

TEENAGE CHILDBEARING AS A PUBLIC ISSUE AND PRIVATE CONCERN

Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr.

*Department of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104;
email: fff@pop.upenn.edu*

Key Words family change, public policy

■ **Abstract** Teenage childbearing has been a topic of sociological research, public discourse, and political discussion since the mid-1960s. It is surprising that the intensity and topics of the discussion over this period have corresponded poorly with research on the rates and consequences of teenage childbearing. This essay chronicles the history of the issue of early childbearing and my contributions to this field of study.

INTRODUCTION

I never intended to spend such a large share of my academic life studying the issue of teenage childbearing. It just happened that way. Not unlike parenthood for most of the young mothers whose lives I have followed for nearly four decades, I (see Figure 1) drifted into the study. And, I suppose, like the teenage mothers, I was predisposed to become involved in the mid-1960s when the Baltimore Study began. As Howard Becker (1994) has argued, coincidences are socially structured.

My longitudinal study of teenage mothers began in 1965, when I was a graduate student at Columbia. I was studying the sociology of the family with William J. Goode (1961, 1963), who had written widely on illegitimacy. I was also working with Richard A. Cloward, whose work on delinquency and opportunity and on the sociology of urban poverty influenced me greatly (Cloward & Ohlin 1960). I had no idea that during the next decade teenage childbearing would go on the hit parade of social problems. I was simply responding to my opportunity structure by identifying a topic with sociological promise. The fact that I have stuck with the topic for the past 35 years or so is no testimony to either my professional acumen or my tenacious character. Two or three times during my career, I declared my lack of interest in doing more work, but each time I was enticed into continuing the study by a reward system that encourages researchers to do what they are already doing and by colleagues who found the possibility of following up on the teenage mothers more appealing than I did.

At the onset of the study, I was barely older than most of the young women whose lives I have followed for several decades. It would be hard to exaggerate my

