

Structural Racism, Family Structure, & Black-White Inequality in Poverty: The Differential
Impact of the Legacy of Slavery among Single Mother & Married Parent Households

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To assess whether an indicator of structural racism—the legacy of slavery—impacts racial inequality in poverty among individuals within the same family structure.

Background: Family structure is a dominant explanation for racial inequality in poverty. This overemphasis on an “individual-level” variable results in relatively less attention to the role of structural factors. Yet, structural factors, like the legacy of slavery, may be key to understanding how race and family structure intersect in the context of poverty.

Method: We use data from the Luxembourg Income Study, the American Community Survey, and the Historical 1860 Census. Multilevel models link individual- and state-level data and separate models focus on counties. We assess whether a proxy of the legacy of slavery (i.e. the historical concentration of enslaved people in 1860) relates to Black-White inequality in poverty among single mother households and among married with children households in the U.S. South.

Results: There is an impact of the legacy of slavery on Black-White inequality in poverty even within family type, but the legacy of slavery appears to be more consequential for married with children households than single mother households. Among married parent households, the racial gap in poverty is more pronounced where the legacy of slavery is stronger.

Conclusion: Results suggests the link between family structure and racial inequality in poverty is overstated and more indirect, operating—at least partially—through structural racism

Implications: This study challenges the perception of marriage as an anti-poverty mechanism. It also underscores the limitations of viewing family structure from an individual-level perspective when explaining racial inequality. Local manifestations of structural racism are part of how family structure matters for inequality in poverty

Keywords: *disparities, family structure, inequality, marriage, poverty, race*

Reskin (2012:26) accurately summarized a pressing issue that continues to plague America: “today, in virtually every realm for which evidence exists—from the bottom to the top of the socioeconomic hierarchy—Whites remain better off, on average, than Blacks.” One of the most enduring of these socioeconomic racial disparities is the disproportionate share of poor families that are Black. Compared to White families, Black families are over two times more likely to live in poverty, and this disparity has persisted for decades (Sullivan & Ziegert, 2021).

When it comes to understanding racial inequality in poverty in the U.S., scholars and policy makers have emphasized differences in family structure among Black and White families. This is largely due to the fact that poverty rates are higher among single-mother families as opposed to married-parent families and a disproportionate share of Black families are represented among single-mother families (Damaske, Bratter, & Frech, 2017). Research has thus identified single motherhood as a mechanism for the reproduction of poverty (McLanahan, 1985; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008) that contributes to Black-White inequality in poverty (Iceland, 2019; Rendall, Weden, & Brown, 2021; Sullivan & Ziegert, 2021). Relatedly, studies have emphasized the economic benefits that marriage provides for families relative to single parent families (e.g., Amato & Maynard, 2007; Thomas & Sawhill, 2002; Waite, 1995). Consequently, both poverty scholarship and policy debates have highlighted marriage as a solution for poverty reduction and economic stability in families with children (AEI-Brookings, 2015, 2022; Amato & Maynard, 2007). At the same time, research demonstrates the impact of marriage on child poverty has declined over time, and employment, not marriage, is more consequential for child poverty (Baker, 2015) and Black-White poverty inequality (Baker et al., 2021; Thiede et al., 2017). Therefore, although it is true that family structure is an important poverty correlate, its

causal power is overstated, and this overemphasis on family structure often comes at the cost of acknowledging the external structural factors involved.

We argue that identifying how structural mechanisms (i.e., macro-level systems and social institutions) interact with family structure is key to understanding the mechanisms that link different family compositions to greater and lower likelihoods of living in poverty. We build this argument based on prior research indicating the impact of family structure is not the same for everyone: single motherhood does not yield the same adverse consequences, and marriage does not have the same benefits, particularly when examining differences across racialized groups (e.g., Bryant et al., 2010; Cross, 2020; Williams & Baker, 2021). The disparate impact of family structure on poverty suggests broader structural forces are at play, which is consistent with research that underscores the importance of factors beyond the individual in the perpetuation of poverty and inequality (see Brady, 2019; Rank, 2005; Williams, 2019).

This study advances the literature on family structure and racial inequality in poverty by examining connections to structural racism. In particular, we examine the impact of structural racism rooted in the historical institution of slavery (i.e., the legacy of slavery) in the context of the American South. As a proxy for the contemporary structural racism associated with the legacy of slavery, studies have examined the historical concentration of enslaved persons—the percent of the total population enslaved in 1860—in connection with contemporary outcomes. For instance, scholars have demonstrated the persistence of slavery's racist legacy on Black-White inequalities in poverty (O'Connell, 2012), economic mobility (Berger, 2018), and White socioeconomic gains (Reece, 2020). We extend prior work on the legacy of slavery and connect it to literature on family structure by considering how the legacy of slavery relates to racial inequality in poverty across distinct family types. Specifically, we ask: is Black-White inequality

in poverty amplified by the legacy of slavery among single-mother and married-parent households? Consistent with previous research on the legacy of slavery, we focus our analyses on the South, where the practice of chattel slavery was the most concentrated. However, the connection between the (southern) legacy of slavery and structural racism makes the implications of this research applicable to broader debates and research conducted using national datasets. There are many forms of structural racism, some of which are more prevalent in the non-South (e.g., sundown towns, redlining, predatory and residential segregation; see especially Loewen, 2005; O’Connell, 2019, Rothstein, 2017; Taylor, 2019). Although we have elected to focus on the legacy of slavery in this paper, the argument should be applied to other manifestations of structural racism in future research, particularly those that can be measured throughout the U.S.

Our study uniquely combines the individual-level focus traditionally used in past studies of poverty, race, and families with the primarily county-level, place based approach used in legacy of slavery studies. To do so, we employ both a multilevel analysis linking individual- and state-level data and a separate county-level analysis. We examine the relationship between the 1860 enslaved population and Black-White inequality among two separate groups—individuals living in single-mother households and those living in married headed households with children. We find there is an impact of the legacy of slavery on Black-White inequality in poverty even within family type, but the legacy of slavery appears to be more consequential for married with children households than in single mother households. The poverty-reducing impact of marriage is greater for White relative to Black households where the legacy of slavery is stronger, which suggests the reasons why marriage is protective—in any context—is due to external factors rather than marriage itself. This adds to the evidence of a contemporary legacy of slavery, but more importantly suggests the impact of family structure on poverty (and inequality in poverty)

is overstated and more indirect than previously recognized. Local manifestations of structural racism are part of how family matters for poverty and inequality. This study thus advances our understanding of the enduring racial inequality in poverty among families and underscores the salience of structural mechanisms, such as those associated with historical context, in perpetuating this inequality.

BACKGROUND/THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Family Structure, Race, and Poverty

Scholars and policy makers have long placed heavy emphasis on differences in family structure among Black and White families as a “cause” for the enduring racial inequality in poverty. In the 1920s and 1930s, sociologists developed a theory of “Negro pathology” positing Black women’s perpetual unwed motherhood was the cause of Black family instability (Roberts, 1999). This coincided with growing concern regarding the “fundamental transformation of the American family since the 1960s” marked by the decline in marriage and dramatic rise of non-marital births (Cherlin, 2010:146). That this trend occurred when nearly half of single mothers were living in poverty was deemed the “new American dilemma” (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986). Subsequent studies have found women who have had a nonmarital birth are substantially more likely to be poor (e.g., Lichter, Graefe, & Brown, 2003; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). Given a disproportionate share of non-marital births occurs in Black families (Sweeney & Raley, 2014), and Black single mothers consistently have among the highest poverty rates (Damaske, Bratter, & Frech, 2017), the focus on family structure has had substantial implications for the study of racial inequality in poverty.

For example, Eggebeen and Lichter (1991) concluded that higher rates of single motherhood among Black women has exacerbated Black-White disparities in poverty since

1960. Several studies have since examined the link between family structure and racial inequality in poverty (e.g., Iceland, 2019; Lichter et al., 2003; McLanahan, 1985; Thiede et al., 2017; Sullivan & Zigeart, 2021). This has culminated in recent studies that found a high prevalence of single motherhood accounts for the largest share of the Black-White poverty gap (Iceland, 2019; Sullivan & Zigeart, 2021). The result, even if unintended, has been a perpetuation of the idea that Black poverty is the product of individual choices rather than structural factors, such as racism (Williams, 2019). The trends are undeniable. Yet, we question the interpretation of such results, as they rarely consider whether the impact of family structure on poverty varies by race. This is a critical avenue of recent research because it challenges perspectives that treat marriage and family structure as an entity that operates independently of race and broader social institutions.

