supreme Court decision as "*a court order for someone to associate with me who does not wish me near them*". She found the court's assertion that school's with a disproportionate black population were inherently inferior and that Blacks would only succeed with the help of whites to be "*insulting rather than honoring*." (10 p. 199) In 1995 Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas echoed this saying, "*It never ceases to amaze me that the courts are so willing to assume that anything that is predominantly black must be inferior*".

Busing was initially overwhelmingly opposed by white parents and supported by a slight majority of black parents. Polls at the time showed that only about half of Southern Blacks actually favored the court's decision (10) however, it should be remembered that busing was frequently more of an issue outside of the South where populations were more geographically separated. Support amongst black families gradually eroded as well. Quoting Historian Thomas Woods, "Loretta Roach, who chaired Boston's Citywide Educational Coalition, argued that busing had damaged black life as well as white. Busing, she said, undermined parental involvement in the "often faraway schools their children are bused to every morning." She also regretted the disappearance of community support for public schools, which "evaporated since schools are no longer part of their communities. Busing destroyed the neighborhood passion for those schools that previously existed."" (10 p. 202)

In 1968 the Supreme Court expanded the Brown decision in Greene vs. Country School Board of New Kent Virginia where the district had a school choice system where a student / family could choose any school in the district and transportation would be provided to attend that school. No white students chose to attend a black school and few black students chose to attend a white school. In this ruling the court determined that having the opportunity to attend any school wasn't enough, the schools were to be integrated regardless of the will of the students and their families. This led directly to forced busing which the court upheld in 1971 (Swann vs. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education) and impacted the entire country and not just the South. In many other areas the distances involved were very significant. For example, in LA the average busing time was two hours a day. (10)

How did all of this work out? The local schools that acted as a sort of community center creating civic pride were eroded. In some cases, most notably Boston, it led to violence where the primary goal of high school students wasn't education or extra-curricular activities but simply getting through the day safely. The local control of local schools was lost. There was no demonstrable improvement in Black educational performance. A 1983 survey by the Department of Education was unable to identify any study that found integrated schooling to have had any appreciable effect on black educational achievement.

Finally the “*magnet school*” concept that eventually developed as a way to avoid forced busing with amenities did nothing but drive up costs. In Kansas City, which was a magnet school test case, white enrollment consistently dropped, black performance didn't improve, dropout rates increased, and total attendance dropped.

Assessing the Outcomes independent from other variables

Looking at the three hallmark pieces of legislation of the civil rights era without considering other external variables, they have a good deal in common. They all dealt with situations or conditions that were improving naturally according to non-governmental market and cultural shifts. The Economic Opportunity Act brought about an initial decline in poverty that may or may not be attributable to the program while the others failed to bring about any real improvement of the underlying problems that were used to justify programs in the first place. They brought about negative cultural changes and centralized power and decision making in the federal government. They used very questionable and dubious constitutional justification and would be considered by most conservatives to be clearly unconstitutional. Finally and probably most importantly, these acts created a massive expansion of government dependency targeted principally but not entirely toward minority populations.

The seemingly purposeful destruction of the Black family, removing the strongest link to cultural continuity and economic self-sufficiency was concisely summarized by the late Walter E. Williams in 2017 in his essay, *The Welfare State's Legacy*:

“According to the 1938 Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, that year 11 percent of black children were born to unwed mothers. Today about 75 percent of black children are born to unwed mothers. Is that supposed to be a delayed response to the legacy of slavery? The bottom line is that the black family was stronger the first 100 years after slavery than during what will be the second 100 years.

At one time, almost all black families were poor, regardless of whether one or both parents were present. Today roughly 30 percent of blacks are poor. However, two-parent black families are rarely poor. Only 8 percent of black married-couple families live in poverty. Among black families in which both the husband and wife work full time, the poverty rate is under 5 percent. Poverty in black families headed by single women is 37 percent. The undeniable truth is that neither slavery nor Jim Crow nor the harshest racism has decimated the black family the way the welfare state has.” Walter E. Williams (3)

Hart-Cellar Immigration Act, Medicare/Medicaid, Voting Right Act of 1965

These pieces of landmark social legislation, however, didn't happen in a vacuum. There were three other notable measures that changed political demographics fairly dramatically during this period that should be noted and the economy was starting to change in ways that would be to the detriment of American workers and generally favor capital over labor. The Hart-Cellar Immigration Act of 1965 changed the immigration system to allow for family chain migration and revised quotas away from European immigrants as had been established in 1924. The impact of this one act was tremendous and is the subject of the book, *"Back of the Hiring Line"* by author Roy Beck that specifically looks at the relationship of mass immigration to Black poverty throughout the history of the country while noting that this has a similar impact on all lower wage earners regardless of race. His summary of the impact of the immigration act of Black opportunity and poverty is as follows from Chapter 11 titled "The Accidental Betrayal":

"In August of 1965, every trend had seemed to be in the right direction for African Americans. The civil Rights Movement was beginning to win the hearts and minds of the American public, A year earlier, Congress had passed the most sweeping civil rights legislation since the end of the Civil War, The four decade Black workers march into the middle class was continuing within tight labor makets. Unions had opened much more widely to Black members.. And in August, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act.

