

# The Welfare State Did What Slavery Couldn't Do

*"The welfare state has done to black Americans what slavery couldn't do...And that is to destroy the black family."  
—Walter E. Williams, The Wall Street Journal*

On August 14, the Commission on Social Status of Black Men and Boys Act was [signed into law](#). It establishes a nineteen-member panel within the Commission on Civil Rights to examine social problems that disproportionately affect black males.

The act is a conscious response to the death of George Floyd, with the opening section of the bill being subtitled the "George Floyd and Walter Scott Notification Act." Floyd died on May 25 after a white police officer knelt on his neck for several minutes. Walter Scott died on April 4, 2015, after being shot by a white police officer who had stopped him for a broken brake light. Both have become symbols of police brutality against black males. Invoking them indicates that the new commission will focus on the disparity with which law enforcement and the court system treat black males.

Any spotlight shone on the neglected problem of discrimination against males deserves applause. Higher education is often used to illustrate how far the pendulum has swung from several decades ago, when discrimination against women was rife. A February 1 article in *Forbes*, "[The Collegiate War against Males](#)," commented on the recent decline in college enrollment. "Most of that fall...is concentrated among men. Between 2015 and 2019...the number of men on campuses declined by 691,643, almost double the smaller fall among women, 348,955. In percentage terms, the male decline of 8.34% was far more than double that among women, 3.18%....In 2015, there were 32% more women than men, but now the differential is nearly 40%." From [family](#)

[courts](#) to the handling of [sexual violence](#), from [protective laws](#) for women to harsh [prison sentencing](#) for men, the government unjustly advantages one gender over the other instead of treating all individuals equally under the same law.

The Commission on Social Status of Black Men and Boys is not likely to increase justice, however; it may well damage the cause it seems to champion.

There is reason for skepticism. A DC [Commission on Black Men and Boys](#) was established in 2001 by Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC), who also cochairs the [Congressional Caucus on Black Men and Boys](#). Predictably, Norton applauds the new act, because it “mandates government action to help improve the condition of African-American men and boys.” There are two takeaways from her comment: government will become more deeply involved in directing the lives of black males, and two decades of activity by the first commission has accomplished little.

The government mandate is unfortunate, for several reasons.

Improving the status and safety of anyone is laudable, but a number of problems exist with the bill’s approach. For one thing, social status refers to a person’s standing in a community. It refers to how highly others in society value a person. As long as people are nonviolent, the government has no business dictating what or whom they value. It is akin to mandating what people must think and feel, which is a matter of social control – not justice.

Moreover, the government can elevate the social status of a group only by changing their legal status and treatment. If the change makes all people equal under just law, then it is an improvement. If it elevates one class by harming the status of another class, then it is discriminatory and unjust on its face.

There are two basic ways that government can use the law to influence social status. It can remove any legal entitlements or disadvantages for categories of people and allow the status of each individual to rise or fall on its own. Or it can redistribute status – in a manner similar to redistributing wealth – by extending privileges and opportunities to one group while denying them to another; affirmative action in university admission is an example. The new commission will almost certainly take the latter path. And the disadvantaged category will almost certainly be white males. (Women are unlikely to be disadvantaged, because they are still viewed as “oppressed.”) If the new Commission follows the lead of Norton’s original one, it will make frequent comparisons between the status of black males and white ones as a way to “prove” racial inequity. If this happens, males will be divided into warring groups – black and white – with one category of males benefiting at the expense of the other, with the interests of both in conflict.

Another objection: the new commission tacitly accepts the idea that there is institutionalized racism in America. Although racist individuals and organizations certainly exist, America has overwhelmingly purged its institutions of anti-black bias. Racism is not systemic. In an article entitled “[Why Social Justice Warriors Battle ‘Institutional Racism,’](#)” the noted black economist Walter Williams, who teaches at George Mason University, speculated on the ill-defined terms *institutional racism* and *systemic racism*. He wrote, “I suspect it means that they cannot identify the actual person or entities engaged in the practice...And it is seen by many, particularly the intellectual elite, as a desirable form of determining who gets what.”

On the other hand, a clear-cut misandry or anti-male bias *does* exist in American institutions and culture. This is especially true of white heterosexual males, who politically lack the intersectional “advantage” of being a racial or sexual

minority. But the anti-male bias also applies to blacks who are disadvantaged simply because of their gender. In fighting this bias, they should find common cause with white males instead of being politically juxtaposed.

Yet another objection to the commission is that its members almost certainly accept “the legacy of slavery” as the cause of any racism in America. This means it will not address the single most powerful cause of black impoverishment: [the decline of the black family](#), for which government bears much responsibility. The black social theorist Thomas Sowell, who teaches at Stanford University, has written extensively on the decline of the black family. In his article “[A Legacy of Liberalism](#),” Sowell rejects the argument that current black impoverishment is the residue of slavery or due to inherent racism. He refers to “the legacy of slavery” argument as a reason not to think about the subject or rely on evidence, because it replaces research with an emotional reaction. “If we wanted to be serious about evidence,” Sowell observed, “we might compare where blacks stood a hundred years after the end of slavery with where they stood after 30 years of the liberal welfare state...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 1960s, the cold fact is that the poverty rate among blacks fell from 87 percent in 1940 to 47 percent by 1960. This was before any of those programs began.”

In his article “[The Legacy of the Welfare State](#),” Williams agreed. “The No. 1 problem among blacks is the effects stemming from a very weak family structure. Children from fatherless homes are likelier to drop out of high school, die by suicide, have behavioral disorders, join gangs, commit crimes and end up in prison. They are also likelier to live in poverty-stricken households. But is the weak black family a legacy of slavery?...Here’s my question: Was the increase in single-parent black families after 1960 a legacy of slavery,

or might it be a legacy of the welfare state ushered in by the War on Poverty?"

[In another article](#) Sowell answered, "A vastly expanded welfare state in the 1960s destroyed the black family, which had survived centuries of slavery and generations of racial oppression. In 1960, before this expansion of the welfare state, 22 percent of black children were raised with only one parent. By 1985, 67 percent of black children were raised with either one parent or no parent." The percentage [has held fairly steady](#) since then. And, statistically, the parent figure is usually a mother or a grandmother.

Being effectively fatherless can be devastating. The paper "[What Can the Federal Government Do to Decrease Crime and Revitalize Communities?](#)," issued by the U.S. Department of Justice, offered statistics on children from fatherless homes. The children account for:

- Suicide: 63 percent of youth suicides
- Runaways: 90 percent of all homeless and runaway youths
- Behavioral disorders: 85 percent of all children that exhibit behavioral disorders
- [High school dropouts](#): 71 percent of all high school dropouts
- Juvenile detention rates: 70 percent of juveniles in state-operated institutions
- Substance abuse: 75 percent of adolescent patients in substance abuse centers

Lawmakers do black people no favor when they advance a narrative that dismisses the importance of the family structure and offers instead dependence on government rather than independence as human beings. [As Williams stated](#), "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....The most damage done to black Americans is inflicted by those politicians, civil rights leaders and

academics who assert that every problem confronting blacks is a result of a legacy of slavery and discrimination. That's a vision that guarantees perpetuity for the problems."

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