

TV: 'CBS REPORTS' EXAMINES BLACK FAMILIES

By John Corry

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Television journalism may not exactly come of age tonight, but "The Vanishing Family - Crisis in Black America" is as close to maturity as we are likely to get. It should be seen; it demands to be seen. It plunges into an enormously important, culturally unpopular topic, and examines it with intelligence and grace. The two-hour program, a "CBS Reports," can be seen on Channel 2 at 9 P.M.

The topic - the disintegrating black family structure - came briefly on the American agenda in 1965. The Department of Labor issued "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," the so-called Moynihan Report. Its principal author, Senator Daniel P. Moynihan, then Assistant Secretary of Labor, argued that "the Negro family in the urban ghettos is crumbling."

Presciently he added, although few seemed to notice, "So long as this situation persists, the cycle of poverty and disadvantage will continue to repeat itself."

The Moynihan Report, criticized at the time as racist, found little favor. Even the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said that its bleak picture of black family life would be used to justify an argument for "innate Negro weakness." As a subject for respectable journalistic, political and academic discussion, the subject was virtually dead.

This "CBS Reports," though it never mentions the Moynihan Report, is resuming the old discussion. Therefore, it is fitting that the CBS correspondent should be Bill Moyers, who was Press Secretary for President Johnson when the report was issued. This is also prudent. Mr. Moyers, a certified liberal, is venturing into an area where conservatives are suspect. George Will, reporting the story, for example, would be discredited in advance.

Thus, Mr. Moyers begins by saying that "black teen-agers have the highest pregnancy rate in the industrial world, and in the black inner city practically no teen-age mother gets married."

Then "The Vanishing Family" visits Newark. Mr. Moyers listens to people talk. Clarinda Henderson, 17 years old, became pregnant at 15. "I wouldn't want no man holding me down," she says, "because I think I could make it as a single parent." The father of her child,

Darren Lyell, is 18. Mr. Moyers asks him if his friends were impressed when Miss Henderson had his daughter.

"Everybody was telling me, you know, that she look just like me," he says. "And, you know, kind of pretty, and make me feel good." Are his friends fathers, too? "That's all they be doing around here," Mr. Lyell replies. "Making babies and stuff. Making babies."

In fact, Miss Henderson's mother, who was a teen-ager when Miss Henderson was born, was also unmarried. Her mother, Miss Henderson's grandmother, was unmarried, too. It is worth noting here that when the Moynihan Report was issued, the white intellectuals who attacked it reached something like consensus: Black society was matriarchal; white middle-class values did not apply.

Carefully, however, the "CBS Reports" makes its point: A matriarchal society in urban America does not work. The absence of two parents encourages rootlessness. The question of white middle-class values is irrelevant; the climate of poverty, dependency and despair that the rootlessness breeds is not.

Even more carefully, meanwhile, the "CBS Reports" makes a secondary point: the social structure erected by the state can be counterproductive. Even the Moynihan Report skipped over this, although in recent years it has been discussed by some black academics. When does welfare assistance hinder rather than help? When does it destroy personal responsibility?

Mr. Moyers approaches this almost obliquely. He speaks to an unmarried 23-year-old woman who is the mother of two children and is expecting a third.

"I don't think I would have had the second two children," she says, "if I didn't think welfare was there. I don't like welfare because it makes me lazy." "It does?" Mr. Moyers says. "Yeah, it makes you lazy just to sit around and wait for a monthly check to come in," the young mother replies. "You know, I just like to work. I like money coming in every week or every two weeks."

Then Mr. Moyers talks to the father of her children. He is 26, and has fathered six children by four women. He has supported none of them. "Well, the majority of the mothers are welfare," he says briskly. "And welfare gives them the stipend for the month. So what I'm not doing, the Government does."

Note immediately that there are no negative racial stereotypes on "The Vanishing Family." Virtually everyone we see is attractive and intelligent. In part, this may reflect a cosmetic value: television is simply happier with attractive people.

At the same time, the people who put together the production - Perry Wolff, executive producer; Ruth C. Streeter, director-producer; Kate Roth Knull and Lionel Phillips, associate producers - have also been thoughtful. It's hard to dismiss the attractive, intelligent people in Newark as parasites or losers. Dr. King's old fear that material like this would uphold an argument for "innate Negro weakness" is groundless.

Certainly, what we see is distressing. Men who take no responsibility for their children are not edifying. Even Mr. Moyers, reasoned, nonjudgmental, once or twice seems ready to lose his temper. Nonetheless, much of what we see is also tremendously moving. A Newark mother, for example, returns to her birthplace in North Carolina. The sense of family solidarity there is strong; the contrast with Newark is heartbreaking.

The "CBS Reports" will conclude with a 30-minute panel discussion. One wishes it didn't, and simply allowed the program to speak for itself. The panelists will be the Rev. Jesse Jackson; Eleanor Holmes Norton, now a law professor at Georgetown University; Charles Knox, the Newark police director, and Glenn C. Loury of Harvard.

Mr. Loury, however, a conservative black economist, is one of the academics who has raised some of the issues. In a speech at the National Press Club in Washington last December, he criticized civil rights leaders for attributing all black problems to racism; he also criticized "those now in power in our Government" who blame "the failures of Great Society liberals" for all the problems. A new approach, he said, is needed.

Presumably, it is, and "The Vanishing Family - Crisis in Black America," which concludes with a moving peroration by a Newark social worker, Carolyn Wallace, is a starting point.

First Mr. Moyers, agreeing with Mrs. Wallace, says: "It's not right to have children out of wedlock, welfare needs to be changed, you've got take responsibility. Who's going to say these things to these kids?"

Mrs. Wallace tells Mr. Moyers to say it. He says, "They won't listen to me."

She replies: "It doesn't make any difference. You've got to say it anyway. They may not listen to me, either. But I'm saying if you say it in your corner, and I say it in my corner, and everybody's saying it, it's going to be like a drumbeat, and sooner or later it will sound."

"The Vanishing Family - Crisis in Black America," one of the best television reports in years, redeems television journalism.