

# 6

## **Teenage Sex, Pregnancy, and Nonmarital Births**

*Isabel V. Sawhill*



Maryland School of Public Affairs  
**Welfare Reform Academy**

Committee to Review Welfare Reform Research

[www.welfareacademy.org](http://www.welfareacademy.org)

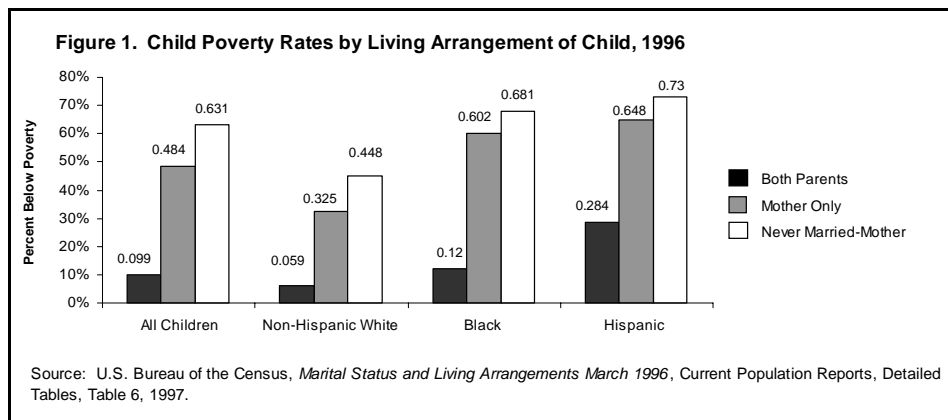
Part of a forthcoming monograph  
*Family Well-Being After Welfare Reform*  
Douglas J. Besharov, Editor

# 6

## Teenage Sex, Pregnancy, and Nonmarital Births

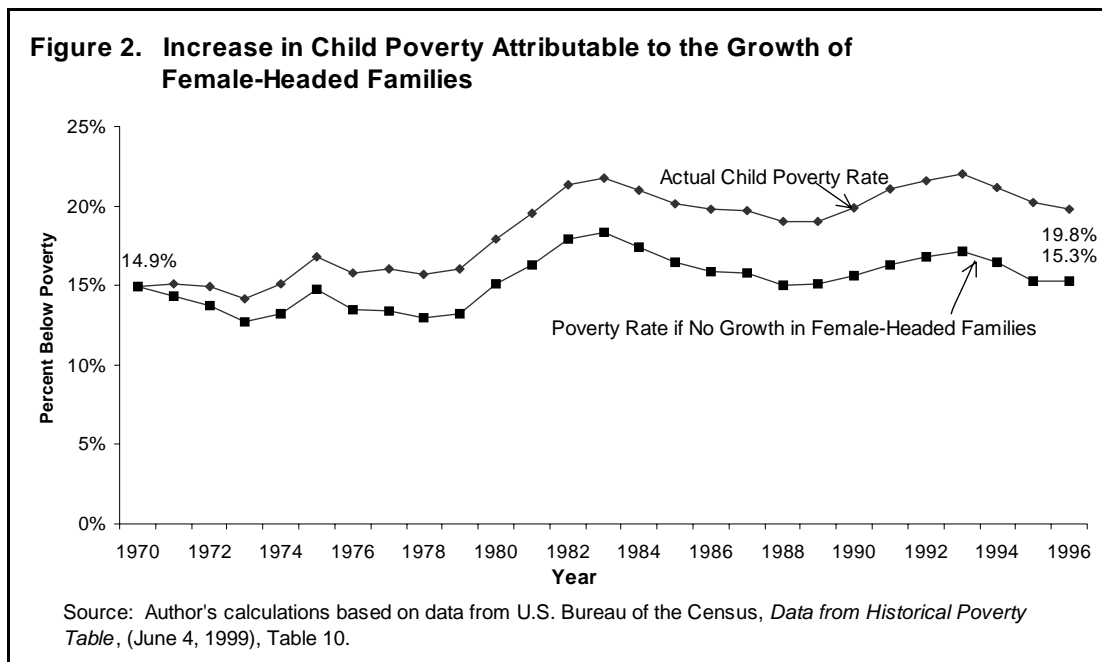
Isabel Sawhill\*

When Congress enacted the new welfare law in 1996, it put at least as much emphasis on reducing teen and out-of-wedlock childbearing as it did on requiring work. It did so for a very good reason: A high proportion of children living in single-parent families are poor (figure 1), and the growth of single-parent families has contributed to the rise in child poverty over the past few decades. So anything we could do to stem the growth of such families would be beneficial to children. Poverty in the United States, especially child poverty, is increasingly associated with family structure. In the mid-1960s, only 35 percent of all poor children lived in female-headed families. Today, that figure stands at almost 60 percent. When we exclude children affected by short spells of poverty of the kind typically associated with brief periods of joblessness and focus just on children who spend most of their formative years in poverty, the proportion being raised by single parents is even higher.



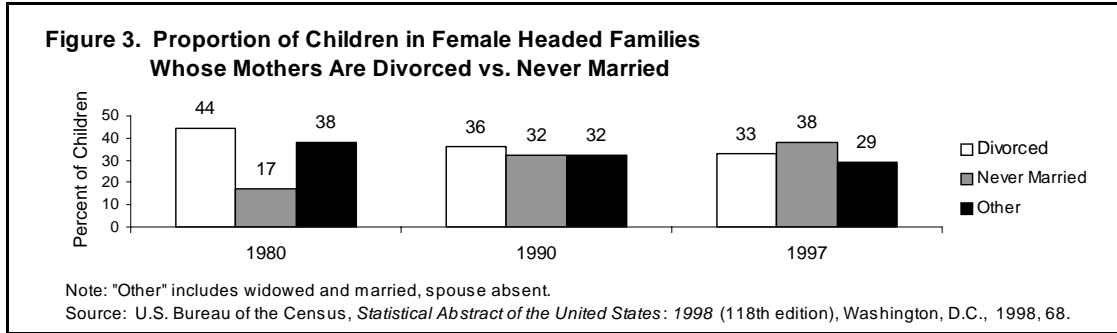
\*Isabel V. Sawhill is senior fellow, Economic Studies, and co-director, Welfare Reform and Beyond, at the Brookings Institution.