Racial Disparities in the Impact of Family Structure

A rich literature has examined the relationship between family structure and racial inequality in poverty. Yet, relatively fewer studies have examined variation in the impact of family structure across different racial groups. Fortunately, there has been a growing literature examining racial disparities in how family structure impacts socioeconomic factors. In an early study, Lichter et al. (2003) found that although getting and staying married is associated with economic advantages for unwed mothers and women more generally, large racial differences persist. Even if Black women had similar family backgrounds and rates of marriage and unwed childbearing as White women, they still would have had poverty rates over twice as high (Lichter et al., 2003). Relatedly, a more recent study by Williams & Baker (2021) examined various economic, health, and social risk factors associated with poverty (e.g., economic hardship, unemployment, adverse health conditions, and low social support) and found that Black and Latinx mothers experience higher penalties from poverty risk factors than White mothers,

regardless of family structure. In fact, they found that among married mothers, the probability of poverty for White women with 3 or more poverty risk factors is equal to that of Black women with *zero* (Williams & Baker, 2021).

Other studies demonstrate the racially differentiated impact of family structure on additional socioeconomic outcomes. For instance, while marriage is associated with greater economic resources, the ability to pool resources and accumulate wealth in marriage differs by race. White women experience greater economic returns to marriage in terms of wealth generation and upward mobility than do Black women (Addo & Lichter, 2013; Blackwell & Lichter, 2000; Shapiro, Meschede, & Osoro, 2013). Studies also show variation in the outcomes that family structure has for children. For instance, marriage appears to provide more material advantages to White children than to Black or Latinx children (Manning & Brown, 2006). Yet, research also has shown single motherhood has a more adverse impact on the educational outcomes of White children than Black children, which suggests “the experience of single-parenthood for white children has limited generalizability to black children, as the two groups may adjust differently to life in a single-parent family” (Cross, 2020:708).

Altogether, the findings from the aforementioned studies challenge prevailing notions that certain behaviors (e.g., getting married, avoiding non-marital childbearing) will lead to similar outcomes across racialized groups. In particular, the disparate impact of family structure for families along racial lines suggests that broader structural forces are at play. Scholars argue such findings are in line with a racial stratification perspective, and “reflect a long racist history of human subjugation” (Williams & Baker, 2021:18). Racial inequalities are manifestations of underlying structural processes (Williams, 2019), and we argue research on families and inequality could benefit from incorporating this perspective.

Structural Mechanisms of Inequality across Families

Research well-documented structural factors that significantly impact families and subsequent racial inequality. For instance, Black individuals are more likely to face discrimination in all facets of the labor market (Reskin, 2012), which can adversely impact Black families' ability to generate income and accumulate wealth to avoid or combat poverty. Moreover, Black married couple families, in particular, may be less likely than their White counterparts to reap the benefits of having two earners because of the potential "double-disadvantage" of having two spouses who are Black and face racism in employment. Similarly, discrimination in the housing market and residential racial segregation (Korver-Glenn, 2021; Taylor, 2017) not only adversely impacts Black families' ability to accumulate wealth, but also their ability to leverage the bundle of goods (e.g., job opportunities, schools, services, community resources) that housing provides—goods that can have a strong economic impact for families. Other U.S. institutions are steeped in racism and differentially affect Black and White families as well. Consider, for example, the welfare and criminal legal systems. Race is strongly associated with welfare perceptions and support (Johnson, 2003), spending, implementation (Brown, 2013; Parolin, 2019), and sanctioning (Schram et al., 2009), all to the disadvantage of Black families. Black individuals are also subject to racial profiling within the criminal legal system, more likely to be charged and arrested for a crime, face higher bail costs and longer average sentence lengths, and are less likely to get out on parole (Sentencing Project, 2018). The socioeconomic impact of incarceration is thus particularly salient for Black families who are disproportionately affected by the criminal legal system (Western & Pettit, 2010; Miller 2021). Despite these real consequences outlined above, existing racial inequality scholarship examining the role of family structure typically does not adequately account for the impact of structural

mechanisms outside the family. We contribute to existing literature by examining the role of structural racism.

Structural Racism

Structural racism involves “macrolevel systems, social forces, institutions, ideologies, and processes that interact with one another to generate and reinforce inequities among racial and ethnic groups” (Gee & Ford, 2011). Although racism and hence racial inequality occurs at all levels of society (from the individual/micro to the structural/macro), structural racism emphasizes the highly influential role of macrolevel structures, in particular (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Gee & Ford 2011). Specifically, racism is so deeply embedded in macrolevel structures that the impact of structural racism is consequential, despite the role of individuals (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). However, the systemic nature of structural racism does affect the actions, views, attitudes, and emotions of individual actors (Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Thus, the significance of structural racism cannot be understated. It is a necessary factor to consider when examining the link between family structure and racial inequality in poverty. This is especially in light of recent research demonstrating differential probabilities of facing poverty, even within the same family type (Williams & Baker, 2021). We build on this literature by connecting it with research on the structural racism associated with the legacy of slavery.

In this study, we focus on the institutional aspect of structural racism. A rich literature underscores how racism, and thus racial inequalities, are (re)produced and maintained in societal institutions (see Golash-Boza, 2016; Bonilla-Silva 1997; Feagin, 2014; Ray, 2029). According to Bonilla-Silva (1997:476) “racial practices that reproduce racial inequality in contemporary America are embedded in normal operations of institutions.” The structural mechanisms we discussed above (i.e., the labor market, housing market, welfare state, and criminal legal system),

and others (e.g., education, health system), are examples of contemporary institutions that are sources of structural racism. Broadly, “[i]nstitutions reflect the residue of the power of collective actors in the past, and institutions continue to be consequential even without active maintenance by collective actors (Brady, 2019:164). Thus, even after being formal dismantled, institutions can leave legacies through the reproduction of material-resources and cultural conditions that result from the institution having been in place (Ruef & Fletcher, 2003). In particular, institutions that are racially oppressive have harmful effects that are not only immediately felt, but also exhibit great persistence (Feagin, 2014). Thus, historically racially oppressive institutions and their enduring effects, which reflect structural racism, can be particularly salient for understanding contemporary racial inequalities. The institution of slavery is a prime example.

A Historical Institutional Mechanism of Structural Racism: The Legacy of Slavery

Scholars have contended that slavery was a racialized state policy that served as an institutionalized mechanism of racial inequality (Biggs & Andrews, 2015; Omi & Winant, 2014). Not only was slavery a cruel institution of domination and exploitation (Du Bois, 1903), it solidified social divisions that would continue to influence U.S. race relations over time (Omi & Winant, 2014). Slavery also severely limited Black families’ abilities to generate income and accumulate wealth (Oliver & Shapiro, 2013). Hence, the legacy of slavery for contemporary outcomes has been of growing scholarly interest to scholars (e.g., Acharya, Blackwell, & Sen, 2016; Berger, 2018; Bertocchi & Dimico, 2012; Curtis & O’Connell, 2017; Gabriel et al., 2021; Gottlieb & Flynn, 2021; Kramer et al., 2017; O’Connell, 2012; Reece, 2020; Reece & O’Connell, 2016; Vandiver, Giacompassi, & Lofquist, 2006; Zajonc, 2003).

As a proxy for local manifestations of the legacy of slavery, most studies have measured the historical concentration of enslaved people in 1860—the last decennial census year for which

there is a record of chattel slavery before it was formally abolished in 1865. The 1860 census also provides data for the largest number of counties (Gouda & Rigterink, 2017). Scholars employ the historical concentration of enslaved people to reflect the extent to which a place was reliant on enslaved labor, which is suggestive of the extent to which the system of slavery was/is embedded in local institutions (see especially O’Connell, 2012; Reece, 2020; for exceptions see Vandiver et al., 2006; Zajonc, 2003).

The legacy of slavery is—by and large—conceptualized as an institutional legacy, which refers to the “reproduction of material resources and cultural conditions of the social institution despite its formal deinstitutionalization” (Chandler 2010: 917). This means that the legacy of slavery is a component of contemporary society despite its origins in an institution that was formally dismantled over 160 years ago.

