

The wages of illegitimacy

Disturbing report greeted by indifference

Unwed mothers set a record high for births. (Ho-hum.) For the first time in our history more than 1.3 million babies came into the world without fathers. (Eyes glaze over.)

In 1999, fully one-third of all babies were born to single mothers. (Wake us up when you have some news.)

These numbers in the final report on birth data by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) have been generally ignored by most newspapers. The Washington Post didn't mention the rise in illegitimacy in a six-paragraph story about the report. The Washington Times, the rare exception, put it on the front page.

Blacks, as usual, are hurt most. Of the 1.3 million illegitimate births, 69.1 percent were to black women, 42.2 percent to Hispanics, and 22.1 percent to non-Hispanic whites. There's a slight decrease for blacks and a slight

increase for whites and Hispanics. But no matter how you look at the why and wherefore, the numbers are spectacularly high.

The 4 percent increase in illegitimacy between 1997 and 1999 has generally been ignored or rationalized as insignificant because there has been a concurrent 3 percent growth rate in the population of unmarried women between the ages of 15 to 44 years. Hence a 4 percent increase in illegitimacy doesn't strike anybody as a big deal. We're supposed to regard it as just the accepted American way of families, just another life style choice.

Nevertheless, these statistics reflect rising personal and public

costs. A litany of woes stalk these children into adulthood, such as lower educational achievement, poor health and economic misery.

The taxpayers will pay for an array of bad things, ranging from poverty to prison. Most of all, this means that more sad and troubled kids will have no daddies to anchor them emotionally in their childhood. More boys will grow up without the loving attachment of a father to imitate, no big guy to teach them how to throw a baseball, arm wrestle, or solve a math



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problem. More girls will miss twirling to the salsa in Daddy's arms, waxing in his admiration of her new haircut, or learning a video game sitting next to him at a computer screen.

Feminism taught us that Mom can do almost anything Dad can do, some of them better than Dad, but she can't be Mom and Dad at the same time, and trying to raises the level of stress and reduces the patience of both mother and child. None of this is new. What is new is the blase public indifference.

Nobody, or almost nobody, wants to go back to the bad old days when a stigma was attached to unwed motherhood, but it wouldn't hurt to bring back a little embarrassment, if not shame; to call indifference to the decencies for what they are; Unwed motherhood is bad for a child's health, and it's not so good for Mom's health, either. Anyone squeamish about making a moral issue of it can call it dumb behavior. **A society that can transform the image of a smoker from chic fashion to social felony can make illegitimacy unacceptable.**

Teen-agers are getting the message that getting pregnant is not a good career move. The birth rate for teen-age mothers aged 15 to 19 is declining, although high at 49.6 births per 1,000 teen-age girls. Clearly fewer teen-age girls see pregnancy as a positive passage to womanhood.

The sexual revolution is recognized now as having done considerably more damage to the have-nots than to haves. Myron Magnet,

author of "The Dream and the Nightmare" and an intellectual guru for George W. Bush, observes that the legacy of the '60s counterculture victimized a generation of poor who locked themselves in a ghetto of indulgent behavior.

With the illumination of hindsight, we're less patronizing toward the poor than we used to be about the importance of personal responsibility. Welfare reform changed economic incentives. We no longer reward unwed mothers by giving them a bonus for every child they produce. Cultural attitudes are harder to turn around, but we've got to find a way to do it. We've got to make it big (and bad) news when a study tells us that we've hit a record of babies born without fathers. We've got to remember where we left the outrage.

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