



F.Y.I.

June 29, 1994

RIISING ILLEGITIMACY: AMERICA'S SOCIAL CATASTROPHE

By Patrick F. Fagan
Senior Policy Analyst

The numbers are stark and incontrovertible. The United States is on an undeviating path toward becoming a nation of fatherless families. Last year, some 80 percent of the black inner-city poor children born were born outside of a married family. As the figure on the following page shows, moreover, this destructive trend is not confined to the inner city.

Commenting on recent data and the strength of the trend in the rate of births outside of marriage, Senator Daniel Moynihan recently wrote to *National Review* editor William F. Buckley:

A few weeks ago the natal statistics for 1991 were published. I happened to glance at the series and thought I saw a straight line.... On a straight ascent from 10 percent of all births in 1970, births to unmarried women have now reached 30% ($b = 0.86$, $r = 0.99$). I do not believe any such correlation has ever been found in social science.¹

That is, Senator Moynihan has never seen any trend in the social science literature as strong as this one.

To put this in perspective: In 1991, 68 percent of black children were born outside of marriage. When Moynihan wrote, in 1965, on the coming destruction of the black family, the out-of-wedlock birthrate was 25 percent among blacks.² In 1991 the out-of-wedlock birthrate for the country as a whole was 29.5 percent. In other words, the country as a whole is further down the road of family disintegration now than the black family was in 1965.

This has huge implications for society and for the perception of social problems. For instance, the raw data seem to suggest that race is a major factor in crime rates. However, when one factors in family structure it turns out that the absence of marriage, not race, is the major factor in explaining differing crime rates.³ The rise in crime, in other words, is tied to the disintegration of marriage.

FYI#19/94

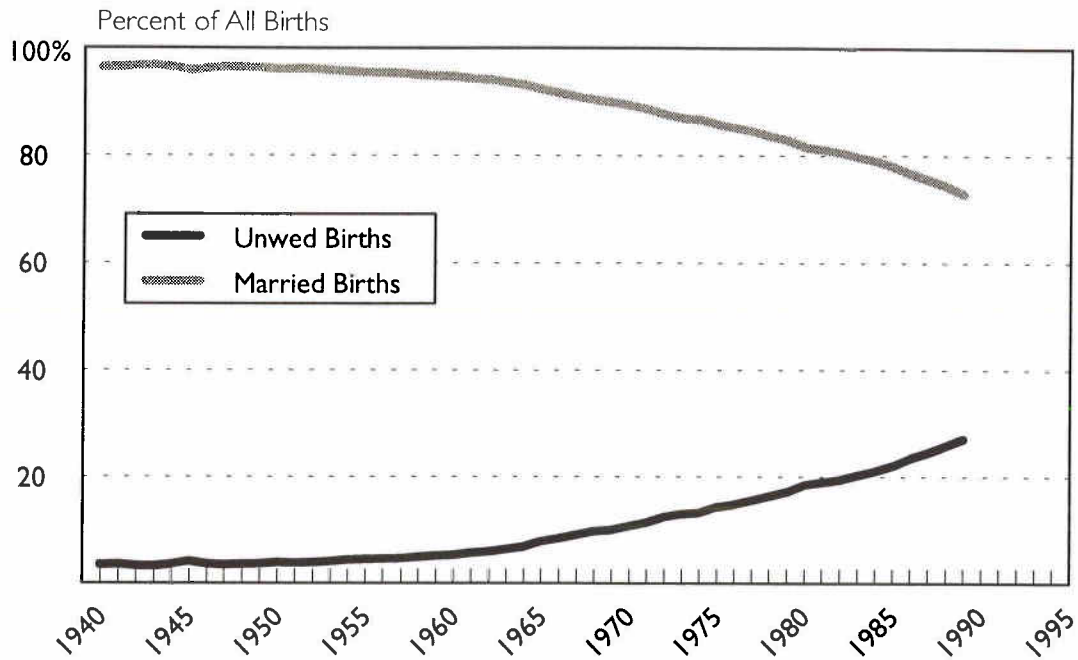
1 *National Review*, April 4, 1994, p. 24.