Scholars provide evidence of the enduring salience of the legacy of slavery for various outcomes including voting behavior (Acharya et al., 2016), inequality in socioeconomic mobility (Berger, 2018), and even declines in heart disease mortality (Kramer et al., 2017). Research has identified some damaging outcomes for Whites (e.g., Vandiver et al., 2006) and/or all residents in southern places with strong historical connections to slavery (e.g. Berger, 2018; Levernier and White, 1998). However, the dominant theme is one of White advantage (see especially Gabriel et al., 2021; Reece 2020) and greater Black-White inequality (e.g. Gottlieb & Flynn 2021; Kramer et al., 2017; O’Connell 2012; Reece & O’Connell, 2016), both of which are seen across a variety of outcomes, including those related to health, the criminal legal system, poverty, and education. Critically, the empirical evidence suggestive of a legacy of slavery is robust to extensive contemporary and historical controls (e.g., Acharya et al., 2016; Gabriel et al., 2021; Gottlieb & Flynn, 2021), in addition to methods that attempt to isolate a causal relationship using cotton

suitability as an instrumental variable (Acharya et al., 2016; Berger, 2018; Bertocchi & Dimico, 2012; Gottlieb & Flynn, 2021). For example, O’Connell (2012) demonstrated the relationship between local slave concentration in 1860 and Black-White poverty inequality in Southern counties, independent of contemporary demographic and economic conditions, racialized wealth disparities, and racial threat. Additionally, Gottlieb and Flynn (2021) find dramatic inequalities in how felony cases are treated (e.g. exacerbated disparities in sentence length) to the advantage of Whites in connection to the historical concentration of enslaved people, even after instrumenting on the suitability of cotton growing conditions. Modern inequalities, especially racial inequality, cannot be fully understood without a knowledge of the historical foundations that support them (Williams, 2019).

The Current Study: Legacy of Slavery, Family Structure, and Racial Inequality in Poverty

While both the existing literature on poverty in families and the legacy of slavery have made valuable contributions to scholarship on racial inequality in poverty, new insights can be gained by integrating these two research areas. For instance, one implication of research demonstrating variation in the economic returns to different family structures by race is that racism shapes how family relates to poverty (Williams & Baker, 2021). However, we can provide more direct evidence on this point by assessing whether indicators of structural racism, like the legacy of slavery, impact racial inequality differently, even within a given family type.

We focus our analysis of the relationship between a proxy of the legacy of slavery—the percent of the enslaved population in 1860—and racial disparities in poverty on the two types of family structures that have dominated scholarly and policy discussions: single-mother households and married couple with children households. We note there may be differences in the relevance of the legacy of slavery across family types due to how the institutionalized

mechanisms intersect with family. However, we center our analysis on whether the legacy of slavery enhances racial inequality within either family type, essentially holding family type constant. This allows us to address the theoretical question underlying recent developments in the poverty literature (Baker et al. 2021; Williams & Baker, 2021): should family structure be considered an independent explanation for poverty, or is its influence better explained by external factors, like structural racism? As a result, we consider the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Places with higher concentrations of enslaved people in 1860 will exhibit greater racial inequality in poverty among single-mother households and/or married with children households. Accordingly, we expect a positive and significant interaction between the 1860 enslaved population and being Black in the focal, multilevel analyses.

In contrast to our expectations, it is possible that the within-family type racialized differentials in poverty found in previous research (Williams & Baker, 2021) are consistent across place, regardless of local connections to the legacy of slavery. This would suggest the mechanisms producing enhanced disadvantage for Black single-mother households and reduced advantage among Black married households are not tied to this form of structural racism, and may be more universal in nature. Under this scenario, we would predict the following:

Hypothesis 2: Places will have similar levels of Black-White inequality in poverty among single-mother and married with children households, regardless of the historical concentration of enslaved people in 1860. While we expect a positive relationship between race and poverty among single-mother and married with children households, there would be no interaction with the legacy of slavery and race.

Distinguishing between these two possibilities will provide critical guidance for future research and policy development by indicating the connections between family structure and structural racism when understanding economic outcomes.

METHODS

Our research question draws together research on poverty, families, and the legacy of slavery. The literature on poverty and families has traditionally had analysis with an individual-

level focus (e.g., Amato & Maynard, 2007; Eggebeen & Lichter, 1991; Lichter et al., 2003; McLanahan, 1985; Thomas & Sawhill, 2002). Yet, the legacy of slavery literature has taken a primarily county-level, place-based analytical approach (e.g., Acharya et al., 2016; Kramer et al., 2017; O’Connell, 2012; Reece, 2020; Reece & O’Connell, 2016). In this study, we develop two sets of analyses based on these traditions that overcome limitations in the available data: 1) a multilevel analysis linking individual- and state-level data, and 2) a county-level analysis.

Individual-Level Data

For our individual-level analyses, we rely on data from the Luxembourg Income Study (LIS). The LIS is a cross-national archive of historically harmonized, nationally representative individual-level datasets. For the U.S., the LIS uses the March Current Population Survey (CPS). The LIS cleans the data and creates a new set of standardized variables. The compelling advantage of the LIS over the underlying CPS is the high quality and significantly improved income measures that comprehensively incorporate taxes and transfers. Because we are interested in contemporary inequality, we use the 2015-2019 U.S. LIS datasets to coincide with our secondary analyses using county-level data.

We limit our sample to individuals residing in non-Latinx White and non-Latinx Black households in the South as defined by the U.S. Census. The South is an appropriate focus for our analysis because historical reliance on enslaved labor was concentrated in the South, and the system of slavery—and therefore its institutional consequences—was distinct in the South compared to the non-South (Berlin, 1998). We include 15 states: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. We exclude Oklahoma, for which there is no census data on the enslaved population given it was not yet a state in 1860. We also exclude

Washington D.C., an extreme and highly influential outlier in the state-level analysis. It does not have the same effect in the county-level analysis, but we exclude it there, too, for consistency.

Our unit of analysis is individuals in households. We divide our data into two sub-samples—individuals living in single mother-headed households and individuals living in married headed households with children. We define single-mother households as households headed by an unmarried, single mother who resides with her own children under the age of 18. If a mother is unmarried, but cohabitating with a partner, she is still categorized as single. Conversely, we define married headed with children households as those with a married head of household whose own children under the age of 18 reside in the household. This yields a sample of 22,006 individuals in single-mother households and 84,979 individuals in married headed households with children. The total sample N is 106,985.

Our use of these two sub-samples simplifies our analysis while still allowing us to address a complex theoretical question—whether the differential relationship between family structure and poverty for Black and White households is enhanced by aspects of structural racism, like the legacy of slavery. This would ideally be addressed using a model that pools all Black and White households and includes a three-way interaction among race, family structure, and the legacy of slavery. However, due to the cumbersome nature of interpreting a three-way interaction, we have elected to use sub-samples to achieve the same statistical end. The setup of our data—with our use of family structure sub-samples instead of race sub-samples—allows us to maintain a direct statistical test of differences by race, which we see as more fundamental to our structural racism argument than differences between family structures. Results stratifying by race are consistent with the interpretation we present below regarding family structure, yet we prefer to center on racial inequality, particularly given our attention to structural racism. We

stress that our analytical approach—while seemingly disconnected from our theoretical motivation—still provides insight into the dynamics surrounding why family structure relates to poverty by examining the legacy-inequality relationship within the isolated contexts of single-motherhood and marriage.

Individual-Level Analyses Measures

The dependent variable is racial inequality in *poverty*. We follow prior poverty research using LIS data (Baker, 2015; Chen and Corak, 2008; Parolin, 2019; Rainwater and Smeeding, 2003), and employ a standard relative poverty measure in which all individuals are categorized as poor if they are living in households with total post-tax, post-transfer incomes that are below 50 percent of the national median household income. We calculate household income using the standardized LIS variable, disposable household income (DHI). DHI includes cash and noncash income after taxes and transfers, including food stamps, housing allowances, tax credits, and near cash benefits. We equalize our income measure of DHI, meaning that we adjust for household size by dividing by the square root of the number of household members. DHI is a leading international standard for comprehensive income (Smeeding 2016), and thus our relative measure based on DHI provides a more defensible alternative to the official poverty measure (OPM). The OPM is based on gross pre-tax income and excludes near-cash and in-kind benefits, thus it does not provide a comprehensive measure of true income. The OPM is also outdated, has a threshold that is commonly understood to be too low, and underestimates poverty (Rainwater and Smeeding 2003) and material hardship (Rodems and Shaefer 2020).

Given our interest in racial inequality in poverty by family structure and how the legacy of slavery impacts this relationship, our key independent variable is race. We measure race using a binary variable indicating whether the individual is Non-Latinx *White* (reference) or Non-

Latinx *Black*. In particular, we focus on the interaction of race with the legacy of slavery. Consistent with prior research, we use the historical concentration of enslaved people in 1860 as a proxy for the contemporary structural racism associated with the legacy of slavery. The historical reliance on enslaved labor is suggestive of the extent to which the system of slavery was/is embedded in local institutions (see especially O’Connell, 2012; Reece, 2020). In the individual-level analyses, we use a state-level measure of the *total enslaved population* from the 1860 U.S. Census. The state is the lowest level of geography to which we can attach the individual-level LIS data.

