

# MAKING WELFARE WORK

By Douglas J. Besharov

## Building a System that Strengthens the Family, the Individual, the Community

In 1990, more than one in four (28 percent) American children were born out of wedlock, reflecting a steady increase from 1960, when only 5 percent were born out of wedlock. More than 1 million children were born out of wedlock in 1990; more than a third of these births were to teenagers, often after they had dropped out of school.

Unwed teenage parenthood looms as the central cause of long-term welfare dependency. Recognizing this, 160 of the 175 House Republicans have signed on to a sweeping new welfare reform bill that seeks to reverse a 30-year trend of rising illegitimacy and welfare dependency.

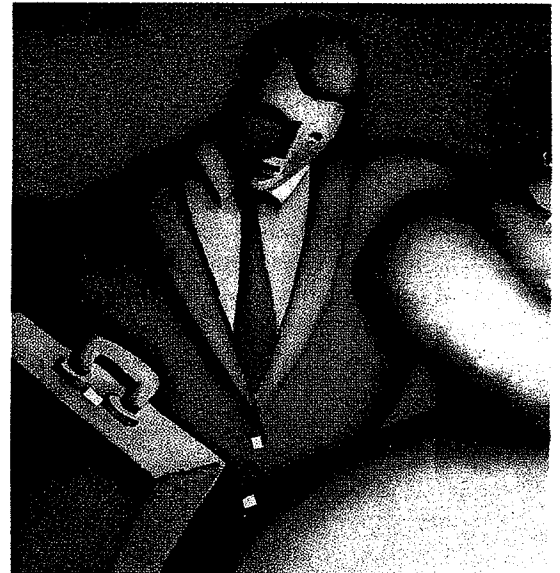
Despite media coverage, illegitimacy is not just a problem among black Americans. Although out-of-wedlock birth rates are higher for blacks than for whites, they are rising faster among whites. In fact, since 1980, 776,000 more white babies than black have been born out of wedlock.

The social cost of illegitimacy is clear and growing. Only 57 percent of never-married mothers have high school diplomas. Almost half of all unwed teen mothers go on welfare within one year of their baby's birth. The figures are about the same for whites and blacks: 49 percent vs. 53 percent. Within five years of delivering their first out-of-wedlock baby, 84 percent of black teens and 72 percent of white teens receive welfare. Moreover, it is these mothers who form the bulk of long-term welfare recipients: 43 percent of those on the rolls for at least three of the past five years started their families as unwed teens. The bill proposed by House Republicans directly attacks the long-term dependency caused by out-of-wedlock births to teenage mothers. Here's what the bill would do:

### Identify unwed fathers

Paternal responsibility is central to the Republican plan. Therefore, the Republican bill would withhold full welfare benefits to an unwed mother until she helps the authorities legally establish the identity of her child's father. (The only exceptions would be for cases of rape, incest or where there might be physical danger to the mother or the child.)

A mother would have to name the father of each of her children applying for welfare benefits. If she would not receive



benefits for any child for whom the father remained unnamed. If she is not certain about the identity of the father, she would be required to supply the names (as many as three) of those who could possibly be the father.

But giving the father's name would be only the first step. Until legal paternity is established (such as through a blood test), the mother would receive only that portion of the welfare grant applicable to the child. She would receive no funds for herself. If she has only one child, this would mean that her grant would be reduced by about one-third (about \$100 a month) — until paternity is legally established. If the child support agency finds that the mother named the wrong man as the father, payments to the entire family would be suspended until the real father's identity is established.

To help make sure young people get the message that parental responsibility will be enforced, the Republican bill would require state officers and employees — including schoolteachers — to warn single pregnant women that they will be ineligible for welfare benefits if they cannot identify the fathers of their children. The bill also requires that the states share in the responsibility of establishing paternity. To avoid being penalized, states must gradually increase their paternity establishment rate to 90 percent.



REBECCA RUEGGER

### Require child support from absent fathers

Measures to enforce child support payments would also be strengthened. Noteworthy is a provision that would hold men responsible for payments whether or not they are working. If a father is unemployed and no payment is made within 30 days, he would be required to participate in a 35-hour-per-week work program.

### Mandate job training and work

The Republican bill seeks to prevent young mothers from falling into a pattern of inactivity by requiring them to participate immediately in job search, job training and, ultimately, mandatory work programs. The bill would give mothers up to two years of job training or education to help prepare them for work. During this transition period, mothers would have to spend at least 520 hours per year on these activities.

If, after two years, the mother is still unemployed, she would be required to enroll in a state-organized work program for at least 35 hours per week. This could be a Community Work Experience Program, where recipients work in return for welfare payments; a Work Supplementation Program, where recipients' welfare benefits are used to supplement earnings from a private-sector job; or some other state-created program approved by the Department of Health and Human Services. States would

also be permitted to drop from welfare those who have participated in the work program for three years and received Aid to Families with Dependent Children for a total of five years.

### Reduce the attractiveness of life on welfare

The Republican bill mandates that mothers who are minors must live with their parents. It also has two other provisions that are mandatory unless states pass legislation exempting themselves. First, the bill would prohibit the payment of all benefits if the mother is a minor — regardless of where she is living. Second, benefits would not be increased because of the birth of additional children 10 months or more after the mother applies for welfare. But again, states could opt out of these two provisions.

### Encourage better care for children

The bill also contains provisions designed to help mothers provide a supportive environment for their children. It would, for example, require that mothers with children under six years of age get their children immunized and ensure that they go to school regularly. If a child does not meet the state's established minimum requirement for school attendance, the state would be authorized to reduce the family's benefits by any amount up to \$75 per child every month. The same penalties could also be applied to teen parents who have not completed high school themselves. States would also be authorized to provide mandatory classes on parenting in their two-year transitional training programs.

The House Republicans' welfare reform bill seeks to lessen long-term welfare dependency by reducing the rate of illegitimacy and by putting welfare mothers to work. In doing so, it has identified the real culprit and set the agenda for reform. Let's see whether President Clinton's proposals, when they are finally announced, will do as well. ■

*Douglas J. Besharov, who served as the first director of the U.S. National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and a visiting professor at the University of Maryland School of Public Affairs. Kelly M. Swanson and Kristina Hanson of AEI helped prepare this article.*

## VOICES



CARLOS PUMA

Wesley Ru, *business owner, Los Angeles, Calif.*

**"Human beings are by their very nature competitive and achievement oriented. You take away their pride when they take welfare. Welfare is supposed to be for people in transition, people who need a temporary means to make ends meet until they find something permanent. Welfare should not be a lifestyle. All able-bodied individuals need to work. I am an immigrant who came to the United States penniless. My parents each held one or two jobs in order to take care of the children. I started my business with \$236. This nation has a history of blood, sweat and tears — a pioneer spirit that has made this nation great. You never saw pioneers on welfare. America should be a working state."**