



Paul Offner

Reducing Non-Marital Births

Executive Summary

When Congress passed welfare reform legislation in 1996, it had two main objectives: cut welfare dependency and reduce non-marital childbearing. The first of these objectives has been amply realized over the last five years as millions of welfare recipients have gone to work and welfare caseloads have dropped by over 50 percent. The second goal, however, has received less attention. From the standpoint of children, this is puzzling. After all, there is strong evidence that children are better off in two-parent families, whereas there is much less evidence that putting single parents to work improves things for children. Still, it is easier to get people to work than to live together, so perhaps it is not surprising that states have concentrated their efforts on the first objective. Reducing non-marital births remains the unfinished part of the 1996 welfare reform law. This brief examines why non-marital births happen, the effort states have made to address the problem, and what additional steps could be taken to reduce non-marital births when Congress reauthorizes welfare reform legislation next year.

The Problem

Thirty-five years ago in “The Negro Family: A Call to Action,” Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who was then assistant secretary of labor, called the nation’s attention to the growing problem of non-marital births within the African American community. At the time, his views were attacked as racist, although just about everyone now agrees that Moynihan was right in his diagnosis. Today, the non-marital ratio (non-marital births as a proportion of all births) is one of our most carefully watched social indicators, and is seen by many as a measure of our society’s sexual permissiveness, as well as its less than total commitment to the needs of children.

It would be a mistake, though, to think of this statistic as simply a gauge of the nation’s sexual mores, for it is much more than that. Between 1960 and 1999, the non-marital ratio went from 5.3 percent (low enough to please even the most committed

conservative) to 33 percent, a more than six-fold increase (see figure 1). But most of this rise was due to demographic changes only indirectly related to sexual behavior. As table 1 shows, if the marriage rate (marriages per 1,000 women) and the birth rate of unmarried women (births per 1,000 unmarried women) had remained frozen at their 1960 levels, the non-marital ratio would still have doubled (11.5 percent) by 1999 simply because married women were having fewer babies. If the birth rate of unmarried women had stayed at its 1960 level, and we allowed for other demographic changes to occur during this period, the non-marital ratio would have risen to 19.2 percent, almost four times the 1960 ratio.

The same pattern holds for African Americans, who are disproportionately represented on the welfare rolls, and whose non-marital ratio went from 23.3 percent in 1960 to an alarming 69.1 percent in 1999. Yet the birth rate of unmarried black women

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actually dropped by one quarter during this period. The non-marital ratio rose because the birth rate of married black women dropped by almost two thirds, and the marriage rate declined by over 40 percent.

Three things could be done to bring down the non-marital ratio: convince married women to have more children; convince people to marry earlier; or convince unmarried couples to defer childbearing until they are married. No one is advocating the first of these, and the second is problematic because early first marriages often end in divorce and shorten the educational careers of both partners at a time when increased knowledge is essential for success in the new economy. That leaves us with the task of convincing unmarried women to defer childbearing. While almost everyone is in favor of this policy, it is worth noting that among blacks, the rate of non-marital births has been falling for 40 years (both marital and

non-marital birth rates have been falling, but marital birth rates have been falling faster, which has caused the proportion of non-marital black births to rise). And in any event, simply reducing the non-marital birth rate solves only part of the problem. If we were able to roll it back to its 1960 level, we would still have a non-marital ratio today of almost 20 percent, which, while an enormous improvement over the current situation, would still be a far cry from the low 5.3 percent of the 1960s.

How Did We Get Here?

Although there is a consensus on the need to reduce non-marital births, there is little agreement on the causes of our current predicament. Some argue that as more women entered the work force over the last 50 years, they were better able to support themselves and thus had less reason to marry. The evidence on this theory is mixed. Some