Following prior poverty studies, our models adjust for a range of other independent variables (e.g. Baker, 2015; Brady et al., 2013; Parolin, 2019; Rainwater & Smeeding 2003). To measure additional aspects of family composition, we include measures of the *number of children* and the presence of *adults over 65* in the household. Binary indicators measure the age of the household head (*under 25, age 25-34, age 35 to 44, age 44 to 54 (reference), age 65 to 74, and age over 74*). To measure educational attainment, we include binary variables indicating whether the head of the household has *less than a high school education, a high school diploma/GED or some college (reference) or a college degree*. Binary measures indicate household *non-employment* (no employed household members) and presence of *multiple earners* as well as *rural residence* and whether the head of household is *foreign-born*. Models also include five binary controls reflecting each year from 2015 (reference) to 2019.

Individual-Level Analyses

We begin our analyses by summarizing key descriptive results (i.e. poverty rates across family structure, by race), and testing whether these differences are statistically significant using

t-tests. Second, we examine the bivariate relationship of the 1860 enslaved population and the Black-White poverty gap in the South from 2015-2019 for individuals in single-mother households and then individuals in married with children households. Scatterplots provide a visual depiction of the strength of these linear relationships. Third, we employ multilevel regression to examine the relationship between the legacy of slavery and Black-White inequality in poverty among individuals in single-mother and married headed households. In the online appendix, we estimated the main analyses for the heads of household to address the potential of multiple individuals of the same household being included in the same sample, and the results were consistent.

In this study, individuals are nested in states meaning that individuals within the same state may be more similar to each other than individuals living in other states in ways that are related to their poverty status. Multilevel modeling adjusts for this potential correlation of characteristics among residents of the same state. A multilevel modeling strategy also allows for us to test whether historical slave concentration impacts the Black-White poverty gap net of household characteristics. In our multilevel analyses, we use a binary measure of the head of household's race to indicate the extent of inequality net of other factors, and the interaction between that variable and the state-level legacy of slavery variable demonstrates how the legacy of slavery affects Black-White inequality. The interaction provides the means to assess whether a stronger legacy of slavery exacerbates the differential connection between race and poverty within a given family type in that state, as indicated by a positive interaction coefficient.

Multilevel analyses with binary dependent variables typically employ multilevel logit models, but given issues comparing coefficients across logit models or groups in logit models (See Karlson, Holm, & Breen, 2012; Mood, 2010), we employ linear probability models (LPMs)

for our multilevel analyses for more straightforward interpretation and comparison of coefficients (Mood, 2010). Our use of contiguous geographic units as our level-2 unit of analysis gives us reason to be concerned about spatial autocorrelation in our level-2 residuals (see O'Connell 2015). Unfortunately, we were unable to formally test for this form of autocorrelation among our residuals due to limitations of the remote server where the LIS data are housed. However, we are able to test the residuals in our county-level analyses and find no evidence of spatial autocorrelation (described below), which gives us more confidence in our multilevel models despite not having a separate test.

These LPMs adjust for the abovementioned independent variables. However, we note that these are not “control variables” in the traditional sense, as several plausibly mediate the relationship between the legacy of slavery and poverty. We only present the full models since they are most consistent for our theoretical focus, but we compared the presented results with those from a model with just race, the legacy of slavery, and the interaction. We find similar estimates in those models, but there are some reductions in magnitude suggesting the legacy of slavery operates partially through some of the proximate determinants in our model (available upon request).

Although there are benefits to employing a multilevel analysis of individuals nested in states, one limitation in this case is that the second-level consists of data at the state-level. States are the smallest unit for which geographic identifiers are available, which are necessary for conducting multi-level analyses that connect people to places. However, states are not monolithic entities. There is much variation within states with regard to the historical concentration of slavery, even among states that are traditionally characterized as having a uniformly strong connection to the institution. Alabama and Mississippi exhibit two of the widest ranges in the

historical concentration of enslaved labor: Alabama has a county low of 3% and a high of 78%, while Mississippi has higher concentrations that range from 12% to 93%, but both states have a standard deviation above 20 percentage-points. Our multilevel individual-state models cannot capture these differences across counties, which may be consequential for examining the relationship between the legacy of slavery and Black-White inequality in poverty by family structure to the extent to which the mechanisms are embedded in local institutions (see e.g. Acharya et al., 2016; O’Connell, 2012; Zajonc, 2003).

County-level Data

In a secondary analysis, we use county-level data to further assess the relationships identified in the individual-level data and address the limitation of using a state-level measure of attachment to slavery in our primary analysis. Paralleling the individual-level analysis, female-headed families are defined as households with a female household head, no spouse present, and children under the age of 18 who are related to the household head. Married couple households with children include all households where the householder is married and has children present who are under the age of 18. There are 1,075 southern counties included in our analysis of single-mother household poverty, and 1,087 counties for our analysis of poverty among married households with children. The number of observations differs between the two sub-groups due to there being differing counties with a resident Black population that meets the family structure requirements described above. Results are consistent when focusing on counties that are available for both analyses. An advantage of counties—as opposed to other sub-state geographic units—is that they are associated with socio-political structures that are relevant to understanding racial and family dynamics (e.g., county-level court systems, school districts, and labor markets; also see Irwin 2007 and Petersen and Ward 2015).

We rely on county-level data from the American Community Survey (ACS) for this portion of the analysis. Decennial census estimates stopped including information on poverty status (among other social outcomes) after the year 2000. Despite the limitations of the ACS, it is the best available source for aggregate estimates of Black-White poverty inequality. In order to cover all counties in the U.S. South—regardless of population size—we use the 5-year period estimates for 2015-2019. These were the most recent estimates at the time of our analysis. This is also the same period covered by our individual-level data.

County-Level Measures

As with our individual-level analysis, our county-level analyses focus on the concentration of poverty among female-headed families and married couple households with children. We measure the concentration of poverty within these two different family types at the county-level using the number of poor female-headed families relative to the total number of female-headed families for Blacks and Whites, separately. We create the same kind of measure for married couple households with children. This concentration of poverty measure allows us to estimate the “likelihood” of poverty at the aggregate level. The estimate of Black-White poverty inequality uses the difference between the Black and White measures of poverty concentration in each family type. Positive values reflect greater Black-White inequality to the advantage of Whites. We tested a ratio measure of inequality that provides similar results, but the statistical distribution is skewed making it less ideal than the difference measure for statistical analyses.

We estimate county-level poverty using the OPM. As we discussed above, there are numerous limitations of the OPM, but this is the best available measure of economic insecurity for our purposes. Alternative measures of poverty are available at the county-level, but not by race and family structure, which are key to our study. Fortunately, our primary analysis relies on

a more comprehensive poverty measure. The combination of our two analyses provides more complete coverage against the limitations of the available data.

County-Level Analyses

Our focus is on the extent to which the legacy of slavery relates to Black-White poverty inequality within different family structures. Analyses within the legacy of slavery literature frequently include additional covariates that reflect the dominant explanations for the outcome of interest to help isolate the focal relationship. Unfortunately, there are no variables available at the county-level that parallel the individual covariates included in our primary analysis. For example, we could include Black and White employment rates, but not the employment rates of Black and White families of differing family structures. The consequence is that this portion of our analysis will demonstrate the overall relationship without accounting for potential mediating outcomes (e.g. differential employment outcomes).

We use correlation coefficients with tests for statistical significance and a regression model with state fixed effects to assess whether the legacy of slavery relates to the differential concentration of poverty among Black and White families. Fortunately, our setup of the data—namely our use of a concentration measure of poverty and sub-samples for family type—mimics the interaction used in the individual-level analysis so that we can focus exclusively on the binary relationship without needing to use an interaction directly. We focus on the binary relationship rather than trying to identify a causal relationship, as has been done in previous research using an instrumental variable approach (see especially Acharya et al., 2016; Berger, 2018; Bertocchi & Dimico, 2012; Gottlieb & Flynn, 2021). This is because previous research demonstrates the relationship is robust, and more complex modeling strategies are unnecessary to meet our objectives. We aim to contribute to theory on family poverty by demonstrating

whether the local context of institutionalized racism (e.g., the legacy of slavery) shapes our understanding of how family status relates to poverty.

Similar to our use of all southern states, our use of all southern counties raises questions about the presence of spatial autocorrelation in our model residuals. As alluded to above, we test for this possibility using a Queen contiguity spatial weights matrix and the Moran's I statistic. We find no evidence of spatial autocorrelation (i.e., the statistic is .01 or less and non-significant), and confirmed results are consistent when estimating a spatial error model, which accounts for any unobserved processes that manifest spatially. As a result, we report standard correlation and regression coefficients estimated in Stata because the added complexity of a spatial modeling approach is excessive. We estimate one set of estimates for Black-White inequality in the concentration of poverty among female-headed families; and one for the concentration of poverty among married households with children. We supplement these statistical estimates with maps of each dependent variable.

