

The perils of early motherhood

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CONSERVATIVES have decided that what ails America is that not enough of us are getting and staying married. They have a point. Not only are fewer people marrying than in the past but, more disturbingly, one out of every three children is born outside of marriage. The life chances of these children are seriously compromised. Far more of them will grow up in poverty, fail in school, and enter adolescence with a propensity to repeat their parents' youthful mistakes. Indeed, as Jonathan Rauch has argued, and the data suggest, marriage is displacing both earnings and race as a source of division in America. Children growing up in a one-parent family are four times as likely to be poor as those growing up in a two-parent family, and those growing up in a single-parent white family are three times more likely to be poor than those growing up in a two-parent black family.

Not all children in single-parent homes are adversely affected, of course, but the odds that they will succeed are considerably lower than for children who grow up in intact

families. Moreover, when single-parent families predominate in a community, children grow up with few male role models and do not view marriage as a realistic option. The argument that this gives rise to various forms of antisocial behavior, especially among young men, remains controversial, but it should not be dismissed.

Having successfully reformed the tax system to favor marriage in 2001, conservatives are now targeting the welfare system. They are disappointed that most states have not taken to heart the strong emphasis on marriage and on reducing unwed childbearing in the 1996 welfare-reform law, known as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families or TANF. In the round of reform expected in 2002, they want these family formation goals to be given at least as much weight as the goal of moving single mothers into work.

But this raises the question of how best to achieve these goals. Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation has suggested earmarking 10 percent of all TANF funds (about \$1.5 billion a year) for such activities as marriage education and counseling, especially in high-risk communities. Charles Murray has suggested, as an experiment, cutting off all means-tested benefits for unwed mothers under 18 in one state. Governor Frank Keating of Oklahoma is emphasizing a reduction in divorce rates. Many in the "fatherhood movement" want more resources devoted to helping young unwed fathers acquire the motivation, skills, and job opportunities that will enable them to marry the mothers of their children—or barring that, at least to be more involved in raising these children. Still others want to target young people who have not yet married or had children in order to prevent unwed births from occurring in the first place. The current welfare-reform law contains a number of provisions intended to reduce nonmarital births. These include a requirement that teen mothers live with their parents or in another supervised setting, bonuses for states that reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing, and funding for abstinence education programs. The law also permits states to deny additional benefits to women who have children while on welfare ("family caps").

These agendas are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they involve different strategies (encouraging marriage, reduc-

ing divorce, discouraging early births) and different target groups (married or romantically involved couples, unwed parents, and young unmarried men and women, including teens). Obviously, marriage is a good thing, but in my view, preventing early childbearing among those who are still young and unmarried is likely to be the most effective strategy for restoring the institution of marriage.

Is marriage the solution?

Most people would agree that the ultimate goal is to increase the number of children growing up with two biological, married parents. Reducing divorce rates can contribute to this end. However, after increasing sharply in the 1960s and 1970s, divorce rates have leveled off or even declined modestly since the early 1980s. Moreover, children in divorced families are generally much better off than those born to never-married mothers: They more often retain a relationship with both parents, are more likely to receive support from a nonresident father, and are less likely to receive welfare or other government assistance. Finally, most of the increase in child poverty between 1980 and 1996 was related to the increase in nonmarital childbearing over this period, not to greater divorce. In short, efforts to strengthen marriages in ways that reduce the likelihood of divorce should be welcomed; but divorce rates, though high, are not the crux of the problem and should not be the focus of any new effort.

The real problem is too many unmarried women having babies. Most of these women are very young when they have their first child. While only 30 percent of all nonmarital births are to women under the age of 20, half of first nonmarital births are to teenagers and most of the rest are to women in their early twenties. So the pattern typically begins in the teenage years or just beyond, and once begun often leads to additional births outside of marriage. There are two solutions to this problem. One is to encourage these young women to marry the fathers of their children (assuming the fathers are willing). The other is to convince them to delay childbearing until they are older and married.

