

Race Differences in Teenage Sexuality, Pregnancy, and Adolescent Childbearing

FRANK F. FURSTENBERG, Jr.

University of Pennsylvania

LATE IN 1986 THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF Sciences (NAS) released the report of a special scientific panel established to review and evaluate existing research on the causes and consequences of adolescent pregnancy and childbearing (Hayes 1987). The panel, consisting of social scientists and health professionals, had been given the charge of drawing lessons for public policy from the massive research literature on teenage fertility. One of the issues discussed by the panel was the extent to which teenage parenthood is perceived and defined as largely a problem among blacks.

The panel's report was exceedingly cautious in addressing the question of whether and how early childbearing is linked to racial status. In the executive summary, which provides a digest of the major findings and recommendations, no mention is made of race whatsoever. In the body of the report, racial differences in patterns of sex, pregnancy, and childbearing among adolescents are frequently documented, but the panel refrains, as is evident in the passage cited below, from interpreting the meaning of black/white differences.

Race differences in patterns of early sexual activity and fertility are dramatic, yet disagreement exists over the source of these differences: some attribute the disparity wholly or in large part to socioeconomic differences among blacks and whites; others maintain that differences in the acceptability of early nonmarital sexual activity, pregnancy, and parenthood account for the difference. Research has yet to

resolve the debate, for in many cases it has failed to ask the right questions.

In the face of limited evidence, the NAS panel was reluctant to draw any conclusions about the complex causal chain between race, socioeconomic status, perceived life options, and strategies of family formation. Instead, they made an urgent plea for additional research on the question of whether racial differences in teenage fertility reflect "deep-seated subgroup values or more transient attitudinal adjustments to external circumstances."

The wariness of the experts sharply contrasts with opinions often voiced by social commentators, journalists, policy makers, and some politicians who portray teen pregnancy and childbearing as a black problem. In the year or so preceding the publication of *Risking the Future*, the NAS report, a large number of articles and stories appeared that clearly implied that teenage childbearing principally afflicts blacks and must be solved by reducing the susceptibility of black youth to sexual activity, pregnancy, and childbearing.

Just after the NAS report was released an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* (1986) declared:

After spending \$600,000 given by five foundations, the National Academy of Sciences has concluded that virtually no known public policy can contain the surge in *black* teenage pregnancy. . . . Nonetheless this study of sex and pregnancy among *black* teenagers by a prominent group of U.S. social scientists deserves attention and discussion.

In a reply to this comment, the chair of the panel, Daniel Federman, in noting the *Journal's* assertion that teen pregnancy was a black problem, pointed out that the panel did not subscribe to this view. But this mismatch in communication shows how deeply imprinted in the public mind is the notion that teenage parenthood is largely confined to blacks.

This article reconsiders the evidence on the link between race and teen childbearing in hopes of resolving the seeming wide discrepancy between scholarly and popular perception. The data presented here mostly come from secondary sources, though I will occasionally introduce evidence from several studies that I have conducted. (For an excellent summary of the research evidence and an intelligent discussion of

racial differences in teen childbearing, see Moore, Simms, and Betsey 1986.) My main objective will be in interpreting, in some instances reinterpreting, available data that address the origins of racial differences in rates of pregnancy and childbearing and provide possible explanations of these differences. As one of the members of the NAS panel, I am obviously sympathetic with the caution exercised in *Risking the Future*. In this article, however, I am prepared to be more speculative about the sources of racial differences and the implications for public policy.

The first part of the article discusses demographic and survey data on black/white differences in patterns of intercourse, contraceptive use, pregnancy and resolution of pregnancy, and marital and nonmarital childbearing. The following section reviews the varying consequences of pregnancy and childbearing for whites and blacks. The final part takes up interventions and their potential effect on diminishing racial differences in premature parenthood.

Race Differences in Sexuality, Pregnancy, and Childbearing

It has often been noted that rates of teenage childbearing are the product of the rates of sexual activity, the risk of conception, and different strategies used for resolving a pregnancy (Cutright 1972). Consequently, racial differences can be produced by any or all of these components. In fact, differences occur among blacks and whites at each stage of the process, complicating our task of explaining racial disparities in the rate of teenage parenthood.

Overall, as is recorded in table 1, sizable differences exist in the rate of both marital and nonmarital childbearing between black and white teenagers. In the group aged 15 to 19, the total birthrate of blacks is somewhat more than twice as high as the rate for whites—a ratio that has been reasonably constant over the past several decades during which teenage fertility has dropped by more than 40 percent. The more revealing statistic, also displayed in table 1, is the rate of nonmarital fertility which has risen by 100 percent since 1955. For white teens, out-of-wedlock rates have more than tripled while for blacks they have climbed only 12 percent. Black nonmarital fertility among teens in 1984 is still 4.6 times higher than for whites—a steep decline from the 12.9:1 ratio that existed in 1955, but a sizable

