

January 23, 2008

By Frank F. Furstenberg, Zellerback Family Professor of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania; fff@sas.upenn.edu; 415.291.4486

America's high poverty rates on the actions of teenage girls. In fairy tales, there are two possible outcomes for a young girl. In the Disney version, the handsome prince rescues her, then marries her, and everyone lives happily ever after. In the dark version, the heroine makes a dreadful mistake that leads to disaster. For the past 15 years, political pundits have been telling us a dark fairy tale about American teens, blaming who have babies out of wedlock. This assumption guided the welfare reform act of 1996, which promised to write America a happy ending by getting teens to stop having babies, get married, and thus end poverty.

But a new longitudinal study by Frank Furstenberg shows that fairy tales have no place in the realm of policy-making. His data reveal that teen childbearing is NOT the reason that many Americans have been trapped in poverty over the past three decades.

The United States, one of the richest nations in the world, has higher poverty rates than any advanced Western country other than the former Soviet Union. It also has higher rates of teen births, especially unwed teen births. Many policy-makers believe that the first situation is a direct result of the second. They argue that if we could only reduce teen births, and get young women who do give birth to marry, we could substantially reduce poverty and the need for public assistance programs, which are often thought to reinforce social inequality by giving incentives to young women to bear more children and become permanently dependent on government handouts.

However, a new body of research, including my own long-term study described below, reveals that this is not true. Beginning in 1991, teen childbearing declined steadily and steeply for 15 years in a row, as teens began to practice contraception more effectively. But the rapid fall in teenage childbearing that occurred from 1991 to 2005 did not improve the life prospects of disadvantaged youth as they entered adulthood. Socioeconomic inequality did decline in the boom years of the late 1990s, but with little effect on the fortunes of the poorest of the poor. And by 2001, poverty and income inequality were once more on the rise, reaching highs not seen in more than 30 years.

In 2006, the rate of teenage childbearing took a surprising turn upward, leading to widespread concern that we may be in for a new cycle of teen births, child poverty, and social disadvantage. That may be true, given current trends in the housing and financial markets. But if so, teenage births will not be the main cause.

Bringing down the rate of teen births is an important goal on its own. But when it comes to reducing poverty, both the optimism associated with the 15-year decline in teen birthrates and the pessimism triggered by the uptick in 2006 may be overblown.

I recently completed the analysis of my three-decade-long study chronicling the lives of more than 300 teen mothers from Baltimore. I first interviewed these women in the mid-1960s and then followed their lives, along with their first-born children, over the next 30 years, in one of the longest running studies in American social science. Their experiences reveal a surprising fact: Early childbearing was not the main cause of the economic difficulties these women faced in their lives, and did not trap them in welfare dependence for the rest of their lives. Having a child as a teen, which most policymakers believe to be a powerful source of disadvantage, had only modest effects on their educational and economic achievement in later life, after taking into account their economic circumstances prior to becoming pregnant. The teen mothers in Baltimore did better than most observers would have predicted in continuing their education, and did not fare substantially worse than their counterparts who postponed parenthood until their twenties.

More than three-fourths of these teen mothers finished high school or obtained a GED and one in ten got a college degree, an outcome very similar to that of equally impoverished women who did not have children as teens. But this good news is offset by a more depressing fact. Whether they become teen mothers or not, few women in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods and families of the United States experience much mobility, because they are frequently unable to stay in school or obtain well paying and stable employment. Even when their first child is born later in life, such women are rarely able to rely on a stable marriage for long-term economic support.

This finding from my Baltimore study is supported by a growing body of research by economists, demographers, and sociologists. Statistical analysis and longitudinal research suggest that when poor minority women, who represent a disproportionate share of all teen mothers, delay their first birth, their life chances are only marginally improved, if at all.

The families that I followed in Baltimore were formed long before the movement to reform the welfare system. Over two thirds of the young mothers spent some time on public assistance, but I could find no evidence that being on welfare for limited periods interfered with women's prospects of doing well in later life or hampered the well-being of their children. Most used public assistance to get back on their feet rather than as a form of permanent support. They typically used the support that they received to return to school or invest time in childrearing when their children were young. When their offspring went to school, they entered the labor force. The minority of women who became chronic recipients of welfare women -- roughly one in six - tended to suffer from long-term disabilities such as mental illness, substance abuse, or learning problems, and had limited family support to help them cope.

Preventing teen pregnancy is a worthy goal of public policy. But teenage parenthood is simply not the disastrous and life-compromising event that Conventional Wisdom portrays it to be. The argument that by preventing early childbearing we will break the cycle of social disadvantage is greatly overstated. Prevention of teenage childbearing is a desirable goal for many reasons. But it is not the silver bullet for reducing poverty or strengthening the family. Indeed, as Gabrielle Raley notes in an article forthcoming in March, many researchers find that teen childbearing is often a reaction to, rather than cause of, the dismal economic and educational options available to impoverished teens.