The proportion of all American children who are poor has been increasing—from 15 percent in 1970 to 20 percent in 1996 (and just slightly lower than 20 percent by 1998). Virtually all of this increase is associated with the growth of single-parent families (figure 2). The arithmetic behind this conclusion is straightforward. Simply because child poverty is five times higher in single-parent than in two-parent families and because the proportion of all children living in fatherless families has increased dramatically, child poverty rates have increased by about five percentage points since 1970. This phenomenon begs the question of why marriage has collapsed, but the simple facts about the breakdown of families and their implications for children are indisputable.

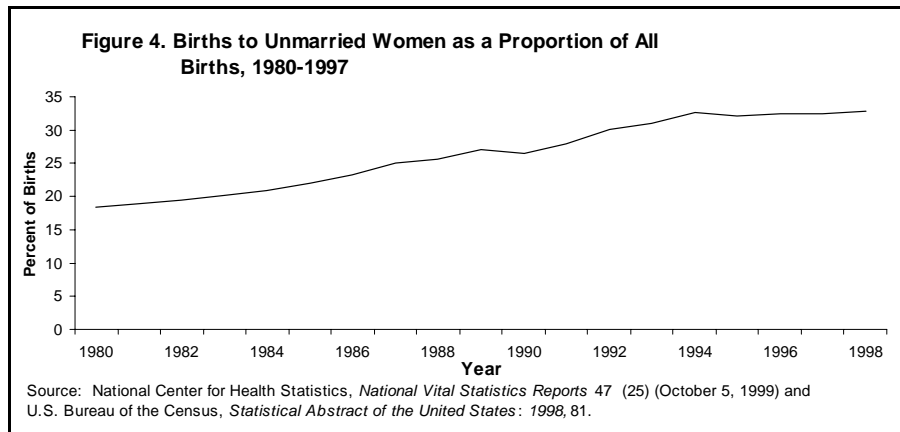


Not just the growth of female-headed families but also shifts in the composition of the group of single parents have contributed to greater poverty and welfare dependency. In the 1960s and 1970s, most of the growth of single-parent families was caused by increases in divorce. In the 1980s and 1990s, almost all of the increase has been driven by out-of-wedlock childbearing (figure 3). Currently, 33 percent of all children in the United States are born outside of marriage. The proportion is more than half in many of our largest cities and nearly half now in several states (for example, Louisiana and Mississippi). Unmarried mothers tend to be younger and more disadvantaged than their divorced counterparts; as a result, they and their children are even more likely to be poor. Poverty is not the only consequence of growing up in a single-parent home; research by Sara McLanahan and others has shown that such children are disadvantaged in other

ways as well, but the economic consequences are the most obvious and to many people the most compelling.<sup>1</sup>



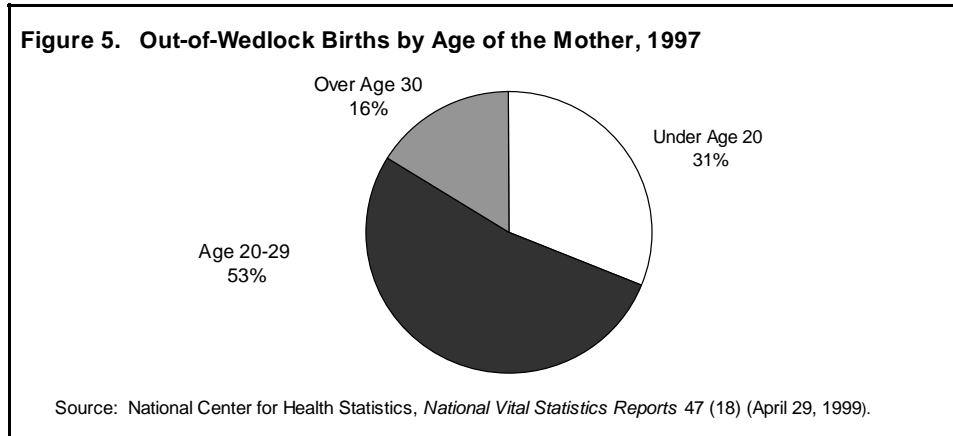
The good news is that the rise in the fraction of all children born out of wedlock—and the concomitant rise in single-parent families—appears to have slowed or stabilized since about 1994 (figure 4). This trend happens to coincide with the welfare rolls’ sharp decline but precedes the enactment of the national welfare reform law by two years. Although the reasons for the slowdown remain murky, some data will put the changes in context.



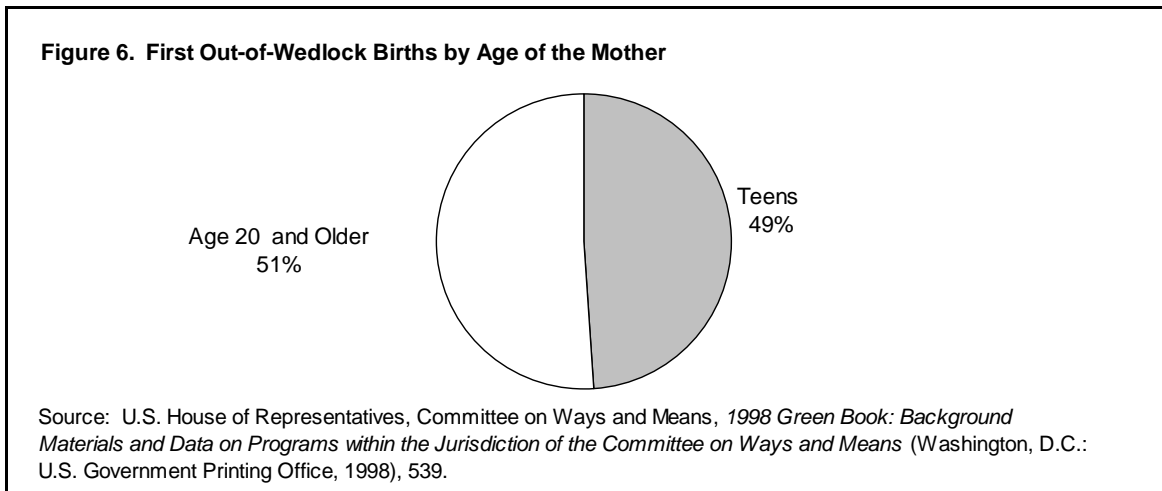
First, we should be clear that statistically, most out-of-wedlock births occur among women in their twenties, especially their early twenties (figure 5). Nonmarital childbearing is not, as many people seem to think, synonymous with teenage childbearing. Moreover, there is nothing magic about age twenty. A woman who has a birth at age eighteen or nineteen is not very different from one who has a birth at age twenty or twenty-one. A high proportion (about

<sup>1</sup>Sara McLanahan, “Parent Absence or Poverty: Which Matters More?” in *Consequences of Growing Up Poor*, edited by Greg Duncan and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn (New York: Russell Sage, 1997), 35–48.

