

Reducing Unwed Childbearing: The Missing Link in Efforts to Promote Marriage

By Andrea Kane and Daniel T. Lichter

ABSTRACT



Most social scientists acknowledge that, on balance, single parents, stepparents, or cohabiting couples are no substitute for childrearing by two married parents. Yet, new data from the federal government show that a record number of babies—nearly 1.5 million—were born to unmarried women in the United States in 2004.

Empirical evidence of this sort has leveraged political support for the Bush administration's "Healthy Marriage Initiative." Congress recently approved major funding for this initiative as part of welfare reform reauthorization. Approximately \$100 million per year will be available for research, demonstration, and technical assistance projects to promote healthy marriage through such activities as public advertising campaigns, relationship and marriage education in high schools, and relationship and marriage skills for both unmarried and married couples. In addition, about \$50 million per year will be available to promote responsible fatherhood.

Preliminary evaluations of marriage education programs have revealed some positive results for middle-class parents, but there is not yet scientific evidence on how these programs will work for more disadvantaged couples. Indeed, marriage promotion among the poor remains a contentious issue. Not only is the effectiveness of such strategies unproven, but some critics view these strategies as poorly designed for dealing with high rates of incarceration, unemployment, substance abuse, and domestic violence among low-income men and with high rates of early unwed childbearing among low-income women.

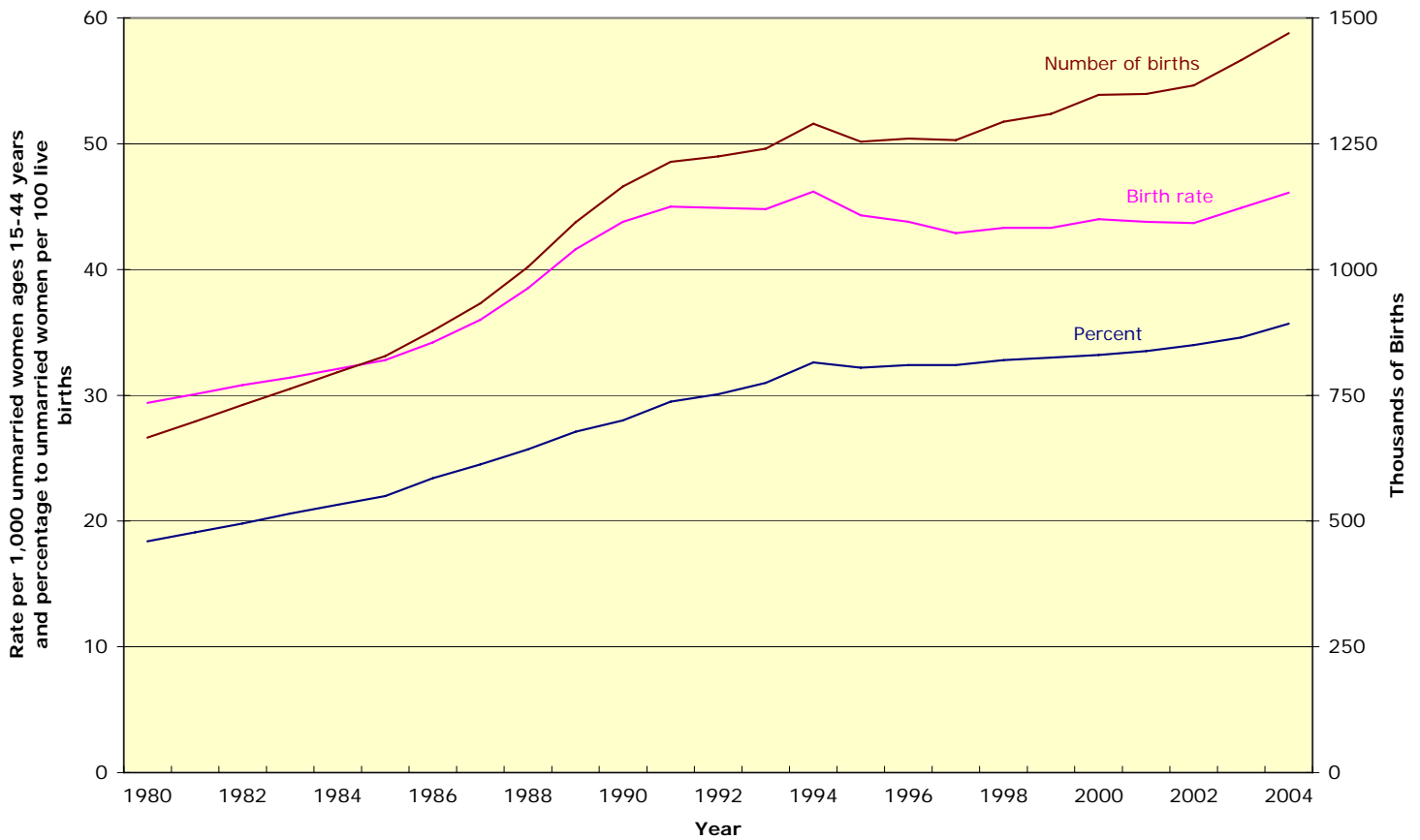
This brief argues that for marriages to succeed among low-income families, it is also essential to address these underlying problems—most specifically, the problem of unwed childbearing.