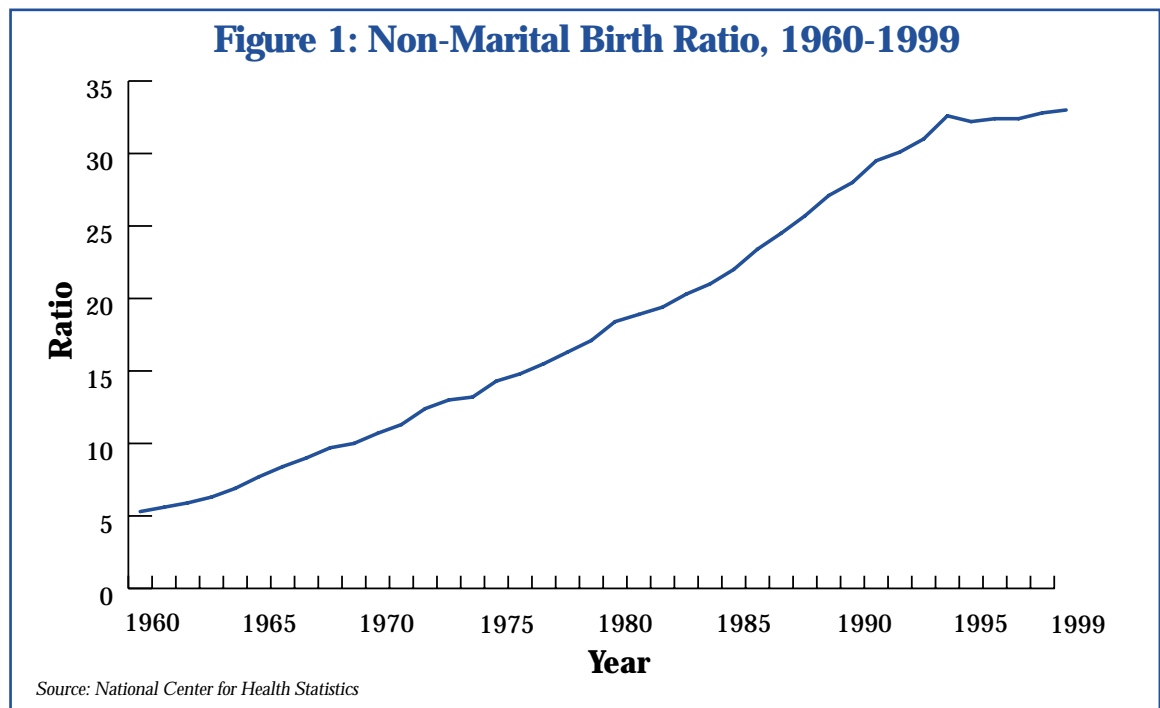


Table 1: Non-Marital Ratio in 1999 (Percent)

If nothing had changed from 1960	5.3
If nothing had changed except the fertility of married women	11.5
If nothing had changed except the fertility of married women and the marriage rate	19.2
Actual	33.0

researchers have found that greater economic independence has contributed to higher divorce rates and more non-marital births. Others report that trends in female employment and earnings have had little effect on marriage rates for either blacks or whites.

A second thesis is that the marriage rate is down because work opportunities have deteriorated for males, making them less attractive as marriage partners. This position was popularized by William Julius Wilson, now at Harvard University, based on his work in the inner city of Chicago. Part of the problem is disentangling cause and effect—is it that economically attractive men are more likely to get married, or that married men tend to be more productive in the workplace? Another problem is that researchers have found that marriage rates fell almost as much among well-educated black men as they did among poorly educated black men. Marriage rates among those with jobs fell as much as among those who were unemployed. On balance, the decline in earnings or employment cannot explain more than about 20 percent of the change in black family structure since 1960.

A third hypothesis is that non-marital births rose because of welfare, which allegedly provided an alternative, more stable means of

support for women who wanted to have children but were not ready for marriage. While researchers in the 1970s and early 1980s generally found little support for this thesis, Robert Moffitt of Johns Hopkins University reports that now “a slight majority” of researchers find “a significant negative effect on marriage or positive effect on fertility.” Even so, the effect is uncertain and modest.

Another theory is that sexual mores have changed. Many observers believe that beginning roughly in the 1960s, Americans began to feel less strongly that all adults should be married and that sex outside marriage was wrong. By the 1980s and 1990s, television shows, for example, regularly featured characters who were single and who acted as if sex outside marriage should not be proscribed.