## 6: Teenage Sex, Pregnancy, and Nonmarital Births



half) of out-of-wedlock births are second or higher-order births; if we look just at the *first* birth a woman has outside of marriage, the importance of the teenage years looms larger. Specifically, half of all out-of-wedlock childbearing starts during the teen years (figure 6). So if we want to reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing and the poverty that accompanies it, the adolescent years are a good time to start. Young girls who have children, often before completing their education, are less likely to marry and more likely to have additional children than those who delay parenting to a later age. One study<sup>2</sup> compared teens who delayed childbearing because of a miscarriage with those who did not and found that those in the latter group were not particularly



---

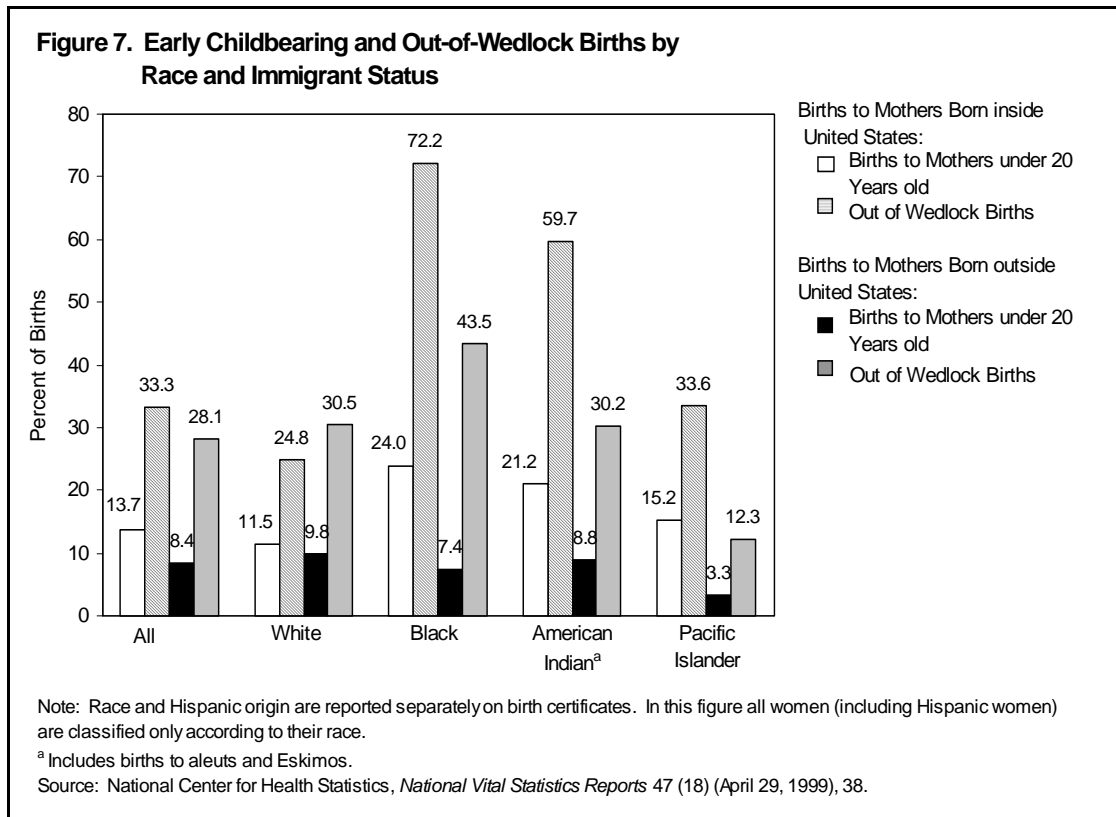
<sup>2</sup>V. Joseph Hotz, Susan Williams McElroy, and Seth G. Sanders, “The Impacts of Teenage Childbearing on the Mothers and the Consequences of those Impacts for Government,” in *Kids Having Kids*, edited by Rebecca A. Maynard (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 1997), 55–94.

## 6: Teenage Sex, Pregnancy, and Nonmarital Births

disadvantaged by the birth. They did, however, spend longer as single parents and had more births before age thirty than those who miscarried. This study relied on a very small sample in which more than half of the control group (that is, the girls who miscarried) got pregnant again and went on to give birth before age twenty. Moreover, the children of the young mothers suffer a variety of adverse consequences, including poorer health, less success in school, and more behavior problems.

I want to say a word here about culture. Both early childbearing and out-of-wedlock childbearing vary enormously among population subgroups (figure 7). Some of the differences are a result of differences in socioeconomic status, but one would be hard-pressed to explain all of them in this way. Note, for example, that early childbearing rates and out-of-wedlock childbearing rates are much lower among immigrant than among native-born women, despite the fact that immigrants have much less education.

The increasing number of children born out of wedlock is a direct result of three factors: later marriage, a higher birth rate among young unmarried women, and a lower birth rate among older married women. Some people believe the solution is to encourage marriage even among the very young, and others believe the solution is to encourage postponement of childbearing to



later ages. Without delving too deeply into this controversy, let me simply suggest that the goal among those concerned about child poverty should be to discourage both too early childbearing and childbearing outside of marriage. Very early childbearing, even were it to occur within marriage, is inconsistent with the growing requirements of the economy for workers with high levels of education. In addition, teenage marriages are highly unstable. But we should also recognize that the breakdown of marriage as the normative context for raising children may have consequences for our society that are at least as profound as the age at which childbearing begins. Indeed, the teen birth rate is far lower now than it was in the 1950s. What is new is the proportion of very early births that occur to unmarried women and the much broader acceptance of single parenting.

For whatever reasons, marriage is being replaced by what a team of researchers from Columbia and Princeton Universities call “fragile families.” Preliminary evidence from this team’s work in several cities, as well as some other research, suggests that about half of young mothers who give birth out of wedlock are cohabiting with the father of their child at the time of birth and that another 30 percent are “romantically involved.” Past research suggests that such ties are not very durable. If this research is any guide, within a year or two, many of the fathers will have disappeared. But some believe that the outcome could change if we intervened at the time of the child’s birth in ways that encouraged more father involvement.

