

Effects of Out-of-Wedlock Birth on Children

Synthesis Paper: [Rising Illegitimacy: America's Social Catastrophe](#)

The rate of nonmarital births has increased rapidly. In 1970, about 11 percent of all births were to unmarried parents; by 1990, that figure rose to 28 percent. By 2013, around 41 percent of all U.S. births—roughly 1.6 million births per a year—were to unmarried parents.¹⁾ The largest share of nonmarital births are to women aged 20 through 24 years. Unlike in past decades, most out-of-wedlock births today—58 percent—are to cohabiting couples.²⁾ Therefore, while a majority of these children have their biological mother and father present at birth, many spend most of their life in a single-parent family.

From the very beginning, children born outside of marriage have life stacked against them. While many single mothers work wonders and raise their children well despite the obstacles they encounter, for many others the challenge is too great and their children suffer the consequences.

1. Health at Birth

Illegitimacy is related to poor health at birth. The consequences of illegitimacy start right at birth for some children. A 1991 overview of the professional literature concluded that the main reason for America's low international standing on infant mortality was the rate of the young mothers giving birth outside of marriage.³⁾ Nicholas Eberstadt of the Washington-based American Enterprise Institute makes the same case for Washington, D.C., the infant mortality capital of the country.⁴⁾ Infants born to younger women are somewhat more likely to be born prematurely, and to die in the neonatal period.⁵⁾ According to researchers from The National Center for Health Statistics: "Both black and white unmarried women had a substantially higher risk of having infants with very low or moderately low birth rates."⁶⁾ Very low birth weight babies are at high risk for serious complications and their treatment add significantly to the Medicaid cost of births to welfare mothers.

The early onset of sexual intercourse, which lies behind these statistics, is more likely if the young woman is the daughter of a teenage mother who has a low educational level and if the girl's school environment is poor.⁷⁾

2. Development

The absence of married parents is related to retarded development in early childhood. Different risks of associated with illegitimacy arise as the child grows older. The professional scientific literature amply documents the relationship to delays in development. For example, illegitimate children tend to be shorter and have smaller heads.⁸⁾ Their cognitive (especially verbal) development is lessened.⁹⁾ Many of these children have problems in controlling their activity (popularly called "hyperactivity"). This lack of control is usually an indication of problems in learning that will arise later in the child's development.¹⁰⁾ The effect on boys is greater, at least in the early years.¹¹⁾

Similar findings were enumerated again in the recent 1992 National Institute of Child Health and Development summary, "Outcomes of Early Childbearing: An Appraisal of Recent Evidence."¹²⁾

And such findings are in line with earlier studies. For instance, Project TALENT, a federal survey commissioned in 1960 through 1971, found that children born outside of marriage were likely to have lower cognitive scores, lower educational aspirations and a greater likelihood of becoming teenager parents themselves. Once again, all of these effects were greater for boys.¹³⁾

3. Academic Performance

The absence of married parents is related to poor academic performance during school years. The risks and consequences of illegitimacy continue through the middle years of childhood and express themselves in poor academic performance. This is amply documented in the professional literature.

A 1988 University of Illinois study of adults born outside of marriage found that the longer the time spent in a single-parent family the less education attained at all income levels of the parent. This significantly reduces the job and income attainments of these individuals and also reduces the overall performance of the nation's economy. Those who have lived in single-parent homes as preschoolers (which includes all those born outside of wedlock) are most effected. And once again, the study indicated, boys are more affected than girls.¹⁴⁾ Explains Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, a researcher at the Manhattan-based Institute for American Values:

According to a study by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, 33 percent of two-parent elementary school students are ranked as high achievers, as compared with 17 percent of single-parent students. The children in single parent families are more likely to be truant or to have disciplinary action taken against them. Even after controlling for race, income and religion, scholars find significant differences in educational attainment between children who grow up in intact families and children who do not.¹⁵⁾

In sharp contrast with parents of illegitimate children, married parents have higher expectations of their children, even when the children have the same intelligence and performance abilities.¹⁶⁾

These findings are confirmed again and again in studies conducted in the United States and abroad. These studies demonstrate that illegitimacy is also associated with lower job and salary attainment.¹⁷⁾

With the burden of these consequences upon them, boys are less likely to grow up to be breadwinners, and will be less attractive to young women seeking a competent husband for themselves and a capable father for their children.

