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SEX RATIO IMBALANCE AMONG LOS ANGELES AFRO-AMERICANS

M. Belinda Tucker

About the Author

M. Belinda Tucker is Assistant Director, Research at the Center for Afro American Studies at UCLA. This report is based on preliminary results from the first phase of a larger research effort being conducted by the author and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Center for Afro-American Studies. The first phase of research was funded by the National Institute of Mental Health.

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This paper explores the social structural implications of a male shortage among Afro-Americans living in Los Angeles County, California from two perspectives: (1) the relationship between the sex ratio and selected hypothesized consequences of sex ratio imbalance and (2) the economic cost of non-marriage for women. A discussion of the contemporary significance of the study and a brief review of the related literatures follow.

Recently, the issue of sex ratio imbalance has received considerable attention in the popular press (e.g., Campbell 1986; Ebony 1986; Levin 1986; Salholz et al. 1986). One apparent stimulus was an unpublished account of research on the determinants of non-marriage in the United States conducted by a trio of social scientists at Yale University (Bennett, personal communication; Bloom Bennett 1985). The aspect of the Yale study that caught the attention of the national media was the suggestion that because of the scarcity of men in the population at large, women--career women in particular--who have delayed marriage until their thirties have little chance of marrying at all. Such a suggestion, presumably empirically based, coming on the heels of a socio-political movement that seemingly gave women the impetus to think of more than marriage and to develop themselves to their fullest potential was bound to create a furor. The Yale researchers reported receiving a ". . .swarm of letters, some angry" and some speculating on the researchers own personal relations (Levin 1986).

While the non-scientific literature has been focused in somewhat hysterical fashion on the "crisis" of "spinsterhood," so to speak, the very real issue of sex ratio imbalance in the American population has been evident to social scientists for a number of years now. It is clear that on a national level there are more women than men in the American population (e.g., Goldman, Westoff and Hammerslough 1984; Guttentag and Secord 1983). This is a fairly recent phenomenon in this country. Until the beginning of the 20th century, a situation of female shortage was more likely to exist, largely because of migration patterns and the fact that women were more likely to die in childbirth. However, the current situation of more extreme male shortage is due primarily to the baby boom (i.e., the steady increase in the general U.S. birthrate between 1945 and 1957). Since women tend to marry men who are on average two to three years older than they are, each cohort of baby boom women was faced with a smaller supply of older men from which to select marriage partners (since those men were born during a period when the birth rate was lower). The situation of male shortage for whites is expected to end about 1990 (Guttentag and Secord 1983).

Afro-American Sex Ratios

Although the male shortage is a relatively recent occurrence in the general American population (primarily evident since 1960 when the first baby boomers reached marriageable age), blacks in this country have experienced a significant male shortage since 1920. Furthermore, the situation has steadily worsened over the years since. Measuring male shortage in terms of the sex ratio, that is, the number of men in a given population per 100 women, raw Census figures (see Table 1) indicate that the while the sex ratio for the Afro-American population was 99.2 in 1920, it had dropped to 95.0 by 1940 and to 89.6 by 1980. Among whites, the figure did not fall below 100 until 1950, bottoming out at 95.3 in 1970 and 1980.

The situation has not escaped the attention of Afro-American social scientists (Cox 1940; Cazenave 1980; Darity and Myers 1983; Jackson 1971; Mcguen 1979; Staples 1981a,b). As early as 1908 W.E.B. Dubois commented that low sex ratios were responsible for the occurrence of certain "sexual irregularities" among blacks (Dubois 1908). More recently, the black media has given equal, if not greater, attention to the problem of male shortage although focusing more directly than the general press on coping strategies needed to address the nearly century old problem for Afro-Americans (e.g., Campbell 1986; Ebony 1986).