RESULTS

Descriptive Individual Results

Table 1 displays sample characteristics. As expected, there are differences in poverty by race and family structure. The poverty rates for Black and White individuals in single mother households are 48.4% and 35.6%, respectively. These rates are higher than those for individuals living in married with children households, whose rates of poverty are 13.7% (Black) and 8.2% (White). The Black-White poverty gap (12.6 percentage points) for individuals in single mother households is twice as high as those in married headed households (5.5 percentage points), and these differences are statistically significant. It is notable that a gap among those in married

households exists at all, especially given the attention marriage receives when explaining poverty and poverty inequality in particular.

Among those living in single mother headed households, the Black-White poverty gap ranges from a high of 21.1% (North Carolina) to a low of 4.9% (Kentucky). Among those in married headed households with children, the Black-White poverty gaps are much smaller. Louisiana has the highest gap (12.5%), whereas North Carolina has the smallest gap (0.9%).

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

State-Level Bivariate Analysis

Figure 1 displays the state-level bivariate relationships between the enslaved population in 1860 and Black-White inequality in poverty among individuals living in single mother households (Panel A) and those in married households with children (Panel B). In contrasting the two scatter plots, a few things are of note. First, Black-White inequality in poverty is higher among those living in single mother households than those in married households with children. Second, there is greater variation in the levels of Black-White inequality among those in single mother households. Third, there is a positive linear association between the proportion of the population enslaved and Black-White inequality for both family types, but the relationship is more pronounced for married families.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

To elaborate on this third point, among those living in single mother households, there is a weak, positive correlation ($r=.27$; $p=0.332$). Some states with the highest enslaved populations have rather high Black-White poverty gaps (e.g. MS, SC, GA), yet, some states with relatively small enslaved populations (e.g. Delaware, West Virginia, and Maryland) have larger Black-White poverty gaps than states with larger enslaved populations (e.g. Alabama and Virginia).

Among those in married households with children, there is a moderate, positive association between enslaved population and Black-White inequality in poverty ($r=.50$, $p=.0563$). States with a higher enslaved population tend to have relatively high inequality in poverty (e.g. Louisiana, South Carolina), whereas states with lower enslaved populations tend to have lower Black-White inequality in poverty among individuals in married with children households (e.g. Delaware, West Virginia, and Maryland). However, North Carolina stands out for having middling slavery rates but the lowest Black-White inequality among those in married households with children as compared to the highest inequality among those in single mother households. Overall, when it comes to the relationship between historical enslaved concentration and Black-White inequality in poverty, these bivariate associations suggest the legacy of slavery is more consequential for Black-White inequality in married families than for single-mother families.

We note here that we conducted tests to assess the extent to which the difference in the legacy of slavery coefficients across the two samples (for single-mother and married couple households) is different from zero, but we find no such evidence. This suggests the relationships are similar in magnitude even though a visual comparison suggests otherwise. As a result, even though our analyses suggest the legacy of slavery is more consequential for individuals in married couple households, we cannot conclude that the relationship is, in fact, larger than it is for single-mother households. Regardless of whether such a difference exists, the implication of the significant relationship between poverty inequality and the legacy of slavery among individuals in married couple households is that marriage is not as protective for Blacks as it is for Whites, and this gap is more pronounced where the legacy of slavery is stronger.

Individual-Level Analyses: Linear Probability Models

To further scrutinize the relationships between the legacy of slavery and poverty among Black and White Southerners, multi-level LPMs test whether the historical concentration of enslaved people is associated with poverty net of individual-level factors. Our focus is on the interaction between the race variable and the historical concentration of enslaved people in each sub-sample, which indicates whether the legacy of slavery increases the probability of poverty for Black relative to White individuals. Table 2 displays these results for single-mother (Model 1) and married with children households (Model 2).

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Across both models, results indicate that the total enslaved population is not a significant predictor of poverty for the White population, as indicated by the null main effects for the legacy of slavery variable. White individuals do not suffer any additional penalty for residing in a state with a stronger legacy of slavery regardless of the family household type in which they reside. By contrast, living in a state with a higher concentration of enslaved people elevates the probability of poverty for Black individuals. The interaction between the total enslaved population and being Black is positively signed for both samples. However, consistent with the state-level bivariate results, the interaction is not statistically significant for those living in single-mother households (Model 1, $p = .165$), yet is significant for those living in married with children households (Model 2, $p < .01$).

We provide brief comment on the magnitude of the legacy interaction before moving on to other results. While the interaction coefficient is small compared to other variables in the model, it is notable that the legacy of slavery exerts any significant influence on poverty at all given that more than a century has elapsed. Moreover, we argue a small coefficient for the

interaction does not mean the legacy of slavery is substantively inconsequential for racial inequality in poverty. In fact, given the literature we outlined above suggesting the legacy of slavery operates through various social institutions (e.g., education), we know that some of the impact of the legacy of slavery for families is absorbed through these other, more sizeable mechanisms. Finally, as noted earlier, one limitation of a state-level legacy of slavery proxy is that it masks potentially important variation within states, thus, that we are able to find a significant interaction at this higher geographic-level is especially noteworthy.

In sum, the interaction we test suggests the legacy of slavery exacerbates Black-White inequality in poverty, but primarily for individuals in married parent households. Moreover, this result is not explained by proximate determinants of poverty included in our models, suggesting the legacy of slavery disadvantages Black families through more subtle means.

Supplemental County-Level Analyses

Descriptive County-Level Results

Reflecting our individual-level analyses, our county-level analyses show Black single-mother households with children are at a greater economic disadvantage than are White single-mother households with children. Among single mother families, the average county poverty rate using the official poverty measure (OPM) is 48% for Black mothers and 40% for White mothers (see Table 3). Both rates are high, but the economic consequences associated with being in a single-mother household are more pronounced for families headed by Black women than for White women. The average county-level difference in the concentration of poverty for southern counties is 10 percentage-points, suggesting White advantage/Black disadvantage on this outcome is the dominant trend across the region.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Compared to single mother households, the official poverty rates among married families with children are much lower, with county averages of 12% and 8% for Black and White families, respectively. There is substantial variation across counties, but the average county-level inequality in poverty is only 5 percentage-points to the advantage of Whites as compared to the 10 for single-mother households.

County-Level Correlations & Regression Results

Similar to our multilevel analyses of individuals nested in states, we find no evidence that the differential disadvantage associated with residing in a single-mother household is related to the county-level manifestation of the legacy of slavery. The binary correlation between our measure of racial inequality in poverty concentration among single-mother families and the historical concentration of enslaved people in 1860 is null with an estimate of $-.02$ ($p > .10$) (see Figure 2, Panel A). The partial correlation from a regression model with state fixed effects is also null, further suggesting that local manifestations of the legacy of slavery are unrelated to Black-White poverty inequality among single-mother households (see Table 4).

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Consistent with our individual-level analyses with a state-level context, we find racial inequality in poverty in married with children households is positively related to the historical concentration of enslaved people. The binary correlation is $.10$, and is statistically significant from zero ($p < .001$) (see Figure 2, Panel B). The relationship is weaker statistically in the regression model with state fixed effects, but remains significant ($\beta = .07$, $p < .05$) (see Table 4).

Maps depicting the Black-White inequality in poverty by family type across Southern counties provide some insight into the relationships we observe. Regarding the null relationship

between the legacy of slavery and Black-White inequality in poverty among single mother households, Figure 3 shows that the level of racial inequality is relatively consistent across counties. This suggests little spatial variation to be explained by the legacy of slavery or any other county-level factors. The structural advantage associated with lower poverty among White single-mother families relative to Black single-mother families is pervasive across place.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Compared to single mother families, the degree of county-level racial inequality in the experience of poverty is less pronounced for married parent families, but the spatial patterning is more defined (see Figure 4). This suggests systematic variation in the observed inequality that can be explained by structural explanations of poverty. This spatial variation further suggests the protective effect of being in a married household—that is widely touted in the family and poverty literatures—is not shared equally by Black- and White-headed households. Moreover, the greater advantage enjoyed by White households is more pronounced in some places than others, namely places with a stronger connection to the exploitative system of slavery.

Results indicate the structural racism associated with the legacy of slavery could enhance the benefits of marriage for Whites while dampening them for Blacks. We emphasize that results from alternative model specifications that more directly interrogate the relative importance of family structure corroborate this understanding of the racialized protectiveness of marriage. Moreover, our county-level correlations complement the findings from our primary models by confirming that the relationships identified there—with a robust set of controls—persist when using a more refined geographic scale.