TABLE 1
Adolescent Fertility by Race, 1955–1984

Age/Race	1955	1960	1970	1980	1983	1984
Number of births (in thousands)						
15–19						
Total**	484	587	645	552	489	470
White	373	459	464	388	338	321
Black	111*	129*	172	150	137	134
18–19						
Total	334	405	421	354	317	303
White	269	329	320	260	229	216
Black	65*	76*	95	84	79	77
15–17						
Total	150	182	224	198	173	167
White	104	130	144	128	110	105
Black	46*	53*	77	66	58	57
<15						
Total	6	7	12	10	10	10
White	2	3	4	4	4	4
Black	4*	4*	7	6	5	6
Birthrates (per thousand women)						
15–19						
Total	90.3	89.1	68.3	53.0	51.7	50.9
White	79.1	79.4	57.4	44.7	43.6	42.5
Black	167.2*	156.1*	147.7	100.0	95.5	95.7
18–19						
Total	—	—	114.7	82.1	78.1	78.3
White	—	—	101.5	72.1	68.3	68.1
Black	—	—	204.9	138.8	130.4	132.0
15–17						
Total	—	—	38.8	32.5	32.0	31.1
White	—	—	29.2	25.2	24.8	23.9
Black	—	—	101.4	73.6	70.1	69.7
10–14						
Total	0.9	0.8	1.2	1.1	1.1	1.2
White	0.3	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.6	.6
Black	4.8*	4.3*	5.2	4.3	4.1	4.3

TABLE 1—Continued

Age/Race	1955	1960	1970	1980	1983	1984
Rates of out-of-wedlock births (per thousand unmarried women)						
15-19						
Total	15.1	15.3	22.4	27.6	29.8	30.2
White	6.0	6.6	10.9	16.2	18.5	19.0
Black	77.6*	76.5*	96.9	89.2	86.4	87.1
Ratios of out-of-wedlock births (per thousand births)						
15-19						
Total	143	148	295	476	534	556
White	64	72	171	330	391	415
Black	407*	421*	628	851	883	891
18-19						
Total	102	107	224	398	457	481
White	49	54	135	270	323	349
Black	324*	337*	521	792	835	848
15-17						
Total	232	240	430	615	676	692
White	102	116	252	452	527	552
Black	524*	543*	760	928	948	950
<15						
Total	663	679	808	887	904	910
White	421	475	579	754	799	807
Black	801*	822*	935	985	984	985

* Includes all nonwhites, not only blacks

** All totals include all nonwhites, which is somewhat more than the sum of whites plus blacks.

Sources: Moore, Simms, and Betsey 1986; National Institute of Child and Human Development 1984; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1984; National Center for Health Statistics 1985, 1986.

differential nonetheless (National Center for Health Statistics 1986). Were we to confine these comparisons to the group of teens under age 18, who are the greatest source of public concern, the trends described above of diminishing racial differences over time would stand, but the persisting racial differences would be somewhat greater—close to 5 times as high for young unmarried blacks as young unmarried whites.

Thus, the complexion of teen childbearing has changed dramatically in the past thirty years. A growing proportion of teen mothers are unmarried. Whites increasingly, especially those under the age of 18, are having out-of-wedlock births, following what was at midcentury predominantly a black pattern. Childbearing was almost an exclusive problem for unmarried black youth a generation ago; today, it has become a problem for whites as well. In 1955, 71 percent of all unmarried mothers below the age of 18 were black; in 1984, their proportion had dropped to 45 percent.

Dramatic as these changes are, unmarried blacks are still five times as likely to become mothers before age 18 than whites. Or, to put it in more comprehensible terms, approximately a quarter of all unmarried blacks will have a child by age 18 compared to about one in twenty whites. Thus, teenage childbearing still remains a far more serious problem for blacks than whites.

Patterns of Sexual Activity

A closer look at the process of unwed parenthood is instructive for revealing why these racial differences persist. A series of studies in the 1970s carried out by Zelnik and Kantner (Zelnik, Kantner, and Ford 1981; Zelnik and Kantner 1980; Zelnik and Shah 1983) uncovered sharp differences in the timing and prevalence of intercourse among blacks and whites. In 1971 unmarried black females living in metropolitan areas were almost three times as likely to engage in intercourse by age 15 as whites (31 percent vs. 11 percent); by 1979 this ratio had dropped to about 2 to 1 (41 percent vs. 18 percent). Several surveys carried out in the early 1980s reveal similar race differences (Hofferth and Hayes 1987). Apparently, the incidence of sexual activity at early ages has leveled off or even slightly declined, but black females continue to initiate intercourse earlier than whites.

Many social scientists believe that these racial patterns are spurious and actually represent socioeconomic differences. The few efforts testing this interpretation suggest that it is only partially supported by empirical evidence. The NAS panel commissioned a series of special analyses of data on sexual activity collected in the National Longitudinal Survey, a representative survey of youth conducted in 1983. Their report shows that when socioeconomic differences are taken into account, racial differences are diminished only modestly (Hofferth and Hayes

1987). Similar findings emerge from a separate examination of data from the National Survey of Children, another nationwide sample of adolescents. Controlling for social class, black females initiate sexual activity earlier in adolescence and attain higher levels of nonvirginity by age 16. Differences are even sharper for males (Furstenberg et al. 1987). Several other studies reveal that substantial proportions of black males engage in sex prior to puberty (Clark, Zabin, and Hardy 1984). Thus, the best available evidence suggests that race differences in the timing and incidence of sexual intercourse among teens are not entirely a correlate of high rates of economic disadvantage among blacks.

