

— Chapter 1 —

# The History of Teenage Childbearing as a Social Problem

A CENTURY FROM NOW, social and demographic historians may be pondering the question of why the topic of teenage childbearing suddenly became so prominent in America during the last several decades of the twentieth century. The issue emerged from social invisibility during the 1950s and early 1960s, when rates of childbearing among teens reached historical peaks, and rose to a level of public obsession just as rates of teenage childbearing began to plummet in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1995, in his State of the Union address, President Bill Clinton singled out teenage childbearing as “our most serious social problem.” When he issued this bit of hyperbole, the overall rate of teenage childbearing was barely more than half of what it had been several decades earlier, and even the rate of *nonmarital* childbearing among teenagers had begun a decline that has continued for more than a decade (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2007; Ventura, Mathews, and Hamilton 2001).

Clinton was not the first president to take note of the costs of early childbearing. Beginning with Jimmy Carter’s administration, every president since has put the issue high on his domestic agenda. Americans appear to agree with this emphasis. An advocacy group aimed at preventing teenage pregnancy, reporting on the results of a poll conducted in 1995, concluded that “the number one symptom of erosion in family cohesiveness is the spread of teenage pregnancy” (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy 1997, 1). According to the poll, more people were troubled by teenage pregnancy than by the growth of nonmarital childbearing in the

## 2 Destinies of the Disadvantaged

population. Most recently, a poll conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California revealed that more than two-fifths of those surveyed in the state regarded teenage pregnancy as a “big problem” in their community, and despite a sharp and steady drop in the rate of pregnancy and childbearing over the past fifteen years, nearly three out of four believed that the problem had been increasing or staying at the same level. Just one in eight Californians knew that early childbearing had been declining.

A veritable industry has grown up over the past several decades producing and disseminating information about teenage pregnancy and childbearing (Alan Guttmacher Institute 2006a; National Campaign to Prevent Teenage Pregnancy 1997). When I began my study on the consequences of early childbearing in 1965 in Baltimore, it was possible to read virtually *every* study that had ever been done on the subject by social scientists and medical researchers. “Teenage parenthood,” “adolescent mothers,” or similar terms to describe early childbearing were not even mentioned in the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature* or in any of the standard medical and social sciences indexes because the issue was simply absent from public discussion.

What an extraordinary contrast to today, when it is virtually impossible to read all the studies produced in a *single year*. Over the years, I have amassed an entire library of professional and popular books and articles on the topic, and no doubt it represents but a small fraction of the studies published on the subject. A recent search on Google of the term “teenage childbearing” yielded more than half a million references and counting.

How did the United States traverse from indifference to public concern to moral crisis in a matter of two or three decades? Was the political, policy, and public concern justified by the evidence? If not, why has the issue loomed so large on the public agenda? Will social historians be intrigued and mystified by our nation’s fixation on teenage childbearing, as they are with our other periodic bouts of moral concern, or will they regard the singular attention given to adolescent childbearing as plausible, if not self-evident? This book seeks answers to these questions, building on my own research over the past four decades as well as the considerable contributions of the social scientists and policy analysts who have thought about and studied the causes and consequences of early childbearing.

Of course, the answer I craft must confront a blend of “reality” drawn not only from demographic and social research but also from the popular perception promulgated by the media, political figures, and policy analysts from both the left and the right. Surely, no one could dispute that a dramatic transformation took place in patterns of family formation in the United States and elsewhere beginning in the 1960s. Whether this shift justified the intense focus on the perils of adolescent childbearing is another question altogether. Many of the apprehensions about the powerful and lasting consequences of early parenthood, I will show, have not been substantiated by social science research. But many policymakers and most Americans continue to believe that eliminating early childbearing would produce great dividends for young people, their families, and society at large. More importantly, many of the policies adopted to deter pregnancy and childbearing among young people or to ameliorate its effects may have made matters worse.

Let me be clear about my own position from the start. I do not contend that the issue has been merely contrived by social scientists and advocates, for either worthy or unworthy purposes. As with most other social problems, the public and private costs of early childbearing have a basis in reality; however, our response to the issue has both exaggerated these costs and produced remedies that are either ineffectual or counterproductive, mainly because the problem has come to signify something more than and something different from the reality of young couples having children before they may be fully prepared to enter parenthood. The causes and the consequences of early childbearing, I argue in this book, have been misunderstood, distorted, and exaggerated because they are refracted through a peculiarly American lens strongly tinted by our distinctive political culture.

I am not the only researcher to make this claim. Over the past several decades, a small cadre of feminist scholars, scholars of color, critical theorists, and some social scientists has taken note of how the issue of early childbearing stands for more than the simple proposition that bearing children at a very early age is problematic for young parents and their families (see, for example, the writings of Deborah Rhode, Constance Nathanson, Kristin Luker, and Arline Geronimus, among others who have prominently written about this issue). Our understanding of teenage childbearing was pervaded

## 4 Destinies of the Disadvantaged

from the start by a number of preconceptions about the type of women who are willing to bear children in their teens, the families who permit their teenage daughters to become pregnant, and the men who father the children of teenage women. It would not be an exaggeration to describe these beliefs as embodying a series of misunderstandings about the family lives of poor women, of single mothers, of minority males, and even of teenagers more generally. The race or ethnicity, social class, gender, and age of women who have children in their teens all figure into a bundle of American cultural beliefs that have dominated public discourse and social policies surrounding teenage parenthood, such as the assumptions that young women become mothers to receive welfare benefits, that teenage parenthood is the outcome of sexual promiscuity, or that teen mothers are typically irresponsible or indifferent parents (Banfield 1974; Luker 1996; Murray 1984; Nathanson 1991; Wilson 2002).