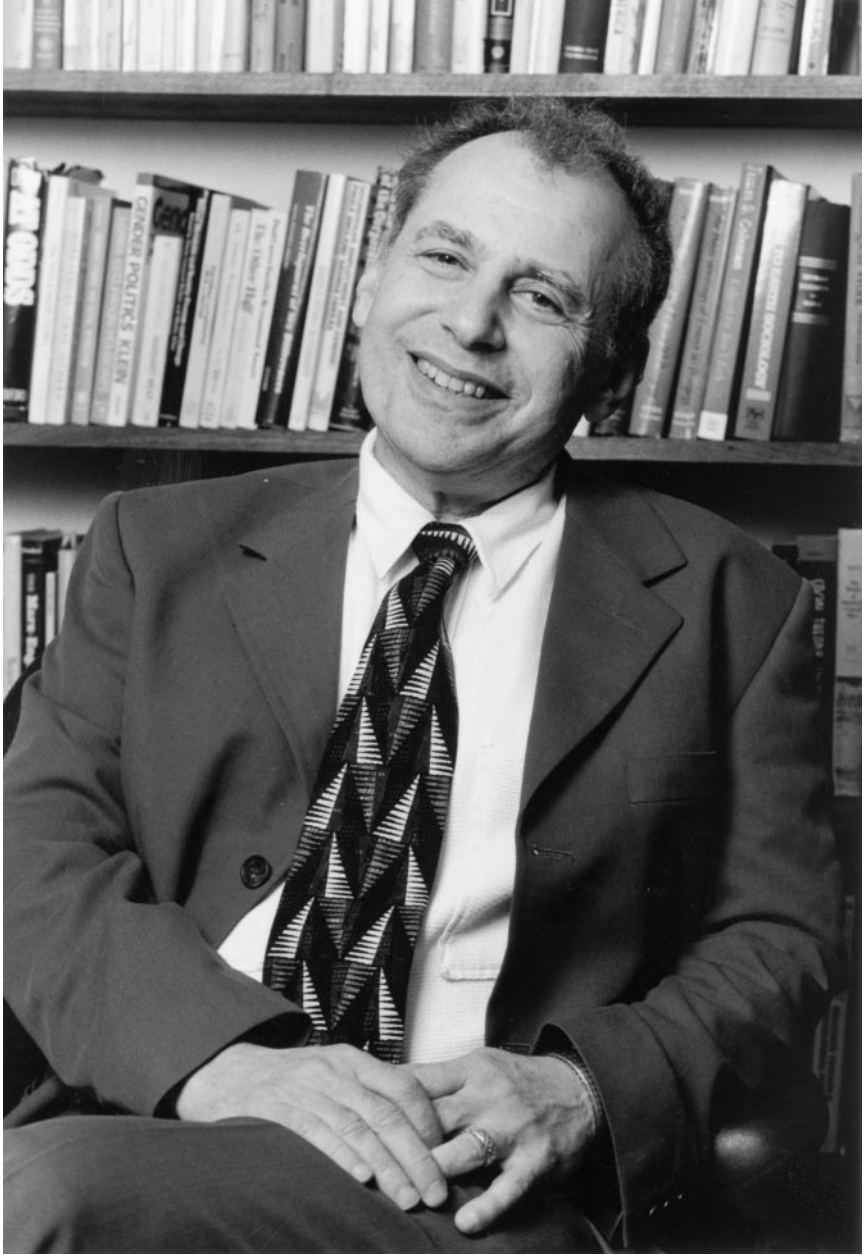


Figure 1 Photo of Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr.

naïveté. My earliest surveys are embarrassingly crude and makeshift; I learned the craft of survey through practice and the forgiving response of families participating in the study. The interview schedules provide a historical record of my intellectual involvement and the birth of teenage parenthood as a public concern in the 1970s and 1980s.

I have grown up with the teenage mothers and watched their children develop into young adults. The mothers and I have shared a journey through life. In chronicling this journey, I have become a participant-observer of sorts, in what I have referred to elsewhere as the curious history of teenage childbearing in American society. Participating in policy discussions while witnessing the lives of teenage mothers, I have observed a growing disjuncture between what researchers know and what policy makers, politicians, and the public think are the facts about early parenthood.

Early childbearing disturbs the lives of young mothers, although not nearly as much as most people believe. In the United States, the singularity of the issue has more to do with how our political culture has responded to the ancillary problems of poverty, sexuality, gender relations, and the like, than with the threat posed by teenagers having babies before they want to or their families want them to or before society thinks is good for their welfare and that of their offspring. I am not the only sociologist to reach this conclusion, but this perspective has not been widely accepted by most policy makers or the public at large (Lawson & Rhode 1993, Nathanson 1992, Luker 1991).

THE DAWNING OF A PUBLIC ISSUE

Teenage childbearing was conspicuously invisible in the 1960s. By using this oxymoron, I mean to suggest that during the baby boom years, in the aftermath of World War II, it was both common and unremarkable for parenthood to begin in the teenage years. In 1957, at the height of the baby boom, the birthrate among teenagers stood at 96.3 per 1000 women. In other words, nearly 10% of teenagers were giving birth each year, compared with 7% when my study began in 1965 and less than 5% today (Ventura et al. 2001). But during the era in which fertility rates were highest, virtually no discussion of adolescent childbearing occurred in either popular or professional literature.

What happened over the next decade to propel this issue into public attention? Beginning in the late 1960s, several simultaneous demographic trends gave teenage childbearing the appearance of an urgent and growing problem. First, fertility rates among older women were declining much more rapidly than were rates among women under age 20, which increased the proportion of births born to teenagers (Elo et al. 1999, Furstenberg 1998). Second, the unusually large cohort of children born during the baby boom were entering their teens, producing an upsurge in the number of births even though the birth rate among teenage women was dropping and has continued to fall except for a brief reversal in the 1980s. Third, and most important of all, although premarital conceptions were common in the 1950s and

1960s, by the mid-1960s larger numbers of pregnant women began to elect not to marry. No one worried about the effects of teenage childbearing as long as they occurred within wedlock, despite the fact that early marriages were at high risk of failing, resulting in a large number of single-parent families (Vincent 1961, Weeks 1976).

Many scholars, myself included, have written about the decline of marriage, especially marriage among younger women (Cherlin 1992, Furstenberg 2001, Ellwood & Jencks 2001). It occurred first among the poor African Americans who had begun to weigh the costs of early marriage against the potential stigma of out-of-wedlock childbearing, illegal abortion, or adoption. Premarital pregnancy was common, if not epidemic, throughout the 1950s and 1960s. It was virtually a part of the courtship process for Whites and Blacks alike. With the declining earning power of young Black men, and the growing economic independence of young women, marriage became a distinctly less attractive option for young Black women who became pregnant out of wedlock. As marriage rates declined, nonmarital childbearing rates climbed rapidly among teenage Blacks—not because women were setting out to have children outside of marriage, but simply because they were less likely to resort to “shotgun marriages,” a term that has become almost archaic (O’Connell & Moore 1980).