If this is true, what could account for distinctive patterns of early intercourse among blacks and whites? Several ethnographic studies indicate the possibility of normative differences in attitudes toward nonmarital sex and childbearing (Staples 1971; Schultz 1969; Hannerz 1969; Levy and Grinker 1982). Qualitative research indicates that many young black males, especially in urban ghettos, are encouraged, even provoked, into having sex at a very early age by peers. This peer group pressure for sexual engagement extends to females as well where sexual activity, and sometimes motherhood, is regarded as a marker of adulthood. While similar patterns are evident among white working and lower-class youth, the peer pressure for early sex may not be as strong and may still be moderated by fears of the consequences of pregnancy.

One study based on survey data revealed strong ecological variations in rates of early intercourse (Furstenberg, Gunn, and Morgan 1987). Blacks in racially isolated school settings were much more likely to engage in early intercourse than those in racially mixed schools, even controlling for social class. Possibly racial segregation in neighborhoods or schools creates or intensifies differences in normative climates that can result in distinctive sexual patterns (see also Hogan and Kitagawa 1985).

Use of Contraception

None of the existing evidence suggests sharp racial differences in contraceptive use among teenagers. Modest black/white differences, however, emerge in birth control practices, which put blacks at somewhat greater risk of conception. Sexually active blacks are somewhat less likely than whites to use birth control at first intercourse, slightly

less likely to use contraception regularly, and more likely to have never used contraceptives. On the other hand, blacks are somewhat more likely to have used prescriptive methods of contraception. These seemingly anomalous and contradictory trends probably result from the fact that blacks are disproportionately more likely to use family planning clinics (and less likely to receive services from private physicians). Overall, access to contraceptive services remains a problem for black and white teens alike, and they are equally likely to delay a visit to a contraceptive provider.

The racial differences in the consistency of contraceptive practice mentioned above probably are due, at least in part, to the earlier timing of intercourse among blacks. Intercourse in the early teens is less likely to be planned, reducing the likelihood of contraception. Younger teens, even when provided with contraception, are probably less able to use contraception regularly. For these reasons, it seems likely that blacks, who generally initiate intercourse earlier than whites, will encounter more difficulty using contraception (Moore, Simms, and Betsey 1986). These empirical findings have important policy implications which will be discussed later in this article.

Abortion

Black/white differences in patterns of abortion are complicated by the higher incidence of pregnancy among blacks. Their greater risk of pregnancy increases their odds of abortion during their teen years. In any given year, blacks are about twice as likely as whites to obtain an abortion, which is roughly proportional to their chances of becoming pregnant (Moore, Simms, and Betsey 1986). Given a pregnancy, black teens are slightly less likely to end it in abortion (41 percent) than white teens (47 percent). Whether this difference is due to preference or access to services is not known (Hayes 1987).

A small proportion (about 13 percent) of teen pregnancies are terminated by miscarriage. This figure does not seem to vary greatly by race and consequently does not have important implications for race differences in childbearing rates (Henshaw 1987).

Nonmarital Births

It is well known that white teens are much more likely to marry in the event of a pregnancy than are blacks. In 1984 42 percent of births

to white teens occurred out of wedlock compared to 89 percent of births to black teens. As large as this difference is, it should be noted that the racial differential in the proportion of nonmarital births has been declining. In 1955 only 6 percent of white births to teenagers were nonmarital compared to 41 percent of black births (Furstenberg, Lincoln, and Menken 1981). In other words, the pattern of nonmarital teen childbearing that was prevalent only among blacks a generation ago has now extended to whites; fewer and fewer whites are electing to marry when a premarital conception occurs.

The declining appeal of marriage among pregnant whites was foreshadowed by black attitudes toward marriage several decades ago (Cherlin 1981). Marriage was an attractive solution when and only when the father of the child was in a position to provide economic support. During the 1950s and 1960s a diminishing number of black males were "marriageable," and accordingly the stigma attached to out-of-wedlock parenthood faded. This is precisely what is happening among pregnant whites today, especially those under the age of 18 for whom over half of all births occur out of wedlock today. As more white teens see marriage as an undesirable way of resolving a premarital pregnancy, public concern over teenage parenthood grows.

To summarize, the sources of race differences in rates of nonmarital childbearing are diverse. Blacks are more likely to be at risk of becoming pregnant because they are sexually active at an earlier age, they are slightly less likely to use contraception effectively, a little less likely to obtain an abortion, and much less likely to marry. We have not presented data on patterns of adoption, as accurate statistics by age and race are unavailable. All evidence indicates that adoption, while relatively common among whites several decades ago, is relatively rare today and does not importantly affect the racial differential in rates of nonmarital childbearing.

As I have noted throughout, racial differences in teen sexual activity, pregnancy, and childbearing have been declining in recent decades. In the 1970s, the proportion of whites engaging in sex during their teen years grew rapidly. While there is little prospect that white teens will match the incidence of sexual behavior among blacks in the near future, racial differences are not nearly so large as they once were. The same is true among marriage patterns—the other major source of the racial disparity. Fewer white teens are resorting to marriage to resolve a teen pregnancy, resulting in a sharp rise in the rate of nonmarital births. This pattern is likely to continue for the

foreseeable future. Thus, there is reason to expect further declines in the patterns of race differences that were so prominent in the middle of the twentieth century.