2 Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, Washington, D.C., Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, 1965.

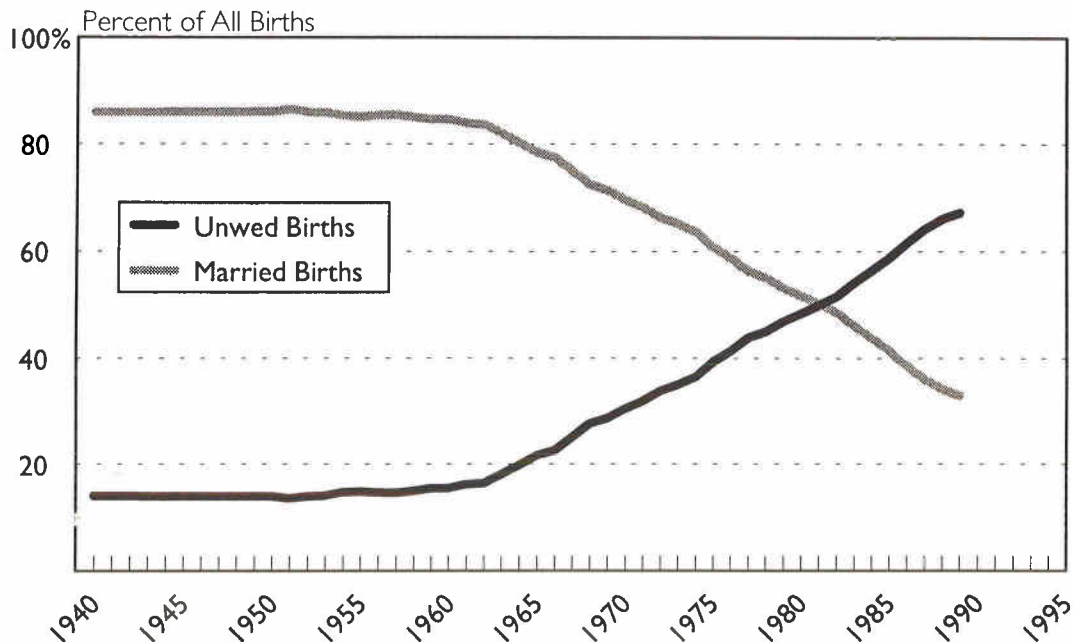
3 Douglas A. Smith and G. Roger Jarjoura, "Social Structure and Criminal Victimization," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, Vol. 25 (1988), pp. 27-52.

Married Births and Unwed Births as a Percentage of Total Births

Births For Whole U.S. Population



Births For Women Under 20



Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Survey*, 1991.

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.

The impact on the child is significant and can be permanent. For many, out-of-wedlock birth and growing up in a single-parent family means the child is more likely to suffer from:

- X Poorer health as a newborn and, if his mother is very young, from an increased chance of dying;**
- X Retarded cognitive (especially verbal) development;**
- X Lower educational achievement;**
- X Lower job attainment;**
- X Increased behavior and emotional problems;**
- X Lower impulse control;**
- X Retarded social development; and**
- X Increased crime in their community if there is a high level of illegitimacy.**

The root cause of these ills lies not in poverty but in the lack of married parents.

While federal policy has not been the fundamental cause of this catastrophe, it has reinforced it.⁴ Unfortunately, many Members of Congress continue to defend the present welfare incentives to childbirth outside of marriage. It is time instead for lawmakers to do what they can to reverse the crisis of illegitimacy and fatherlessness in America. This requires bold steps to reverse current trends.