These findings suggest that many policies devised to discourage teen childbearing and ameliorate poverty may be ineffective, and in some cases may even have adverse effects. The main reason for the decline in teen births between 1991 and 2005 was an increase in the proportion of teens who used contraceptives. But over the past 8 years, there has been an aggressive campaign to encourage abstinence-only sex education and roll back comprehensive reproductive health policies. While the push for abstinence-only education and programs has had relatively little impact on the level of sexual activity among teens, it may be undermining the use of contraception, thus contributing to the uptick in teen births last year.

Marriage promotion, a signature policy of the Bush Administration, is another policy that can produce unintended and adverse effects when impoverished single mothers are encouraged to wed their partners. No doubt, children in stable and secure marriages fare better than those whose parents do not remain together. However, when I examined the life history of women who married the father of their children in the Baltimore study, I discovered that only a minority of the women (about 20 percent who wed the father of their children and 10 percent who married someone other than the father) remained wed throughout the children's lives. Even if we convince teenage couples that they should marry if the girl becomes pregnant, this does not mean they will stay together for the long haul. Divorce rates are twice as high among impoverished and poorly-educated couples as among more affluent and educated Americans. And when impoverished couples enter unions that later break up, the women often end up

worse off economically than if they had never married, while their children are exposed to the added risks of marital conflict and multiple transitions in living arrangements.

These are but two examples of a fundamental mismatch between social policy and social realities in the United States. A 2007 report issued by UNICEF ranked the United States second from the bottom among twenty-one Western nations in the material well-being, health and safety, educational performance, family relationships, social behavior, and subjective well-being of its total population. The United States has long invested less in programs to ameliorate social inequality and fight poverty than those other nations, and the tax relief provided to high-income households in the early years of the Bush administration set the stage for later cutbacks in social programs for less advantaged Americans. In the industrialized world, America stands out as a land of unequal opportunities for children.

Focusing primarily on preventing teen pregnancy and parenthood has not proved to be an effective strategy for eliminating social disadvantage, promoting educational and occupational achievement, or fostering stable marriages. It is time to broaden our approach to breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Two promising approaches, according to economic analysis, are adjusting the Earned Income Tax Credit so that it is available to all single workers, men and women alike, and strengthening public education for low-income children. Paradoxically, both these strategies may do more to create stable families than policies that explicitly attempt to promote marriage.

### **FURTHER INFORMATION**

For more information on the studies described in this briefing paper, see Furstenberg's recent book, *Destinies of the Disadvantaged: The Politics of Teen Childbearing* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2007). See also Gabrielle Raley, "Avenue to Adulthood: Teen Pregnancy and the Meaning of Motherhood in Poor Communities," in *American Families: A Multicultural Reader* by Coontz, Raley, and Parson, eds (Routledge, 2008).

On international comparisons of poverty rates and child well-being, contact Timothy Smeeding, Distinguished Professor of Economics and Public Administration and Director, Center for Policy Research, Syracuse University: [tmsmeed@maxwell.syr.edu](mailto:tmsmeed@maxwell.syr.edu), 315.443.9042.

On the reasons that impoverished mothers, of all races, often choose motherhood over marriage, contact Kathryn Edin, Professor of Public Policy and Management, Harvard University: [kathy\\_edin@ksg.harvard.edu](mailto:kathy_edin@ksg.harvard.edu), 617.496.4082.

On the diverging benefits and functions of marriage for impoverished and for economically affluent women over the last 50 years, contact Stephanie Coontz, Professor of History and Family Studies, The Evergreen State College: [coontzs@msn.com](mailto:coontzs@msn.com), 360.556.9223.

On the obstacles facing teen fathers, contact Waldo Johnson, Professor of Social Service Administration and Director, Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture, University of Chicago: [wejohnso@uchicago.edu](mailto:wejohnso@uchicago.edu), 773.702.8063.

For more information on the complex causes of unwed childbearing and relationship break-up among impoverished women, contact Paula England, Professor of Sociology, Stanford University: [pengland@stanford.edu](mailto:pengland@stanford.edu), 650.723.4912 or 650.815.9308.

About CCF: The Council on Contemporary Families is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to providing the press and public with the latest research and best-practice findings about American families. Our members include demographers, economists, family therapists, historians, political scientists, psychologists, social workers, sociologists, as well as other family social scientists and practitioners. Founded in 1996 and based at the University of Illinois at Chicago, the Council's mission is to enhance the national understanding of how and why contemporary families are changing, what needs and challenges they face, and how these needs can best be met.

To learn more about other briefing papers and about our annual April conferences, including complimentary press passes for journalists, contact Stephanie Coontz, CCF's Director of Research and Public Education, at [coontzs@msn.com](mailto:coontzs@msn.com).