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

DISCUSSION

In this study, we examined an indicator of structural racism—the legacy of slavery—family structure, and racial inequality in poverty among Black and White households in the U.S. South. We uniquely employed multilevel analysis linking individual- and state-level data and a separate county-level analysis to examine how a proxy of the legacy of slavery—the historical concentration of enslaved people in 1860—relates to racial inequality in poverty among single mother households and married with children households. We considered two hypotheses:

1) The legacy of slavery is associated with racial inequality in poverty and exacerbates Black poverty, even among individuals in the same family type; and 2) The race differentials in poverty are consistent across place for both family types, regardless of local connections to the legacy of slavery.

In both our primary analyses examining multilevel data of individuals nested in states and in our county-level analyses, descriptive results are consistent with prior research, and indicate Black poverty is higher than White poverty regardless of family type. This suggests a need to consider explanations for inequality that lie beyond family structure. Moreover, additional analyses suggest a role of structural racism when considering why family composition relates to different odds of poverty. Our primary individual-level analyses and the county-level associations provide some evidence to support Hypothesis 1. However, only when considering the racial inequality among married couple households. The legacy of slavery significantly increases the exposure of Black married couple households with children to poverty. The fact this is not also the case when examining poverty among single-mother households provides partial support for Hypothesis 2, and suggests the mechanisms stemming from the legacy of slavery that affect how family structure relates to poverty may be unique to the relative

advantages associated with marriage. In sum, that our two different sets of analyses (i.e. individual-level analysis employing a state context and county-level analysis), each with their own strengths and limitations, yield similar conclusions provide evidence that the legacy of slavery operates differently by family structure to impact poverty in households.

The lack of association between the legacy of slavery and racial inequality in poverty among single mother families was unexpected, even though relationship differences across family types was not part of our theoretical development. Because areas with higher former enslaved concentrations tend to be more economically distressed (Snipp, 1996), living in these areas would seem to further exacerbate the outcomes for families that are already more disadvantaged (e.g. Black single mother families). However, the punitive nature of the legacy of slavery, particularly its connections to the criminal legal system (e.g., Gottlieb and Flynn, 2021; Vandiver et al., 2006), may extend to the economic realm and impact marginalized families (i.e. single-mother families) similarly, regardless of race. To this point, Berger (2018) concludes that the most important correlate for worse economic mobility outcomes today—for people of any race—are the “fragile family structures” (i.e., lower marriage rates and a larger share of children living in single-parent households) in areas with higher concentrations of enslaved people. The lack of economic/welfare support combined with the enhanced role of the criminal legal system associated with the legacy of slavery produces a context that is detrimental for individuals in marginalized groups, perhaps especially when those marginalized groups are associated with Blackness (i.e., single-mother families).

As for married with children households, the significant interaction we find between the legacy of slavery and race indicates elevated levels of poverty for Black married families with children in stronger legacy contexts. This is consistent with recent research demonstrating

marriage does not operate as the same protective mechanism against adverse socioeconomic outcomes across racialized groups (Cross, 2020; Williams & Baker, 2021). White married individuals experience significantly greater financial returns as a result of being married than individuals who are Black and married (Addo & Lichter, 2013; Brown, 2021; Shapiro et al. 2013). These benefits may be exacerbated by the legacy of slavery, which has been shown to protect White advantages (Gabriel et al., 2021; Reece, 2020). Simultaneously, Black married families residing in stronger slavery contexts are likely to experience enhanced negative consequences as a result of this form of structural racism. For instance, while racial discrimination in the workplace exists throughout the South and the U.S., it could be particularly pronounced in places that were more reliant on slavery as an institution historically. Thus, a Black married couple with both partners working could face a double disadvantage in the labor market that is not experienced by a White married couple due to their privileged racialized position. In fact, prior research has found that some states, particularly Southern states, are more likely to have discriminatory policies and practices that adversely impact people of color (Baker Forthcoming; Parolin 2019). For instance, Parolin (2019) finds places with high levels of Black concentration (i.e., southern states) are more likely to devote Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds to “marriage promotion” programs as opposed to direct cash assistances, the latter of which is proven to reduce child poverty for families of all races. Furthermore, it is also possible that while Black married families remain vulnerable to the punitive criminal legal system associated with the legacy of slavery due to their racialized minority status (see especially Gottlieb & Flynn, 2021; Vandiver et al., 2006), White married families avoid such disadvantages. This would explain why marriage is less protective against poverty for Black

families than it is for White families, which is why we find more pronounced racial inequality as the legacy of slavery increases.

Our findings suggest policy may reward or protect certain family structures that are associated with Whiteness—namely, marriage. This can be direct or indirect, and occurs at all institutional levels, not just the state/local level. Consider the federal tax law as an example. At every income level, Black households are more likely to pay a marriage tax penalty, and White households are more likely to receive a marriage tax bonus (Brown, 2021). This is because tax law benefits sole-bread winner households (which are more likely to be White) and penalize dual-earner households, particularly those whose spouses make similar amounts (which are more likely to be Black). Even changes in tax law from 1972-2009 to minimize the marriage tax penalty have benefited White married households more, who received, on average, a -\$1,350 reduction in their marriage tax penalty as compared to only a -\$618 reduction for Black households (Alm & Leguizamon, 2015). Similarly, because Black wives are likely to make larger spousal contributions to household income (and thus, social security payments), they experience lower spousal and survival benefits from social security than do White wives who are working less and not contributing as much to social security (Brown, 2004).

Such existing marriage penalties can compound with local structural racism to the disadvantage of married Black households. However, federal policy can also mitigate the impact of the discriminatory contexts associated with the legacy of slavery that are implied by our analyses. In particular, federal income support policies, such as the Child Tax Credit, which has proven to be successful in lifting families out of poverty (Parolin & Curran, 2021), could be helpful in improving the relative position of Black families.

Our findings have three broad implications for research on racial inequality and poverty. First, our results—consistent across multiple modeling strategies—add to the now overwhelming evidence of a contemporary legacy of slavery. We demonstrate this legacy is consequential across geographic scales (i.e. states and counties) and even for inequality among individuals residing in the same type of family household. In doing so, we add to the growing race and poverty literature illustrating how research can gain useful insights by focusing more attention to structural mechanisms (Baker et al., 2021; Parolin, 2019), especially those rooted in historical institutions (e.g., Baker, forthcoming; O’Connell, 2012).

Second, this study suggests the utility of examining how institutional mechanisms of structural racism interact with family structure to advance our understanding of what leads to different family types experiencing greater likelihoods of poverty. Despite focusing on a specialized form of structural racism (i.e., the legacy of slavery) that is concentrated in the U.S. South, our results suggest giving more attention to the role of racism when explaining *why* family structure—and marriage in particular—is differentially protective against poverty for Black and White households. Racism is a national, and not just a southern issue, so our theoretical contribution is broadly applicable. For instance, other kinds of structural racism with varying regional concentrations (e.g., redlining, predatory lending, residential segregation, etc.), may also influence the impact of family structure. Thus, future research should examine how other forms of structural racism—whether rooted in history or not—impact the relationship between family structure and Black-White inequality in poverty. Doing so will not only allow scholars to examine how this relationship compares beyond the South, across regions, and nationally, but it will also help address the critical need for research on family structure and

racialized child outcomes to account for the influential role of structural racism (Cross, Fomby, and Letiecq, forthcoming).

Finally, our findings challenge the implicit belief that marriage is an anti-poverty mechanism that works equally across groups and contexts. A dominant explanation for poverty and racial inequality in poverty has been family structure—namely the high rates of single motherhood (Amato & Maynard, 2007; McLanahan, 1985; Thomas & Sawhill, 2002). Prior studies have found family structure explains a large portion of the Black-White poverty gap (Iceland, 2019; Rendall et al., 2021; Sullivan & Ziegert, 2021), and marriage continues to be deemed a solution for poverty and racial inequality in poverty among families with children (AEI-Brookings, 2022; 2015). However, our study examining the legacy of slavery, and its relationship with Black-White inequality by family type provides further evidence that marriage does not operate the same across groups. As Williams & Baker (2021) concluded, family structure is “not only an oversimplified explanation, but also contributes to obscuring structural and systemic sources of racial inequality in poverty.” This study reinforces this salient point. Our results suggest the link between family structure and poverty is overstated and more indirect than previously recognized, operating—at least partially—through structural racism. We cannot blame racial inequality in poverty on “the pathology of Black single motherhood” because it is not as if single mothers are simply creating their own poverty, and married parents are creating their own relative advantage. We must consider the (racialized) contexts in which families reside because local manifestations of structural racism play a crucial role in understanding how family structure matters for racial inequality in poverty.

