

Effects of Out-of-Wedlock Births on Society

Synthesis Paper: [Rising Illegitimacy: America's Social Catastrophe](#)

1. Intergenerational Effect

The absence of married parents can lead to intergenerational illegitimacy. Even as the child enters adolescence and the influence of peers and community increases, the consequences of being born outside marriage continue to dog the development of many young people and compound the risks confronting them.

Nonmarital births are becoming the accepted way of life particularly in inner-city poor communities. In 2013, nonmarital births accounted for 41 percent of all U.S. births. Roughly 29 percent of these births were to White women, 53 percent to Hispanic women, and 71 percent to Black women.¹⁾ A University of Wisconsin study shows that inner-city young women feel less pressure to marry and have family intentions very different from their middle-class counterparts—black or white. They do not expect to have their own children within marriage, and frequently they deliberately chose single-parent family life for lack of suitable husbands.²⁾

This growing practice of birth outside of marriage is by now widely accepted and is affecting expectations. Nationally, 41 percent of blacks, 29 percent of Hispanics and 23 percent of whites are positively disposed toward the idea of being a single parent.³⁾ The intergenerational trend is unmistakable. Recent research casts some light on these findings: being born outside of marriage significantly reduces the chances of the child growing up to have an intact marriage. Children born to unmarried parents are more likely to have their first child out of wedlock, thereby perpetuating the cycle of rejection.⁴⁾

2. Crime

The effects of illegitimacy spill over into crime in the community. The effects of illegitimacy continue into adolescence and are linked to increased crime rates in a neighborhood. Again the professional literature illustrates the statistical relationship: lack of married parents, rather than race or poverty, is the principal factor in the crime increase.

It has been known for some time that high rates of welfare dependency correlate with high crime rates among young men in a neighborhood.⁵⁾ But more important, a major 1988 study of 11,000 individuals found that “the percentage of single-parent households with children between the ages of 12 and 20 is significantly associated with rates of violent crime and burglary.” The same study makes clear that the widespread popular assumption that there is an association between race and crime is false. Illegitimacy is the key factor. The absence of marriage, and the failure to form and maintain intact families, explains the incidence of high crime in a neighborhood among whites as well as blacks. This study also concluded not only that poverty does not explain the incidence of crime, but also that it actually appears to have a negative effect on crime.⁶⁾ This is a dramatic reversal of conventional wisdom. Further, University of Illinois sociologist Robert J. Sampson, in a major study on the differential effects of poverty and family disruption on crime, states:

Overall the analysis shows that rates of black violent offending, especially by juveniles, are strongly influenced by variations in family structure. Independent of the major candidates supplied by prior criminological theory (e.g. income, region, size, density, age and race composition) black family disruptions has the largest effects on black juvenile robbery and homicide...The effects of family structure are strong and cannot be easily dismissed by reference to other structural and cultural features of urban environments...The effect of family disruption on black violence is not due to the effect of black violence on family structure.

Commenting on crime among whites, Sampson concludes: "In fact the predictors of white robbery are in large part identical in sign and magnitude to those for blacks."⁷⁾

Dr. June O'Neill, of Baruch College, City of University of New York, in recent research on underclass behaviors confirms the linkage between crimes and single-parent families. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, O'Neill found that young black men raised in single-parent families were twice as likely to engage in criminal activities when compared to black men raised in two-parent families, even after holding constant a wide range of variables such as family income, urban residence, neighborhood environment, and parents' education. Growing up in a single-parent family in a neighborhood with many other single-parent families on welfare triples the probability that a young black man will engage in criminal activity.⁸⁾

These academic findings on the relationship between crime and illegitimacy are confirmed in government studies. For example, the U.S. Department of Justice reported in 1987 that 70 percent of juveniles in custody did not live with both parents while growing up, and almost three-quarters of those lived primarily in a single-parent family.⁹⁾

Meanwhile, a major sociological review from the University of Wisconsin concludes that teens from single-parent families are much more likely to become delinquent than are teens from intact families. Family disruption drives up delinquency rates because of the way it "hampers the formation of attachments to parents and the transmission of antidelinquent definitions from parent to child." Adolescents from broken homes often "associate with delinquents learn...definitions favorable to delinquency and consequently, violate the law."¹⁰⁾