Any scholar who hopes to comprehend what teenage parenthood is all about must sift through a mountain of evidence on the impact of early childbearing on the lives of young parents and their children as well as take account of how these demographic and social facts have been shaped and interpreted by researchers, the media, politicians, policymakers, advocates, and the public at large. Ultimately, this task is often relegated to intellectual and social historians, but I would like to provide the contemporary perspective of someone who has been a participant-observer of sorts. As a researcher who has been drawn into policy discussions over the past several decades, I have been a player and a witness. Not for a moment would I claim that this double role removes me from my own set of values and preconceptions, which will become evident as I lay out my argument. Yet I do have the advantage (and probably sometimes the disadvantage) that comes with having been steeped in the subject for four decades (Furstenberg 2003).

I report on what the research tells us, though any summary of the literature admittedly involves sorting through studies with differing results. I am convinced that the evidence on the effects of early childbearing on the lives of teen parents and their children does not conform to what most politicians, policymakers, and concerned citizens believe about those effects. If my interpretation of the evidence is correct, it may account for why so many of our policies and prescriptions have been ill crafted, both to prevent early

childbearing and to ameliorate its apparent consequences. Indeed, I contend that many of the policies and programs not only miss the mark but have sometimes shot the body politic in the leg, making it harder to address the reasons why young people have children before they want to and often before they are prepared to assume the responsibilities of parenthood.

My conclusions are admittedly controversial, especially when many would argue that our current policies have succeeded in bringing about declining rates of teen childbearing over the past decade—or, depending on how you count it, the last several decades. I show that the drop in teenage childbearing is only loosely connected to many of the public policies that have been instituted in this country. Although we appear to be winning the battle, I argue in later chapters, we are doing so at the cost of losing the war. As happened with other social issues that experienced similar waves of public concern in earlier decades, such as high school dropout rates, gang violence and delinquency, and drug use, most of those concerned about early childbearing have focused myopically on the symptoms of the “disease” rather than on the underlying causes. But to state this thesis is a long way from demonstrating it, so let me turn to the specific contours of the case that I make in this book.

In this chapter and the next, I show why and how teenage childbearing came to stand for something that it is not: a primary explanation for why so many poor people, especially poor minorities, do not succeed in American society. I argue that instead of being a cause of such failure, it primarily represents a marker of marginality and inequality. In later chapters, I examine some of the policies and programs that were devised to curb early childbearing but that have not confronted the underlying problems. We are mainly telling teens to abstain from sex rather than preparing them to make responsible decisions about when, with whom, and why to engage in sex. We have exhorted teens to succeed in school without providing them with the means for doing so. We have changed the welfare system without greatly improving the lives of the families who previously used public assistance. Finally, we are promoting marriage without understanding why a growing share of the population will not or cannot marry. Our collective efforts to address these issues reveal at least as much about how

## 6 Destinies of the Disadvantaged

we think about poor minorities and their families as they do about our intentions to address the sources or effects of early childbearing.

### **THE NATURAL HISTORY OF A SOCIAL PROBLEM**

Long before the issue of teenage childbearing was placed on the hit parade of social problems, there was a subfield of sociology that examined how “deviant” behavior is socially organized, or as Émile Durkheim (1951) contends in his famous book *Suicide*, how it arises from the very nature of social life. Decades before critical theorists began to write about the importance of social and cultural constructions of reality, some social scientists were empirically examining the regularities in how crimes, deviance, and social problems are processed in different societies and cultures. They identified a set of stages in the “natural history” of response to moral concerns (Davis and Blake 1956; Fuller and Myers 1941; Waller 1936).

Simply stated, social problems arise when widespread infractions of social rules (or what used to be called mores) take place. Efforts to deter such behavior follow a course of identifiable phases. Accordingly, researchers must begin their efforts to understand why and how certain actions come to be perceived as deviant or abnormal by exploring the underlying set of standards that they offend. Similarly, social efforts to combat these offenses are themselves rooted in social understandings and arrangements that shape and constrain public response to these problems or efforts to solve them (Becker 1973; Bosk 2005; Gusfield 1963). By failing to take account of the cultural, social, and political values that frame problems and their solutions, we cannot understand why some issues attract attention, especially at particular historical moments, while other equally significant problems are ignored.

The social problems of drugs, alcohol consumption, crime and delinquency, sexual promiscuity, and a litany of other socially disapproved behaviors typically cycle through historical epochs, alternately placed high on the public agenda or relegated to social invisibility. Periods of tolerance or intolerance rise and fall depending on the public agenda. The issues are discovered and rediscovered, or occasionally redefined as normal or, at least, unavoidable. Some problems persist, and others disappear to be replaced by other

issues that appear to be more threatening. Habits change, social control diminishes problems, or public initiatives may reduce actions defined as deviant, unnatural, or dangerous.

