



## Guest view: Minority kids and poverty

Don't underestimate role it plays and the damage it can do

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I beg to differ with Kay S. Hymowitz's Nov. 18 Viewpoints column, "Instability damages kids the most," in which she discusses the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study found in the fall issue of the *Future of Children*, a journal jointly published by the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs and the Brookings Institute.

According to Hymowitz, the study was a longitudinal look at the family life of 5,000 children and their urban, primarily minority parents. She reviews the findings of low incidence of marriage between the couples, high rate of marital break-up among those who have married, the pattern of live-in boyfriends resulting in low father involvement with children and the prevalence of "multi-partner fertility," a term she informs was coined by "experts" to describe urban poor minority mothers who father children by more than one man. I find this term highly insulting and derogatory as a reference as it implies that there is something inherent in the biological make-up of these mothers that predisposes them to fathering children with more than one man.

If we are going to turn the judgment research microscope on the relationship dynamics of the urban minority poor, let us also turn it on the lifestyles of the rich and famous. Media reports are replete with examples of white female Hollywood icons who have demonstrated their inability to make marital commitment, have live-in boyfriends, have children out of wedlock and also could have the designation of "multi-partner fertility" applied to them.

I see this article and the focus of this study as another attempt to pathologize the urban poor, minimize the damage to family life caused by poverty and to advance data about minority poor people without critically addressing the social, economic and psychological hardships they have to deal with day by day as they try to raise their children. I wonder if Hymowitz had to live within the economic, environmental and social constraints of the urban poor would she still retain the belief that their problems had no economic fix?

This type of research fosters stereotypes about the behavior and moral character of poor people and encourages people in our society to make sweeping generalizations about their conduct and values and draw the conclusion that they don't deserve anything. And most damaging of all, it is the kind of research that guides social welfare policy and is used by politicians to justify the termination of programs and critical resources that in effect entrenches the urban minority poor at the bottom of the social and economic order.

A case in point is the opposition to President Obama's health care law and current mean-spirited attempts to have it repealed.

Five thousand children and their parents are not the entire poor population of this nation. We cannot assume that because people are poor that they cannot and do not raise their children successfully. There are many examples in our urban poor communities of fathers and mothers who work hard as a team (whether married or not) to be a stabilizing influence in the lives of their children and raise strong, confident and college educated children against overwhelming odds. Unfortunately, these examples and stories are not told despite the abundance of research that has documented the strengths and resilience of these families as in Robert Hill's book "Strengths of the Black Family."

We cannot argue our concern for the stability of urban poor minority children and not address the continuing injustice of the inequalities that exist in their schools due to the disparity in funding between schools that serve the wealthy and affluent and schools that serve minority poor children. In too many school systems across this country, poor children are being damaged and demoralized by having to receive their social and intellectual education in schools that are still segregated and unequal and lacking in the basic educational inputs that exist in our more affluent school systems.

Jonathan Kozol, in his book "Savage Inequalities-Children in America's Schools," presents a compelling account of the glaring inequalities in the inner city public school systems and how the resulting disparity limits the options of poor children and kills their hope and dreams and sabotages their opportunity for higher education.

In conclusion, if we leave poverty and inequality out of the equation in assessing what does psychological damage to poor minority children, we only have an incomplete analysis that does more damage to furthering the understanding of the plight of these children and what causes instability for them and their parent.

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