

Leave 'Leave it to Beaver' to Beaver

November 17, 2006 - American Prospect Online, by Ezra Klein

To momentarily take a breath from the election's aftermath and zoom back to the long view, there's some interesting research out of the Brookings-Princeton project "The Future of Children," on the impact of culture on poverty transmission.

In short, conservatives have two ideas on poverty. The first is that people should work. That was achieved in the 1996 welfare reform. The second is that they should get married. Post-welfare reform, that's been their focus. Nothing, they claim, is nearly so critical as marriage. So Charles Murray now preaches the gospel of Leave It To Beaver. The approach is a particularly elegant form of pandering: It denies the need for government action, reifies the Christian obsession with marriage, and insinuates that the poverty of poor blacks can be blamed on their insufficiently virtuous family structures. In other words, it's their fault.

Problem is, the evidence doesn't support the claims. There's plenty of data proving a correlation between marriage rates and better situations for children, but precious little proving that it is an effective bulwark against intergenerational poverty. Poverty isn't actually primarily intergenerational. Generally, poor kids don't grow up into poor adults, and poor adults don't start as poor kids. It's a problem epidemiologists often face: When evaluating a condition's spread, a small group at high risk may not be nearly so important as a large group at small risk. And that's the case here.

According to the National Education Longitudinal Study, eighth-graders living apart from their biological fathers have an expected poverty rate of 16.6 percent. Those in an intact family have an expected poverty rate of 9.9 percent. But that latter group is almost three times as large as the former one. As such, a deeply generous estimate -- one that assumes all fathers are, so to speak, equal and equally desirable, and that single-parent families aren't actually that way for a damn good reason -- suggests that eliminating single-parent families would lower poverty by a mere 16 percent. As such, marriage promotion, while a possible part of an eventual war on poverty, is totally insufficient. It's just not enough. The authors conclude that "to reduce poverty among future generations, there may be no substitute for a system of social insurance and income transfers." No, there probably isn't.

In a future post, I'll go through some of the study's other conclusions, including a troublesome one for liberals -- that economic integration achieved by moving poor families to richer areas does not, in fact, substantially improve outcomes for children. It's all depressing stuff. A behavioral or environmental silver bullet would be nice, but neat and tidy solutions tend to have impacts as limited as the remedies are simple.

*"Tapped" is The American Prospect Online's Editorial Blog.*