3. Welfare

The absence of married parents reinforces the cycle of welfare. The cumulative earlier effects carry over into young adult life. Welfare contributes to the sorry picture. From the professional literature, for instance, it becomes clear that receiving public aid increases the percentage of pregnant teenagers choosing unmarried motherhood.¹¹⁾ Data on the American welfare system, moreover, show a positive relationship between illegitimacy and long-term welfare dependency. Women who give birth outside of marriage are more likely to go on AFDC and spend more years on welfare once enrolled (72 percent of single mothers 17 years of age or younger receive AFDC). These combined effects of "younger and longer" increase total AFDC costs per household by 25 percent to 30 percent for 17-year-olds.¹²⁾

According to eminent poverty researcher Sara McLanahan, then at the University of Wisconsin and now at Princeton University, family structure is powerful in explaining much of these effects. Though the numbers show that single parenthood in adolescence is associated with daughters' future

dependence, they also show that single parenthood in adolescence is associated with daughters' future likelihood of being on welfare, even after controlling for family income and size.¹³⁾

Not only is illegitimacy linked to future welfare dependency, but welfare dependency is linked to illegitimacy. For instance research by Dr. C.R. Winegarden of the University of Toledo found that half of the increase in black illegitimacy in recent decades could be attributed to the effects of welfare. Research by Shelley Lundberg and Robert D. Plotnick of the University of Washington shows that an increase of roughly \$200 per a month in welfare benefits per family causes the teenage illegitimate birth rate in a state to increase by 150 percent. Dr. June O'Neill's research has found that, holding constant a wide range of other variables such as income, parental education and urban and neighborhood setting, a 50 percent increase in the monthly value of AFDC and Food Stamp benefits led to a 43 percent increase in the number of out-of-wedlock births.¹⁴⁾

This pattern also holds in Canada, where welfare disbursements are more generous. A recent study of the Canadian welfare system, for instance, found that increases in welfare led to an increase in the number of births outside of marriage. An addition of \$100-\$200 in yearly welfare support was found to lead to a 5 percent increase in the probability of being a single parent, a 2 percent increase in the probability of a child being born out of wedlock and a 1 percent increase in divorce.¹⁵⁾

4. Role of Government

The evidence is clear and disturbing, being born outside of marriage lowers the health of newborns and increases their chances of dying; it delays children's cognitive (especially their verbal) development; it lowers their educational achievement; it lowers their job attainment; it increases their behavior problems; it lowers their impulse control; it warps their social development; it helps change their community from being a support to being a danger to their development; and it increases the crime rate in their community.

To make the situation worse, the government has instilled powerful incentives in the welfare system which makes illegitimacy a community way of life, particularly in very poor communities. The widespread incidence of illegitimacy in turn passes on all these effects to the next generation in an even more malignant form.

While government cannot instill virtue, it does not need to subsidize this rejection. Government policies have subsidized illegitimacy, and the evidence of its serious effects are steadily growing. Given the resultant suffering to children, current welfare policy is little more than governmental child abuse. What Congress must do is to adopt policies friendly to children. But that in plain language, means being far more friendly to married fathers and mothers.

¹⁾ Carmen Solomon-Fears, "Nonmarital Births: An Overview," *Congressional Research Services Report* (2014) available at <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43667.pdf> (accessed September 4, 2015).

"CDC: Fewer Children Born Out of Wedlock", U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports* (August 2014) Series P-60, 1994.

²⁾ Ione Y. Deollos, "Promises I can keep: Why poor women put motherhood before marriage," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, (2006) 68(4), 1112-1113.

Naomi Farber, "The Significance of Race and Class in Marital Decisions among Unmarried Adolescent Mothers," *Social Problems*, Vol. 37 (1990), pp. 51-63.

³⁾ Jonathan Vespa, Jamie M. Lewis, and Rose M. Kreider "America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2012", (2013).

Data from National High School and Beyond panel study of 13,601 teenagers, from Allan F.

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