Consequences of Early Childbearing

Over the past decade an extensive amount of research has been conducted on the consequences of early childbearing for young mothers and their children (Chilman 1983; McAnarney and Schreider 1984; Hayes 1987). Some investigations have also been undertaken on the impact of early childbearing on the life chances of young fathers (Park and Neville 1987). This work is inconclusive in part because it is difficult to obtain reliable information on male fertility patterns and to devise effective research designs to study males who become fathers. Finally, some studies have been carried out on the effect of early childbearing on the families of teen mothers, though this area of research remains relatively unexplored and will not be discussed in this article (Ooms 1981).

I shall not attempt to summarize this literature as it has been fully described in several recent articles and monographs and was extensively reviewed in the report of the NAS panel. It is sufficient to say that little disagreement exists that early childbearing adversely affects the life chances of young mothers to complete school and attain economic self-sufficiency. Premature parenthood clearly reduces the prospects of marital stability and increases the odds of having more children than desired. The effects of early childbearing on the offspring of teen mothers are less clearcut. Though many researchers are convinced that the children of young mothers are at a developmental disadvantage, the extent and sources of this disadvantage have not been clearly delineated (Hayes 1987; Brooks-Gunn and Furstenberg 1986). At the very least, the educational and economic handicaps that early childbearing impose on young mothers creates a family environment for their offspring that is not strongly conducive to success. Added to that the immaturity of the parents, the strain of managing motherhood while still in school or at work, the limited assistance provided by fathers, and the instability of child care figures further complicate and perhaps compromise the child's cognitive and emotional development.

Less can be said about how parenthood in adolescence affects young men. Perhaps family commitments early in life could constrain educational attainment and economic achievement in later life for males as they appear to for females. But the supporting evidence for this proposition is scanty (Card and Wise 1978). As we have already seen, an increasing proportion of males eschew marriage and many, if not most, eschew paternal support as well (Weitzman 1985). Thus, it is entirely possible that the effects of early childbearing on men are relatively small, except for the males who marry or undertake to support their children.

Even for females, the magnitude of the differences in life chances attributable to early childbearing may be somewhat exaggerated. Moreover, the question of whether racial differences exist in the consequences of teen childbearing has not really been explored. Given the substantial variations in sexual patterns among blacks and whites and racial differences in the response to teen pregnancy described earlier in this article, there is some reason to expect that teenage whites and blacks may respond to early parenthood differently as well.

Early parenthood is far more common among blacks and consequently there may be less selectivity in the population of individuals who become young parents than among white teens for whom parenthood, at least out-of-wedlock parenthood, is still a relatively rare event. Both evidence from qualitative and quantitative studies indicates a strong commitment among black parents to provide assistance to pregnant teens in order to discourage them from leaving school (Furstenberg 1976). It is less clear whether white teens receive the same level of family support. White teens are, on the other hand, more likely to marry and, consequently, may receive greater support from the biological father. Thus, evidence exists that blacks and whites manage early parenthood somewhat differently and have access to different types of resources. Do the long-term effects of early parenthood differ by racial status accordingly?

Evidence from a longitudinal study of a predominantly black sample of teen mothers and their children in Baltimore, which I and my colleagues, J. Brooks Gunn and Philip Morgan, have conducted reveals that many black teen mothers manage to deal surprisingly well with the potential handicaps imposed by premature parenthood (Furstenberg, Gunn, and Morgan 1987). A substantial majority of the 300 teen

parents followed over nearly a twenty-year period were able to complete school, become economically self-sufficient, and limit their family size.

When we compared these findings to the educational, occupational, and family histories collected from black teenage mothers in several national surveys, there was a good deal of consistency across studies. In no sense were the Baltimore data atypical of the experience of most black teenage mothers, at least those aged now in their early thirties. And it would appear that teen mothers do not entirely live up to the conventional stereotype of the adolescent mother. They are generally not high school dropouts, the majority are not receiving public assistance, and most do not end up with a large number of children (see table 2).

Lest we paint too rosy a picture of the situations of the teen mothers, most women in Baltimore were struggling economically. Two-thirds were single mothers and had family incomes of under \$15,000. Even when they were fully employed, most were unable to rise much above the poverty level. Again, these findings were replicated when the national surveys were consulted, though a somewhat higher proportion of black teen mothers nationwide were currently married than was true for the Baltimore women (table 2).

Black teen mothers in both the Baltimore study and the national surveys were clearly not making out as well as black women who delayed childbearing until their twenties. Consistent with the evidence cited earlier, older childbearers were noticeably more likely to complete high school, attain economic self-sufficiency, be currently married, and limit their family size than teen mothers (table 2).

The analysis of the Baltimore data was confined to black women as there were too few whites in the study to provide reliable comparisons with the national data. But the national data sets do contain information on the situations of white women as well, permitting us to see whether the impact of birth timing differs among blacks and whites. Table 3 summarizes that information.