It has been noted that the Census undercount results in particular in a substantial undercount of Afro-American males. According to the Census Bureau, lack males from ages 25 through 54 are particularly likely to be omitted from Census figures (Passell and Robinson 1985). The Bureau has produced revised population estimates on the basis of independent data sources, including birth and death records and sample surveys (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1982). These "corrected" ratios increased age-specific sex ratios for Afro-Americans in 1980 by as much as 10 points for certain subgroups. Nevertheless, the comparable figures for whites remained about five points higher. In the single fairly comprehensive academic treatment of the issue of sex ratio, Guttentag and Secord (1983) argued that the sex ratio need not fall substantially below 100 in order to have a significant social impact. Furthermore, when one attempts to make arguments about marriage potential on the basis of sex ratio statistics, one wonders about the marriage potential of the "hidden" men. For example, recent reports have indicated that black males are greatly over represented in the Los Angeles "homeless" population (i.e., those most subject to omission from the Census). To what extent are such men able to for and maintain relationships? Can we really consider such marginalized men a part of the marriage pool?

Why are Afro-American sex ratios so low? There are several reasons for an imbalance in the sheer numbers of black males compared to black females. First, fewer black males are born due to very high prenatal death rates caused both by poorer health care availability in lower income black communities and the high proportion of high risk adolescent pregnancies. Since male fetuses are less viable, fetal deaths are more likely to be male. Secondly, the infant, childhood, and adolescent mortality rates of black males are excessive. Again, male infants are more vulnerable than female infants leading to more male deaths. Also black male adolescents die in greater proportions than comparable females from a range of causes, including accidents, homicides, and drug abuse. Thirdly, on the other end of the spectrum, relative to whites of both sexes and black females, the life expectancy of black adult males is much lower, with higher death

rates from disease and accidents. Finally, in recent times, the "baby boom" effect discussed earlier has also influenced age-specific black sex ratios.

Aside from these matters of numerical availability, other factors compromise the eligibility of significant numbers of black males for marriage, including higher black male rates of incarceration and inter-racial marriage (Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan, forthcoming). Such conditions can differ quite dramatically, depending on geographical or urban versus rural location. For example, in 1980 12.3 percent of marriages involving black men in the Western

Table 1. Sex Ratios from Raw Census Data for Blacks and Whites from 1830 through 1980

Year	Race	
	Blacks	Whites
1980	89.6	95.3
1970	90.8	95.3
1960	93.4	97.4
1950	94.3	99.1
1940	95.0	101.2
1930	97.0	102.9
1920	99.2	104.4
1910	98.9	106.7
1900	98.6	101.5
1890	99.5	105.4
1880	97.8	104.0
1870	96.2	102.8
1860	99.6	105.3
1850	99.1	105.2
1840	99.5	104.6
1830	100.3	103.7

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1960, 1964, 1973, 1982b, 1983).

states included non-black spouses; among those who married for the first time between 1970 and 1980, the percentage rose to 16.5 percent. Comparable figures for the South were 1.6 percent and 2.5 percent. The black female out-marriage percentages are approximately one-quarter of the male figures.

Consequences of Sex Ratio Imbalance

Attempts to generate theory about the consequences of sex ratio imbalance have been quite limited. Prior to her untimely death in 1977, Marcia Guttentag spent a considerable amount of time examining historical, anthropological, literary, and sociological data in an attempt to find support for what she believed to be a societal pattern resulting from imbalance. In the book completed by her husband, Paul Secord, it was asserted that a situation of male shortage is generally accompanied by higher rates of singlehood, divorce, "out-of-wedlock" births, adultery, and transient relationships; less commitment among men to relationships; lower societal value on marriage and the family; and a rise in feminism (Guttentag and Secord 1983). This theoretical argument is well buttressed by a wealth of historical facts, indicating, for example, that societies of the same historical era but differing primarily on the basis of sex ratio evidenced all of the hypothesized patterns. Essentially, however, the theory remains empirically untested. The consequence of sex ratio imbalance in contemporary societies is unknown.