High rates of cohabitation raise another issue: Are our estimates of child poverty too high because we fail to capture the income available from men who live with single mothers? On the one hand, such income may be substantially underreported or incompletely measured in standard tabulations of family income. On the other hand, that income may not be consistently or reliably available to the women and children living in such households. Although I think we need more research on this question, I would note that some recent studies have attempted to more fully incorporate this source of income. These studies found that counting the reported income of unrelated males living in the household did not produce a dramatic difference, although it did reveal a somewhat different picture. For example, in the Urban Institute study, the median income of children in one-parent families was increased by 11 percent once the income of such men was included.<sup>3</sup> Other studies, such as those by Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein,<sup>4</sup> suggest that not all of the income available to such households is reported, a problem that no amount of new analysis of existing data sources can overcome.

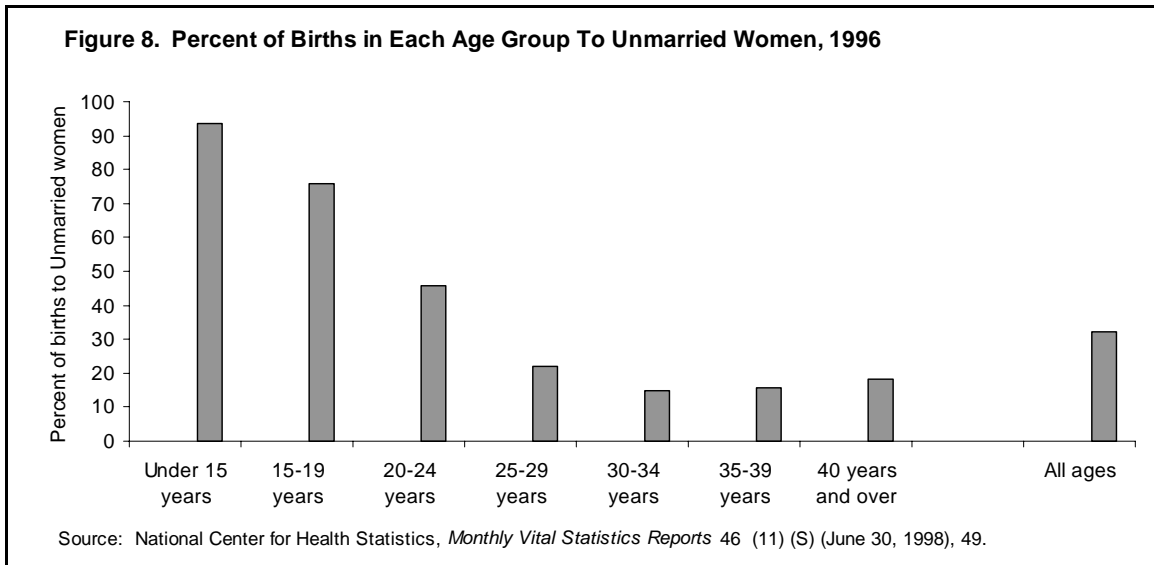
---

<sup>3</sup>Gregory Acs and Megan Gallagher, “Income Inequality Among America’s Children,” Urban Institute policy brief series *New Federalism: National Survey of America’s Families* B-6 (January 2000), 2.

<sup>4</sup>Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein, *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work* (New York: Russell Sage, 1997).

## 6: Teenage Sex, Pregnancy, and Nonmarital Births

Returning to the question of trends in early out-of-wedlock childbearing, one reason that out-of-wedlock childbearing appears to have stabilized is that teen birth rates have declined. Because such a high proportion of teen births (more than three quarters) occur outside of marriage (figure 8) and because teen mothers often go on to have additional children without



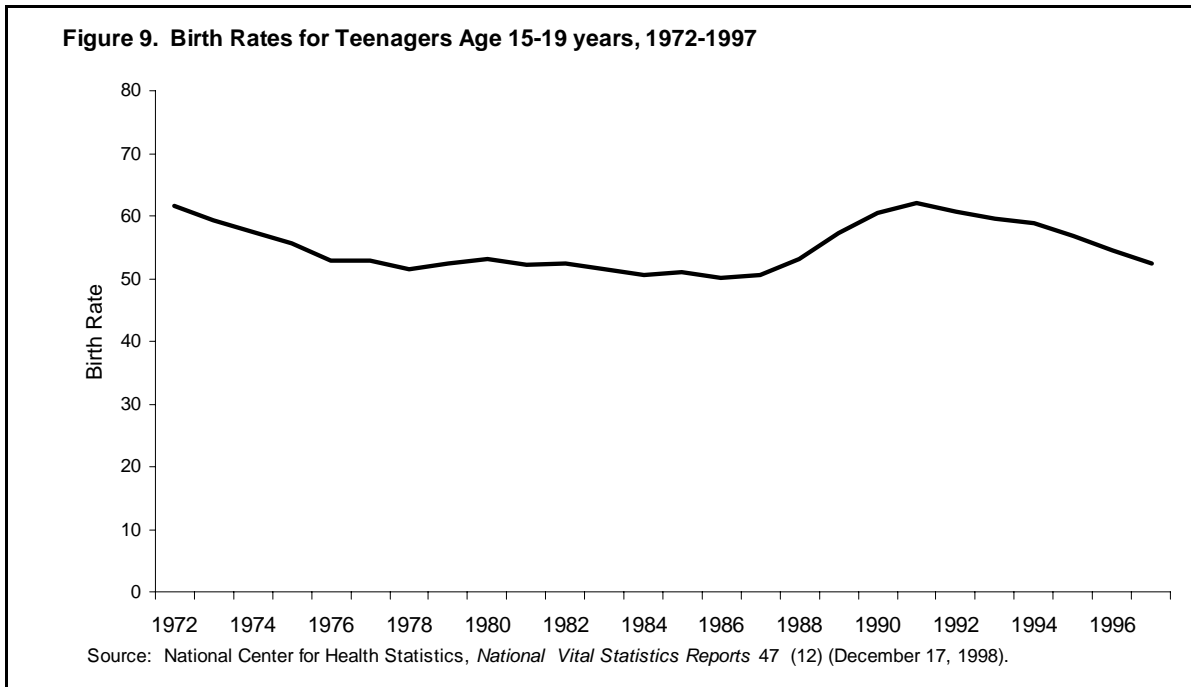
marrying, any decline in teenage childbearing will eventually reduce the proportion of all births that occur outside of marriage. The decline in teen birth rates dates from the early 1990s (figure 9) but it appears to have accelerated in recent years and can be expected to have a lagged effect on out-of-wedlock childbearing and single parenting more generally.