The contrast between white early and later childbearers reveals the same patterns observed among blacks, showing greater disadvantage when the first birth occurred before age 20. Some interesting racial differences, however, appear in the configuration of disadvantage. Schooling is somewhat more likely to be curtailed among whites than blacks. Whites who delayed childbearing almost always completed

TABLE 2
Socioeconomic Variables among Black Females Aged 29-36 with at Least One Biological Child

Data set: Year:	Baltimore*		CPS** 1983		NLS** 1982		NSFG** 1982	
	14-19	20+	14-19	20+	14-19	20+	14-19	20+
Age at first birth:								
Age (mean)	32.7	32.7	32.3	32.7	32.1	32.2	32.3	32.4
Education								
High school graduates (%)	70.5	86.3	73.4	86.3	59.0	86.2	69.9	87.9
Years completed (mean)	12.0	13.1	12.3	13.1	11.4	12.8	12.0	13.3
Marital Status								
Currently married (%)	30.2	47.9	35.1	47.9	37.5	57.2	32.2	56.9
First marriage (%)	80.8	—	—	—	82.0	91.0	73.7	88.3
Remarriage (%)	19.2	—	—	—	18.0	9.0	26.3	11.7
Previously married (%)	45.7	32.9	41.5	32.9	45.4	23.3	43.3	26.1
Never married (%)	24.0	19.3	23.5	19.3	17.1	19.5	24.5	17.0
Biological Children (mean)	2.3	2.0	2.7	2.0	2.9	1.9	2.9	2.0
Occupational Status								
Currently employed (%)	67.8	65.6	56.1	65.6	61.5	71.8	63.7	70.3
Welfare Received in Past Year (%)	29.1	—	—	—	29.7	14.3	27.5	20.0
Family Income								
Less than \$15,000	52.8	51.2	61.7	51.2	61.9	41.1	54.6	35.0
\$15,000 — \$24,999	23.6	20.4	19.4	20.4	18.6	19.3	20.9	22.6
\$25,000 or more	23.6	28.4	18.9	28.4	19.4	39.6	24.5	42.4
N (unweighted)	(258)	(233)	(242)	(233)	(252)	(231)	(289)	(310)

* A few white respondents (30) excluded from analysis.

** Respondents residing in SMSAs only. Figures weighted to represent national population.

— Data not available.

TABLE 3
Socioeconomic Variables among White Females Aged 29-36 with at Least One Biological Child

Data set: Year:	CPS* 1983		NLS* 1982		NSFG* 1982	
	14-19	20+	14-19	20+	14-19	20+
Age at first birth:						
Age (mean)	32.5	32.7	32.2	32.5	32.4	32.6
Education						
High school graduates (%)	72.1	89.8	61.1	94.0	61.1	94.8
Years completed (mean)	11.9	13.3	11.5	13.5	11.3	13.7
Marital Status						
Currently married (%)	65.4	82.4	74.5	86.4	67.5	84.2
First marriage (%)	—	—	64.5	86.3	63.0	85.3
Remarriage (%)	—	—	35.6	13.6	37.0	14.7
Previously married (%)	32.1	15.3	24.1	12.4	28.9	14.0
Never married (%)	2.5	2.3	1.5	1.2	3.6	1.8
Biological Children (mean)	2.6	1.9	2.5	2.0	2.7	2.0
Occupational Status						
Currently employed (%)	59.7	51.2	65.7	59.9	53.7	54.7
Welfare Received in Past Year (%)	—	—	8.0	3.9	10.8	3.2
Family Income						
Less than \$15,000	33.4	19.1	28.4	13.9	31.4	14.8
\$15,000 - \$24,999	27.1	22.8	25.8	24.2	25.4	24.7
\$25,000 or more	39.4	58.1	45.7	61.9	43.1	60.5
N (unweighted)	(490)	(1632)	(238)	(824)	(169)	(530)

* Respondents residing in SMSAs only. Figures weighted to represent national population.
— Data not available.

school whereas those who became mothers in their teens had a quite high probability of not completing high school. Educational attainment differences are less sharp among blacks, if only because blacks are more likely to drop out *even* if they delay childbearing.

The most distinctive racial differences occur in marriage patterns. Regardless of the timing of childbearing, whites are much more likely to enter marriage and remain wed than blacks. Younger and older black mothers alike are far less likely to marry than whites. Early parenthood seems to reduce slightly the chances of blacks entering marriage by their early thirties; for whites, the effect of early childbearing is the reverse: it slightly increases the odds of marriage among women in their early thirties.

Both blacks and whites who become teen mothers and marry are more likely to divorce eventually. The great majority of black teen mothers who married ultimately separated and rather few made their way back into marriage. Only about a quarter of the black teen mothers are currently in a first marriage as compared to roughly half of the blacks who delayed childbearing. The impact of early childbearing on white teen mothers is almost as large. More than half the teen mothers divorce, though a much higher proportion of white divorcees eventually remarry. So by comparison to blacks, white teen mothers are significantly more likely to be currently married. Of course, compared to white women who postponed childbearing, white teenage mothers are notably less likely to be currently married or in their first marriages. Still, white *teen* mothers are much more likely to be currently married and almost as likely to be in a first marriage than black *older* mothers.

