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Unwed Moms Are White: Once Again the Conventional Wisdom Has It Wrong

By DOUGLAS J. BESHAROV and KARL ZINSMEISTER

ONCE AGAIN, the conventional wisdom has it wrong. Illegitimacy is not solely a black problem: It is an American problem that, increasingly, is cutting across all communities. The crucial factor isn't race, but income.

When we look at income figures, we find that white illegitimacy rates are lower than black rates in certain respects, but the gap is rapidly being closed.

Out-of-wedlock births can be measured in three ways: absolute numbers; birth rates, and ratios. By each measure, black and white levels are converging.

First, the absolute numbers: From 1960 to 1980, black unwed births actually exceeded white unwed births. Only since 1981 has the number of white out-of-wedlock births surpassed that of blacks. In 1984, unmarried white women gave birth to 391,929 children. The black figure was 350,896. Thus, black women accounted for 46 percent of all out-of-wedlock births, a number disproportionately high given their percentage of women of child bearing age (16 percent). Yet, the number of out-of-wedlock births is increasing more rapidly among whites than among blacks. Since 1969, the number of black out-of-wedlock births has increased 85 percent; the white number has increased 139 percent.

The second measure, birth rate, is the number of births to unmarried women per thousand unmarried women of child bearing age in any given year. This tells us whether increases in the absolute number of out-of-wedlock births are attributable to increases in the number of unmarried women. In 1984, the black out-of-wedlock rate was 76.8 per 1,000, compared to 20.1 for whites. Although the black rate is almost four times that of whites, again, whites are catching up. The difference between the two races fell from about 7:1 (in 1970) to less than 4:1 (in 1984). Moreover, as the white rate has been increasing (up 45 percent since 1970), the black rate has been declining (down 20 percent in the same period).

The rise in the white out-of-wedlock birth rate is particularly striking in light of a 26 percent decline (between 1970 and 1984) in the birth rate for all women. Unmarried black fertility rates are down, in line with the overall trend. But fertility among unmarried white women is up, going against the tide.

The third measure is ratio, that is, the proportion of unwed births to all live births. This controls for the number of births, as opposed to the number of unwed women of child-bearing age. If women, in general, were having more children, that could account for a rise in both the absolute number and rates of unwed births, but the ratio would hold steady. The ratio for both blacks and whites has increased, but it is increasing faster for whites. Since 1970, the proportion of unwed births among whites has increased 58 percent, while the black increase was only 38 percent.

Differences in black and white illegitimacy are exaggerated by the failure to consider income and educational differences. About half of all out-of-wedlock births are to families with annual incomes under \$10,000. According to an unpublished Census Bureau analysis, among families in this income range, the 1985 difference between the black and white out-of-wedlock birth rates drops from 4:1 to less than 2:1. Although the black rate still is higher, the difference is of markedly less social significance.

A similar correlation between poverty and illegitimacy was found by Charles Murray in his study of illegitimacy rates in Ohio. He found that poverty and lack of education were more accurate predictors of high illegitimacy rates than was race; poverty and lack of education accounted for 67 percent of the variation in illegitimacy rates among white communities and 79 percent of the variation among black communities.

Although Murray concedes that "substantial black-white differences persist even after taking education and poverty into account," he concludes that "we have barely started asking the right question. When illegitimacy is so intertwined with socioeconomic class, it is absurd to use the black-white difference as the benchmark for discussion."

Not that the concern for black families is unwarranted. Blacks in female-headed families are inordinately likely to be poor. They account for, and suffer from, a disproportionately large share of our national pathology-crime, drug abuse, delinquency, teenage pregnancy, and so forth.

Black out-of-wedlock births have gained singular attention only because they have already become a majority phenomenon among blacks. It is in the black community where the centripetal forces acting on the American family can be seen most clearly. The out-of-wedlock birth ratio among American whites today is roughly what it was among non-whites 35 years ago. If present trends continue, the time for TV specials about white illegitimacy will soon come.

The national out-of-wedlock birth ratio, calculated without regard to race, has increased from 5.2 percent of all live births in 1960 to 21 percent in 1984, a threefold increase. The economic consequences of this soaring illegitimacy should be an urgent concern. Over the past several decades, female-headed families with children have made up an increasing proportion of the poor. And, while divorced women are part of the "feminization of poverty," never-married women tend to be much poorer than their divorced counterparts. In 1985, the mean family income for a never-married mother with children under the age of eighteen was \$6,225, less than half the average income of divorced women with children, \$13,281.

The causes of out-of-wedlock births are deeply rooted and complex. Certainly, new personal values, sexual practices, and cultural attitudes have had their effect. Poverty, however, does stand out. Looking at the strong correlation between poverty and out-of-wedlock births, some will say that the conditions that lie behind poverty help cause illegitimacy; others will look at the same data and conclude the opposite-that illegitimacy begets poverty. Still others would argue that the availability of welfare at least facilitates and perhaps encourages births out of wedlock.

The data we have described do not settle this argument. But one thing should be clear: In looking for the causes of illegitimacy, we should look first at this correlation, rather than the race of the mother.

Douglas J. Besharov, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, is an adjunct professor of law at Georgetown and American Universities. Karl Zinsmeister, a former a research assistant at AEI, is a demographic consultant. Alison Quin, a research assistant at AEI, also assisted in writing this article which is adapted from Public Opinion.