

Babies Having Babies

FROM *Constructing an Epidemic*

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During the 1970s, '80s, and '90s a number of related issues became the subject of considerable public and policymaking concern: premarital sex, abortion, out-of-wedlock births, and teenage pregnancy. Kristin Luker points out that teenage pregnancy became the most visible of these issues, in spite of the fact that it was not the epidemic that various claimsmakers portrayed it to be. Rather, teenage pregnancy became, in Luker's words, a "lightening rod" issue: it became a powerful, convenient, and shorthand way for the public and for policymakers to make sense of a variety of massive changes taking place in American society. Luker analyzes why teenage pregnancy consequently became identified as a leading explanation for poverty and its related social ills, and she concludes by examining the short-sightedness of this explanation.

By the early 1980s Americans had come to believe that teenagers were becoming pregnant in epidemic numbers, and the issue occupied a prominent place on the national agenda. "Teenage pregnancy," along with crack-addicted mothers, drive-by shootings, and the failing educational system, was beginning to be used as a form of shorthand for the country's social ills. Everyone now agreed that it was a serious problem, and solutions were proposed across the ideological spectrum. Conservatives (members of the New Right, in particular) wanted to give parents more control over their daughters, including the right to determine whether they should have access to sex education and contraception. Liberals, doubting that a "just say no" strategy would do much to curtail sexual activity among teenagers, continued to urge that young men and women be granted the same legal access to abortion and

contraception that their elders had. Scholars debated the exact costs of early pregnancy to the individuals involved and to society, foundations targeted it for funding and investigation, government at all levels instituted programs to reduce it, and the media gave it a great deal of scrutiny. In the early 1970s the phrase “teenage pregnancy” was just not part of the public lexicon. By 1978, however, a dozen articles per year were being published on the topic; by the mid-1980s the number had increased to two dozen; and by 1990 there were more than two hundred, including cover stories in both *Time* and *Newsweek*.

Ironically (in view of all this media attention), births to teenagers actually declined in the 1970s and 1980s. During the baby boom years (1946–1964), teenagers, like older women, increased their childbearing dramatically: their birthrates almost doubled, reaching a peak in 1957. Subsequently, the rates drifted back to their earlier levels, where they have pretty much stayed since 1975. The real “epidemic” occurred when Dwight Eisenhower was in the White House and poodle skirts were the height of fashion. But although birthrates among teenagers were declining, other aspects of their behavior were changing in ways that many people saw as disturbing. From the vantage point of the 1970s, the relevant statistics could have been used to tell any one of a number of stories. For example, when abortion was legalized in 1973, experts began to refer to a new demographic measure, the “pregnancy rate,” which combined the rate of abortion and the rate of live births. In the case of teenagers an increasing abortion rate meant that, despite a declining birthrate, the pregnancy rate was going up, and dramatically so.

Since the rise in the pregnancy rate among teenagers (and among older women as well) was entirely due to the increase in abortions, it is curious that professionals and the public identified pregnancy, rather than abortion, as the problem. It is likewise curious that although the abortion rate increased for all women, most observers limited their attention to teenagers, who have always accounted for fewer than a third of the abortions performed. Teenagers are proportionately overrepresented in the ranks of women having abortions. But to pay attention almost exclusively to them, while neglecting the other groups that account for 70 percent of all abortions, does not make sense.

A similar misdirection characterized the issue of illegitimacy. In the 1970s teenagers were having fewer babies overall than in previous decades, but they—like older women—were having more babies out of wedlock. Compared to other women, teenagers have relatively few babies, and a very high proportion of these are born to unmarried parents (about 30 percent in 1970, 50 percent in 1980, and 70 percent in 1995). But although most babies born

to teenagers are born out of wedlock, most babies born out of wedlock are not born to teens. In 1975 teens accounted for just under a half of all babies born out of wedlock; in 1980 they accounted for 40 percent; and in 1990 they accounted for fewer than a third. Obviously, teens should hardly be the only population of interest.

Thus, in the 1970s and early 1980s the data revealed a number of disquieting trends, and teenagers became the focus of the public's worry about these trends. More single women were having sex, more women were having abortions, more women were having babies out of wedlock, and—contrary to prevailing stereotypes—older women and white women were slowly replacing African Americans and teens as the largest groups within the population of unwed mothers. These trends bespeak a number of social changes worth looking at closely. Sex and pregnancy had been decoupled by the contraception revolution of the 1960s; pregnancy and birth had been decoupled by the legalization of abortion in the 1970s; and more and more children were growing up in “postmodern” families—that is, without their biological mother and father—in part because divorce rates were rising and in part because more children were being born out of wedlock. But these broad demographic changes, which impinged on women and men of all ages, were seen as problems that primarily concerned *teenagers*. The teenage mother—in particular, the black teenage mother—came to personify the social, economic, and sexual trends that in one way or another affected almost everyone in America.