In 1965 Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the assistant secretary of labor in the Johnson Administration, issued a report arguing poverty and unemployment were undermining marriage among Blacks (Moynihan 1965). Moynihan’s blunt assessment of the Black family’s precarious situation was widely criticized by many on the Left as pathologizing what they viewed as an adaptive institution. His critics argued that poverty, not being a single parent, created disadvantages for Black children. This disagreement between whether poverty or unstable unions created problems for children became a dividing point between the Left and Right and has generated a policy debate that has lasted to the present day (Rainwater & Yancey 1967).

To observers then, it appeared as if the problems facing the Black family in the 1960s were unique and could be traced to vulnerabilities created by the legacies of slavery, discrimination, urbanization, and poverty. In the 1960s, levels of marital instability and out-of-wedlock childbearing among Blacks were markedly higher than comparable levels among Whites. In 1960, children born to non-White-teenage mothers were nearly six times as likely to be born out of wedlock than were the children of White teenage mothers (Furstenberg et al. 1987). Racial differences in the likelihood of sex, pregnancy, and nonmarital births all contributed to the racial disparity in out-of-wedlock teenage childbearing (Moore et al. 1986). These enormous disparities could be partly explained by the equally enormous racial gaps in income, education, and occupation. But even when socioeconomic ties were taken into account, Blacks appeared to have weaker conjugal ties (Cherlin 1992, 1998). Thus, for a period of time, it really appeared as if these patterns resulted from a “culture of poverty” (Lewis 1966) or, in the revised language of Wilson (1987), “a ghetto-specific culture.”

With the hindsight gained from the past several decades, evidence for a subcultural difference between Blacks and Whites is less compelling. Less economically advantaged, younger Whites and low-income, older women of all races have begun to exhibit similar patterns of out-of-wedlock childbearing. For unmarried teenagers, the ratio of Black to White birth rates, for example, dropped from nine to one in 1970 to three to one in 2000 and continues to converge (Furstenberg et al. 1987, Martin et al. 2002). A strong case can be made that Blacks were simply the first to experience the weakening of marriage in American society because they were more readily susceptible to the effects of deindustrialization and the loss of union jobs, conditions that eventually began to affect Whites as well. As it turned out, my study happened upon a public issue just as it was emerging and examined it from the perspective of the very population—poor urban Blacks—that were to become the focus of so much national policy debate in the final third of the past century.

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE BALTIMORE STUDY

The Baltimore Study began as an evaluation of a hospital-based intervention program designed to prevent second births among a population of low-income, mostly Black women who became pregnant for the first time before the age of 18. Among the nearly 400 women in the study, some were randomly assigned to a special treatment program and others to receive routine prenatal and antenatal services. The women in both the treatment and the control groups were interviewed during pregnancy and one, three, and five years after giving birth, at which point nearly 80% were still in the study. The parents of the pregnant teens were also interviewed. At the three- and five-year follow-up interviews, a sample of the women who had been classmates of the teenage mothers before they became pregnant were also interviewed to assess the impact of early childbearing on the mothers' educational, occupational, and marital careers as well as on their economic and family circumstances. The data collected by the Baltimore Study provided an unusually rich picture of Black family life and of teenage mothers in particular.

Even in the years of the Great Society (President Johnson's U.S. domestic program), when Moynihan (1965) wrote his report, the portrait of Black family life was generally pejorative. As the country swung to the Right in the early 1970s, during the Nixon Administration, the stereotype of young women with large families on welfare, "the brood sow myth," began to take root (Placek & Hendershot 1974). In a more sympathetic vein, the demographer, Arthur Campbell (1968) contended in an often quoted passage that "a girl who has an illegitimate child at the age of 16 suddenly has 90% of her life's script written for her." Correct or not, it was, and still is, widely assumed that teenage parenthood is a sure route to long-term disadvantage in later life.

In fact, the empirical support for such a claim was weak. During the late 1960s and throughout the next decades, the government and private foundations began funding studies on the consequences of early childbearing. Through good fortune,

I received grants typically denied inexperienced researchers. My evaluation study transformed into one of a handful of longitudinal studies that began in the 1960s (see also Klerman & Jekel 1974, Hardy et al. 1978).