On a more specific level, the concept of "marriage squeeze" has been coined and utilized by sociologists to describe the impact of sex ratio imbalance on marriage chances (Glick, Heer and Beresford 1963; Akers 1967; Hirschman and Matras 1971; Schoen 1983). However, only one marriage squeeze study examined the situation of Afro-Americans specifically. Spanier and Glick (1980) found that black women married men who were significantly older, had lower educational attainment, and were more often previously married than men married by comparable white women. These patterns were viewed as an adaptive response to an unfavorable marriage market.

METHODS

This report is based on preliminary results from the first phase of a larger research effort being conducted by the author and Dr. Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, also of UCLA. The first phase is being funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan, 1984). The ultimate purpose of the research program is to examine the impact of male shortage on Afro-American social structure and psychosocial adaptation in the context of recent socio-behavioral theories of the consequences of imbalanced sex ratio. The research goals of the first phase are to (1) to analyze Los Angeles County Census data in order to determine whether there are distinctive social patterns that could be related to the sex ratio imbalance; (2) to generate measures of male availability that could be statistically related to our other variables of interest, and (3) to conduct focused group discussions in order to delineate and clarify the concepts that form the basis of our research.

The specific goals of the analyses presented here are to examine the relationship between the sex ratio and selected variables believed to reflect hypothesized consequences of sex ratio imbalance, including marital status, percent single women of marriage age, and percent female-headed households; and to examine the economic cost of non-marriage for black women in Los Angeles. For these preliminary analyses the first research question was analyzed in terms of the sex ratio, despite the fact that it is a rather limited measure of male availability. The measure does not account for socio-structural and socio-cultural constraints on eligibility (e.g., very educated women tend to seek equally educated or more educated men as partners; the range of ages acceptable for partnership differs by gender and by age). It also does not account for the fact that not all persons in the population in question are heterosexual and that certain kinds of people are not sufficiently covered by the Census. It is because of these concerns that a major project goal is the generation of an availability measure that is sensitive to such factors. [One potential basis for such an indicator is the Availability Ratio (AR) formulated by Goldman et al. 1984.]

The second research question focuses on the structural costs of not being married in the present society. That is, apart from the social-cultural questions of the value of being married and having children within marriage, are there particular socio-economic costs associated with the state of non-marriage relative to the state of marriage? The rationale for this approach is the need to examine the potential structural consequences for a group of women who find their opportunities for marriage are constrained.

It has been demonstrated that sex ratios vary considerably on the basis of geographic location, ethnicity, and age, among other factors (Guttentag and Secord 1983; Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan, forthcoming). It would appear, then, that an understanding

of the social dynamics associated with sex ratio would have to have a geographically localized focus. In addition, it seems clear that persons living in Los Angeles do not typically seek potential partnerships among people living in Pittsburgh. Partnering is to a great extent a function of physical accessibility. For these reasons, the present study is focused solely on persons who dwell in the County of Los Angeles.

RESULTS

Sex Ratio and the Consequences of Imbalance

An examination of the Summary Tape File 4 Census data for individuals in Los Angeles County over the age of 15 indicates that among the five major ethnic groups in Los Angeles, Afro-Americans and Native Americans have the lowest uncorrected sex ratios at 85.6 and 86.4, respectively (see Table 2). The Asian and Spanish-origin populations have the highest sex ratios of 94.4 and 98.8, respectively. Whites fall in the middle. The very high Spanish-origin figure may be biased by an undercount of undocumented individuals (although an underestimate of women in particular does not seem likely) or an unequal migration pattern.