Why Reducing Unwed Childbearing Is Important

With so much attention on promoting and sustaining marriage among low-income couples who already have children, policymakers risk forgetting about the need to reduce unwed childbearing in the first place. These initiatives are needed for a number of reasons.

First, an increasing number of children are being born to unmarried parents. In 2004, 36 percent of all births were to unmarried women. This record-high non-marital fertility ratio is not simply a result of declining rates of marriage or marital fertility. The rate at which unmarried women aged 15 to 44 have babies rose substantially during the 1970s and 1980s, leveled off during the 1990s, and has inched upward again over the past few years (figure 1).

Figure 1. Number of Births, Birth Rate, and Percentage of Births to Unmarried Women: United States, 1980-2004



Source: Hamilton, Brady E., Stephanie J. Ventura, Joyce A. Martin, and Paul D. Sutton. "Preliminary Births for 2004." Health E-stats. Hyattsville, Md.: National Center for Health Statistics. October 28, 2005.

Second, almost one-half of first unwed births are to teenagers. Although the teen birth rate has declined by one-third over the past decade, it remains far higher than in most other industrialized countries. Out-of-wedlock childbearing often sets teenagers on an unfortunate life course, one that places them and their children at greater risk of additional unintended childbearing, diminished economic opportunities, and unstable and unhealthy marriages.

Third, women who have children outside marriage are less likely to marry, stay married, or marry well (particularly in economic terms). Put most starkly, out-of-wedlock childbearing reduces women's attractiveness in the marriage market.

Fourth, a rising share—estimates vary between 40 and 50 percent—of non-marital births are to cohabiting couples. This trend would not be especially worrisome if most couples later married or maintained a stable family environment for their children. But evidence suggests that the bonds between cohabiting couples are much less stable than those between married couples, especially among poor cohabiting couples with children.

Finally, the rising number of children growing up in single-parent homes over the past several decades has been driven almost entirely by increases in out-of-wedlock childbearing, not by increases in divorce. If out-of-wedlock childbearing is a root cause of the rise of lone parenting, then reducing out-of-wedlock childbearing has to be part of the solution. Programs and policies must begin by redoubling efforts to reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing, especially during the teenage years where there has already been significant success.

Teenagers Are Not Good Candidates for Marriage

Unwed childbearing often begins in the teenage years. But marrying while still an adolescent usually does not produce a stable or healthy relationship. Divorce rates among those who marry at such a young age are much higher than for those who delay marriage. A recent study by Megan M. Sweeney and Julie A. Phillips showed that divorce rates (over a ten-year period) were 42 and 55 percent lower among white women who married in the 20 to 22 and 23 to 29 age ranges, respectively, than otherwise similar women who married as teenagers. The higher divorce rate among teenagers remained even after controlling for whether they had children. The gap is magnified further for those who have a non-marital birth. For teenagers, the focus should be on preventing early pregnancy rather than promoting marriage, although there is value in laying the foundation for healthier relationships and eventual marriage by educating teens about both.