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Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for Black and White Southerners, 2015-2019*

	Single Mother Households			Married Head Households		
	<i>Black</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black-White Diff.</i>	<i>Black</i>	<i>White</i>	<i>Black-White Diff.</i>
Poverty	.484	.356	.128	.137	.082	.055
# Children in Household	2.217	1.916	.301	2.121	2.046	.075
Adults Age > 65 in Household	.040	.052	-.012	.096	.061	.035
Age of Head						
Age < 25	.080	.084	-.004 ^{NS}	.015	.017	-.002 ^{NS}
Age 25-34	.373	.275	.098	.177	.218	-.041
Age 35-44	.355	.356	-.001	.366	.394	-.028
Age 45-54	.133	.207	-.074 ^{NS}	.267	.257	.010 ^{NS}
Age 55-64	.022	.033	-.011	.121	.073	.048
Age 65-74	.008	.010	-.002	.038	.025	.013
Age > 74	.002	.007	-.005 ^{NS}	.007	.007	.000 ^{NS}
Education of Head						
Less than High School	.106	.098	.008	.073	.044	.029
College Degree	.169	.263	-.094	.376	.473	-.097
Employment in Household						
Non-Employed	.145	.136	.009 ^{NS}	.038	.022	.016
Multiple Earners	.240	.303	-.063	.724	.711	.013
Foreign-Born Head	.024	.112	-.088	.051	.014	.037
Rural Residence	.196	.280	-.084	.128	.225	-.097
<i>N</i>	10,878	11,128		13,756	71,223	

Note: Mean Differences (Black – White) are significant unless denoted by ^{NS} as determined by T-tests.

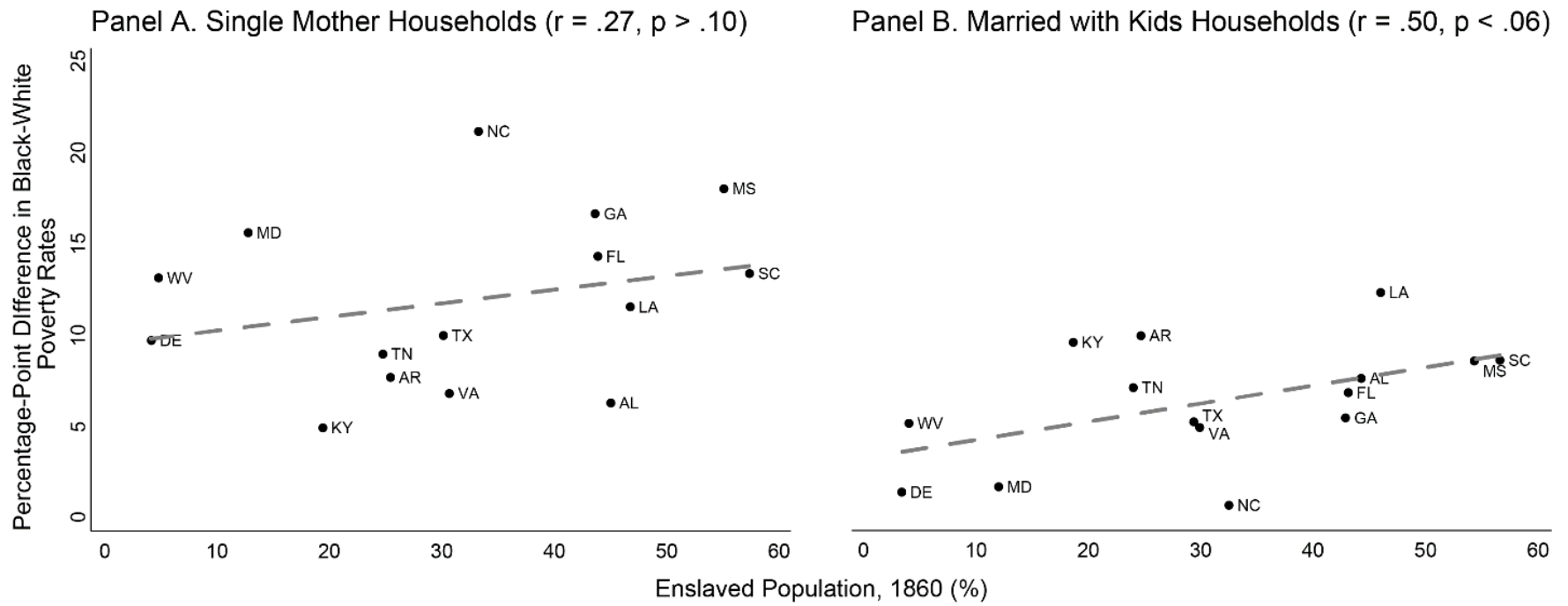


FIGURE 1. BINARY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BLACK-WHITE INEQUALITY IN POVERTY AND TOTAL POPULATION ENSLAVED IN 1860 BY FAMILY STRUCTURE ACROSS SOUTHERN STATES (2015-2019).

Table 2. *Multi-Level Linear Probability Models of Poverty in among Black and White Southerners, 2015-2019*

	<i>Single Mother Households</i>		<i>Married with Children Households</i>	
	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>	
	<i>Coef.</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>Coef.</i>	<i>Z</i>
Enslaved Population	.000	0.75	-.000	-0.10
Enslaved Pop. x Black	.001	1.39	.001***	3.13
Black	.029	1.00	.005	0.37
Number of Children in Household	.045***	6.72	.024***	8.36
Adults Age >65 in Household	-.052	-2.38	-.020	-1.59
Age of Head (Ref: 45-54)				
Age < 25	.142***	4.74	.130***	5.10
Age 25-34	.047**	3.66	.024***	5.00
Age 35-44	-.007	-0.68	-.008*	-2.05
Age 55-64	-.023	0.66	-.009	-0.97
Age 65-74	-.030	-0.66	-.052**	-2.88
Age >74	-.058	-0.91	-.040	-1.56
Education of Head (Ref: HS Grad/ Some College)				
< High School	.135***	5.97	.142***	18.18
College Degree	-.235***	-20.67	-.061***	-12.11
Employment in Household				
Non-Employed	.405***	18.68	.496***	21.19
Multiple Earners	-.263***	-16.27	-.154***	-15.56
Foreign-Born	.039	1.66	.031**	3.42
Rural Residence	.080***	5.61	.036***	5.78
<i>N</i>		22,006		84,979

Note: All models include controls for year and cluster the errors by state.

*** p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05

Table 3. *County Averages for Black-White Poverty Inequality,
ACS 5-year Period Estimates 2015-2019*

	Black	White	Inequality
Single Mother Households	.484	.401	.096
<i>N</i>	1,080	1,327	1,076
Married with Children Households	.122	.077	.052
<i>N</i>	1,088	1,343	1,088

Note: Discrepancies between the Black minus White averages and the reported average level of inequality are due to rounding error.