Why are teen birth rates declining? In the past any progress in this area was entirely a result of the greater availability of abortion. What is new in the 1990s is that teen birth rates are declining because of fewer pregnancies, not because an increasing fraction of teen pregnancies are being aborted (figure 10).

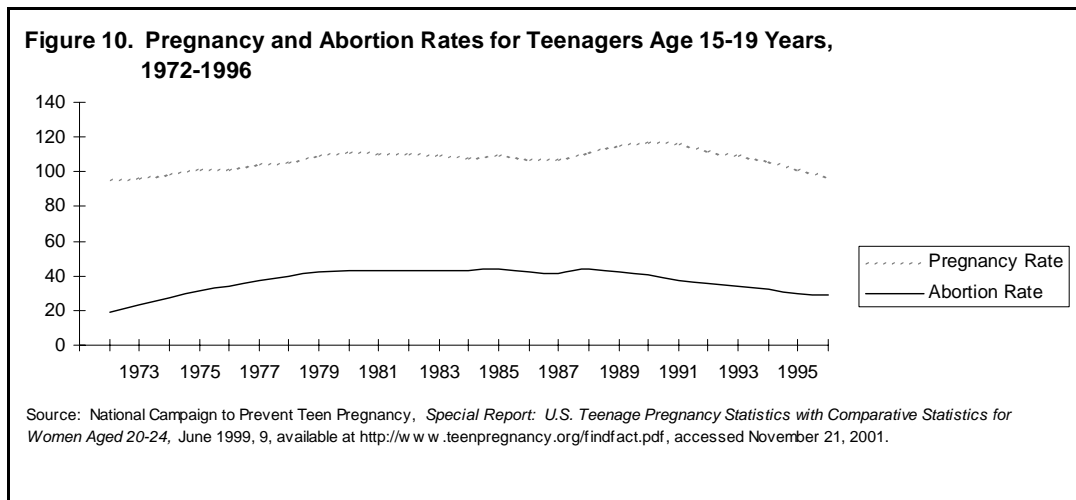
The decline in the teen pregnancy rate simply raises the question of what is causing fewer teens to become pregnant. Some analysts contend that the major reason is that more of them are abstaining from sex, and some say that greater use of contraception is the primary reason. At the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, we have carefully reviewed all the data on this question, and our conclusion is that both have played a role. I would caution against any attempt to be much more specific than that in terms of allocating the credit, given the uncertainties in the data. Obtaining good measures of sexual activity and contraceptive use is extremely difficult, and one's answer to the question about the relative importance of abstinence versus contraception is highly sensitive to technical questions about the data and methods used. For



6: Teenage Sex, Pregnancy, and Nonmarital Births



example, although the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) reported a decline in sexual activity from 1990 to 1995, many researchers are unwilling to rely on that data because the 1990 data came from a telephone rather than an in-person interview and thus are not strictly comparable to data from earlier years. And although some data sources, such as the National Survey of Adolescent Males, show a decline in sexual activity among males (at least among white males), other data sources, such as the Youth Risk Behavioral Survey and the NSFG, indicate that this decline was not accompanied by a statistically significant decline in sexual



activity among females, at least over the period for which comparable data exist. Because only females can get pregnant, it is not clear what we should make of this finding.

Most people who have reviewed the data and the associated controversies have suggested that a reasonable conclusion is that teens are both engaging in less sex and using more protection. The reasons for these changes in their behavior are not clear, but they probably stem from five developments.

First, some indirect evidence suggests that the changes are related to a growing awareness of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, which now affect more than 3 million teens per year. The proportion of adolescents who have received formal education about these dangers has increased during the past decade, a fact that has had an effect on the extent of sexual activity among this group, according to at least one study.<sup>5</sup> In addition, condom use among teens has increased sharply, although benefits from condom use have been partially offset by a decline in the use of the pill. This substitution of one birth control method for another undoubtedly reflects the relative efficacy of the two methods in protecting against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Finally, the threat of AIDS may explain why rates of sexual activity among young males appear to have declined faster than for females. The new health risks associated with sexual activity have put males and females on a slightly more level playing field.

A second possible reason for the decline in teen pregnancy is more conservative attitudes. Various polls and surveys suggest that the youngest generation is less accepting of casual sex than are their older brothers and sisters. According to the General Social Survey, in 1972 only 10 percent of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds said that it was “always wrong to have sex before marriage,” whereas in 1998 this proportion had more than doubled, to 23 percent. More conservative attitudes do not always translate into more conservative behavior, but at least one study done by a group of researchers at the Urban Institute, found that more than half of the decline in sexual activity among seventeen- to nineteen-year-old urban males between 1988 and 1995 was directly attributable to the more conservative attitudes that emerged during this period.<sup>6</sup>

Among the teens who remain sexually active, a third factor that appears to have lowered pregnancy rates is the availability of more effective forms of contraception, such as injectables and implants. Failure rates for more traditional forms of contraception are high—especially

---

<sup>5</sup>Leighton Ku, Freya L. Sonenstein, Laura D. Lindberg, Carolyn H. Bradner, Scott Boggess, and Joseph H. Pleck, “Understanding Changes in Sexual Activity among Young Metropolitan Men: 1979–1995,” *Family Planning Perspectives* 30 (November–December 1998): 256–262.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

given the tendency of teens to use them inconsistently—so the small but growing use of Depo-Provera and Norplant appears to be making a real difference.

A fourth possible source of the decline in teen pregnancy is welfare reform itself in combination with new supports for the working poor. Not only does the new welfare system provide less long-term assistance to unmarried women, but during the past decade, Congress has increased supports for the working poor by expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), Medicaid, and some other programs. In 1986, a single mother who took a low-paying job was little better off than she had been on welfare. But by 1997, she was able to double her income by going to work, and not surprisingly, the employment rates of young, unmarried mothers have increased dramatically in recent years. Work is, I would suggest, a great contraceptive.