Most women eventually do marry (90 percent by age 45). The problem is one of timing. Up until their mid twenties,

more women have had babies than are or have been married. Those calling for more marriage are really calling for earlier marriages. But this would reverse a strong and generally healthy trend toward marriage at a later age among both men and women. Between 1960 and 1999, age at first marriage increased from 20 to 25 for women and from 23 to 27 for men. Age at first marriage is one of the strongest predictors of marital stability. One recent study by Tim Heaton at Brigham Young University based on data from the National Survey of Family Growth finds that almost all of the decline in divorce rates since 1975 is related to the increase in age at first marriage. Not only is this trend good for marriage, it is good for children as well. Younger mothers often lack the maturity, patience, and education that a child needs.

The argument will be made that in earlier times it was common for women to marry young. But our economy now demands much higher levels of education than in earlier periods, and women as well as men have greater opportunities to pursue both education and a career beyond high school. To be sure, some women may want to forego such opportunities in order to become full-time wives and mothers at an early age. But a social policy that actively encourages such early marriage would be inconsistent with one that also favors investments in education and in stable, long-term marriages.

Perhaps what is really intended by marriage advocates is not a set of policies that would encourage earlier marriages across the board but only in cases where a woman is already pregnant or has had a child. Such "shotgun" or "after-the-fact" marriages to the biological father were common in the past but have virtually disappeared in recent years. Their modern counterpart is what is often called "fragile-family" initiatives—efforts to work with young couples, many of whom are romantically involved or cohabiting at the time of the baby's birth, to form more stable ties and, where appropriate, to marry. These efforts often involve education, training, counseling, and peer support for the fathers. An evaluation of one such effort, Parents Fair Share, produced somewhat disappointing results. About two-fifths of all out-of-wedlock births are to cohabiting couples, and cohabitation seems to be rapidly replacing mar-

riage as a preferred living arrangement among the younger generation. These cohabiting families are much less stable than married families. Less than half of them stay together for five years or more. Whether such couples can be persuaded to marry and whether these marriages would endure if they did is not clear, but some research suggests that marriages preceded by cohabitation are less stable than those that are not. In the meantime, any program that provides special supports, such as education and training, to unwed parents, whether mothers or fathers, runs the risk of rewarding behavior that society presumably would like to discourage.

Many unwed mothers cohabit not with the biological father of their children but with another man, and some of these relationships may also end in marriage. But, surprising as it may seem, such stepfamilies seem to be no better for children than being raised in a single-parent home.

The real problem

More importantly, once a woman has had a child outside of marriage, her chances of marrying plummet. Daniel Lichter of Ohio State University finds that the likelihood that a woman of a given age, race, and socioeconomic status will be married is 40 percent lower for those who first had a child out of wedlock (and 51 percent lower if we exclude women who marry the biological father within the first six months after the birth). By age 35, only 70 percent of all unwed mothers are married in contrast to 88 percent among those who have not had a child. Lichter compares women who had a premarital pregnancy terminated by a miscarriage to those who carried to term, and finds that these differences in marriage rates persist. This suggests that the lower rates of marriage are caused by having a baby out of wedlock rather than simply reflecting the pre-existing characteristics of this group of women. Unwed mothers are less likely to spend time at work or in school where they can meet marriageable men. And having had one child out of wedlock, they appear to be relatively uninhibited about having additional children in the same way. For these or other reasons, early unwed childbearing leads to less marriage and more illegitimacy. Thus a key strat-

egy for bringing back marriage is to prevent the initial birth that makes a single woman less marriageable throughout her adult years.

Not only are unwed mothers less likely to marry than those without children but when they do marry, they do not marry as well. Their partners are more likely to be high school drop-outs or unemployed than the partners of women who have similarly disadvantaged backgrounds but no children. Although marriage improves an unwed mother's chance of escaping from poverty, it does not offset the negative effects associated with an unwed birth, according to Lichter and his colleagues.