My book, *Unplanned Parenthood: The Social Consequences of Teenage Childbearing*, appeared in 1976 amidst a growing literature on teenage childbearing. By today's standards, much of this research was methodologically crude. This study was one of the first to use a comparison group and to employ multivariate analysis and life tables. I was keenly aware of the problem of selection—what I referred to as “selective recruitment to teenage childbearing”—and made efforts to correct for it when assessing the impact of early childbearing on education, marriage, employment, and subsequent fertility. Observing the enormous variability in the way that the teenage mothers managed the first five years of parenthood, I concluded the following:

One cannot glibly conclude that parenthood in adolescence inevitably or irreversibly disrupts the life course . . . A sizeable proportion of the young mothers in our study was able to cope successfully with the problems of early parenthood . . . these mothers were making out as well as their former classmates who did not become pregnant premaritally (Furstenberg 1976, p. 218).

I traced these divergent careers to a series of conditions including preexisting personal differences, family resources and opportunities, and the impact of choices such as marriage, returning to school, and fertility control that were made after the pregnancy. No doubt, however, I still overestimated the effect of early childbearing on the teenage mothers by ignoring many unmeasured differences between the teenage mothers and their former classmates. The Baltimore study, and others like it, supported the claim that early childbearing was a disruptive event with adverse consequences for the young mothers and their families; the effect of these studies on the emerging national debate about teenage parenthood was fairly powerful (Vinovskis 1988).

THE ISSUE OF TEENAGE CHILDBEARING COMES OF AGE

Teenage mothers appeared to suffer from a long list of liabilities: poor educational attainment and weak attachment to the labor force, low earnings and reliance on public assistance, marital instability and single parenthood, additional births and large family size, and poor health outcomes during and after pregnancy. Their offspring began life with a plethora of associated disadvantages that seemed likely to thwart their development and success in later life.

In fact, many of the early studies were plagued by problems of selection. The youth who became teenage mothers were often not doing well before the pregnancy occurred: They were more likely to come from disadvantaged households, have experienced trouble in school, and have lower expectations of going to college than their peers (Abrahamse et al. 1988, Moore et al. 1986). Accordingly, they were

prone to engaging in early sexual activity, using contraception ineffectively, and not aborting or giving up their child for adoption, and often, the father of the child had poor education and earnings prospects. How much of the disadvantage associated with early childbearing resulted from these preexisting problems and how much of it resulted from the childbearing was not adequately addressed by the research designs and statistical techniques that were employed in the first generation of research. Indeed, not until the 1980s and 1990s, were the new methods of detecting sample selection employed. So, social science research by and large reinforced the stereotype of the teenage parent as a perpetrator of poverty.

Advocates on both the Left and Right also played a large part in perpetuating this stereotype. Conservatives like Edward Banfield (1974) and Charles Murray (1984) used teenage pregnancy findings to argue that the poor had a different value system and, if allowed, were content to rely on public assistance. Beginning in the 1970s and extending into the next decade, the sentiment that permissiveness was fostered by family planners and advocates of abortion, that dependency developed because of public assistance, and that marriage was undermined by government programs that aided single mothers and their offspring grew among some conservatives. Teenage parents became their poster children.

On the Left, the Alan Guttmacher Institute and its journal, *Family Planning Perspectives*, issued a steady stream of research showing that teenage parenthood was costly to the taxpayers, the young parents, and their children. This is not to say that the publications by the Alan Guttmacher Institute cynically exploited the issue to promote reproductive health; to the contrary, the findings were generally scrupulously even-handed. The results from studies of teenage parenthood happened to suit the agenda of the family planners as well as the advocacy community groups attempting to diminish poverty and social disadvantage.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a huge volume of research on the causes and consequences of early childbearing appeared. Most of this research seemed to support the contention that young parents and their children were not faring well, but little of it took adequate account of the selection of adolescents with academic, social, and family problems into early parenthood. In 1987, the National Academy of Sciences published a two-volume compendium of research findings and policy recommendations calling on government and the private sector to mount a more aggressive campaign to reduce teenage pregnancy and childbearing (Hayes 1987).

After the publication of my book in 1976, I took a welcome break from my research on teenage parenthood. In the final chapter of *Unplanned Parenthood*, I had predicted that the issue of adolescent parenthood would fade out of public view when the children of the baby boom aged beyond adolescence and as abortion and better methods of contraception began to reduce the level of unwanted parenthood. I was wrong, or at least premature in this prediction. I overestimated the importance of waning demographic forces and underestimated the political forces that would keep teenage childbearing in the public limelight for the next quarter century.