Several decades ago, the economist Anthony Downs (1972) labeled this process an “issue attention cycle” during which politicians, policymakers and advocates, the media, and service providers and practitioners come to recognize, respond to, and shape policies and assess the effects of those policies. Attention rises from “social invisibility” in the “pre-problem stage” to a period of “alarmed discovery and euphoric excitement” when confidence about illuminating the problem is high. Next, as policymakers and the public come to recognize the costs of making significant progress, public interest wanes, and this gradual decline is a prelude to a twilight period when reformers confront social and political resistance. Finally, Downs identifies a post-problem stage of “lesser attention or spasmodic re-occurrence of interest.” Downs’s description nicely captures the history of teenage childbearing as a social problem.

## **TEENAGE CHILDBEARING IN THE PRE-PROBLEM STAGE**

Early childbearing has never been unusual in this country. From the colonial era onward, Americans have always had a distinctly early pattern of family formation, at least compared with Western European nations. There has been great variation over time and place in the age of first marriage and birth, but local birth records, registries, and census data show that a substantial proportion of teenagers became parents before they reached the age of majority (Carter and Glick 1976; Haines and Steckel 2000). Before the twentieth century, early childbearing occurred more frequently in parts of the South, in the border states, and on the western frontier than in the more settled and established sections of New England. Even in the Northeast, however, teen childbearing was not uncommon.

As I discuss in more detail in a later chapter, the timing of family formation is linked to the availability of economic opportunities (Easterlin 1985). When land was cheap and plentiful, Americans began childbearing earlier and had larger families. As resources became scarcer, marriage age rose, and so did the age of first birth. No doubt, the opportunities this nation generally afforded to new

## 8 Destinies of the Disadvantaged

settlers and immigrants encouraged the young to establish independence early, especially during earlier times when agriculture was the basis of the family economy.

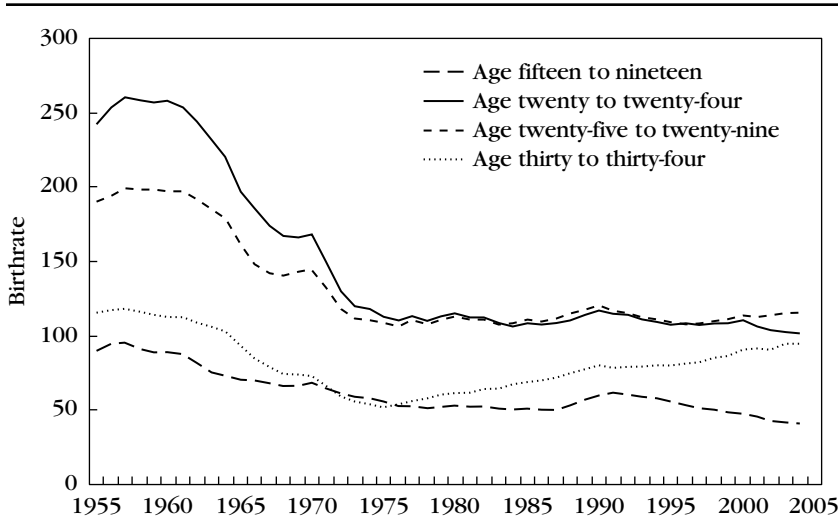
With the advent of industrialization, the availability of work continued to influence the timing of family formation. Young women worked in the factories, accumulating savings for marriage, while men tried to establish themselves in the new job economy (Hareven 1994). By 1900 the traditionally agricultural economy had been partially transformed, a process that would continue throughout the twentieth century. The timing of marriage and parenthood rose as the country moved from an agrarian to an industrialized nation with a market economy, declining in good times and rising when the economy was bad. Along with older women, teenagers curtailed their fertility during the Great Depression, and rates remained lower during the period leading up to World War II (Haines and Steckel 2000).

This pattern of relatively late family formation abruptly reversed in the postwar period for a complex set of reasons—postponement of family formation in the 1930s and after the outbreak of the war, unbridled optimism with the collapse of Germany and Japan after the Second World War, the hot economy of the 1950s, massive government expenditures on education and housing, and the strong cultural focus on the comforts of hearth and home (Cherlin 1981; Coontz 1992; May 1988). For teenagers, as for older women, this era became a time of domestic mass production. This is shown in figure 1.1, which depicts fertility rates for women of different ages. During the decades between 1955 and 1965, corresponding to the baby boom era, women of all ages began to produce more children. The rise of fertility among teens both led to and resulted from a wave of early marriage that began in the postwar period.

Beginning in the 1960s, American women abruptly shifted course. For women of all ages, childbearing declined significantly. However, young women did not curtail their fertility as quickly as did older women, nor perhaps did they react as swiftly to new economic realities affecting the family (Vinovskis 1988). Whatever signals were leading older women to defer or curb their fertility were not as apparent to teens, particularly teens of color. Demographers now have a pretty good idea of why young women were slower to respond than older women to the social and economic changes



**FIGURE 1.1 Birthrates Among American Women by Age, 1955 to 2004**



Source: 1955 to 1969: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1975); 1970 to 2004: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2006).

that depressed fertility. Teen childbearing was less often planned and hence less regulated by contraception. Moreover, in times past, an ill-timed pregnancy was routinely followed by marriage. However, in the 1960s, early marriage became increasingly difficult, and its swift demise created a painful dilemma for sexually active teenagers who became unintentionally pregnant.