The evidence is clear that it is possible to reduce teen births significantly, and that both more abstinence and more contraception have played a role. To be sure, specific sex education and abstinence education programs are often controversial, and not all of them work. But a number of effective programs exist, as documented in Julie Solomon and Josefina J. Card's report for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. Some of the most effective programs that include community service and intensive youth development activities coupled with information about delaying sex and avoiding pregnancy have produced significant reductions in risky sexual activity and teen pregnancy.

Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing Reduces Marriage

Unwed mothers are less likely to marry and stay married than those who do not have children before marriage. For example, unwed mothers are roughly 30 percent less likely to marry in a given year than childless women. Some will argue that many disadvantaged unmarried women would be unlikely to marry even if they did not have children outside of marriage. Some single mothers simply do not want to marry. Others, for one reason or another, cannot find a partner to marry but nevertheless want children. Indeed, a recent study by Adam Thomas and Isabel Sawhill shows that young, disadvantaged African American women face a demographic shortage of men to marry as the result of high levels of early death and incarceration. And as sociologists Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas show in *Promises I Can Keep*, single mothers hold the same aspirations for a healthy and satisfying family life as other Americans, but face a number of other obstacles—such as emotional and physical abuse, infidelity, and distrust—that prevent them from achieving their aspirations for a good marriage. Most low-income single mothers are not willing to sacrifice their independence or emotional well-being, or their desire to have children, simply for the sake of marriage.

That said, empirical studies by Daniel T. Lichter and Deborah Roempke Graefe, among others, show that out-of-wedlock childbearing itself reduces the likelihood of marriage compared with an otherwise similar childless woman. Non-marital births may reduce marriage because such births cut short schooling and work opportunities, thereby diminishing women's attractiveness in the marriage market as well as their exposure to economically attractive men. Childcare responsibilities and financial constraints also may make it more difficult for single mothers to meet and wed marriage-eligible men. In short, out-of-wedlock childbearing reduces marital opportunities.

Even when they do marry, women who have an out-of-wedlock birth are less likely to stay married. Analysis of data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth indicates that women aged 25 to 44 who had their first child before marriage and later got married are half as likely to stay married as women who did not have an out-of-wedlock birth (42 percent compared to 82 percent).

Unwed Mothers Often Lack Good Marriage Prospects

Historically, marriage has been a route to upward socioeconomic mobility for women. But this pattern appears to be much weaker among single or cohabiting mothers. Indeed, out-of-wedlock childbearing reduces the likelihood that women will marry men with earnings that help lift their families out of poverty. The men in these women's lives are often less well educated, and typically have higher-than-average unemployment rates, lower earnings, and higher poverty rates than the male partners of otherwise comparable women who have not had an unwed birth. The notion that marriage is economically beneficial for low-income women clearly depends on the kinds of potential partners available to single women. Unfortunately, the odds of marriage to an economically attractive partner are greatly reduced by out-of-wedlock childbearing.

For women who lack access to economically attractive or otherwise compatible potential partners, efforts by government, community groups, and faith-based institutions to build a marriage culture or promote good relationship or

communication skills may be a less effective means of improving the life prospects of their children than helping these women avoid early, unplanned pregnancies and delay childbearing until they are better prepared to support a child. Delaying early, unwed childbearing may in turn increase their chances of marriage. At the same time, research points to the need to learn more about how to help low-income young men delay early parenthood, improve their economic prospects, and develop relationship skills that could help sustain a marriage. The new funding provided through welfare reform reauthorization offers an important opportunity to expand our knowledge in this area.

Cohabitation Is No Substitute for Marriage

Research indicates that cohabitation, especially among poor mothers, is not a segue into marriage. The large majority of these relationships dissolve. Clearly, the well-being of a sizeable share of America's children is tied to the quality and stability of cohabiting families. Cohabitation is on the rise, but research by Daniel T. Lichter and Zhenchao Qian indicates that less than 30 percent of poor, cohabiting women marry within five years. And young mothers who cohabit with many different partners—serial cohabitants—have even lower rates of marriage.

Cohabiting unions are highly unstable, even if they make it to the altar. Many—perhaps the majority of—cohabiting couples with children who choose marriage will end up divorcing. For many young couples, cohabitations are often entered into quickly with little forethought about marriage plans. Family life educator and psychologist Scott Stanley calls this “sliding” (into cohabitation) rather than “deciding.” Unwed childbearing further complicates matters.