A fifth explanation points to the so-called marriage penalties. Under all means-tested programs (those providing benefits to people with incomes below a certain level), benefits decline as income increases, and combining the incomes of two people increases family income, thus reducing benefits. This is a characteristic of welfare, food stamps, and Medicaid, as well as of state and federal tax systems (the Earned Income Tax Credit is a particular culprit). Taken together, these

provisions reduce benefits by as much as 85 cents for each extra dollar of income, and those benefit reduction rates extend well up into the middle-income range. But there is little research evidence to support the claim that these provisions discourage marriage, perhaps because the complexities of the law make it difficult for most people to know how marriage will affect them, or because such penalties do not loom large in the marriage decision. So we are in a fix: everyone wants to reduce non-marital births and promote marriage, but there is no consensus on how we got to where we are today or what we should do about it.

What Have States Done?

The authors of the welfare reform legislation were deeply committed to promoting marriage and reducing non-marital births, and the legislation contains 17 provisions designed to advance these objectives. Yet the focus of state efforts has been on moving people from welfare to work. According to the Washington, D.C.-based child advocacy group Child Trends, 23 states provided contraceptive education in public schools statewide in 1999, while 26 states had school-based abstinence education programs (15 provided both). General media campaigns discouraging non-marital pregnancies were conducted in 17 states, and three—Georgia, North Dakota, and Tennessee—had programs to encourage couples expecting a child to marry. Still, the total resources spent on these activities were small. According to state data compiled by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington, D.C., approximately one half of one percent of funds from the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program is being spent on reducing

non-marital births and promoting marriage. Research from the Rockefeller Institute at the State University of New York, which is monitoring state implementation of the 1996 reforms, comes to a similar conclusion.

One of the most popular initiatives to reduce non-marital births has been the family cap, which reduces or eliminates any benefit increase for mothers who have additional children while on welfare. Twenty-three states have such programs. Unfortunately, the few good evaluations that exist have produced inconclusive results (the best of these comes from New Jersey, and shows some reduction in birth rates, but also some increase in abortions). One problem is that the family cap programs were implemented at the same time as a broad set of other changes, any number of which could impact on fertility behavior. Disentangling the effects of these initiatives is a big challenge, and current evaluations are generally not up to the job.

The welfare reform legislation also includes a bonus to be awarded each year to the five states that are most successful in lowering their non-marital ratios while decreasing abortions. When the first year's results were announced in 1999, the winners were the District of Columbia, California, Michigan, Alabama, and Massachusetts—all jurisdictions with large African American and Hispanic populations (D.C., Michigan, and Alabama also won bonuses in the second round). Between 1994-95 and 1996-97, black and Hispanic non-marital birth rates dropped twice as fast as white non-marital birth rates. This suggests that demographic factors may have been as important as any actions taken by the states in determining the bonus winners.

One state that has had some success in increasing marriage within its low-income population is Minnesota. Its welfare reform plan allows recipients to keep more of the money they earn (the welfare grant declines more slowly than in other states as earnings rise), and recipients remain eligible for cash benefits until income equals 140 percent of the poverty level. An evaluation by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC) found a 3.6 percent increase in marriage by the end of the third year, and a 19 point increase in marital stability (67 percent of couples who were married at the program's beginning were still married three years later, compared with 48 percent in the control group). The typical pattern in this study was for the second earner in a two-parent family to cut back her work effort, suggesting that allowing welfare families to keep more of their earnings reduced the stress on couples. Still, this is just one state, and we should be cautious in drawing conclusions.

In general, while there has been some improvement in reducing non-marital births in the 1990s, little of it can be attributed to welfare reform. Among African Americans, for instance, non-marital births dropped from 90.5 per thousand in 1990 to 73.3 per thousand in 1998, a decline of 19 percent. Almost all of the improvement, however, predated the 1996 legislation.

What Do We Do Now?