Up until the 1960s, marriage and childbearing had been tightly linked. Researchers have documented relatively high rates of premarital pregnancy throughout American history (Bachu 1999; Cutright and Jaffe 1977; Smith and Hindus 1975). In agricultural communities and in the rapidly urbanizing cities, women often became pregnant in the anticipation that their partner would marry them. “Shotgun weddings” were an integral feature of the courtship system in America. Especially in the middle of the past century, pregnancy propelled many couples into marriage earlier than they otherwise might have wed. The fact that nearly half of all teenagers in the 1950s who married were pregnant at the time (O’Connell and Moore 1980)

## 10 Destinies of the Disadvantaged

helps to account for both the huge surge in marriage rates and the high rate of teenage parenthood during this era. Black women, as had long been true, were far more likely than whites to have children out-of-wedlock in the 1950s, although most of these women also married either the father or someone else.

Few observers today appreciate how common this pattern was in the past century (and in earlier times as well). As many sociologists in the 1950s and 1960s noted, early marriage was a way of managing the risks associated with premarital sexual activity (Vincent 1961). In many instances, it was women in committed relationships—either formally or informally engaged—who became pregnant. Typically in such cases, a premarital pregnancy merely moved up the timing of a wedding, but sometimes pregnancy led to the collapse of the relationship because one partner pulled out (Green 1941; Whyte 1943). A certain number of forsaken women were left scrambling to find an alternative solution when their partner, in the parlance of the 1950s, refused “to make an honest woman of them” (Vincent 1961).

The alternatives to marriage were not attractive. Illegal abortions were not uncommon, although in the absence of reliable data, we do not know just how prevalent they were. Certainly, among white women, adoption was the most popular remedy for those who were unwilling or unable to obtain abortions. Pregnant black women who did not marry were more likely to foster their children with extended family or friends. Thus, premarital pregnancy during the teenage years was socially managed, albeit imperfectly from a woman’s perspective. As the prominent sociologist Clark Vincent (1961, 251) noted in his book *Unmarried Mothers*, the shame inflicted on unwed mothers was designed to support marriage. In a prescient passage that could presage the culture wars, Vincent wrote: “The most vexing complex aspects of trying to decrease the incidence of illegitimacy are results of the contradiction between (a) providing deterrents and punishments that will discourage behavior that undermines legitimate family life, and (b) attempting to facilitate the rehabilitation of the unwed mother, and the development of the illegitimate child, into good and useful citizens.”

About the time Vincent completed his study of the veiled practices of unmarried mothers, signs were already evident, especially for teenagers, that these practiced ways of managing unplanned

parenthood were becoming less satisfactory. By the mid-1960s, as I have already reported, early marriage was on the wane. This was particularly true for African Americans and other disadvantaged minorities, for whom marriage was becoming a less tenable solution to an unplanned pregnancy. The surge of manufacturing jobs in the postwar era was coming to an end, and the premium on post-secondary education was growing. Minorities were also being affected by the flight of jobs from urban areas to the burgeoning lily-white suburbs as the postwar boom in housing altered the location of jobs (Wilson 1987, 1996).

Sociologists were discovering that early marriages, especially when preceded by a pregnancy, were highly prone to divorce (Weeks 1976). Women were beginning to learn from the experiences of their kin and community that marriage was not a good bet, particularly when their sexual partner was uneducated and underemployed, as was often the case among African Americans. As I show in the next chapter, there is little doubt that African American teen mothers were acutely aware of the risks of entering marriage. They were gradually moving toward a view—later adopted by teenage whites and older women in general—that single parenthood was at least as viable a solution to premarital pregnancy as was a hasty marriage or its alternatives (informal adoption or illegal abortion).

In part, their attitudes about nonmarital childbearing reflected a powerful shift of attitudes taking place in the nation as a whole: the stigma associated with premarital sex was on the decline. This change took root in the 1960s, a time when many traditional beliefs were being called into question (Smith 2000). It is difficult to underestimate the powerful role the media played in stimulating a national conversation about premarital sex. Beginning with the release of the first Kinsey report on men in 1948, and especially with the second report on females in 1953, an enormous amount of attention was devoted to the sexual practices of teenagers and young adults. Kinsey and his coauthors reported, whether entirely accurately or not, that premarital sex had long been common in the United States (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948; Kinsey 1953).

As Americans began to perceive that the general standards about sex were more relaxed than they had been led to believe, change in both attitudes and behavior began to snowball. The first nationally representative survey of teenage sexual behavior in the late 1960s

## 12 Destinies of the Disadvantaged

and early 1970s, conducted by Melvin Zelnik, John Kantner, and Kathleen Ford (1981), reinforced the findings of the Kinsey reports. Premarital sex was prevalent and rapidly becoming more so. For example, the proportion of teenagers who had ever had sex by age eighteen doubled from about one-fourth of all women born in the 1940s to more than half of women born two decades later (Finer 2007; Laumann et al. 1994).