Data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study highlight the challenges facing these families. Marcia Carlson and her colleagues report that—despite high aspirations for marriage—only 15 percent of cohabiting couples married within one year of the birth of their child. The cohabiting relationships of new parents were more likely to end altogether; indeed, over one-quarter dissolved within one year. The likelihood of marriage is even lower for new mothers who were neither married nor cohabiting at the time of the birth of their children. Only 5 percent married over the ensuing year. Another one-third began cohabiting. Although healthy marriage programs might strengthen these fragile relationships, the jury is still out on whether they will have this effect.

For cohabiting couples, newborn children can destabilize relationships. Children—especially if they were unintended or they are not biologically related to both partners—can be a source of conflict and new financial pressures that undermine the stability and health of the relationship. An analysis by Ronald B. Mincy found that 35 percent of unwed parents already have children with other people, making matters even more complicated. A 2002 study by Kelly Musick showed that only 21 percent of children born to married couples were unplanned, but among cohabiting women, nearly 50 percent of births were unplanned. The clear policy implication is that out-of-wedlock childbearing—even among cohabitants—represents a threat to stable and healthy marriages.

Implications for Policy

For good reasons, the federal government is concerned about the rapid changes in the American family. On average, children do best—on a variety of dimensions—living with their married biological parents. Of course, these marriages should be stable and low-conflict, and marriage is clearly not for everyone. Some single parents and their children overcome the odds and do well, and some single women have children on their own because opportunities to marry are limited.

But the question is how best to achieve the goal of increasing the proportion of children growing up with married parents. Simply put, there are three options: 1) reduce unwed childbearing, 2) encourage and prepare unwed parents to marry, and 3) reduce divorce among married parents. Available evidence suggests that current policies may put too much emphasis on strengthening fragile relationships or marriages between couples who already have children and not enough on reducing unwed childbearing in the first place.

Policymakers can do a number of things to accomplish this goal. They could make substantial investments to replicate effective programs that have been shown to delay sexual activity or increase contraceptive use among sexually active teens, and thereby reduce teen pregnancy.

It is also important to educate teens, as well as young adults, about the consequences of early unwed childbearing, both for themselves and their children. As an analysis by Nick Zill shows, the order in which important life events happen does matter: A child born to a mother who is a teenager, has not finished high school, and is not married is nine times more likely to be poor than if the mother is an adult who has finished high school and is married. Broad media-based strategies could be employed as an efficient and powerful way to reach young people through entertainment, the Internet, and other emerging forms of media to help change cultural norms. Research by Brent Miller, Robert Blum, and others shows that parents play a critical role in helping young people avoid teen pregnancy, so it would be wise to equip more parents of adolescents with information to support them in communicating with their teens about sex, relationships, and marriage. In addition, family planning information and services need to be available for sexually active teens and young adults.

The time when cohabiting couples have newborn children is sometimes regarded as the magic moment for policy intervention—a time when couples often redefine their relationships. But the commonplace notion that these couples may be especially receptive to marriage or to marriage promotion initiatives should be revisited. They should be targeted not because of the likelihood of marital success, which is uncertain at best, but because these couples and their children represent a significant portion of the population at risk and thus a group that needs help. These unwed parents not only need help in strengthening their relationships so that they can work together in the best interest of their children, and possibly prepare for marriage, but they also need help in avoiding additional unplanned pregnancies that put too many children at risk of living in a highly unstable environment.

Conclusion

The reasons for the current retreat from marriage are complex. There is no silver bullet that will reverse these trends quickly. Reducing out-of-wedlock childbearing alone will not restore marriage rates or reduce divorce rates to levels observed in the 1950s. At the same time, the evidence is clear that out-of-wedlock childbearing—among both single persons and cohabiting couples—is a primary reason for the lack of family stability in children's lives and therefore deserves the nation's full attention. The new funding for marriage and responsible fatherhood programs offers the potential to learn more about how to strengthen marriage for parents who already have children. However, we should not put all our eggs in this basket. Federal, state, and community officials should seize the opportunity presented by this new funding to intervene earlier by educating teens about healthy relationships and marriage before they have children. It is also imperative to make postponing early, unwed childbearing a priority—particularly among teens, where we have strong evidence of success. Otherwise, these efforts to “fix” relationships may be too little and too late.

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