My conclusion is that efforts to promote marriage and reduce divorce hold little promise for curbing the growth of single-parent families. What is needed instead is a serious effort to reduce early, out-of-wedlock childbearing—something that, unlike encouraging marriage, we probably can accomplish. Certainly, some of what needs to be done is controversial, but no more so than the promarriage agenda that many conservatives now tout. Indeed, the public consensus in favor of reducing teen pregnancy and early childbearing is strong, whereas support for a pro-marriage agenda is considerably weaker. Whole segments of the body politic are skeptical of, if not downright opposed to, the marriage agenda. This includes in addition to many feminists, some conservatives of a libertarian bent for whom this seems like social engineering run amok. Finally, a promarriage agenda is undercut by powerful cultural trends. As Claudia Winkler, managing editor of the *Weekly Standard*, notes, the effort to restore a marriage culture “is at odds with deep-rooted, centrifugal American values—individualism, pluralism, the separation of church and state—that have never been more vigorous.” Of the two means for insuring that more children are born in-wedlock—delayed childbearing or earlier marriages—the former is most consistent with these deep-rooted values.

Of course, we should use the bully pulpit to promote marriage, provide pre-marital education and counseling, and encourage communities, schools, and parents to teach young people about the benefits of marriage. We should also reduce some of the financial disincentives to marriage, especially in

low-income communities. Congress acted in 2001 to reduce the marriage penalty in the tax code, including the large marriage penalty associated with the Earned Income Tax Credit. Many states have liberalized welfare eligibility standards for two-parent families. More could be done, but any meaningful reduction of marriage penalties in income-tested programs carries enormous budgetary costs and is unlikely to significantly affect behavior. Without a strong effort to prevent early childbearing, these other strategies are unlikely to reduce the growth of single-parent families and to improve the economic and social environment of children.

Reducing early childbearing

After climbing steadily at almost 1 percentage point per year for over 20 years, the proportion of births outside of marriage (“the nonmarital birth ratio”) leveled off after 1994. This development could be related to an increase in marriage, an increase in births to married women, or a decrease in births to unmarried women, but it appears to be primarily due to this last factor. The teen-age birth rate (four-fifths of teen births are out of wedlock) has declined since 1991. In fact, if there had been no decline in the teen birth rate, the nonmarital birth ratio would have continued to climb through the late 1990s, though not as rapidly as in the prior decade. More specifically, if teen birth rates had held at the levels reached in the early 1990s, the nonmarital birth ratio would, by 1999, have been more than a percentage point higher. This suggests that a focus on teenagers (although not to the exclusion of women in their early twenties who also contribute disproportionately to out-of-wedlock births) has a major role to play in reducing both out-of-wedlock childbearing and the growth of single-parent families.

What caused the decline? Can additional steps be taken to lower the rate (and ratio) further? The decline in teen pregnancy rates and births has been driven by both declining rates of sexual activity among teens and better contraception. Proponents of abstinence like to think that the former has been most important while proponents of birth control give greater weight to changes in contraceptive behavior. From the exist-

ing data, it's not possible to determine the precise role of each, but almost everyone agrees that both have been important. There is a growing public consensus that abstinence is preferable, especially for school-age youth, but that contraception should be made available. Polling by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy has consistently found majority support for this view, with 73 percent of adults agreeing with the proposition that teens should not be sexually active but that if teens are they should have access to contraception. Support for this moderate position has increased 14 percent since 1996.

The emphasis on abstinence, including new funding for abstinence education in the 1996 welfare-reform bill, is helping to reduce teen pregnancies and out-of-wedlock births. Yet evaluations of abstinence education programs have thus far failed to show much evidence of success. How does one explain this discrepancy? In my view, the messages about abstinence are having an impact less because they are embedded in so-called "abstinence only" education programs and more because they have influenced the entire culture, from traditional sex-education programs and faith-based efforts to the media and the way in which parents communicate with their children. The abstinence message is no longer the exclusive province of a small band of conservative activists. It is now being promoted by many liberal groups and is widely endorsed by most ordinary Americans including parents, teachers, many political leaders, and to a lesser degree, by teens themselves. This shift in both attitudes and behavior during the 1990s, to which the fear of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases contributed, is significant.

The decline in teen pregnancy and birth rates beginning in the early 1990s predates welfare reform. We saw a drop in second or higher-order births to teens who were already mothers in the early 1990s, and this appears to have been caused by the availability for the first time of longer-lasting, more effective forms of contraception such as Depo Provera. These methods are not widely used but have caught on particularly among the subgroup of young women who have already had a baby. But a much sharper decline in births to teens began in the latter half of the 1990s. Evidence suggests that welfare

reform, along with more extensive and effective efforts to prevent teen pregnancy, played a large role in producing recent trends.