Premarital sex, it seems, was becoming more common just as early marriage was becoming more problematic—a perfect formula for producing a rapid increase in rates of nonmarital pregnancies and births. From the 1940s onward, nonmarital childbearing climbed steadily for all age groups as nonmarital intercourse increased and contraceptive use lagged far behind. Among older women in their twenties and thirties, a pause in nonmarital childbearing took place in the 1960s and early 1970s, while among teens the pace of nonmarital childbearing picked up, driven by both more sexual risk-taking and fewer marriages (Ventura and Bachrach 2000).

### **WHY TEENAGE CHILDBEARING BECAME THE PROBLEM**

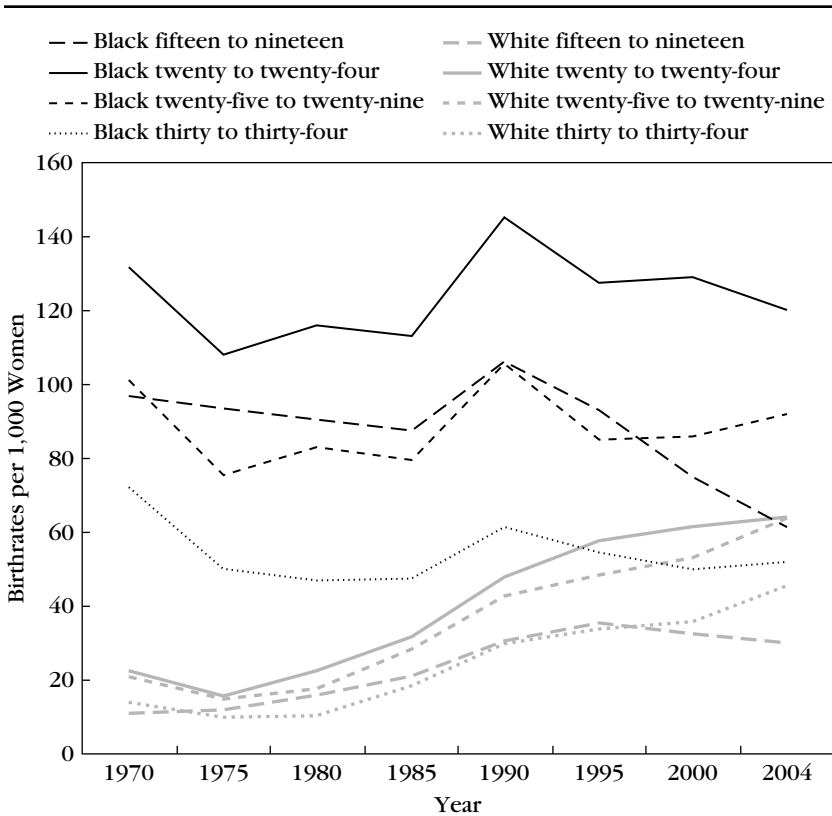
The demographic disparity created by a rising age of marriage plus the huge number of teens entering the population created by the baby boom first began to be noticed in the 1960s. To most observers, it appeared that teens were suddenly behaving differently from older women. Although unmarried women in their twenties and early thirties actually had a much higher rate of nonmarital births than those age fifteen to nineteen, what initially caught the attention of policymakers and the public was not the changing *rates* of nonmarital childbearing per thousand unmarried women, but the changing *ratio* of nonmarital births—the percentage of all births born to unmarried women. Among teens, this ratio skyrocketed as fewer teenagers married and hence had fewer marital births to offset the growing number of births to single women. Fewer teenagers were actually having children, but more of them who did were electing to have children outside of marriage, creating an increased demand for public assistance and other services for single mothers.

Of course, we know now that older women would follow suit in the last two decades of the century. However, because older women were still marrying in large numbers, it appeared for a time that nonmarital childbearing was reaching epidemic proportions among the young. In fact, the term “epidemic,” as some labeled it, was questionable, to say the least. Although a rhetorically effective way of garnering support for young mothers, the word created the impression that a huge wave of early childbearing was sweeping the country (Vinovskis 1988). Teenagers, in effect, were wrongly singled out as demographically deviant from the rest of the population.

African American teens in particular were identified as the main source of the problem because they were the vanguard of change in marriage practices. In fact, the issue of early childbearing was initially identified as a problem that mostly occurred among black teens. The reason why this perception appeared to be plausible is illustrated in figure 1.2, which shows the rate of births to unmarried women by age and race. Young black women were clearly ahead of white teenagers in patterns of family formation in the rise of nonmarital childbearing, but the exclusive focus on out-of-wedlock childbearing among younger teens was hardly warranted. For a time, it might have appeared that blacks generally and black teenagers specifically might be exhibiting a distinctively different set of family practices from the rest of the population. Young black women, in part because so many came from poor, single-parent households, became emblematic of a much more general change in family formation in the United States that was taking place. I concur with previous authors who contend that black teens were singled out and stereotyped unfairly, though clearly it is easier to see that now than it was at the time (Luker 1996; Nathanson 1991).

In 1965 a young assistant secretary of labor in the Johnson administration, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, helped to place the issue of teenage childbearing on the public agenda when he wrote a highly controversial report on the state of the black family in America. Speaking of blacks, Moynihan (1965, 27) stated: “A cycle is at work; too many children too early make it most difficult for parents to finish school. . . . Low education levels in turn produce low income levels, which deprive children of many opportunities, and so the cycle repeats itself.”