The size of the teenage cohort did indeed decline over the next decade, but this decline was offset by a more restrictive policy toward abortion and

contraception that began in the Reagan Administration. Declining abortion rates partially fueled the continued rise of White nonmarital fertility rates as well as a new increase in the previously stable, Black nonmarital fertility rate. Because teenage marriage was becoming less common during this period, the ratio of nonmarital births to marital births climbed rapidly even though births among teens were not rising (Smith et al. 1996). The bottom line was that births to unmarried teenagers were increasingly visible and an ever-present reminder that teenagers were not subscribing to the Congressional mandates for "premarital chastity" (Alan Guttmacher Institute 2001b).

ADOLESCENT MOTHERS IN LATER LIFE: THE BALTIMORE STUDY CONTINUES

I began to do more work on the topic of teenage parenthood in the late 1970s and early 1980s with some reluctance, fearing that it might limit my intellectual growth as a sociologist. But finding myself in the enviable position of being invited to address policy makers and solicited by foundations interested in grant making was a heady experience for someone at a relatively young age and early point in his academic career.

I first discussed conducting another follow-up with Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, a developmental psychologist, in 1981. She encouraged me to look at the circumstances of the children, who were now approaching the age that their mothers had been when the study began. It was also time to see how the mothers were faring in their adult years. Now in their mid-30s, would they still be struggling to attain economic independence because of their educational deficiencies and growing family size? How had their marriages worked out and how were their children doing in their adolescent years? It took me six years to answer these questions, but the results were well worth the effort.

Despite the 12-year hiatus since the previous follow up, we located 90% of all the women who were interviewed last in 1972 and successfully interviewed 90% of these women and their children (Furstenberg et al. 1987). The findings from this follow-up contradicted the conventional wisdom about the life course of teenage mothers and their children: The vast majority of women had incomes above the poverty line and fewer than a fifth were still on public assistance. More than three out of four had entered the labor force and were regularly employed. Although just a fourth had reached middle class, half of all the women in the study held jobs with benefits and had some cash reserves in the bank or credit cards that could be drawn upon in times of need. In short, most were hardly living up to the public stereotype of teenage mothers.

What explained the surprising level of economic mobility among most of the teenage mothers? A high percentage had returned to high school and graduated or received a GED; one fifth had even taken some college courses over the past decade. It is surprising that almost none of the women had very large families by their mid-30s. Just one fifth had three or more children; all the others had only

one or two. Nearly three fifths of the women had voluntarily sought sterilization in their mid- or late 20s after contending with the perils of contraceptive use and occasional abortions to limit their fertility.

On the more negative side, relatively few of the women had been able to enter enduring marriages. Only a quarter of the women who had married the father of their first child were still married to him. Although nearly three quarters of the women had eventually wed, only slightly more than a third were currently married. Successful marriages were few and far between.

High levels of family flux might have indicated a poor prognosis for the children whose family lives had been generally unstable if not turbulent. Yet, the majority of the children seemed to be on track for at least completing high school and avoiding early parenthood—goals universally subscribed to by their parents throughout the study. However, because the children were still in their mid-teens, we decided to reinterview them in 1989 as they approached their 20s. We calculated that just under two fifths of the women and one fifth of the males had a child as a teenager. Nearly 80% of the women and 60% of the men completed high school. The dark side of the picture is that a significant minority of the men was in jail, had dropped out of high school, or was out of work in their late teens and early 20s.

It would be something of an overstatement to say that the high-risk families in the Baltimore study were doing well, at least by standards of the general population. But when compared to urban Blacks in several national samples (the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, the National Survey of Family Growth, and the Panel Survey of Income Dynamics), they were only slightly worse off than the families of comparable women who began childbearing after their teens. The findings of the Baltimore Study strongly suggest that the long-term costs of teenage childbearing, at least among Black families, were only modest. No doubt, some of the women would have achieved more and at an earlier age had they been able to delay their first birth, but because of their poor circumstances before pregnancy, they still would have encountered many of the same economic and social barriers to rising up to the middle class. In some situations, according to the mothers' own accounts, having a child helped to galvanize their motivation to succeed and surmount the challenges created by early parenthood.