WHAT ILLEGITIMACY MEANS TO CHILDREN

When a child is raised in a single-parent household, the pattern of that child's life is likely to be different from that of a child raised in a two-parent family in similar financial circumstances. Very few studies in the literature and in this paper controlled for the status of the single mother. In other words most studies do not distinguish between the households in which the mother was never married or ones in which she was divorced. Instead they are most frequently lumped together. However all indications are that the general direction of the effects found for the children of the mixed group (single-never-married mothers and single-divorced mothers) hold for the children of the single-never-married mothers. This paper deals with the general and cumulative nature of these effects.

To understand these impacts, the findings in the professional literature can be categorized by their implications for the child as he or she grows up, starting at birth and moving through childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood.

STAGE 1: 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 young mothers giving birth outside of marriage.⁵ Nicholas Eberstadt of the Washington-based American Enterprise Institute makes the same case for

4 Robert Rector, "Combating Family Disintegration, Crime, and Dependence: Welfare Reform and Beyond," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 983, April 8, 1994.

5 David Lester, "Infant Mortality and Illegitimacy," *Soc. Sci. Med.*, Vol. 35, No. 5 (1992), pp. 739-740.

Washington, D.C., the infant mortality capital of the country.⁶ Infants born to younger women are somewhat more likely to be born prematurely, and to die in the neonatal period.⁷ 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 weights."⁸ 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.⁹

STAGE 2: The absence of married parents is related to retarded 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.¹⁰ Their cognitive (especially verbal) development is lessened.^{11 12 13} 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.¹⁴ The effect on boys is greater, at least in the early years.^{15 16}

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."¹⁷

And such findings are in line with earlier studies. For instance, Project TALENT, a federal survey commissioned in 1960, which tracked the development of 375,000 high school students from 1960 through 1971, found that children born outside marriage were likely to have lower

-
- 6 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.
 - 7 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.
 - 8 Joel C. Kleinman and Samuel S. Kessel, "Racial Differences in Low Birth Weight," *New England Journal of Medicine*, Vol. 317 (1987), pp. 749-753.
 - 9 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.
 - 10 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.
 - 11 A. Walsh, "Illegitimacy, Child-Abuse and Neglect, and Cognitive Development," *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, Vol. 15 (1990), pp. 279-285.
 - 12 J.J. Card, "Long Term Consequences for Children Born to Adolescent Parents," *Final Report to NICHD, American Institutes for Research*, Palo Alto, California, 1977; and also, J.J. Card, "Long term consequences for children of teenage parents," *Demography*, Vol. 18 (1981), pp. 137-156.
 - 13 Wadsworth *et al.*, *op. cit.*
 - 14 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.
 - 15 Card, *op. cit.*
 - 16 Brooks-Gunn *et al.*, *op. cit.*
 - 17 Bachrach, *et al.*, *op. cit.*

cognitive scores, lower educational aspirations, and a greater likelihood of becoming teenage parents themselves. Once again, all of these effects were greater for boys.¹⁸

STAGE 3: 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.¹⁹ 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 also more likely to be truant or late 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.²⁰

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.²¹

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.^{22 23 24}

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.

STAGE 4: The absence of married parents risks emotional and behavioral problems at the end of childhood.

The effects of illegitimacy continue to compound through childhood.

18 Card, *op. cit.*

19 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.

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

21 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.

22 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.

23 Card, *op. cit.*

24 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.

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.²⁵ 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 and wrong.²⁶

About one-third of children born to unmarried mothers, or whose parents separate, become part of a two-parent family within five years.²⁷ However this is not an unmixed blessing. Children from these “blended” families (families with step siblings in them) tend to have even more difficulties.^{28 29} As Whitehead explains:

In general the evidence suggests that remarriage neither reproduces nor restores the intact family structure, even when it brings 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.³⁰

Adding to all this is the sad fact that the incidence of child abuse and neglect is higher among single-parent families.³¹

STAGE 5: The absence of married parents leads to intergenerational illegitimacy.

Even as the child enters adolescence and the influence of peers and community increases, the consequences of being born outside marriage continue to dog the development of many young people and compound the risks confronting them.