4. Emotional and Behavioral Stability

The absence of married parents risks emotional and behavioral problems at the end of childhood. The effects of illegitimacy continue to compound through childhood. The scientific literature shows a direct relationship between illegitimacy and behavioral problems. In 1990 a major analysis of national survey data confirmed that children from intact families tend to have far fewer mental health and developmental health problems. Children from mother-only families have about twice as many problems.¹⁸⁾ They have less ability to delay gratification, poorer impulse control (that is, control over anger and sexual gratification). They have a weaker sense of conscience or sense of right or wrong.¹⁹⁾

About one-third of children born to unmarried mothers, or whose parents separate, become part of a two-parent family within five years.²⁰⁾ However this is not an unmixed blessing. Children from these “blended” families (families with step siblings in them) tend to have even more difficulties.²¹⁾ As Whitehead explains:

In general the evidence suggests that remarriage neither reproduces nor restores the intact family structure, even when it brings in more income and a second adult into the household...Other difficulties seem to offset the advantages of extra income and an extra pair of hands...Step-families disrupt established loyalties, create new uncertainties, provoke deep anxieties, and sometimes threaten a child's physical as well as emotional security.²²⁾

Adding to all this is the sad fact that the incidence of child abuse and neglect is higher among single-parent families.²³⁾

¹⁾ Carmen Solomon-Fears, “Nonmarital Births: An Overview,” *Congressional Research Services Report* (2014) available at <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43667.pdf> (accessed September 4, 2015).

²⁾ Carmen Solomon-Fears, “Nonmarital Births: An Overview,” *Congressional Research Services Report* (2014) available at <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43667.pdf> (accessed September 4, 2015).

Steven L. Nock, “Marriage as a Public Issue,” *The Future of Children* 15, no. 2 (2005): 26.

Child Trends, Data Bank, Births to Unmarried Women, Indicators on Child and Youth, July 2014.

³⁾ David Lester, “Infant Mortality and Illegitimacy,” *Social Science Medicine*, Vol. 35, No. 5 (1992), pp.739-740.

⁴⁾ See two articles by Nicholas Eberstadt on infant mortality rates in Washington, D.C.: “In the District, Children Without a Chance: The Startling Facts of Life and Death in the Infant Mortality Capital of America” and “Parents and the District's Endangered Children,” *The Washington Times*, February 22 and 23, 1994.

⁵⁾ Christine A. Bachrach, and Karen Carver in the introduction to *Outcomes of Early Childbearing*, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD) Conference Proceedings, May 1992.

⁶⁾ Joel C. Kleinman and Samuel S. Kessel, “Racial Differences in Low Birth Weight,” *New England Journal of Medicine*, Vol. 317 (1987), pp. 749-753.

⁷⁾ Arden Handler, “The Correlates of the Initiation of Sexual Intercourse among Young Urban Black Females,” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1990), pp. 159-170.

⁸⁾ Jane Wadsworth et al., “Teenage Mothering: Child Development at Five Years,” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1984), pp. 303-313.

⁹⁾ A. Walsh, “Illegitimacy, Child-Abuse and Neglect, and Cognitive Development,” *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, Vol. 15 (1990), pp. 279-285;

J.J. Card, “Long Term Consequences for Children Born to Adolescent Parents,” *Final Report to NICHD, American Institutes for Research*, Palo Alto, California, 1977;

J.J. Card, “Long term consequences for children of teenage parents,” *Demography*, Vol. 18 (1981), pp. 137-156;

Jane Wadsworth et al., “Teenage Mothering: Child Development at Five Years,” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (1984), pp. 303-313.