**FIGURE 1.2 Birthrates Among Unmarried American Women by Race and Age, 1970 to 2004**



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2000); author's compilation of national vital statistics data from 2000 to 2004.

Moynihan was incorrect in assuming that the growth of non-marital childbearing was confined largely to young black women. By the end of the twentieth century, it was evident that black women were only at the vanguard of a new pattern of family formation that was being rapidly adopted by all teens and eventually by older couples.

Although many left-leaning scholars excoriated Moynihan for singling out the disintegration of the black family, most accepted the proposition that teenage nonmarital childbearing came at a

great cost to adolescent parents, their children, and society at large (Rainwater and Yancey 1967). Shortly after the publication of the Moynihan report, interest in the issue grew, even from quarters critical of Moynihan's exclusive focus on the black family (Furstenberg 2007). Several years later, a highly respected demographer, Arthur Campbell (1968, 238), wrote his widely quoted assessment of the consequences of early childbearing for teenage mothers:

The girl who has an illegitimate child at the age of 16 suddenly has 90 percent of her life's script written for her. She will probably drop out of school; even if someone else in her family helps to take care of the baby, she will probably not be able to find a steady job that pays enough to provide for herself and her child; she may feel impelled to marry someone she might not otherwise have chosen. Her life choices are few, and most of them are bad.

Many advocates for the poor were understandably drawn to the issue, as there appeared to be a rapidly spreading acceptance of single parenthood in urban ghettos. Foremost among them were family planners and sex educators, who believed that the problem resulted from lack of access to contraception and legal restrictions on abortion. They saw the dilemma faced by teenagers as an urgent mission to expand reproductive health services to a population that had little knowledge of or access to reproductive health services. And they were surely right.

The Guttmacher Institute (formerly the Alan Guttmacher Institute, AGI), a research center devoted to reproductive health, led the charge, lobbying for expanded services for unmarried teens, subsidized with federal dollars. Their proposal for serving unmarried teens through the federally funded family planning clinics, considered by many at the time radical and highly controversial, was in fact quickly adopted in the late 1960s and early 1970s, wiping away many of the existing strictures against providing contraception to the young, the unmarried, and the poor.

In a series of reports and publications from the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, AGI blended alarming demographic data with dire predictions about the adverse consequences of early childbearing, drawing on the relatively primitive research of the time to advocate for funding not only for family planning and service programs to increase contraceptive use among teenagers but also for providing prenatal and postnatal assistance. Indeed, it was AGI that

## 16 Destinies of the Disadvantaged

created the impression that the United States faced an “epidemic” of teenage childbearing (Vinovskis 1988).

AGI bolstered its claim that United States policies were failing the teenage population by presenting a remarkable set of statistics highlighting the risks of pregnancy and childbearing. Perhaps the most dramatic were international comparisons showing that the United States, by a wide margin, had higher rates of pregnancy and childbearing than European nations and even other Anglophone nations, including Canada.

These international comparisons dramatically highlighted the problem in the United States, but they failed to take account of the early marriage pattern here, which greatly aggravated the issue. As I noted earlier, the United States had a long history of early family formation, especially compared with many of the nations from which our population emigrated. This pattern of early family formation created a quandary for young women as they began to back away from ill-timed marriages. The impression, however, that teenage childbearing was a growing problem because its incidence was rapidly increasing was misleading. The new problem—to the extent that one existed—stemmed not from more teenagers becoming pregnant, or teenagers having different views about nonmarital childbearing than older women, but from the declining desirability of marriage.

Advocates for reproductive health services rightly pointed to the need for reproductive services for sexually active teens, but they did so by focusing on the rapidly rising nonmarital birth ratio as well as the growing number of births to unmarried teens. By doing so, they created an impression that teenage childbearing was on the rise, obscuring the fact that marriage no longer provided the safety net that it once had when premarital pregnancy occurred. In fact, fewer teenagers were getting pregnant, but so many more remained single that teenage parenthood became synonymous with single parenthood. This helped to fashion a social stereotype of teenage mothers as socially deviant. In retrospect, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the issue of teenage childbearing was misunderstood from the start. At the very least, there was very little to distinguish the behavior of teens from that of older women, whose rates of unmarried childbearing had also been climbing and would continue to rise again after 1975. In hindsight, we can now see that there was little



reason to single out black women or other minorities, other than to note that they began to retreat from marriage earlier than white women did. Of course, it is easier to grasp these patterns now than it was at the time when they were emerging.

## **THE SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS**

The creation of teenage childbearing as a public issue had profound political and social consequences, stirring up a hornet's nest of loosely connected discussions about the acceptability of premarital sex, the provision of contraception to the young and unmarried, the ethics of legalizing abortion, the costs of providing public assistance to unmarried mothers, and the reasons for the declining attractiveness of adoption. These debates would continue through the rest of the century and indeed show few signs of disappearing in the immediate future.

The federal government during the Johnson, Nixon, and Carter administrations, with congressional support, funded both Title X, the legislation that funded reproductive health, and a wide array of assistance programs to struggling families and young mothers, including a large expansion of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).