Illegitimacy is becoming the accepted way of life particularly in inner-city poor communities. In the black community, 69 percent of all babies born in 1991 were born outside of marriage. The incidence is over 80 percent in poor, inner-city neighborhoods.³² A 1990 University of Wisconsin study shows that inner-city young women feel less pressure to marry and have family intentions very different from their middle-class counterparts—black or white. They do not expect to have their own children within marriage, and frequently they deliberately chose single-parent family life for lack of suitable husbands.³³

-
- 25 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.
 - 26 E.M. Hetherington and B. Martin, “Family Interaction,” in H.C. Quay and J.S. Werry (eds.), *Psychopathological Disorders of Childhood* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), pp. 247-302.
 - 27 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.
 - 28 Zill and Schoenborn, *op. cit.*
 - 29 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.
 - 30 Whitehead, *op. cit.*
 - 31 A. Walsh, “Illegitimacy, Child-Abuse and Neglect, and Cognitive Development,” *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, Vol. 15 (1990), pp. 279-285.
 - 32 U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, Series P-60, 1994.
 - 33 Naomi Farber, “The Significance of Race and Class in Marital Decisions among Unmarried Adolescent Mothers,” *Social Problems*, Vol. 37 (1990), pp. 51-63.

This growing practice of birth outside of marriage is by now widely accepted and is affecting expectations. Nationally, 41 percent of blacks, 29 percent of Hispanics and 23 percent of whites are positively disposed toward the idea of being a single parent.³⁴ The intergenerational trend is unmistakable.

Recent research casts some light on these findings: being born outside of marriage significantly reduces the chances of the child growing up to have an intact marriage.³⁵ Children born outside of marriage themselves are three times more likely to be on welfare when they grow up.³⁶ Daughters of single mothers are twice as likely to be single mothers themselves, if they are black, and only slightly less so if they are white.³⁷ And boys living in a single-parent family are twice as likely to father a child out of wedlock as are boys from a two-parent home.³⁸ The TALENT study, noted earlier, had already found that children born to teenage parents are more likely to become teen parents themselves.³⁹

STAGE 6: The effects of illegitimacy spill over into crime in the community.

The effects of illegitimacy continue into adolescence and are linked to increased crime rates in a neighborhood. Again the professional literature illustrates the statistical relationship: lack of married parents, rather than race or poverty, is the principal factor in the crime increase.

It has been known for some time that high rates of welfare dependency correlate with high crime rates among young men in a neighborhood.⁴⁰ But more important, a major 1988 study of 11,000 individuals found that "the percentage of single-parent households with children between the ages of 12 and 20 is significantly associated with rates of violent crime and burglary." The same study makes clear that the widespread popular assumption that there is an association between race and crime is false. Illegitimacy is the key factor. The absence of marriage, and the failure to form and maintain intact families, explains the incidence of high crime in a neighborhood among whites as well as blacks. This study also concluded not only that poverty does not explain the incidence of crime, but also that it actually appears to have a negative effect on crime.⁴¹ This is a dramatic reversal of conventional wisdom. Further, University of Illinois sociologist Robert J. Sampson, in a major study on the differential effects of poverty and family disruption on crime, states:

Overall the analysis shows that rates of black violent offending, especially by juveniles, are strongly influenced by variations in family structure. Independent of the ma-