These differences in marriage patterns have important implications for the economic situation of black and white mothers. Black *older* mothers have lower family incomes than white *teen* mothers, partly owing to the fact that they are much more likely to be living with a spouse. White teen mothers are about equally likely to be working as black teen mothers, but because they are much more likely to be married they typically have the benefit of two incomes. Note that white teen mothers are actually more likely to be employed than white older childbearers. Among blacks the opposite is true. It appears that white early childbearers can obtain and afford to hold secondary jobs which supplement their family incomes. Accordingly, fewer white teen mothers are receiving public assistance than blacks who postponed parenthood.

Still, large differences exist in the family income distributions of white women depending on their age at first birth. Older childbearers are half as likely to be living near or below the poverty level (under \$15,000). Presumably, the husbands of older childbearers are earning more as also may the women themselves.

The distribution of income among black mothers is sharply skewed downward regardless of the timing of her first birth. Blacks who postpone parenthood are much less well off than white early childbearers, despite the fact that white adolescent mothers are less often employed. Presumably, their poor prospects of marriage adversely affect the family incomes of blacks, even if they wait to have children. Blacks who entered parenthood as teenagers are even worse off, but delaying only helps their situation modestly.

The single area in which the consequences for black and white women appear to be identical is family size. The magnitude of birth timing is the same regardless of race; early childbearers averaged between .5 and 1.0 more children than later childbearers. In the Baltimore study, however, many women had become sterilized by their early thirties, suggesting the possibility that these differences could diminish over time. Early childbearers may be at a different stage in their family development than later childbearers.

Are the consequences of early childbearing, then, better or worse for blacks than whites? Readers may draw their own conclusions from tables 2 and 3. I would argue that they are neither better nor worse—they are different. For both races, the costs of premature parenthood are evident. Yet, the majority of teenage mothers—black and white—manage to stage a recovery, attaining economic self-sufficiency by their early thirties. Most young mothers regardless of race also manage to limit subsequent childbearing. The racial differences lie in the strategies of recovery from the handicaps of premature parenthood and the success of those strategies.

Black teen mothers are less likely to marry, remain married, and to remarry when divorce occurs. Single parenthood, although not an inevitable consequence of teen pregnancy, is a likely one. For whites, marriage operates as a major recovery route, offering an alternative or, at least, an important supplement to their own earning ability. Low education and restricted job opportunities, therefore, are not quite as costly as they are for black young mothers.

On the other hand, the advantages of delaying parenthood are not

so great for blacks as well. As we discovered, blacks who postponed motherhood are less likely to do well economically than whites who enter parenthood in adolescence. The cruel fact is that for blacks delaying childbearing has a relatively low payoff. They are damned if they do and damned if they don't. These data lend credence to observations voiced by leaders in the black community that a major source of early childbearing among blacks is a despair of future opportunities. This perception has important implications for policies and programs designed to prevent early childbearing, the final topic of concern in this article.

The Prevention of Teen Pregnancy

No review of current programs and policies aimed at preventing teen pregnancy or ameliorating its effects has provided a very reassuring picture of the possibilities for effective intervention (Moore, Simms, and Betsey 1986; Furstenberg and Brooks-Gunn 1986; Hayes 1987). The NAS panel on adolescent pregnancy and childbearing summarized the burgeoning literature on intervention and strategies in some detail. It did not directly address the question of whether the special needs of racial or ethnic subgroups might require different types of programs or services than those offered to the general population of adolescents. Nevertheless, the NAS review of alternative interventions and the panel's priorities for social action provide a framework for thinking about how different types of programs and policies may have an impact on persistent racial differences in rates of teen pregnancy and childbearing.

The NAS panel identified several different strategies for preventing teen pregnancy. Some observers had viewed these measures as competing but the NAS report clearly regarded them as complementary.

Lowering the Barriers to Sex Education and Contraception

The NAS panel reviewed a number of seemingly attractive ideas for reducing early and unprotected sexual experience. Among the most popular of these have been a wide variety of sex education and life education programs to equip youth with contraceptive information or provide decision-making skills associated with birth control use. Newer programs promoted by conservatives have placed more emphasis on

teaching teens to postpone sexual experience, encouraging them to "say no to sex." More recently, educational efforts have been directed at expanding adolescents' knowledge about their life options and the problems associated with premature parenthood.

The NAS report strongly recommended a variety of measures to increase access to contraceptives for teens. Since the 1970s, considerable efforts have been made to recruit sexually active teens to publicly funded family planning programs by modifying these services to fit the special needs of teenagers. In the 1980s, attention shifted to bringing family planning services closer to the adolescent population by establishing health clinics on or near the school premises. While none of these approaches has met with great success, the panel urged continued efforts to experiment with making birth control more available to sexually active adolescents. It also called for aggressive promotion of condom use for males and experimenting with ways to make pill distribution easier.

Another direction recommended by the panel was to alter social environments which promote adolescent sexual experience and inhibit the use of contraception. Media content has been a principal target of reformers who believe that teens are directly and indirectly taught to engage in unplanned and unprotected sex. In addition, the panel noted the important efforts being made by advocacy groups like the Children's Defense Fund and the Urban League to increase community awareness of the costs of premature parenthood.

Finally, the NAS report, recognizing the widespread perception that early parenthood is a symptom of blocked social opportunities, have advocated programs and services that reduce social disadvantage. A new wave of programs has been recently instituted that attempts to provide incentives for teens to defer parenthood. Remedial education, job training, summer employment, and guarantees of postsecondary education have all been discussed as possible strategies for discouraging youth from entering parenthood prematurely.