We should also keep in mind that the 1996 welfare law included new tools for establishing paternity and enforcing the child-support obligations of absent fathers. As the word spreads that fathering a child out of wedlock brings ongoing financial responsibilities, some pregnancies and births could be deterred.

But what about the emphasis in the new law on reducing nonmarital and teen births? If the new welfare system is having an effect, it is probably more because of the new signals it is sending than because local offices are doing anything differently, such as referring women to family-planning clinics. Field studies conducted by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) as well as the Rockefeller Institute at the State University of New York-Albany have found few changes in local practice to match the emphasis in the law on reducing teen and out-of-wedlock births, although many states are devoting additional funds to abstinence education or are using the abstinence funds included in the bill for more broadly oriented programs that provide mentoring, after-school programs, or media campaigns directed at reducing teen pregnancy. In addition, many states have capped welfare benefits for those who have additional children while on welfare; although one recent study suggests that the caps may have had an effect, more research is needed before we can come to any firm conclusions on this issue.<sup>7</sup> As an important footnote here, I want to add that child sexual abuse is more common than most people realize; evidence suggests that as many as one-third of women on welfare were sexually abused as children, usually by male relatives or friends. Such abuse puts these women

---

<sup>7</sup>For a more extended discussion of welfare reform and the decline in teen pregnancy, see Isabel V. Sawhill, “Welfare Reform and Reducing Teen Pregnancy,” *The Public Interest* 138 (Winter 2000); and Sawhill, “What Can Be Done to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and Out-of-Wedlock Births?” Brookings Institution policy brief series *Welfare Reform and Beyond* 8 (October 2001).

at much greater risk of early pregnancy and makes them distrustful of other people, leading to a variety of other problems later in life.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the decline in teen pregnancy rates could be related to the recent strength of the economy. Although I know of no data or evidence that would support this hypothesis in a concrete way, it stands to reason that young people may have more reasons to complete their education and more opportunities to enter the job market. In combination with the incentives provided by the EITC and other supports for the working poor, a strong economy has probably played some role.

In conclusion, I would summarize the evidence about recent trends as follows: First, the growth of single-parent families and out-of-wedlock births to young mothers slowed or declined during the late 1990s; this trend should have positive effects on child poverty rates and child well-being in the future. Second, what has produced this good news is probably a combination of fear of AIDS, changes in policy, improvements in contraceptive technology, and more conservative attitudes.

## References

- Acs, Gregory, and Megan Gallagher. 2000. "Income Inequality Among America's Children." Urban Institute policy brief series *New Federalism: National Survey of America's Families*. B-6 (January).
- DeParle, Jason. 1999. "Early Sex Abuse Hinders Many Women on Welfare." *New York Times*. November 28.
- Edin, Kathryn, and Laura Lein. 1997. *Making Ends Meet: How Single Mothers Survive Welfare and Low-Wage Work*. New York: Russell Sage.
- Hotz, V. Joseph, Susan Williams McElroy, and Seth G. Sanders. 1997. "The Impacts of Teenage Childbearing on the Mothers and the Consequences of Those Impacts for Government." In *Kids Having Kids*. Edited by Rebecca A. Maynard. Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press.
- Ku, Leighton, Freya L. Sonenstein, Laura D. Lindberg, Carolyn H. Bradner, Scott Boggess, and Joseph H. Pleck. 1998. "Understanding Changes in Sexual Activity among Young Metropolitan Men: 1979–1995." *Family Planning Perspectives* 30 (November-December): 256–262.

---

<sup>8</sup>See Jason DeParle, "Early Sex Abuse Hinders Many Women on Welfare," *New York Times*, November 28, 1999.

## 6: Teenage Sex, Pregnancy, and Nonmarital Births

McLanahan, Sara. 1997. "Parent Absence or Poverty: Which Matters More?" In *Consequences of Growing Up Poor*. Edited by Greg Duncan and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. New York: Russell Sage.

Sawhill, Isabel V. 2000. "Welfare Reform and Reducing Teen Pregnancy." *The Public Interest* 138 (Winter).

Sawhill, Isabel V. 2001. "What Can Be Done to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and Out-of-Wedlock Births?" Brookings Institution policy brief series *Welfare Reform and Beyond*. 8 (October).

## Comments

*Robert Rector\**

The data on out-of-wedlock births as a percentage of all births from 1940 to 1998 provide mixed news. For all races, starting in 1995, what had been a uniform rate of increase for roughly the preceding twenty-five years abruptly halted, and the percentage of births that were out of wedlock remained essentially fixed for three years. It would be an extraordinary coincidence if this dramatic change occurred at exactly the same time as the welfare reform debate and there were no connection between the two.

In 1994, the year before the trend changed, the gag rule on the discussion of illegitimacy, which was imposed with the Moynihan report, was lifted for the first time in thirty years, and three separate pieces of legislation directly concerning illegitimacy and the decline of marriage were introduced into the Senate and the House. This occurrence generated much public discussion; we tracked the press reporting of it and found a tenfold increase in the discussion of illegitimacy and welfare, starting in 1994. Then Gingrich came in as Speaker of the House and started talking about orphanages, and the moral climate changed tremendously. The illegitimacy rate stopped rising and plateaued for three years.

In 1998 the illegitimacy rate ticked back up for whites; the pause in 1995 was only temporary, and we are going back to the old trend of increasing illegitimate births. We are returning to the old trend because after 1996, all of the public discussion about illegitimacy stopped. We are right back to where we were in the early 1990s, and I do not find it surprising that the trend is reverting.

How should we interpret out-of-wedlock childbearing statistics? Out-of-wedlock childbearing is controlled by three factors. One is the percentage of young married women of childbearing age. The second is the number of births per 1,000 to unmarried women. And the third factor is the birth rate per 1,000 married women. People often confuse the three factors, but all three are necessary to understand illegitimacy.

The most important variable is the percentage of married females, about whom the news is not good, at least through 1997. The number of married women, particularly in their twenties, continued to decline; this drop is the major factor driving illegitimacy.

---

\*Robert Rector is senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation.

## 6: Teenage Sex, Pregnancy, and Nonmarital Births

The birth rate per 1,000 unmarried women and the birth rate per 1,000 married women plateaued at the same time. The birth rate per 1,000 unmarried women often is considered the pertinent variable. It absolutely is not, and until it is joined with the other variables (particularly the marriage rate variable), it does not mean anything. The data are confusing because when the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) publishes its reports on illegitimacy, it never includes this information.