-
- 34 Data from National High School and Beyond panel study of 13,601 teenagers, from Allan F. Abrahamse, Peter A. Morrison, and Linda J. Waite, "Teenagers Willing to Consider Single Parenthood: Who is at Greatest Risk?" *Family Planning Perspectives*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (January 1988), pp 13-18.
 - 35 Neil Bennett and David Bloom, "The influence of Non-marital Childbearing on the Formation of Marital Unions." Paper given at NICHD conference on "Outcomes of Early Childbearing," May 1992.
 - 36 Kristin Moore, "Attainment among Youth from Families That Received Welfare." Paper for DHHS/ASPE and NICHD, Grant #HD21537-03.
 - 37 Sara S. McLanahan, "Family Structure and Dependency: Early Transitions to Female Household Headship," *Demography*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1988), pp. 1-16.
 - 38 William Marsiglio, "Adolescent Fathers in the United States: Their Initial Living Arrangements, Marital Experience and Educational Outcomes," *Family Planning Perspectives*, Vol. 19 (1987), pp. 240-251, reporting a study of 5,500 young men.
 - 39 Card, *op. cit.*
 - 40 Arthur B. Elsters *et al.*, "Judicial Involvement and Conduct Problems of Fathers of Infants Born to Adolescent Mothers," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 79, No. 2 (1987), pp. 230-234.
 - 41 Douglas Smith and G. Roger Jarjoura, "Social Structure and Criminal Victimization," *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, February 1988, pp. 27-52.

major candidates supplied by prior criminological theory (e.g. income, region, size, density, age and race composition) black family disruption has the largest effects on black juvenile robbery and homicide.... The effects of family structure are strong and cannot be easily dismissed by reference to other structural and cultural features of urban environments.... The effect of family disruption on black violence is not due to the effect of black violence on family structure.

Commenting on crime among whites, Sampson concludes: "In fact the predictors of white robbery are in large part identical in sign and magnitude to those for blacks."⁴²

Dr. June O'Neill, of Baruch College, City University of New York, in recent research on underclass behaviors confirms the linkage between crime and single-parent families. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, O'Neill found that young black men raised in single-parent families were twice as likely to engage in criminal activities when compared to black men raised in two-parent families, even after holding constant a wide range of variables such as family income, urban residence, neighborhood environment, and parents' education. Growing up in a single-parent family in a neighborhood with many other single-parent families on welfare triples the probability that a young black man will engage in criminal activity.⁴³

These academic findings on the relationship between crime and illegitimacy are confirmed in government studies. For example, the U.S. Department of Justice reported in 1987 that 70 percent of juveniles in state custody did not live with both parents while growing up, and almost three-quarters of those lived primarily in a single-parent family.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, a major sociological review from the University of Wisconsin concludes that teens from single-parent families are much more likely to become delinquent than are teens from intact families. Family disruption drives up delinquency rates because of the way it "hampers the formation of attachments to parents and the transmission of antidelinquent definitions from parent to child." Adolescents from broken homes often "associate with delinquents, learn ... definitions favorable to delinquency, and consequently, violate the law."⁴⁵

STAGE 7: The absence of married parents reinforces the cycle of welfare.

The cumulative earlier effects carry over into young adult life. Welfare contributes to the sorry picture. From the professional literature, for instance, it becomes clear that receiving public aid increases the percentage of pregnant teenagers choosing unmarried motherhood.⁴⁶ Data on the American welfare system, moreover, show a positive relationship between illegitimacy and long-term welfare dependency. Women who give birth outside of marriage are more likely to go on AFDC and to spend more years on welfare once enrolled (72 percent of single mothers 17 years of age or younger receive AFDC). These combined effects of "younger and longer" increase total AFDC costs per household by 25 percent to 30 percent for 17-year-olds.⁴⁷

42 Robert J. Sampson, "Urban Black Violence: The Effect of Male Joblessness and Family Disruption," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 93 (1987), pp. 348-382.

43 M. Anne Hill and June O'Neill, *Underclass Behaviors in the United States: Measurement and Analysis of Determinants*, New York City, City University of New York, Baruch College March 1990.

44 Allen J. Beck and Susan A. Kline, "Survey of Youth in Custody, 1987," U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Special Report*, September 1988.

45 Ross L. Matsueda and Karen Heimer, "Race, Family Structure and Delinquency: A Test of Differential Association and Social Control Theories," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 52 (1987), pp. 826-840.