The panel discovered that very little evaluation has been conducted on the impact of any of these intervention strategies. Accordingly, it is extremely difficult to assess whether or how they might affect black and white youth differently.

Earlier I identified two major sources accounting for higher rates of early childbearing among blacks—a much greater likelihood of early inception of intercourse and a much lower probability of marriage

in the event of pregnancy. To a lesser extent, sexually active black teens appear to be less likely to use contraception effectively, in part because they initiate intercourse at a younger age.

Will programs aimed at postponing sexual activity and decreasing unprotected sex reduce the racial disparity in rates of pregnancy and childbearing? If they were successful, they could have this impact. Assuming a program were able to delay the onset of intercourse by a year or so, we might expect that blacks would benefit disproportionately for reasons mentioned above. Existing programs, however, do not seem to be achieving results of this magnitude. The most ambitious program designed to delay early sex has been carried out in the Atlanta public schools. It is too early to tell with any certainty how effective this program is, but preliminary estimates suggest that it is having a modest impact. Similarly, the community education programs appear to have small effects, at best, in reducing early sexual activity or decreasing unprotected intercourse.

More aggressive and effective contraceptive services would probably also reduce the racial differential, especially if they reached younger teens. Yet, the existing repertoire of techniques for promoting contraceptive practice do not show any immediate prospect of producing dramatic increases in use of birth control among younger teens. Data on school-based programs, the most innovative program for reaching younger teens, are still lacking. Preliminary indications from ongoing evaluations, however, are not sufficiently encouraging to suggest large changes in the incidence of early childbearing.

The NAS panel placed a strong emphasis on increasing contraceptive availability and use among sexually active young people as a major means of pregnancy prevention. The figures on racial patterns in contraceptive use suggest that greater access to birth control would probably diminish black/white differences somewhat, especially if very young males were encouraged to use condoms.

Differences in marriage rates following premarital conception remain large between blacks and whites. No programs adequately address the underlying causes of the low, and still declining, incidence of marriage among younger blacks. Clearly, rising rates of unemployment among young black males and poor economic prospects for poorly educated men have affected the pool of marriage eligibles for black females. In addition, and probably linked to their declining economic position, large numbers of young black men are afflicted with a variety of social

ills—drug use, alcoholism, delinquency and crime, mental disabilities, and so on. Rough estimates of the proportion of marriageable males suggest that the rise of single parenthood can be traced, at least in part, to the economically marginal position of black men (Wilson and Neckerman 1986).

While it is difficult to demonstrate empirically the direct association between racial differences in social opportunity and teen pregnancy, the NAS panel recognized the plausibility of this explanation.

Chronic unemployment and poor job prospects among some subgroups of the population have had serious adverse effects on many young people's perceptions of opportunity. The lack of meaningful employment options may diminish the motivation to delay parenthood. As with educational reform, the development of a comprehensive plan for youth employment is beyond the mandate and expertise of the panel, yet we emphasize the need to enhance the employability of high-risk youth (Hayes 1987, 268).

We suspect that if all the measures proposed by the NAS panel were adopted, some further decline would occur in the racial differential in early intercourse, use of contraception, and resolution of premarital pregnancy. More likely than not, the difference will continue to decline, if only because the situation of young whites is becoming more like that of young blacks. More white teens have been engaging in early intercourse, using contraception only casually, and showing great reluctance to marry in the event of a premarital conception.

Summary

This article has examined the origin and consequences of racial differences in teen sexuality, pregnancy, and childbearing. Black/white differences in rates of early and out-of-wedlock childbearing have been declining in the past several decades though the incidence of nonmarital fertility among younger teens is still about five times as high for blacks as for whites.

Early sexual behavior, irregular use of contraception, and a much lower probability of marrying prior to having a birth all contribute to the racial differential. Evidence suggests that both normative and socioeconomic differences may account for these demographic patterns.

Black teens show markedly higher tolerance for childbearing before marriage. They also express much greater reservations about the viability of marriage, especially at an early age, than do whites. These views may affect their willingness to risk early pregnancy and initiate intercourse at an early age.

Several types of interventions that might reduce black/white differences in teen childbearing were reviewed. The most promising of these involved simultaneously strengthening the community sanctions that discourage early parenthood while expanding social opportunities. Presently, poor, especially poor minority youth, may feel that they have little to lose by entering parenthood prematurely. Unless we are able to persuade these youth that they have a larger stake in the future, we are unlikely to see a dramatic decline in the incidence of early childbearing among blacks. This does not necessarily mean that racial differences are destined to persist. Increasingly, white youth are subject to many of the same conditions that have produced high rates of early and out-of-wedlock childbearing among blacks. Thus, racial differences may decline not because the situation of blacks is improving but because white youth are less willing to defer sexual activity or less able to marry when pregnancy occurs. This may at least change the perception of early childbearing as a "black" problem. Whatever else it is, teenage childbearing represents the inability of our society to manage the transition to adulthood effectively. This ineptitude appears to be, to a growing extent, colorblind.