Messages and programs

Not only has the teen birth rate declined and the nonmarital birth ratio leveled off, but in the late 1990s the proportion of children living in a single-parent family stabilized or even declined modestly for the first time in many decades. This reversal was most notable for low-income families, and those with less education or very young children, just as one would expect if welfare reform were the cause. Looking at data for 1997 and 1999, for example, Gregory Acs and Sandi Nelson of the Urban Institute found that the share of families composed of single mothers living independently declined almost 3 percentage points more among families in the bottom income quartile than among those in the second quartile.

It would be premature to attribute all or even most of these changes to the 1996 law. Evaluations of some of the specific provisions, such as family caps, the state illegitimacy bonus or abstinence education programs, have not shown clear impacts. Arguably, much more important than any of these are the new messages sent by welfare reform about time limits, work, and abstinence. Young women who decide to have children outside of marriage now know that they will receive much more limited assistance from the government. Young men are getting the message that if they father a child they will be expected to pay child support. The steady, broad messages about work, family formation, sexual abstinence, and the need for fathers to support their children are the key.

These messages have been combined with new efforts on the part of states, communities, and nonprofit (including faith-based) organizations to prevent teen pregnancy. Unfortunately, current efforts, although more extensive than in the past, are fragmented, underfunded, and often ineffective.

The good news is that in the past five years, research on teen pregnancy-prevention programs has found that a number are working. Douglas Kirby's review, *Emerging Answers*, published in the summer of 2001, identifies several rigorously

evaluated programs that have reduced teen-pregnancy rates by as much as one-half. Some effective programs involve teens in community service or afterschool activities with adult supervision and counseling. Others focus more on sex education but not necessarily just on teaching reproductive biology. The most effective sex-education programs provide clear messages about the importance of abstaining from sex or using contraception. They teach teens how to deal with peer pressure and how to communicate and negotiate with partners. This research needs to be aggressively disseminated. Since there are a variety of different approaches that can be effective, communities should be allowed to choose the ones that best fit their needs and values.

More emphasis also needs to be placed on the potential of sophisticated media campaigns to change the wider culture. Such campaigns have been used to change a variety of behaviors in the past, but their full potential has not been tapped in the case of pregnancy prevention. Some nonprofit groups, such as the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy and the National Fatherhood Initiative, are working in partnership with the media to include new messages in the television shows most often watched by teens. Many states are using the abstinence education funds from the welfare-reform bill for public-service announcements, but additional resources, including some that could be used to design and implement a national effort, are needed.

Social policy that works

The reforms instituted in 1996 sent a strong message that women who bear a child outside of marriage will no longer be able to raise that child without working and that the men who father such children will have to contribute to their support. The early indications are that this message is being heard: Teen birth rates have fallen, the share of children born out of wedlock has leveled off, and the share of young children living in married families has grown. And given time for new social norms to evolve, the effects of reform will likely increase. The goal of increasing marriage is laudable, but pushing tough promarriage policies further (such as denying all benefits to young women having children out of wedlock) would

upset the fragile political coalition supporting current reforms.

Our focus must remain on childbearing outside of marriage, not marriage per se. Divorce rates may be high, but they are not increasing and have played no role in the growth of single-parent families for several decades. Most of that growth, and the associated growth in child poverty in the 1980s and early 1990s, was caused by increased childbearing among young, single women. Once such women have had a child, their odds of ever getting married plummet. Many point to the shortage of “marriageable men”—that is, men with good job prospects—in the communities where these women live, but there is a shortage of “marriageable women” as well. Most men are going to think twice about taking on the burden of supporting someone else’s child.

If we want to encourage marriage, prevent divorce, and ensure that more children grow up with married parents, we must first insure that more women reach adulthood *before* they have children. This is a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for success. It implies redoubling efforts to prevent teen pregnancy. And it means convincing young men and women who have not yet had a baby that there is much to lose if they enter parenthood prematurely, and much to gain if they wait until they are married.