A number of different responses might have been devised to meet the challenge of these new trends. It would have been logical, for example, to focus on the problem of abortion, since more than a million abortions were performed each year despite the fact that people presumably had access to effective contraception. Or the problem might have been defined as the increase in out-of-wedlock births, since more and more couples were starting families without being married. Or policymakers could have responded to the way in which sexual activity and childbearing were, to an ever greater extent, taking place outside marriage (in 1975 about three-fourths of all abortions were performed on single women). Yet American society has never framed the problem in any of these broader terms. The widest perspective was perhaps that of the antiabortion activists, who saw the problem as abortion in general. A careful reading of the specialist and nonspecialist media suggests that, with a few exceptions, professionals and the general public paid scant attention to abortion and out-of-wedlock childbearing among older women, while agreeing that abortion and illegitimate births among teenagers constituted a major social and public-health problem. Why did Americans narrow their vision to such an extent? How did

professionals, Congress, and the public come to agree that there was an "epidemic" of pregnancy among teenagers and that teenagers were the main (if not the only) population worth worrying about?

A STORY THAT FITS THE DATA

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Taken together, the data added up to a story that made sense to many people. It convinced Americans that young mothers . . . who gave birth while still in high school and who were not married—were a serious social problem that brought a host of other problems in its wake. It explained why babies . . . were born prematurely, why infant mortality rates in the United States were so high compared to those in other countries, why so many American students were dropping out of high school, and why AFDC costs were skyrocketing. Some people even believed that if teenagers in the United States maintained their high birthrates, the nation would not be able to compete internationally in the coming century. Others argued that distressing racial inequalities in education, income, and social standing were in large part due to the marked difference in the birthrates of white and black teenagers.

Yet this story, which fed both on itself and on diffuse sexual anxiety, was incomplete; the data it was based on were true, but only partial. Evidence that did not fit the argument was left out, or mentioned only in passing. Largely ignored, for example, was the fact that a substantial and growing proportion of all unmarried mothers were not teenagers. And on those rare occasions when older unwed mothers were discussed, they were not seen as a cause for concern. Likewise, although the substantially higher rates of out-of-wedlock childbearing among African Americans were often remarked upon, few observers pointed out that illegitimacy rates among blacks were falling or stable while rates among whites were increasing. Few noted that most of the teenagers giving birth were eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds, or that teens under fifteen had been having babies throughout much of the century.

This story, as it emerged in the media and in policy circles in the 1970s and 1980s, fulfilled the public's need to identify the cause of a spreading social malaise. It led Americans to think that teenagers were the only ones being buffeted by social changes, whereas these changes were in fact pervasive; it led them to think that heedless, promiscuous teenagers were responsible for a great many disturbing social trends; and it led them to think that teenagers

were doing these things unwittingly and despite themselves. When people spoke of "children having children" or of "babies having babies," their very choice of words revealed their belief that teenage mothers, because of their youth, should not be held morally responsible for their actions. "Babies" who had babies were themselves victims; they needed protection from their own ungovernable impulses.

In another sense, limiting the issue to teenagers gave it a deceptive air of universality; after all, everyone has been or will be a teen-ager. Yet the large-scale changes that were taking place in American life did not affect all teenagers equally. The types of behavior that led teenagers to get pregnant and become unwed mothers (engaging in premarital sex, and bearing and keeping illegitimate children) were traditionally much more common among African Americans than among whites, and more common among the poor than among the privileged.

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The myriad congressional hearings, newspaper stories, and technical reports on the "epidemic" of pregnancy among teenagers could not have convinced the public to subscribe to this view if other factors in American life had not made the story plausible. The social sciences abound with theories suggesting that the public is subject to "moral panics" which are in large part irrational, but in this case people were responding to a particular account because it helped them make sense of some very real and rapidly changing conditions in their world. It appeared to explain a number of dismaying social phenomena, such as spreading signs of poverty, persistent racial inequalities, illegitimacy, freer sexual mores, and new family structures. It was and continues to be a resonant issue because of the profound changes that have taken place in the meanings and practices associated with sexuality and reproduction, in the relations among sex, marriage, and childbearing, and in the national and global economies. Through the story of "teenage pregnancy," these revolutionary changes acquired a logic and a human face.

THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION

In the 1950s and 1960s (as those who long for the good old days are fond of telling us) sex was a very private matter. Like childbearing, it was sanctioned only within marriage. Respectable women were careful lest their behavior earn them a reputation for being "loose," which would limit their ability

to marry, a "nice" man. True, in 1958 about four out of ten unmarried women were sexually active before their twentieth birthday, but in those days premarital sex was in a strict sense *premarital*, for the most part occurring within a committed relationship that soon led to marriage. Though the data collected by Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues in the 1940s and 1950s are not nationally representative, they do show that for earlier generations of American women, most premarital sex was in large part "engagement" sex—sex with the man the woman was planning to marry, and then for only a relatively short period before the wedding. In the Kinsey report, almost half of the married women who had engaged in premarital sex had done so only with their fiancés, and for less than two years period to their marriage. More recent and more representative data suggest that this pattern continued for some time: in the 1960s half of all women who engaged in premarital sex did so with their fiancés. By the mid-1980s, this proportion had fallen to less than a fourth.

Many people recall the transformation in sexual behavior that took place in the 1970s, but they may well have forgotten the rapidity of that change. In 1969 the overwhelming majority of Americans—almost 70 percent—agreed that having sex before marriage was wrong; three out of four agreed that magazine photos of nudes were objectionable; and more than four out of five agreed that nudity in a Broadway show (for example, "Hair" or "Oh! Calcutta") was unacceptable. A mere four years later, only traces of these values remained: the percentages of Americans who objected to premarital sex and to nudes in magazines had both dropped an astonishing twenty points, and the percentage of those who objected to nudity on the stage had dropped eighteen points. Similarly, a Roper poll conducted in 1969 found that only 20 percent of the public approved of premarital sex; four years later, the respondents were equally divided on the issue. The General Social Survey conducted by researchers at the University of Chicago asked the question in a slightly different way: in 1972 it found that only 26 percent of the public thought premarital sex was "not wrong at all"; but a decade later this figure had jumped to 40 percent, while the percentage of those who said it was "almost always wrong" had correspondingly declined.

Not surprisingly, as more and more people engaged in premarital sex or extramarital sex (after being divorced, separated, or widowed), it became increasingly difficult to claim that sexual activity should be limited to adults. By what logic could sex be declared taboo for the young? And how young was too young? This created a genuine dilemma. In 1969 the rules about sex were clear, even if they were often ignored in practice. Sex was for married people, and if society sometimes turned a blind eye to sex between unmar-

ried partners, it did so only for those who had attained or were close to attaining legal adulthood. Minors, unless they were deemed mature or emancipated, could not obtain contraception, and in most states "minors" included everyone under twenty-one. Moreover, under the age-of-consent laws that were in force in many states, young women could not legally consent to have sex. In challenging these rules in the courts and in Congress, advocates had been successful in claiming that teenagers had a right to contraception, and therefore a right to have sex. But the new concept of rights for teenagers created a "bright-line" problem. Once adults accepted that unmarried people could have sex and that teenagers had a right to contraception, by what logic was an unmarried thirteen-year-old too young to have sex? What bright line separated the too young from the old enough? The category "teenagers" or "adolescents" included people who were barely out of childhood as well as people who were legal adults. And if teenagers had rights, why not even younger people?

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These changes in the statistics, dramatic though they are, do not begin to capture the extent of the transformation that has actually taken place in teenagers' sexual behavior. For example, we tend to speak of their involvement in "premarital sex," and this is technically correct: today 96 percent of American teenagers have sex before they get married. But this is not the "engagement sex" that young women allowed themselves in the 1950s. Now teenagers are sexually active whether or not they have immediate plans to marry. And for reasons that no one fully understands, Americans of all ages are retreating from marriage. As a result, many of the teenagers who are engaging in sex and having babies are doing exactly what teenagers did in the 1950s, but the nontrivial change is that they are doing so without the benefit of wedlock.

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Public-opinion polls, when read carefully, suggest that adults have complex preferences about the best way to deal with sexual activity among teenagers. Most adults don't want teens to be sexually active, but for a surprisingly long time they have agreed that teenagers who *are* sexually active should have access to birth control information and contraceptives. Most have also long favored providing sex education in the schools, but they are remarkably skeptical about its ability to curtail sexual activity or pregnancy among teenagers. They disapprove of unmarried teenage mothers and consider them

a source of social problems, but a majority are strongly in favor of laws that require parental approval before a teenager can have an abortion. In fact, about 40 percent of Americans think that a young woman should not be permitted to have an abortion even if pregnancy would cause her to drop out of school. In short, most adults seem to have a clear first choice—namely, that teens should not have sex. At the same time, a large majority of them support contraceptive and sex education programs for teens, a fact that suggests they doubt they will get their first choice. . . .