In light of the critical response to these legislative initiatives in recent decades, it is difficult to assess their effectiveness in addressing the growing tide of nonmarital childbearing. It was not obvious to social demographers at the time just how massive the retreat was from early marriage. Some critics, none more influential than Charles Murray, subsequently blamed the array of supports put in place to address the problem for actually increasing the problem. Murray (1984) claimed that the growth of public assistance created a disincentive to marry; others argued that service programs that aided teenage parents would enable young mothers to have children; and many critics of family planning services for the unmarried have contended that they promote sexual promiscuity and risk-taking (Sklar and Berkov 1974). I assess the empirical evidence on the validity of these arguments in later chapters. For now, one need only recognize that public policy aimed at preventing teenage childbearing and reducing its adverse consequences has from its very inception been contentious in the American context,

## 18 Destinies of the Disadvantaged

especially when compared with the political reaction of most other Western nations.

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, contraception became more widely available to teenagers, although its effect on reducing early childbearing was not immediately apparent. For one reason, sexual activity among teens was growing faster than were family planning services, creating an ever-larger pool of teenagers at risk of becoming pregnant. In addition, the methods first available to teens, such as oral contraceptives, the diaphragm, and intrauterine devices, were not easy to use and were often accompanied by annoying and frightening side effects. Because both sex and contraceptive use among teens remained controversial, many young women were not comfortable with the empowerment or responsibility of managing their sexual life, a topic explored in chapter 4. Moreover, until the advent of HIV/AIDS, responsibility fell primarily to women to enforce contraceptive use, a circumstance that frequently led to miscommunication or no communication at all. Many studies, including my own in Baltimore, indicated that merely making birth control more available without actively promoting its practice was an insufficient strategy to cut deeply into the incidence of early and unplanned pregnancies.

Neither did the change in abortion policies, which began in the late 1960s and culminated in *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion, seem to have much effect on the rate of early childbearing. The use of abortion among teenagers rose rapidly in the decade after legalization. From 1973, the ratio of abortions to live births rose from 280 per 1,000 to 462 in 1985, before descending. There is some evidence that abortion policies may have initially reduced early childbearing in the 1970s. Increases in nonmarital birthrates among teenagers (and even more so among older women) slowed in the mid-1970s (and dropped sharply for women in their twenties and thirties). Among black teens, the unmarried birthrate actually dropped during this decade (Ventura and Bachrach 2000). The decline, however, was offset by a rising rate of unmarried births among white teens. (Separate data for Hispanic youth are unavailable until the 1990s.)

The increase in abortion, however, generated a maelstrom of opposition, creating the pro-life movement and its allies. Abortion's availability, it was also argued, encouraged teens to have sex without

worrying about the consequences. In the American context, this argument seemed to resonate with a wary public, even among those who favored abortion rights. No sooner had abortion been made widely available than opponents began to create legal and social barriers to abortions in many parts of the country. These obstacles were especially directed at teenagers, who faced a series of special regulations such as parental consent. As legal barriers and political measures began to shrink access to abortion, nonmarital childbearing rates would resume their steep rise in the 1980s. Even before these restrictions were imposed, however, substantial numbers of women were reluctant to seek abortion because they held scruples against terminating an ill-timed pregnancy. Clearly, abortion, even if it was tolerated politically, did not have as dramatic or immediate an effect as might have been expected by its most optimistic proponents.

The option of adoption also provided no easy solution to managing the growing rates of nonmarital childbearing. Among African Americans, a public market for adoption had never existed. In any case, African Americans generally disapproved of adoption unless it was a matter of fostering children temporarily or permanently with kin or close friends. As nonmarital childbearing began to become more prevalent among whites, they too began to back away from adoption. As the century progressed, white teens became almost as reluctant as black teens to elect adoption over its alternative, single parenthood.

## **SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCHERS ARE MOBILIZED**

These policies and the advocacy for special services for teenage women, their partners, and offspring were aided by an army of social scientists who began to study the causes and consequences of early childbearing. This flood of research was initially underwritten by government funding agencies and private foundations in the belief that by curbing teenage parenthood, they could make a significant dent in poverty and inequality. In effect, they subscribed to the thesis that Arthur Campbell and many other social scientists first articulated in the 1960s and 1970s—that teenage parenthood has devastating consequences for young mothers and their families.

I take up this thesis in the following chapter when I argue that the early social science evidence greatly exaggerated the impact of early childbearing on mothers, and probably its impact on their offspring as well.

Yet, as I have mentioned, the picture from social science research appears far clearer in hindsight than it did when the trends in fertility first emerged. I am not contending that social scientists or the advocates who relied on their research knowingly misled the public to gain support for their initiatives. To the contrary, the social science evidence initially appeared to be quite compelling, albeit for reasons that now seem suspect.

From the perspective of the 1960s and 1970s, however, when teenage childbearing was first discovered as a social problem, few observers recognized the commonalities in the circumstances of teens and older women (Luker 1996). Indeed, it appeared as though teenagers, especially black teenagers, were adopting a “deviant” lifestyle, owing to unemployment, family instability, and distinctive sexual practices. Programs initiated in the era of the Great Society shaped the early wave of response to the issue, although many of these policies were questioned during the Nixon and Carter presidencies. As it became more apparent that such behaviors were not confined to black teens, commentators expanded their definition of the problem, seeking other justifications for curbing childbearing among teens. As the political climate shifted sharply to the right, teenage childbearing was put to a variety of political uses to justify and advance the conservative agenda.