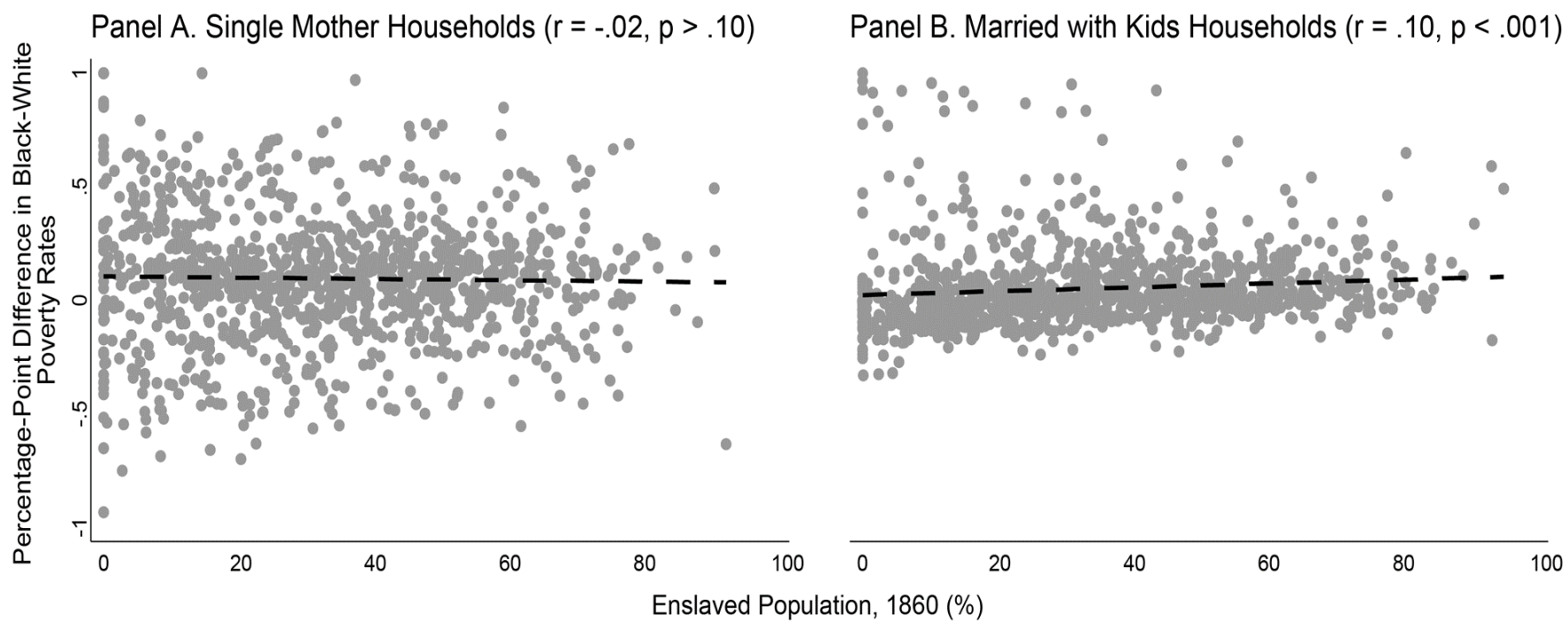


FIGURE 2. BINARY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COUNTY-LEVEL BLACK-WHITE POVERTY INEQUALITY AND THE LEGACY OF SLAVERY, ACS 5-YEAR PERIOD ESTIMATES 2015-2019.

Table 4. *Binary Regression Coefficients with State Fixed Effects for the Relationship between and the Legacy of Slavery and County-level Black-White Poverty Inequality, ACS 5-year Periods Estimates 2015-2019*

	Coef.	Stand. Error
Single Mother Households	-.062	.049
N		1,076
Married with kids Households	.065*	.031
N		1,088

Note: All models include a set of binary variables indicating the state in which a county is located. North Carolina serves as the reference. ***p < .001, ** p < .01, * p < .05

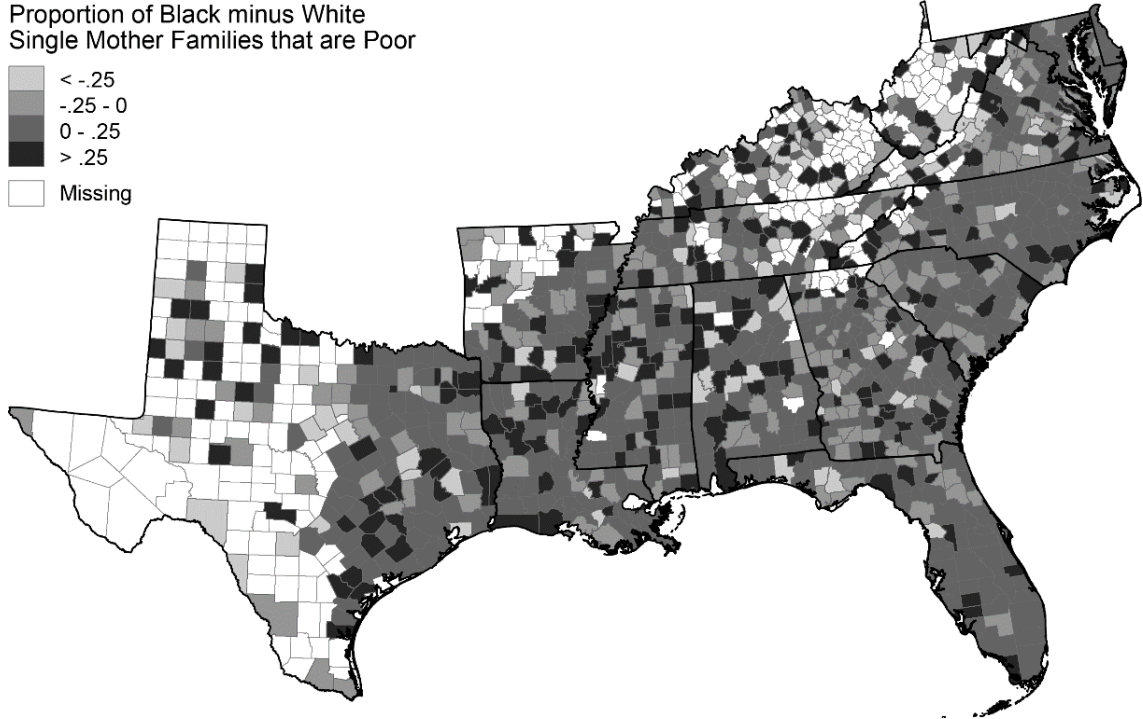


FIGURE 3. BLACK-WHITE INEQUALITY IN POVERTY AMONG SINGLE MOTHER HOUSEHOLDS IN THE SOUTH, 2015-2019.

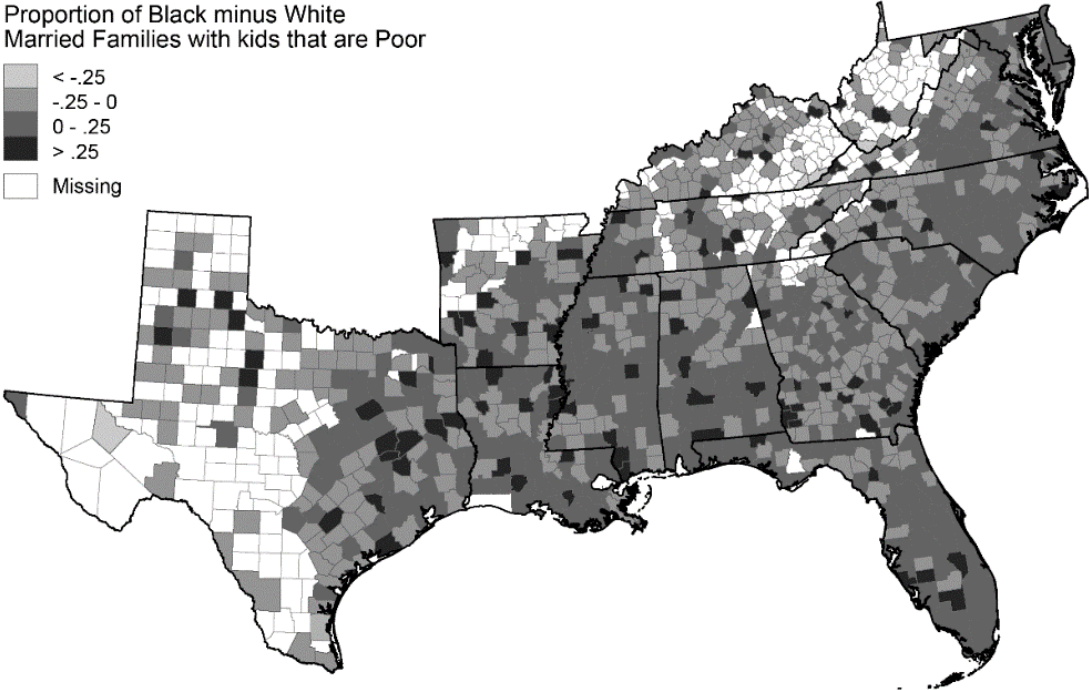


FIGURE 4. BLACK-WHITE INEQUALITY IN POVERTY AMONG MARRIED WITH CHILDREN HOUSEHOLDS IN SOUTHERN STATES, 2015-2019.

Appendix Table 1. *Multi-Level Linear Probability Models of Poverty among Black and White Households (Heads) in the South, 2015-2019.*

	<i>Single Mother Households</i>		<i>Married with Children Households</i>	
	<i>Model 1</i>		<i>Model 2</i>	
	<i>Coef.</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>Coef.</i>	<i>Z</i>
Enslaved Population	.000	0.61	-.000	-0.13
Enslaved Pop. x Black	.001	1.56	.001**	2.67
Black	.019	0.75	.005	0.32
Number of Children	.050***	9.56	.022***	8.54
Adults >65 in Household	-.054*	-2.55	-.019	-1.51
Age (Ref: 45-54)				
Age < 25	.156***	5.78	.154***	5.30
Age 25-34	.045***	3.80	.027***	5.99
Age 35-44	-.012	-1.11	-.006	-1.47
Age 55-64	-.036	0.97	-.011	-1.35
Age 65-74	-.016	-0.30	-.055**	-3.41
Age >74	-.081	-1.31	-.054*	-2.23
Education				
Less than High School	.135***	6.61	.131***	15.12
College Degree	-.244***	-22.34	-.056***	-13.11
Household Employment				
Non-employed	.430***	22.28	.494***	21.40
Multiple Earners	-.244***	-19.27	-.147***	-15.97
Foreign-Born	.046*	1.73	.032**	2.94
Rural Residence	.082***	6.14	.035***	6.96
<i>N</i>		7,011		20,937