46 Arleen Liebowitz, Marvin Eisen, and Winston K. Chow, "An Economic Model of Teenage Pregnancy Decision-Making," *Demography*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1986), pp. 67-77.

47 June O'Neill, communication on analysis of National Longitudinal Study of Youth to Robert Rector, April 1994.

According to eminent poverty researcher Sara McLanahan, then at the University of Wisconsin and now at Princeton University, family structure is powerful in explaining much of these effects. Though the numbers show that family welfare history is a significant predictor of daughters' future dependence, they also show that single parenthood in adolescence is associated with daughters' future likelihood of being on welfare, even after controlling for family income and size.⁴⁸

Not only is illegitimacy linked to future welfare dependency, but welfare dependency is linked to illegitimacy. For instance, research by Dr. C.R. Winegarden of the University of Toledo found that half of the increases in black illegitimacy in recent decades could be attributed to the effects of welfare. Research by Shelley Lundberg and Robert D. Plotnick of the University of Washington shows that an increase of roughly \$200 per month in welfare benefits per family causes the teenage illegitimate birth rate in a state to increase by 150 percent. Dr. June O'Neill's research has found that, holding constant a wide range of other variables such as income, parental education, and urban and neighborhood setting, a 50 percent increase in the monthly value of AFDC and Food Stamp benefits led to a 43 percent increase in the number of out-of-wedlock births.⁴⁹

This pattern also holds in Canada, where welfare disbursements are more generous. A recent study of the Canadian welfare system, for instance, found that increases in welfare led to an increase in the numbers of births outside of marriage. An addition of \$100-\$200 in yearly welfare support was found to lead to a 5 percent increase in the probability of being a single parent, a 2 percent increase in the probability of a child being born out of wedlock and a 1 percent increase in divorce.⁵⁰

CONCLUSION

Personal rejection by those very close to an individual is one of the most painful forms of suffering. In adults it frequently causes depression, irritability, loss of interest and productivity in work, and lack of concentration. It is related to a host of psychiatric and physical illnesses.

Birth outside of marriage is also a form of rejection—by the parents of each other, and of the child by the father. Its effects are profound and last long. It has its very harmful effects on the child and the community, but most particularly on boys.

The evidence is clear and disturbing. Being born outside of marriage lowers the health of newborns and increases their chances of dying; it retards children's cognitive (especially their verbal) development; it lowers their educational achievement; it lowers their job attainment; it increases their behavior problems; it lowers impulse control; it warps their social development; it helps change their community from being a support to being a danger to their development; and it increases the crime rate in their community.

48 McLanahan, *op. cit.*

49 Rector, *op. cit.*, quoting: C.R. Winegarden, "AFDC and Illegitimacy Ratios: A Vector Autoregressive Model," *Applied Economics*, March 1988 pp 1589-1601; Shelley Lundberg and Robert D. Plotnick, "Adolescent Premarital Childbearing: Do Opportunity Costs Matter?" June 1990, a revised version of a paper presented at the May 1990 Population Association of America Conference in Toronto, Canada; and M. Anne Hill and June O'Neill, "Underclass Behaviors in the United States: Measurement and Analysis of Determinants (New York City: City University of New York, Baruch College, August 1993), research funded by 88ASPE201A, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

50 Douglas W. Allen, "Welfare and the Family: The Canadian Experience," *Journal of Labor Economics*, Vol. 11 (1993), pp. S201-S223.

To make the situation worse, the government has instilled powerful incentives in the welfare system which make illegitimacy a community way of life, particularly in very poor communities. The widespread incidence of illegitimacy in turn passes on all these effects to the next generation in an even more malignant form.

While government cannot instill virtue, it does not need to subsidize this rejection. Government policies have subsidized illegitimacy, and the evidence of its serious effects are steadily growing. Given the resultant suffering to children, current welfare policy is little more than governmental child abuse. What Congress must do is to adopt policies friendly to children. But that, in plain language, means being far more friendly to married fathers and mothers.