

Effects of Out-of-Wedlock Birth on Children

Research 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. An 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 more likely to be born prematurely, and to die in the neonatal period.⁵⁾ The 2013 National Vital Statistics Report found that the mortality rate for infants of unmarried mothers was 77 percent higher than the rate for infants of married mothers.⁶⁾ 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."⁷⁾ 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.

2. Development

The absence of married parents is related to delayed development in early childhood. Different risks 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⁾

3. Academic Performance

The absence of married parents is related to poor academic performance in school. This is amply

documented in the professional literature.

A University of Illinois study of adults who were 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 are most effected. And once again, the study indicated, boys are more affected than girls.¹²⁾ 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.¹³⁾

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.¹⁴⁾

4. Emotional and Behavioral Stability

The absence of married parents risks emotional and behavioral problems that compound during childhood. The impact of out-of-wedlock birth and growing up in a single-parent family on the child is significant and can be permanent. These children are more likely to suffer from:

- Emotional and behavioral problems;
- Physical abuse;
- Exposure to cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs;
- Aggression;
- An increased propensity to engage in violent, delinquent, and criminal behavior;
- Poor school performance;
- Expulsion from school;¹⁵⁾
- Difficult in delaying gratification;
- Poor impulse control;
- A weaker sense of conscience or sense of right versus wrong.¹⁶⁾

About one-third of children born to unmarried mothers, or whose parents separate, become part of a two-parent family within five years.¹⁷⁾ However this is not an unmixed blessing. Children from these "blended" families (families with step siblings in them) tend to have even more difficulties.¹⁸⁾ 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.¹⁹⁾

Many of these problems exist even after controlling for family income and education. Hence, the decline of intact married families generates social and monetary poverty for future generations. The root cause of these ills lies in the lack of married parents. Therefore, the effect of a married mother and father are quite pronounced.²⁰⁾

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- 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.
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