Examination of the sex ratios in conjunction with other Census indices indicates that certain features of the pattern of consequences hypothesized by Guttentag and Secord (1983) approximate the same rank ordering among the ethnic groups as do the sex ratios (Table 2). Divorce and separation rates are highest among Afro-Americans and Native Americans and lowest among Asians and those of Spanish-origin. While the overall single rate does not conform to the sex-ratio ranking (although black overall singlehood is the highest), an examination of women only during the peak marriage years of 25-34 does conform to the sex-ratio rank ordering--with the highest rates among blacks and the lowest among Spanish- origin. The percentage of households headed by females with no husbands also conforms to the pattern. When Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance (Hays 1973:801-803) is applied to the ethnic rankings of sex ratio, percent divorced

Table 2. Statistics and Relative Rankings of Major Ethnic Populations in Los Angeles County on Sex Ratio and Selected 1980 Census Indicators

Variables	Ethnic Groups				
	Black	Native American	Asian American	Spanish Origin	White
Sex Ratio	85.55 (5)	86.36 (4)	94.36 (2)	98.81 (1)	91.89 (3)
% Divorced & Separated	23.10 (5)	20.28 (4)	6.36 (1)	11.76 (2)	13.98 (3)
% Single Women Aged 25-34	31.24 (5)	23.28 (2)	24.47 (4)	18.93 (1)	24.38 (3)
% Households With Female Heads, No Husband	10.52 (5)	4.39 (3)	1.39 (1)	5.44 (4)	1.85 (2)

Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance (W) = .61.

Note: Figures in parentheses are relative rankings.

and separated, percent single women aged 25 to 34, and percentage of households with female heads and no husbands, the variance of rank sums is .61 (or 61 percent of the maximum possible). This would indicate a moderately high degree of concordance (Table 2).

Economic Costs of Non-Marriage for Afro-American Women

Focusing only on women in Los Angeles County designated as "black" in the 1980 Census Public Use Sample (which represents a 5 percent sample of the county population), basic cross-tabulation runs evidenced a number of interesting patterns when women who were either never married, divorced, or separated were compared with married women. (Widowed women were omitted from the analysis, since they represent a special population that is significantly older than the rest.)

Since a simple comparison between unmarried and married women would be biased because, on average, single persons are significantly younger than individuals of any other marital status, and therefore much less likely to have attained comparable levels of socio-economic well-being, married women were compared with single, divorced, and separated women for five separate age groups: 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, 40-44, and 45-49.

The results, based on tests using the Lambda measure of association for categorical variables, and t-tests for intervally scaled variables, as shown in Table 3 were as follows: For all age categories of women, married and unmarried women were equally likely to be employed (ranging from levels of 62 percent to 69 percent) and had comparable education levels (ranging from a mean high of 15.3 years for the youngest age group to 14.4 years for the oldest group). However, in all age groups, married women were significantly more likely than unmarried women to live in owner occupied rather than rental units. Further, among those women who lived in owner occupied homes, the homes of married women were of significantly higher value. For the youngest and oldest age categories, married women also made more personal income (despite the fact that they had comparable education). And as would be expected, for all age categories, the total household income and total family income of married women were significantly higher than that of unmarried women. On the whole, married black women in Los Angeles are living much more economically comfortable lives than their unmarried sisters, despite their comparable levels of preparation and comparable output in terms of employment.

Further inspection demonstrates that, moreover, the situation worsens with age. Among 25-29 year olds, 40 percent of married women live in owner occupied dwellings, while only 20.6 percent of nonmarrieds are so housed. By the time the women reach the 35-39 category, 72.5 percent of married women and only 32.2 percent of single women are in owner occupied dwellings (a 32.5 vs. 11.6 point increase). There is an additional 5 point increase for both categories for the 40 and over age groups. Similarly, the absolute dollar difference between personal income (for the youngest and oldest) and for household and family income across all age groups increases with age. The household and family income differences between marrieds and unmarrieds are \$6,874 and \$7,568, respectively for women 25-29 years old. By age 45-49, the comparable differences are \$13,258 and \$12,487.

It would be logical to assume that the economic advantage of marriage extends also to men. And as shown in Table 4, when the same set of analyses are applied to black men in Los Angeles County, some of the patterns observed in the female sample also emerge in the male analyses. Nevertheless, some very important differences are apparent: for every age group of men, married men are much more likely to be employed than are unmarried men (with differences ranging from 12.1 to 20.5 percentage points). For two age categories of men, marrieds were also significantly better educated than unmarried men. These findings would suggest that the lesser economic standing of unmarried men is due, at least in part, to their differential qualifications--a finding not true among women.