This approach generates bizarre news stories, such as the article in last summer's *New York Times*, "Black Illegitimacy at an All-Time Low." Of course, black illegitimacy is nearly at an all-time high. How could the *Times* possibly come up with this bizarre front-page story? It took the birth rate per 1,000 unmarried women, which has remained virtually unchanged for blacks for thirty years. This number alone would show no problem of illegitimacy among blacks. Marriage never disappeared in the inner city. So this huge success story emerged from looking at a silly number. Again, the marriage rate is the key variable.

In normal social science nomenclature, births to eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds are teen births. No policymaker in the United States understands that. If one talks to members of a legislature about teen births, they are thinking about sixteen-year-olds. But out-of-wedlock births, to the extent that there are teen births at all, are occurring to eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds, and most out-of-wedlock childbearing is to women in their early twenties. Such childbearing is not a problem with sixteen-year-olds. Out-of-wedlock births to girls under age fourteen constitute only 14 percent of all out-of-wedlock births.

The data on teen births distorts matters; policymakers actually are concerned about out-of-wedlock childbearing. Most teen births are to eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds; the mothers are not in high school. They have reached the age of majority. But the policy response is to create programs for fifteen-year-olds in high school. That is not where the problem is.

The problem is a crisis in the relationships between young adult men and women, and that is where efforts should be focused. It is not a matter of a lack of birth control or even abstinence among fifteen-year-olds; it is the inability of twenty-year-olds to form stable marital relationships.

In roughly half of all the out-of-wedlock births, the mother states that she intended to have the child. In only 14 percent of the cases do the mothers say that they did not want a child. When asked whether they wanted to have a child at that time, 39 percent of the mothers respond, no. I interpret this answer to mean that they actually wanted to have a child somewhat later in time.

These data mean that most of the women do not regard having a child outside of marriage as a problem. It is a situation they have grown to expect, and that expectation is the root cause of

this large problem, which leads to all the other problems with which we are concerned: crime, poverty, dependency, and so forth.

This information leads to the subject of the lack of policies that address illegitimacy. Welfare reform's number-one goal was to reduce illegitimacy and increase marriage, and authority devolved to the states to achieve this goal. The record on achieving this goal is poor, however. Few states have any initiatives. Governors who have tried to implement initiatives meet strong ideological resistance, creating a sad and perplexing situation. Any Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) office displays signs about working. I challenge anyone to find a single sign in any welfare office about the value of marriage, to find one brochure, to find one film strip that deals with this most crucial issue and deals with what is actually the root cause of most of the other problems discussed here.

This situation is the result of what I call a pro-illegitimacy—or antimarriage—lobby, which existed during the passage of welfare reform and that opposed every single mention of marriage and out-of-wedlock childbearing in welfare reform. Whenever a governor or policymaker in a state tries to advance this agenda, to even print a brochure about marriage, he or she faces strong ideological opposition that rests on the premise that if illegitimacy is not a good thing, it is at least inevitable and should be left alone. Until out-of-wedlock childbearing is recognized as the core problem, most of the other problems are not going to improve.

In conclusion, after years of rising, the illegitimacy rate halted and remained fixed for three years, beginning in 1995; that this plateauing occurred without any policy in place encourages me to think that even modest programs communicating the value of marriage could decrease the illegitimacy rate. No such programs are currently in place.



## Discussion

### Nonmarital Births

*Douglas J. Besharov:* Belle and Robert presented the fact that about 1 in 3 American children is born out of wedlock. There is another way to present that. HHS just issued a press release. Forty percent of first births in this country are to women out of wedlock; in other words, 40 percent of American women have their first baby out of wedlock, and the women later get married and have some more children.

There are real racial and ethnic differences here. African Americans tend to have their babies out of wedlock in younger years, between ages sixteen and twenty-two, and Hispanics, more between ages twenty and twenty-six. So those are very different stories about when each group has its first baby. The declines that Robert is talking about—are they largely in the African-American community, in terms of the teen births?

### Targeting Efforts Against Nonmarital Births

*Jerry Wiener:* The point was made that if we hope to intervene effectively with regard to out-of-wedlock births, we should be targeting the twenty-year-olds and not the fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds. That is somewhat contrary to my own way of thinking about what one must do to change behavior effectively at age twenty. You had better start a long time before you get to age twenty if you expect to change behavior, particularly behavior so important and fundamental as relationships and long-lasting marriages.

So the question was, What percentage of the women who show this high spike of out-of-wedlock births at age twenty have already had an out-of-wedlock birth by the time they get to twenty? What percentage have already had multiple births at age twenty?

*Isabel V. Sawhill:* That is exactly the point that I was trying to emphasize. Many of those births are second or higher-order births, and the pattern starts in the teenage years. The social science research that covers issues of child poverty and disadvantage over the longer term shows that the younger the mother at the time the baby is born—whether it is in or out of marriage, but particularly out of marriage—the worse the consequences are for the child and for the mother. That is common sense, but it is also well documented.

It would be wonderful if everyone were married at age twenty-four, I guess, but our economy and our society are not organized around early marriage anymore, and the major

problem is that people are having children before they are old enough to be able to take care of them.

*Robert Rector:* I would strongly disagree with that. Two-thirds of all the first births occur to women after age eighteen. Absolutely, intervene at age fifteen, but intervene with what problem in mind? If your problem is that you want the girl to get out of high school before she has the out-of-wedlock birth, then let us have a lot of birth control. But if the problem is a crisis in adult relationships and you want to form stable marriages when the young men and women are twenty-one, that calls for a different intervention at age fifteen compared with age ten and so on. What is the ultimate problem you are trying to address?

We are doing some research now where we look at a number of dependent variables, but let us just take child poverty using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. We do not find the age of the mother at the time of the child's birth to be a particularly significant variable, compared with the percentage of time spent in single parenthood, never-married status, amount of time on AFDC, and so forth. Each of those variables is about ten times more significant than the age of the mother at the child's birth. It does not mean that the age of the mother is not important, but it is far less important than the ultimate marital status.

*Isabel V. Sawhill:* But they are highly correlated, so to some extent, this is a relatively unproductive debate.