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Today's parents want to protect their children from the myriad dangers—seen and unseen, life-threatening and emotionally bruising—that sex entails these days. And they want to set their own timetable, so that they themselves can decide when their children are old enough to have sex. Often parents find it difficult to allow a child to be sexually active while he or she is still living as a dependent under their roof. Yet the point at which many parents consider a child old enough to be sexually active—whether they define it as when the child marries, or moves out of the parental home, or becomes self-supporting—is occurring ever later in American life, due to societal and economic changes over which individuals have minimal control. Except for the relatively few people who think that sex outside marriage is always wrong (and whose problem is chiefly one of finding a way to promulgate their values in an unsympathetic society), Americans have numerous questions relating to teenagers' sexual behavior. Should teens be sexually active? At what age? With whom? How are parents to encourage the use of contraception without seeming to push a teenager into having sex before he or she is ready? How can individuals reconcile their antipathy toward abortion with their desire to see fewer children born out of wedlock? In short, the contradictions inherent in teenagers' sexual activity make it hard for adults to give a clear, precise, and unambiguous message to today's young people.

Teenagers, however, are simply the most visible aspect of a far larger problem. Nowhere has public or private life caught up with the sexual revolution of the 1970s, and most Americans do not yet fully appreciate how far-reaching the changes really were. Now that sex seems to have been permanently disconnected from marriage (or as permanently as anything ever is in social life), private citizens as well as policymakers must grapple with a host of legal, ethical, medical, and social issues. Teenagers are a focus of anxiety because so many of them are participating in the new world of sexual freedom and because most adults are (often rightly) doubtful about the skills

and resources these young people possess. The challenge facing parents is to find a way to protect their children and their children's children without making unrealistic or impractical demands, yet still maintain some authority over them. As a consequence, public attitudes toward teenagers' sexual activity are an awkward amalgam of attempts to come to terms with vague fears and a sense that young people are out of control. . . .

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THE REPRODUCTIVE REVOLUTION

Teenagers are not only the most visible exponents of new patterns of sexual behavior but are participating in innovative family structures whose long-term effects are still uncertain. These structures—which have received less attention than the changing sexual mores but which may have even more significance for American society—call into question the relationship between childbearing and marriage. For an increasing number of Americans (and Europeans, for that matter), having and raising a child no longer takes place exclusively within marriage. Demographers have estimated that if present trends continue, an astonishing 50 percent of all American children will spend at least part of their childhood in a single-parent family. In the early 1990s, slightly more than half of these children were being raised by one parent as a result of divorce, but the rest had been born to unmarried mothers.

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That women of all ages are more willing to bear children out of wedlock is usually attributed to the fact that illegitimacy has lost its stigma. This explanation is certainly true. Public attitudes toward what colonial Americans called bastardy have changed dramatically in a relatively short time. In 1970 only about one American in ten thought that childbearing outside marriage should be legal, but four years later that percentage had more than doubled, to 25 percent. By 1985 the figure had risen to 40 percent. Although a majority of Americans still oppose out-of-wedlock childbearing, opinion shifts of this magnitude can truly be called revolutionary.

But these data tell only half the story. It used to be that, for an unmarried woman, becoming pregnant was "a fate worse than death." We can get some idea of what the old days were like, and of how radically society has changed, if we look at media reports from the late 1960s and early 1970s. Neither those

who wrote about unmarried mothers nor the unmarried women themselves questioned the belief that having a baby out of wedlock was very wrong. In 1965 *Time* magazine ran a story revealing just how stigmatizing illegitimacy was: a New York Court of Claims had permitted a child to sue for damages resulting from "the mental anguish of being born a bastard." In 1966 a journalist writing in *Ebony*, a magazine aimed at black readers, noted: "In the pecking order of America, unwed mothers are perhaps the most despised minority. They are the targets of abuse from legislators bent on punishing them. They are the scapegoats of moralists decrying an alleged lapse in public morality. They are the butt of jokes by school children and adults." In 1968 a young woman wrote: "I'm a teenager who has made a big mistake. I am pregnant. I'm not proud of what I've done and I hope and pray other teenagers will read my letter, wake up, and start to lead a good, clean life. . . ."

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Social scientists may eventually understand fully why attitudes toward sex and marriage changed so profoundly. Whatever the mechanisms, in less than a decade a shameful condition was transformed into a personal choice. The rise of the women's movement, the sexual revolution, the greater availability of abortion (which made out-of-wedlock childbearing truly a choice), and the increasing fragility of marriage all no doubt contributed to the astonishing shift in the social meaning of illegitimacy.

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THE ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN LIFE

The fact that the public accepts out-of-wedlock births among older, affluent, white women but deplors them among young, poor, minority women is intimately tied to a third profound change in the lives of Americans—namely, the decline of American economic power and of middle-class affluence.

Today's young Americans are the first generation in living memory who face the prospect of doing less well economically over their lifetimes than did their parents. In recent years the gap between the well-to-do and the poor has grown: the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. Economists use various measures to estimate the distribution of income, and