A comparison of the data presented in Tables 3 and 4 also demonstrates that despite the economic differences between married and unmarried men, unmarried men are still much better off economically than unmarried women. For example, although the difference between the mean personal income of married and unmarried men is greater than the personal income difference between married and unmarried women, unmarried men still make more money than even married women. Furthermore, in every comparison but one, the difference between total household and total family income for marrieds versus singles is substantially greater among women than among men.

Table 3. Marital Status by Selected 1980 Census Public Use Sample Indicators by Age for Afro-American Women in Los Angeles

Indicators/ Marital Status	Age Categories				
	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49
A. % in Owner Occupied Dwellings					
Married	40.0	59.5	72.5	77.3	76.5
Lambda	(.00)	(.21)	(.37)	(.30)	(.28)
Single	20.6	25.0	32.2	37.2	37.6
B. Mean Value Level of Housing Among those in Owner Occupied Housings					
Married	16.0**	17.2**	15.9**	15.8**	14.9*
Single	13.9	14.8	13.9	13.6	13.7
C. % Employed					
Married	66.1	69.3	69.4	64.6	62.2
Lambda	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)
Single	62.3	67.7	68.3	67.0	64.5
D. Mean Years of Education					
Married	15.3	15.2	15.1	14.8	14.7
Single	15.2	15.3	14.9	14.7	14.4
E. Mean 1979 Personal Income from All Sources					
Married	9,026*	10,487	10,510	10,310	10,220*
Single	8,425	10,405	10,158	10,211	9,243
Difference (M-S)	601	82	352	99	977
F. Mean 1979 Total Household Income					
Married	21,729**	25,059**	25,912**	27,126**	27,712**
Single	14,855	15,012	14,281	15,039	14,454
Difference (M-S)	6,874	10,047	11,631	12,087	13,258
G. Mean 1979 Total Family Income					
Married	21,601**	24,906**	25,837**	26,991**	27,477**
Single	14,033	13,538	12,958	14,299	14,990
Difference (M-S)	7,568	11,368	12,879	12,692	12,487

**p .001: *p .05: total male and female n = 16,292.

1. Housing value is coded into 24 intervally scaled categories: codes relevant for findings here: 14 = \$55,000 - \$59,999, 15 = \$60,000 - \$64,000, 16 = \$65,000 -- \$69,999, 17 = \$70,000 - \$74,999, 18 = \$75,000 - \$79,999.

Note: Differences for indicators A and C were tested using the Lambda measure of association with marital status as the independent variable: differences for indicators B, D, E, F, and G were tested by t-tests.

Table 4. Marital Status by Selected 1980 Census Public Use Sample Indicators by Age for Afro-American Men in Los Angeles

Indicators/ Marital Status	Age Categories				
	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-49
A. % in Owner Occupied Dwellings					
Married	29.2	52.5	63.6	71.4	76.7
Lambda	(.00)	(.07)	(.31)	(.32)	(.30)
Single	27.0	26.2	30.2	31.7	34.0
B. Mean Value Level of Housing Among those in Owner Occupied Housing 1					
Married	15.5**	17.1**	16.4	16.1*	15.4**
Single	13.2	14.5	15.5	14.9	13.1
C. % Employed					
Married	84.0	83.4	84.7	87.6	84.5
Lambda	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)	(.00)
Single	63.5	71.3	73.5	71.0	65.2
D. Mean Years of Education					
Married	15.3	15.7**	15.3	14.7	14.6*
Single	15.2	15.3	15.1	14.7	14.1
E. Mean 1979 Personal Income from All Sources					
Married	11,591**	15,146**	17,121**	16,713**	17,093**
Single	9,241	11,624	13,590	13,590	13,622
Difference (M-S)	2,350	3,522	3,531	3,123	3,471
F. Mean 1979 Total Household Income					
Married	18,942	23,564**	25,837**	26,243**	27,883**
Single	18,019	18,729	19,415	18,830	18,382
Difference (M-S)	923	4,835	6,422	7,413	9,501
G. Mean 1979 Total Family Income					
Married	18,893	23,470**	25,626**	26,141**	27,882**
Single	19,741	18,793	17,916	19,103	16,642
Difference (M-S)	-848	4,677	7,710	7,038	11,240