*Robert Rector:* You ultimately have to decide what problem you are trying to solve. Are we just trying to get the girl out of high school without being pregnant, or are we trying to make sure that most of these children who are born out of wedlock have a better environment to grow up in? If you look at crime or any of the other social variables, the age of the mother is not the key thing. It is the presence of the father.

*Richard Bavier:* Isabel Sawhill's charts show the decline in pregnancy, abortion, and birth rates of teenagers. Is there any sort of demographic interaction here, as the other charts have shown, to explain why the fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds have low rates and the eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds have high rates with respect to their outcomes?

*Isabel V. Sawhill:* You are right that this age cohort is going to be growing in the future, so even if we get the rates down, as we have recently, there are going to be more teen births just because there are more teenagers. But I do not think there are any major analytic issues with respect to that.

Some interesting research from Child Trends suggests that the youngest girls who are sexually active are the ones most likely to get pregnant, because if they are fifteen or sixteen, their ability to use contraception effectively and to handle relationships is not what it is at twenty

or twenty-one. So the younger the teens are at the beginning of sexual activity, the bigger the problem. They are the cases that lead to the longest term poverty and welfare dependence as well as adverse consequences for the children. Some disturbing evidence indicates that although there is less sexual activity in general among teenagers, there is a group that is starting earlier and earlier, with adverse consequences for that group.

*Kristin Moore:* I do think we want to acknowledge that this does matter for kids. Both the age of the mother and the marital status of the mother are related to kids.

But conflict also matters. We have to think about the greater complexity of this issue: whether the first child is intended, whether there is nonvoluntary sex leading to the conception, whether the father is involved. You want a committed marriage. You do not want a short-term marriage. You want a low-conflict, sustained marriage. All of those things are important.

There is a lot of nervousness about marriage, but the research shows that people are actually pro-marriage. People want to marry. This is a conversation that they probably would not spurn to the same extent that the welfare caseworkers think they would. We cannot ignore the economic side of it as well as the attitudinal side, but there is a reservoir of interest in marriage that should be acknowledged.

We are seeing a bifurcation, in which the greater conservative attitudes swaying kids against having premarital sex tend to be among more advantaged kids. We are also seeing at-risk kids who are continuing to have risky sex at young ages, and it is a source of ongoing concern.

Last, to highlight what Belle said, even if the teen birth rate is low, we have a large cohort of young people coming to a sexually active age, and the number of teen births increased in 1998. Even though the teen birth rate went down, the number of teen births went up, so we really do need to make progress.

## **Family Caps**

*Lorraine V. Klerman:* New Jersey is claiming or has claimed that the family cap has reduced births. What is the evidence across the country of the impact of the family cap when a state puts it in as part of its welfare reform?

*Isabel V. Sawhill:* Peter Rossi has done one of the most careful studies about the New Jersey evidence, but there are some new papers on this subject. One from Elizabeth Peters at Cornell looks at whether family caps have reduced childbearing, and she finds some evidence that they have. However, the paper is not uniformly applauded by the research community for its data and methods, so we have to say that the jury may still be out—but it is an intriguing study.

*Peter H. Rossi:* The bottom line of the New Jersey experiment, at least as far as the data analysis is concerned, is that we cannot tell whether the analysis tells what it indicates. It seems to show a decline in births as a consequence of the family cap and a rise in abortions. But the data are so poorly analyzed and the experiment so poorly conducted that all faiths, even Christian Scientists, would be undermined by the data.

*Ron Haskins:* We asked the Congressional Research Service to analyze exactly the same thing, and they it came to precisely the same conclusion a year and a half ago. You cannot draw any conclusion.

Robert Rector said that there is a lobby for, maybe not for illegitimacy, but against marriage. And that may be true, but I have talked with a lot of people, caseworkers out in the field, and they are happy to talk about people's obligation to work and to be self-supporting and their spirit is in it. They really believe it. They communicate that to people trying to get on welfare, which, you know, is a big change.

But then you ask them about births outside marriage and whether people should have children they cannot support, and they say, "You know, that is wrong, but that is a personal issue." I think they are reluctant to discuss this. I would not attribute that reluctance to a plot. I do not know exactly what causes it. I think we are all uncomfortable in some situations talking about sex, unless we are on "Oprah Winfrey." But this is at the heart of the issue, that there is a reluctance on the part of people who communicate directly with folks going on welfare and with young girls that they should not have sex. There is a real reluctance to say to people, "It is wrong to have sex outside marriage." Even for young people. I don't know why, but it's there.

*Douglas J. Besharov:* It is hard for parents to say that sometimes, too, for older kids.

### **The "Illegitimacy" Bonus**

*Douglas Steiger:* There is a provision in the 1996 law that rewards states that have seen a reduction in the illegitimacy ratio, as Moynihan calls it, if they can show there is no increase in abortions, and HHS recently gave away some money on that basis. My take is that it was a completely random distribution. I was wondering if somebody who knew more about what the states were doing would comment about the states that were actually reducing this ratio.

*Robert Rector:* The interesting thing is that it appears random, but it's also consistent. The point is not to look at those rewards in one year but to look at them for three years in a row.

Washington, D.C., got the reward because of its demographic base, because the decline is mainly occurring among blacks. I think there is a program in effect in Michigan.

## 6: Teenage Sex, Pregnancy, and Nonmarital Births

Part of the reason we created those rewards was to focus attention on this topic that nobody wants to focus attention on. If those effects go year after year after year, which seems to be the trend, there is something going on, and it might be something that is unclear. It might be something in the economy. We don't really know.

But I think there actually are underlying trends. The differences between the winning states and the next twenty states down the list are not that great. But overall, something is happening in a lot of these states, or was happening up through 1998.

*Isabel V. Sawhill:* I recently tried to get my hands on everything I could find to write an article about whether the various provisions in the welfare reform bill have been implemented at the state level in this area, whether it is family caps, the abstinence-education money, the illegitimacy bonus, or a variety of other things that were in the bill. How are states responding to all of those provisions? My bottom line would be a little bit similar to Robert Rector's, that I think the provisions have had some effect. They have not had as much as people might like. I think Ron Haskins is right, that there is a real reluctance to and sensitivity about talking about these issues.

Both Dick Nathan at SUNY-Albany and the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation have documented in their field work that at the welfare-office level, there is a great reluctance to talk or do anything in this area. However, the abstinence-education money is being used to run statewide media campaigns to prevent teen pregnancy, which are having some impact.