References

- Brooks-Gunn, J., and F.F. Furstenberg, Jr. 1986. Children of Adolescent Mothers: Physical, Academic, and Psychological Outcomes. *Developmental Review* 6:224–51.
- Card, J.J., and L.L. Wise. 1978. Teenage Mothers and Teenage Fathers: The Impact of Early Childbearing on the Parents' Personal and Professional Lives. *Family Planning Perspectives* 10(4):199–205.
- Cherlin, A.J. 1981. *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Chilman, C.S. 1983. *Adolescent Sexuality in a Changing American Society: Social and Psychological Perspectives for the Human Services Professions*. 2nd ed. New York: Wiley.
- Clark, S.D., L.S. Zabin, and J.B. Hardy. 1984. Sex, Contraception

- and Parenthood: Experience and Attitudes among Urban Black Young Men. *Family Planning Perspectives* 16:77-82.
- Cutright, P. 1972. Illegitimacy in the United States, 1920-1968. In *Demographic and Social Aspects of Population Growth*, ed. C. Westoff and R. Parks, 375-438. Washington.
- Furstenberg, F.F., Jr. 1976. *Unplanned Parenthood: The Social Consequences of Teenage Childbearing*. New York: Free Press.
- Furstenberg, F.F., Jr., and J. Brooks-Gunn. 1986. Teenage Childbearing: Causes, Consequences and Remedies. In *Applications of Social Science to Clinical Health*, ed. L.H. Aiken and D. Mechanic. New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press.
- Furstenberg, F.F., Jr., J. Brooks-Gunn, and S.P. Morgan. 1987. *Adolescent Mothers in Later Life*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Furstenberg, F.F., Jr., R. Lincoln, and J. Menken, eds. 1981. *Teenage Sexuality, Pregnancy and Childbearing*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Furstenberg, F.F., Jr., S.P. Morgan, K.A. Moore, and J.L. Peterson. 1987. Race Differences in the Timing of Adolescent Intercourse. *American Sociological Review* 52(8):511-18.
- Hannerz, U. 1969. *Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hayes, C.D., ed. 1987. *Risking the Future*. Vol. 1. Washington: National Academy Press.
- Henshaw, S.K. 1987. Characteristics of U.S. Women Having Abortions, 1982-1983. *Family Planning Perspectives* 19(1):5-9.
- Hofferth, S., and C.D. Hayes. 1987. *Risking the Future*. Vol. 2. Washington: National Academy Press.
- Hogan, D., and E. Kitagawa. 1985. The Impact of Social Status, Family Structure, and Neighborhood on the Fertility of Black Adolescents. *American Journal of Sociology* 90:825-55.
- Levy, S.S., and W.J. Grinker. 1982. Project Redirection: An Ethnographic Study. Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation.
- McAnarney, E.R., and C. Schreider. 1984. *Identifying Social and Psychological Antecedents of Adolescent Pregnancy: The Contribution of Research to Concepts of Prevention*. New York: William T. Grant Foundation.
- Moore, K.A., M. Simms, and C.L. Betsey. 1986. *Choice & Circumstance: Racial Differences: Adolescent Sexuality and Fertility*. New Brunswick: Transaction Books.
- National Center for Health Statistics. 1985. Advance Report of Final Natality Statistics, 1983. *Monthly Vital Statistics Report*. 34:6 (suppl.). Hyattsville, Md.
- . 1986. Advance Report of Final Natality Statistics, 1984. *Monthly Vital Statistics Report* 35:4. Hyattsville, Md.

- National Institute of Child and Human Development. 1984. *Adolescent Pregnancy and Childbearing: Rates, Trends, and Research Findings*. Washington.
- Ooms, T., ed. 1981. *Teenage Pregnancy in a Family Context: Implications for Policy*. Philadelphia: Temple University.
- Park, R.D., and B. Neville. 1987. Teenage Fatherhood. In *Risking the Future*, ed. C.D. Hayes, 145–73. Vol. 2. Washington: National Academy Press.
- Schultz, D.A. 1969. *Coming Up Black: Patterns of Ghetto Socialization*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Staples, R., ed. 1971. *The Black Family: Essays and Studies*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. 1984. Childspacing among Birth Cohorts of American Women: 1905 to 1959. *Current Population Reports*, series P–20, no. 385. Washington.
- Wall Street Journal*. 1986. Editorial. December 15.
- Weitzman, L.J. 1985. *The Divorce Revolution: The Unexpected Social and Economic Consequences for Women and Children in America*. New York: Free Press.
- Wilson, W.J., and K.M. Neckerman. 1986. Poverty and Family Structure: The Widening Gap between Evidence and Public Policy Issues. In *Fighting Poverty: What Works and What Doesn't*, ed. S.H. Danziger and D.H. Weinberg. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Zelnick, M., and J.F. Kantner. 1980. Sexual Activity, Contraceptive Use and Pregnancy among Metropolitan-area Teenagers: 1971–1979. *Family Planning Perspectives* 12:230–37.
- Zelnick, M., J.F. Kantner, and K. Ford. 1981. *Sex and Pregnancy in Adolescence*. Sage Library of Social Research, vol. 133. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Zelnick, M., and F. Shah. 1983. First Intercourse among Young Americans. *Family Planning Perspectives* 15:64–69.

Address correspondence to: Prof. Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., Department of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania, 3718 Locust Walk, Philadelphia, PA 19104–6299.