In the mid-1990s, we decided to revisit the families once more. By this time, the young mothers had entered midlife and their children were in their late 20s. How was the next generation faring as they entered adulthood? Were the teenage mothers continuing to improve their circumstances during the fifth decade of their lives? In addition to surveying both populations, I carried out qualitative interviews with a subsample of the 250 families who remained in the study.

Without glossing over the very real difficulties faced by a substantial minority of the families, it can be said that the life circumstances of most continued to improve. By their mid-40s, many of the women had substantially furthered their educations. A tenth of the sample had completed college, and others were still taking courses in local schools. Three quarters were working, most in jobs with benefits and some security. Although many had given up hope of achieving a

successful union, a minority had entered a marriage or relationship that appeared to be viable. The vast majority had close and supportive relationships with their children (Furstenberg 2002).

Along similar lines, the majority of children were successfully functioning as adults—the women much more so than the men. Close to half of the men had been incarcerated at some point in their lives, and many were still living with the scars of interrupted educations and early work experiences. By contrast, the majority of the women were making much better progress toward attaining the goals shared by most young adults. A fifth had completed college, and others were likely to become college graduates in the next few years. Most were gainfully employed and self-sufficient by their late 20s. Slightly more than half the women and a third of the men had started families. Marriage, however, was far from universal even by their late 20s. Many of the women said that they were holding out for a match that would be more successful than their parents had achieved.

Most children of the teenage mothers who were interviewed at length expressed some bitterness about the role that their biological fathers had played in their upbringing. Some of these young adults articulated the view that it was better not to marry than to have a failed marriage, believing that a bad marriage was worse in the long run for the children and created more lasting dissension in the family. However, the great majority continued to hold out the hope that they could have a long-lasting marriage. They sometimes explained that they wanted marriages like their grandparents had so as not to repeat what their parents had gone through (Furstenberg 1995, 2001).

The results from the Baltimore Study alone do not constitute definitive proof that the problem of early childbearing has been overstated in public discourse and overestimated by early researchers including myself. But, during the 1990s, researchers began to devise a set of sophisticated techniques for detecting unobserved differences in nonexperimental studies. Although none of these methods is without its particular flaws, the bulk of evidence suggests that the Baltimore results are in line with the recent research on the impact that teenage parenthood has on the life chances of mothers, fathers, and their children (Maynard 1997, Geronimus & Korenman 1992, Geronimus et al. 1994, Hoffman et al. 1993). Some debate remains regarding the size of the effect resulting from a birth in the teenage years, which depends on the population and outcome of interest. Nonetheless, it now seems evident that early childbearing is neither a potent nor a permanent cause of long-term poverty and disadvantage among women who would have otherwise escaped this fate had they only waited to have their first child. Waiting five years to have a child might have improved their life prospects a bit, but it hardly would have changed their chances of making a successful marriage or entering the middle class.

As for their children, it is clear that they might have done better had their parents entered a stable marriage, but marital stability for African Americans is only modestly improved by waiting until their 20s to have a child. Most researchers who have examined the new generation of studies and considered the long-term impact of early childbearing now conclude that deferring parenthood, without

substantially changing the educational training and prospects of the urban poor and reducing the level of incarceration among minority males, is likely to make little difference in the perpetuation of poverty and disadvantage among the families like those in the Baltimore Study (Maynard 1997, Geronimus & Korenman 1992, Hoffman et al. 1993).

RECONSIDERING TEENAGE PARENTHOOD AS A PUBLIC POLICY ISSUE

Thus far, these surprising results regarding the consequences of teenage childbearing have done little to temper the growing national discussion about the perils of teenage parenthood. In addition, the drop in teenage childbearing over the past decade has been especially pronounced among African Americans, thereby refuting the once common view that female ghetto residents hold distinctive preferences for having children early in life because they were more likely to get maternal support in lieu of getting married (Geronimus 1990, 1991). Yet, a steady stream of professional and popular literature still continues to emphasize the considerable costs of early childbearing to the public and to the families of adolescent mothers (see, for example, National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy 2002). Even as the teenage childbearing rate began to decline in the early 1990s, President Clinton referred to teenage parenthood as the nation's most urgent problem. Understanding this disconnect between the facts about teenage childbearing and its continued identification as a major social problem remains one of the most interesting areas for future research on teenage parents.

