

Sex and the Underclass: Pregnancy and Poverty

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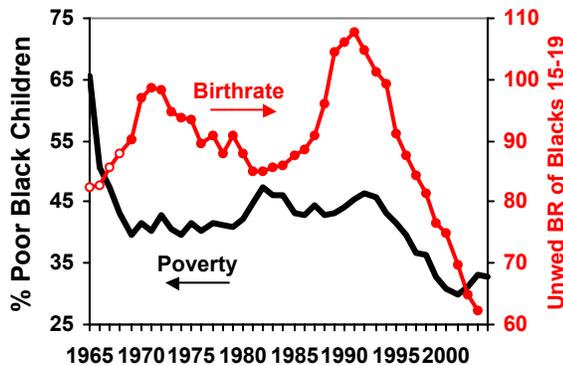
Janice Shaw Crouse, Ph.D.

Liberals, progressives, feminists and welfare advocates have long believed that the road to eliminate poverty was lined with abortions and higher welfare benefits. Indeed, there is no surer route to poverty than for an unmarried teenager to get pregnant and drop out of high school (which is assumed to happen either because the low-quality public education in her poor neighborhood failed to adequately explain sex and demonstrate contraception to her or because poverty drove her to this end). Ultimately, from the liberal point of view, only two options are available to avoid inflicting the hardship of poverty on her child: She must terminate the pregnancy or she must acquire the government funds needed for the necessities of life for herself and her child. That is to say, she needs to be able to obtain a federally approved *abortion* or a federally provided *income*.

exacerbated there by limited job opportunities for the fathers (as well as the mothers) due to racial discrimination combined with the perils of easy money — in the short run, of dealing drugs. This is the prevailing indisputable “truth” among the experts who study poverty.

At this point we do well to pause and consider the old axiom: It’s not what we don’t know that’s the problem, but what we think we know for sure that “just ain’t so.” Experience has shown that the relationship between unwed teen pregnancy and poverty is a lot more complicated than the scenario just described. Moreover, the correct policy needed to break the vicious cycle between unwed childbearing and poverty is anything but more government-funded abortion and income assistance. In Figure 1, we have the poverty rate of black children and the unwed-teen birth rate for black females 15-19.

Figure 1. Black Child Poverty and Unwed Teen Birthrate

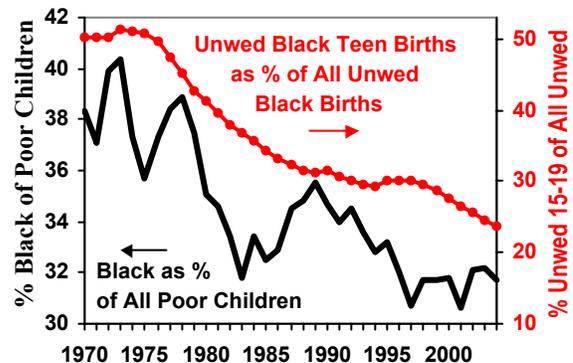


Source: National Center for Health Statistics, “Births: Final Data for 2003,” *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Vol. 54 (2), Sept. 2005 and U.S. Bureau of Census, “Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2004,” *Current Population Reports*, Series P60-229.

Two things stand out about these two trends. First, it is clear that, contrary to the old conventional (read liberal) wisdom, the trends in poverty and unwed childbearing have often moved in opposite directions. Second, since 1991 we have witnessed an unprecedented decrease in black unwed-teen childbearing: In 1991 the unwed birthrate for blacks was almost 108 per thousand, but by 2003 the rate had dropped to 62 per thousand.

This 42 percent drop did not occur because of an increase in the availability of abortions. Quite the contrary, to the dismay of

Figure 2. Black’s Share of Child Poverty and Black Unwed Teens’ Share of Unwed Black Births