### **TEENAGE CHILDBEARING AND POLITICAL BACKLASH**

When teenage childbearing was first identified as a social problem in the era of the Great Society, much of the general public believed that it was possible to eradicate poverty through government action. Responses to the issue focused largely on the need to provide preventive and ameliorative services to young mothers and their children. This sympathetic reaction was all but abandoned in the Reagan years of the 1980s, when criticism of these initiatives became widespread in the body politic.

Conservatives and liberals alike agreed on the demographic dimensions of the problem, but they differed sharply on its etiology and on prescriptions for reducing it. The difference can be summed up easily. What liberals argued were the prescriptions for dealing with the problem, conservatives argued had created the problem in the first place.

The unfavorable international comparisons mentioned earlier began to be used against the advocates as conservative critics countered that American teenagers were behaving less responsibly by having sex before they were ready and then seeking abortions as a remedy or turning to the welfare system for support when they elected to bring their pregnancies to term. Unmarried teenage mothers on public assistance became the poster children for spending reductions. Regardless of whether the conservative claims were valid, these arguments struck a sympathetic nerve among politicians and taxpayers, who felt overburdened by the costs of the Great Society programs that had initially been developed in a period of economic abundance. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War and in the lengthy period of stagflation that began during the oil crisis of the 1970s, the Reagan and Bush administrations in the 1980s and early 1990s believed that they had a political mandate to cut back on social welfare spending. Reducing teen childbearing seemed to be a logical means to cutting back on welfare expenditures.

Paradoxically, the curtailment of government spending for social services occurred at the same time as an uptick in the rate of nonmarital childbearing for black teens, whose rates had been declining in the early 1970s; however, beginning in the early 1980s, nonmarital birthrates reversed course. Among whites, nonmarital childbearing had steadily risen in the 1970s, but its pace accelerated throughout the 1980s (see figure 1.2). The cutbacks in services and the rising rates of nonmarital childbearing among women of all ages might be unrelated, but the withdrawal of preventive and ameliorative services was not warranted by the demographic evidence at the time. As I have already said, the driving force in the changing patterns of early childbearing was the retreat from early marriage. It might be said that poor economic conditions in this country and elsewhere were hastening this trend, as fewer young couples felt able to enter marriage regardless of whether they were facing impending parenthood.

## 22 Destinies of the Disadvantaged

It also seems likely that as restrictions on abortion grew in the 1980s, more pregnant women, and unmarried teens especially, became parents who might have terminated their pregnancies had they been given the opportunity to do so. Clearly too, the declining levels of welfare support and social services did little or nothing to discourage sexual activity among teens, which continued to rise throughout the 1980s as a growing number of white adolescents began to have sex without being well prepared to assume the consequences. Whatever the source of the rise in nonmarital childbearing among teens and older women, the heated political debates of the 1980s did little to curb the trend.

Again, it is important to note that marital fertility was also declining throughout this entire period, albeit at a much slower pace than between 1960 and 1975, when couples first began to postpone marriage. This twin trend of declining marital fertility and rising nonmarital fertility had a dramatic effect on the proportion of women, especially teenagers, who gave birth to a child out of wedlock. For reasons that are still incompletely understood, the steep rise in out-of-wedlock childbearing during the 1980s abruptly reversed course in the 1990s. Among older women, nonmarital childbearing merely settled or slightly declined, but among teens rates fell steeply and steadily throughout the decade, and they continued to fall in the early years of the current century (Ventura and Bachrach 2000; Ventura, Mathews, and Hamilton 2001). During the past decade and a half, sexual activity among teenagers peaked and then declined somewhat, perhaps in response to growing public disapproval and also, no doubt, because of a rising fear of HIV/AIDS.

Condom use rose from the late 1980s onward. Also, during the past two decades new and more effective methods of contraception have been introduced, as well as methods of disrupting conception, obviating the need for later-term abortions. In addition, the booming economy of the 1990s may have contributed to enhanced resolve among teens to complete high school. Finally, many argue that welfare reform in 1996 prompted teens to defer parenthood. In later chapters, I assess these claims and sort out the reasons for the recent decline in early childbearing. Although the phenomenon has not gone away, it may now be entering a twilight period when it is being reconsidered as a major social problem. Eventually, I believe,

teenage childbearing will probably recede into the shadows of public attention.

This much is already clear about the so-called epidemic of teenage childbearing. First, the problem was initially misunderstood by social scientists, misused by advocates and social critics, and misunderstood by the body politic. Second, there is no evidence to support the belief that the problem occurred because more teens were “deciding” to have children in the period after 1965. Total birthrates among teenagers fell steadily throughout the time when teenage childbearing was becoming a public issue. Teens, especially black teens, switched from having marital to non-marital births, a troubling development to be sure, but this pattern quickly was adopted by older women as well. It seems that teenagers were merely at the forefront of a trend away from early marriage and “shotgun weddings”—a term that has become all but obsolete.

Whether teenagers deserved the focus of public attention that they received for contributing to the “breakdown of the family” by having babies before they were ready to marry is addressed in the next two chapters, where I discuss whether and how much early childbearing contributes to adversity for young mothers, the men who father their children, and especially their offspring.