¹⁰⁾ J. Brooks-Gunn and Frank Fustenberg Jr., “The Children of Adolescent Mothers: Physical, Academic and Psychological Outcomes,” *Developmental Review*, Vol. 6 (1986), pp. 224-225.

¹¹⁾ J.J. Card, “Long Term Consequences for Children Born to Adolescent Parents,” *Final Report to NICHD, American Institutes for Research*, Palo Alto, California, 1977;

J.J. Card, “Long term consequences for children of teenage parents,” *Demography*, Vol. 18 (1981), pp. 137-156;

J. Brooks-Gunn and Frank Fustenberg Jr., “The Children of Adolescent Mothers: Physical, Academic and

Psychological Outcomes," *Developmental Review*, Vol. 6 (1986), pp. 224-225.

¹²⁾ Christine A. Bachrach, and Karen Carver in the Introduction to *Outcomes of Early Childbearing*, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD) Conference Proceedings, May 1992.

¹³⁾ J.J. Card, "Long Term Consequences for Children Born to Adolescent Parents," *Final Report to NICHD, American Institutes for Research*, Palo Alto, California, 1977; J.J. Card, "Long term consequences for children of teenage parents," *Demography*, Vol. 18 (1981), pp. 137-156.

¹⁴⁾ Sheila F. Krein and Andrea H. Beller, "Educational Attainment of Children From Single-Parent Families: Differences by Exposure, Gender and Race," *Demography*, Vol. 25 (May 1988), pp. 221-234.

¹⁵⁾ , ²²⁾ Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, "Dan Quayle Was Right," *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1993, pp. 47-70.

¹⁶⁾ Maxine S. Thompson, Karl L. Alexander, and Doris R. Entwisle, "Household Composition, Parental Expectations and School Achievement," *Social Forces*, Vol. 67 (1988), pp. 424-451.

¹⁷⁾ Eric F. Dubow and Tom Lester, "Adjustment of Children Born to Teenage Mothers: The Contribution of Risk and Protective Factors," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, Vol. 52 (1990), pp. 393-404.

J.J. Card, "Long Term Consequences for Children Born to Adolescent Parents," *Final Report to NICHD, American Institutes for Research*, Palo Alto, California, 1977

J.J. Card, "Long term consequences for children of teenage parents," *Demography*, Vol. 18 (1981), pp. 137-156.

Robert W. Blanchard and Henry B. Biller, "Father Availability and Academic Performance among Third-Grade Boys," *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1971), pp. 301-305.

¹⁸⁾ Nicholas Zill and Charlotte A. Schoenborn, "Developmental, Learning, and Emotional Problems,-Health of Our Nation's Children, United States 1988," *Advances Data from Vital and Health Statistics of the National Center for Health Statistics*, No. 190, November 1990.

¹⁹⁾ E.M. Hetherington and B. Martin, "Family Interactions," in H.C. Quay and J.S. Werry (eds.), *Psychopathological Disorders of Childhood* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), pp. 247-302.

²⁰⁾ Greg J. Duncan and Saul D. Hoffman, "Welfare Benefits, Economic Opportunities and Out-of-Wedlock Births Among Black Teenage Girls," *Demography*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (1990), pp. 519-535.

²¹⁾ Nicholas Zill and Charlotte A. Schoenborn, "Developmental, Learning, and Emotional Problems: Health of Our Nation's Children, United States 1988," *Advanced Data from Vital and Health Statistics of the National Center for Health Statistics*, No. 190, November 1990.

Nicholas Zill and Carolyn C. Rogers, "Recent Trends in the Well-Being of Children in the United States and Their Implications for Public Policy" in Andrew J. Cherlin, ed., *The Changing American Family and Public Policy* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 1988), pp. 90-91.

²³⁾ A. Walsh, "Illegitimacy, Child-Abuse and Neglect, and Cognitive Development," *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, Vol. 15 (1990), pp. 279-285.

From:
<http://marripedia.org/> - **Marripedia**

Permanent link:
http://marripedia.org/effects_of_out-of-wedlock_births_on_children?rev=1441830290

Last update: **2015/09/09 13:24**