The good news is that non-marital birth rates have been declining in recent years. Most of the improvement has been among teens—there has been little change in the rate for older women. There is also clear evidence that a more conservative attitude toward premarital sex is taking hold, whether

as a result of the AIDS epidemic, or for other reasons. Among African Americans, over 70 percent say that it would be unacceptable for a daughter to have a child out of wedlock. In order for the trends to continue, the 2002 welfare reform reauthorization legislation should aim to make several improvements.

Testing New Approaches First, Congress and the states should promote wide-ranging experimentation on non-marital birth policy, with the goal of identifying approaches that will work. One could argue that states should use some of their TANF surpluses for this purpose, but they have done that only modestly to date, and there is no reason to expect them to do much more of it in the future. Accordingly, Congress should allocate roughly \$200 million a year to fund such efforts. Applications could be submitted by state or local governments, or by private organizations like universities or research organizations. The Secretary of Health and Human Services should convene a group of experts representing all parts of the political spectrum to develop guidelines for the initiative. Proposals would be rigorously evaluated, with control group experiments given preference in the selection process.

One area that particularly deserves to be tested is employment initiatives for men. Consider the current situation of young African American males. Over the last seven years, the employment rate of black men between the ages of 20 and 24 increased only modestly, and the percentage of this group that was either working or looking for work actually dropped, even though the economy was experiencing strong growth. The employment rates for these men are now 20 points below those of white and Hispanic men of the same age. Meanwhile, the employment rates of young black women

increased by 18 points, a truly remarkable change in such a short period of time. So young black women are doing relatively well in the job market, while their male counterparts are floundering, which does not augur well for the future of marriage within this population. While the evidence linking employment and marriage is not strong, the work of such researchers as William Julius Wilson and Kathryn Edin of Northwestern University suggests that such a link exists. Most low-income women are not going to marry unemployed men who cannot help support them and their children. So demonstration programs aimed at examining the link between employment and marriage should be encouraged.

Eliminating Marriage Penalties Second, Congress should reduce the fiscal disincentives to marriage. A single mother working full-time at the minimum wage and a single man earning \$8 an hour who is not the father of her children can lose as much as \$8,060, primarily in cash from the Earned Income Tax Credit, if they get married. Wendell Primus and Jennifer Beeson of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities point out that this is less of a problem in cases where the prospective husband is the children's father, because in the absence of marriage, the father would still owe child support. Those instances aside, many other cases are still subject to significant disincentives.

While little evidence has been found linking marriage penalties and the drop in marriage over the last 40 years, there are at least three reasons for addressing this problem. First, the fact that no relationship has been found does not mean that none exists. It may take a long time for such factors to influence behavior, and the lags may have been specified incorrectly in past research.

Moreover, many factors have contributed to the drop in marriage; financial disincentives were not the primary variable. Eliminating financial disincentives will not reverse the trend as long as other factors are present. If those factors are removed, however, then

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disincentives will likely reduce progress on the marriage front. In other words, reducing the penalties is a necessary, although not a sufficient, condition for increasing marriage.

Finally, marriage penalties send an unmistakable signal that society is not serious about this problem. At a time when there is growing support for a broad range of initiatives that promote marriage and fatherhood—with some conservatives even proposing to give cash bonuses to young women who defer childbearing until they are married—surely the first priority should be to eliminate the financial disincentives to getting married.

Conclusion

Above all, Congress must be realistic in its approach. The non-marital ratio is largely determined by variables over which it has little control, such as the marriage rate and the birth rate of married women, so large changes are not likely. The other important variable is the birth rate of unmarried women, which rose steadily from 1960 to 1990, but has changed little since then. Everyone would

like to see this rate come down, but no one knows how to make that happen, especially for the adult population (we have more leverage over teenage behavior). Because of that, expectations should remain low. Senator Moynihan, now retired, has cited sociologist Peter Rossi's law, which states that the expected value for any measured effect of a social program is zero.

Still, we cannot afford to give up. Public attitudes evolve, as may already be happening

in this area, and behaviors change, as in the case of smoking.

Congress should remove the impediments to marriage and create a broad-scale demonstration and evaluation program, out of which may come promising initiatives that can be replicated elsewhere. There has already been some success in reducing teenage pregnancy, and it is likely that Congress would support efforts to build on these successes.

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Additional Reading

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