**p .001: *p .05: total male and female n = 16,292.

1. Housing value is coded into 24 intervally scaled categories: codes relevant for findings here: 14 = \$55,000 - \$59,999, 15 = \$60,000 - \$64,000, 16 = \$65,000 - \$69,999, 17 = \$70,000 - \$74,999, 18 = \$75,000 - \$79,999.

Note: Differences for indicators A and C were tested using the Lambda measure of association with marital status as the independent variable: differences for indicators B, D, E, F, and G were tested by t-tests.

DISCUSSION

These results are based on preliminary analyses and do not demonstrate causation; they merely suggest directions. Nevertheless, the findings as a whole contribute in at least two ways to the emerging discussion of the consequences of sex ratio imbalance. First, there is support for some of the possible consequences of imbalance initially proposed by Guttentag and Secord (1983). Differences in the over age 15 sex ratios (uncorrected) among the major ethnic groups in Los Angeles County were moderately related to certain observed differences in the social structure of those

ethnic groups. Although it is clear that such social phenomena are influenced by a host of other factors, including religion (e.g., the Spanish origin population in Los Angeles is largely Catholic and cultural preferences, the fact that the sex ratio achieves a similar ranking among the groups suggests a possible causative role. It does not seem reasonable to assume that any of the other variables could similarly influence the sex ratio.

In many ways, these indicators would seem to be the obvious, first affected, variables in a situation of male shortage. An unavailability of men would necessarily lead to a greater number of single women in the affected age groups, and would consequently lead to more female-headed households. According to the social exchange theory based rationale of Guttentag and Secord (1983), the proportion of divorced and separated persons would increase as a function of the resulting disproportionate level of "dyadic" power in the hands of the sex in short supply. A male in short supply would have more potential sources of satisfaction, alternative to a present partner, and would be less dependent on his present partner for satisfaction. He could more easily than the woman (i.e., the sex in oversupply) turn elsewhere for satisfaction (1983:157).

A second contribution of the results to the sex ratio discussion is the demonstration that a situation of decreasing male availability can have severe economic consequences for the population of women in question. A black woman in Los Angeles who remains unmarried faces an economic future that is far inferior to that of her married sister and far inferior to that of the unmarried male. This remains true despite her own contributions to her economic well being (i.e., education, employment). (The male findings seem to suggest reasons other than marital status for the relatively worse economic situation of unmarried men: their relative lack of employment and, in some cases, less education might be partially explanatory.) The societal reality is that for these black women, economic viability, despite one's age, seems to be strongly related to one's ability to enter into partnership with a man. Therefore, it would appear that a low sex ratio (i.e., a situation of male shortage) not only decreases a woman's chances of getting married and, to some extent, having children--but, due in particular to certain gender-based structural constraints in this society--it also limits the socio-economic well-being of significant numbers of women. Furthermore, since the offspring of broken relationships most often become the primary responsibility of the female parent, the financial implications of the relatively decreasing economic viability of unmarried Afro-American women for the black community at large are dire. This point is often obscured in current discussions of male shortage.

The results presented here represent only a preliminary exploration of a very complex, understudied and serious issue. More refined, comprehensive examinations are needed. It is hoped that the program of research initiated by the work described here can serve to stimulate the development of the broad based empirical foundation required to understand the phenomenon of sex ratio imbalance.

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