But one month later, Congress passed the Hart Cellar Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that restarted sustained surges in mass immigration all over again.

As a result, nearly every aspect of life for the Black working class over the next half century has been different – and not in a good direction. The 1965 act set in motion a series of policies tha loosened labor markets by flooding the hiring lines with foreign workers and betraying a century of struggle toward economic and political equality and Black Americans.

Why would congress restart mass immigration and impede the economic progress of every African American it was trying to help with landmark civil rights legislation?...

The best answer to all of these questions may be: it was an accident.

Beck's conclusion that this was all an accident can certainly be debated as business interests have consistently been supporters of mass immigration but the affects of this policy change are clear.

Medicare would make all seniors dependent on the government for health care and Medicare in conjunction with Medicaid would over-stimulate demand for health care initiating, along with other factors, long term increases in inflation adjusted health care costs. With an aging population and rising health care costs, politically touching this would be virtually impossible. In terms of the impact of poverty and standard of living, Medicaid would have been a solid net benefit to those living at or below the poverty line but it would also have had an inflationary impact of total medical costs which would partially offset the benefit.

Then there was the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which authorized, and in some areas required, federal oversight of elections and election laws. This wouldn't have a direct economic impact but definitely had a political impact. Most, but not all these areas were in the South and it further required these designated areas to obtain pre-clearance by the federal government for any changes in election procedures. This established a "temporary" restriction that was intended to last only five years, but has been repeatedly extended, most recently in 2006 for another 25 years giving the federal government ultimate control over elections that are constitutionally managed by the states. Recently this has been a factor in increasingly loose election laws making it easier to register ineligible voters and to make it harder to verify identity when voting. Election fraud, regardless of the level of sophistication, is largely dependent on having large rolls of non-voters (who may frequently be non-people) creating available votes and being able to monitor results for who has voted.

In summary, the Immigration Act of 1965 and other factors impacting the economy had a positive correlation to rising poverty levels making the determination of the real impact of the Economic Opportunity Act difficult to assess but the cultural impact is clear. Without re-initiating mass immigration it is probable that the poverty problem would have continued to resolve itself if left alone and the negative cultural and demographic effects of the War on Poverty could also have been avoided.

Political Factors

While someone could attempt to defend the Great Society using philosophy and economics, it would be a tortured argument lacking any quantitative data to support it and would likely come down to the common progressive conclusion that *"it would have been even worse if we didn't step in"*. As acknowledged previously, this argument could possibly have some merit except that the outside factors making the problem worse were also largely initiated by the federal government. The more natural and reasonable conclusion is to address the real motives in terms of political demographics. Lyndon Johnson admitted this in his typical crass manner to two governors on board Air Force One when he said of the Civil Rights Act, *"I'll have them n*gg*rs voting Democratic for two hundred years"* (11 p. 33)

Malcolm Little, who came to be known as Malcolm X and is remembered as a more radical Civil Rights figure but was in many ways insightful, further observed: *"The white Liberal differs from the white Conservative only in one way; the Liberal is more deceitful, more hypocritical, than the Conservative. Both want power, but the White Liberal is the one who has perfected the art of posing as the Negro's friend and benefactor and by winning the friendship and support of the Negro, the White Liberal is able to use the Negro as a pawn or a weapon in this political football game, that is constantly raging, between the White Liberals and the White Conservatives."* (12)

Bibliography

1. **Beck, Roy.** *Back of the Hiring Line.* Arlington, Va : Numbers USA, 2021.
2. **Smith, James P and Finis, R. Welch.** *Black Economic Progress After Mydal.* s.l. : Journal of Economic Literature, 1989.

3. **Williams, Walter E.** Creators Syndicate. [Online] September 20, 2017.
<https://www.creators.com/read/walter-williams/09/17/the-welfare-states-legacy>.
4. **Mathews, Dylan.** The Washington Post. [Online] January 8, 2014.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/01/08/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-war-on-poverty/>.
5. Charts. *USgovernmentSpending.com*. [Online] 2024.
https://www.usgovernmentspending.com/spending_chart_1960_2000USp_26s2li011mcny_F0f.
6. **Dickinson, Mathew.** Food Stamp Spending is Skyrocketing. *Economic Policy Innovation Center*. [Online] May 27, 2024. <https://epicforamerica.org/social-programs/food-stamp-spending-is-skyrocketing/>.
7. **Sowell, Thomas.** *Creators.com*. [Online] November 18, 2014.
<https://www.creators.com/read/thomas-sowell/11/14/a-legacy-of-liberalism>.
8. Black Demographics. *Black Marriage*. [Online] 2024.
<https://blackdemographics.com/households/marriage-in-black-america/>.
9. Record Share of Americans have never been married. *Pew Research*. [Online] September 24, 2014.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2014/09/24/record-share-of-americans-have-never-married/>.
10. **Woods, Thomas E.** *The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History*. Washington, DC : Regency Publishing Company, 2004.
11. **Kessler, Ronald.** *Inside the White House*. New York, New York : Simon & Schuster, 1996.
12. **X, Malcolm.** Warning Black America about Liberals. [Online] December 4, 1963.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7YmjWW9tx4>.