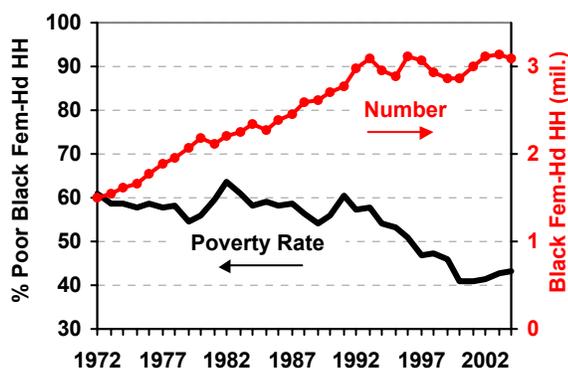


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For the liberal activists and progressive advocates, the existence of poverty and an underclass equates to an iron-clad demand — a moral imperative, if you will — for legal, government-funded abortion and/or generous income assistance (cash, food stamps, housing and medical care) provided, of course, by government. Thus, they hold that poverty leads, inevitably, to unwed teen childbearing for those young girls without any hope for a future and whose only compensation in life is the emotional benefit associated with having a child. But dropping out of high school and having a baby, to be sure, means more poverty, particularly among the “underclass” in black inner-city communities. This vicious cycle is further

Planned Parenthood, the number of abortion providers has been declining. The facts that explain this decline in the unwed black teen birthrate are completely contrary to the expectations of liberals; the Centers for Disease Control reported, “During 1991-2001, the percentage of U.S. high school students who ever had sexual intercourse and the percentage who had multiple sex partners decreased.” For black female teens, the percent ever having sexual intercourse dropped from 81 percent in 1991 to 61 percent in 2001, and the percent currently sexually active declined from 59 percent in 1991 to 47 percent in 2001.¹ With sexual activity of teens decreasing, *both* the abortion rate and the unwed-teen birthrate have decreased. Still, some die-hards persist in claiming that the abstinence message of self-control is unrealistic.

Figure 3. Black Female-Headed Households with Children



Source: U.S. Bureau of Census, “Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2004,” *Current Population Reports*, Series P60-229.

With the decline in the unwed black teen birthrate came a leveling off in the growth in the number of black female-headed households, a growth that heretofore had persisted for more than 20 years (Figure 3); the number of black female-headed families with children was the same in 2004 as it was in 1993. All during the 1970s and 1980s, the poverty rate of these single-mother households hovered around 60 percent, but with the sharp reductions in the unwed black teen birthrate in the 1990s, their poverty rate declined for 10 years to a historic low of less than 41 percent in 2001. Since the onset of the recession in 2001, the single-mother poverty rate has made a modest increase of only 2.6 percentage points.

As it turns out, it is the worldview of the liberals, progressives, feminists and welfare advocates that has proved to be unrealistic. The history of the 1970s and 1980s clearly contradicts the notion that there could ever be enough abortions and welfare benefits to counter the snowballing effects of irresponsible sexual behavior. Only as the message of abstinence’s promise of a hopeful future took hold did the tide begin to change. This was combined in the mid 1990s with a “realistic” welfare policy that ended public assistance as an entitlement and made it a temporary *lifeboat* rather than a permanent *lifestyle*.

When welfare benefits were limited to five years at a maximum (two years in many states), and when a child conceived during a welfare spell no longer meant a larger welfare check, the rolls declined by 60 percent. Note also in Figure 2, the resumption in the downward trend in unwed black teens’ share of all unwed black births with the adoption of welfare reform in 1996.

The expectation of and demand for responsible behavior — as opposed to the old liberal ideas that people are victims helplessly at the mercy of their environment — has brought a new day of hope to the lives of millions. With that hope has come greater personal responsibility and progress; despite the recession of the opening days of this decade, black child poverty is lower today than it ever was during the heyday of liberal social welfare policy in the 1970s and 1980s (Figure 1) and poor black children are a smaller percentage of all poor children than ever before (Figure 2).

With the rebirth of the American creed of personal responsibility and self-reliance, millions in the so-called “underclass,” millions of those written off by liberals as hopelessly in need of a government dole, have found jobs and are recovering the American dream of independence and self-respect. A true “realistic” worldview — one that sees us all as endowed by our Creator with the possibility of choosing what is right and good — has produced a hope for a new future for all those previously thought trapped by poverty.

¹ “Trends in Sexual Risk Behaviors Among High School Students — United States, 1991–2001.” *MMWR: Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. Vol. 51 (38); 856-859. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. September 27, 2002 <<http://www.cdc.gov/epo/mmwr/mmwr.html>>.

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