Why Teenage Birth Rates Have Fallen

No one knows just why the rate among African-American teens has dropped, although the decline really continues a longstanding trend interrupted briefly in the 1980s. I contend that the high rate of nonmarital teenage childbearing was actually a remnant of America's longstanding pattern of early marriage and childbearing, a pattern that we clung to through the 1960s even as it became manifestly evident that early marriages were an unwise and precarious way of resolving an unplanned pregnancy. It has taken several decades for us to adjust to the disappearance of the safety net of early marriage. These days, few who become pregnant in their early teens elect to marry, whether they are Black or White, rich or poor.

Some commentators have argued that our relatively high teenage birth rates may be traced to the fact that we also have the highest levels of income inequality (Singh et al. 2001). And even more to the point, more children in the United States than any other Western nation grow up in poverty (Vleminckx & Smeeding 2000). Marion Wright Edelman, the well-known advocate for children, once observed that hope is the best form of contraception. Although hope is clearly not a substitute for contraception, Edelman is undoubtedly correct that teens are less likely to put up with the inconvenience of using contraception when they feel an early birth

will not seriously impair their immediate prospects. For someone tottering on the brink of school dropout, with no real likelihood of going to college, an untimely birth, if not a salvation as some have claimed, is certainly not a disaster either.

Younger women and men are gradually becoming more adept at managing the risks of pregnancy, partly because they have learned to deal with the more imminent risks of STD's and AIDS. Moreover, as abortion has become an increasingly less attractive or available option for pregnant teens, they have been able to turn to newer methods such as Norplant, Depo-Provera, the morning after pill, and, most recently, RU486 for preventing a viable conception.

The evidence has always suggested that relatively few teenagers plan or desire a pregnancy. Certainly, few women in the Baltimore Study indicated that they had intentionally become pregnant. Rather, most explained that it "just happened by mistake" or that they believed "it wouldn't happen to me." It has always seemed obvious to me that if somehow teens could be required to take a pill for 20 days in a row to become pregnant, rates of teenage childbearing would suddenly plummet and the problem of early childbearing would have disappeared by now.

Why Teenage Childbearing Remains a Social Problem

The problem of early childbearing is defined socially. Thus, political and public perceptions of teenage childbearing have not kept pace with either the dramatic declines in teenage childbearing rates or the research on the consequences of teenage births. And despite recent trends, birth rates for American teens are still highest among nations with advanced economies, in large part because American teenagers use contraception less reliably than their counterparts elsewhere. I suspect that the politics surrounding sex in the United States play an important role in understanding both the continued existence of teenage childbearing and the powerful draw it has on the public attention.

Americans, unlike most comparable nations, continue to embrace the ideal of premarital sexual chastity even as it is largely observed in the breach. I am inclined to believe that the origins of our sexual attitudes are more recent and more related to the continuing strength of Evangelical Christianity over the past several decades, especially in the political sphere, than the often-proposed Puritanical roots. Our national policy toward managing adolescent sexuality has been held hostage to the strongly held views of a small minority of the population.

Despite the overwhelming majority of parents who favor comprehensive instruction on sex and contraceptive use in schools, the programs offered by most school districts are more timid or aimed at promoting sexual abstinence (Kaiser Foundation 2000). Members of Congress and the last several administrations have actively supported this public posture despite the fact that the majority of school-age teens have continued to experiment with sex and show no inclination to behave differently than most of their parents did when they were adolescents. Few organizations and certainly few voting blocs have a strong stake in contending with the vocal opponents of sex education and the easy availability of contraception, not to mention abortion. Fearing that their funding might be revoked, even the family

planning establishment has been steadily retreating from its former position that realistic sex education is an important part of reproductive health services. Family planners appear to have accepted a Faustian bargain to pretend to endorse the principal of abstinence if they are allowed to talk about contraception as an option for youth who engage in sex. Whereas groups who actively try to convince teens that having sex is wrong and dangerous have increasingly hijacked federal, state, and local funding for sex education, the family planning establishment has backed out of the public debate.

The media discourse about contraceptive use has been similarly contained. Condoms have certainly become more visible and easily available though they still are not advertised on television except in public service announcements and on cable networks (Alan Guttmacher Institute 2001b). In other nations, contraceptives are treated more like deodorant than like contraband. How this ban can be justified in the twenty-first century is difficult to explain when so much of the media landscape is littered with sexual innuendos and incidents.

Sociologists and other researchers are not immune to American discomfort with sexuality, particularly among teens. Following the priorities of funding agencies, as well as personal beliefs, most research on teenage childbearing begins with the assumption that early sex is problematic. The purpose of most research is then to delineate the many negative consequences of teenage sex and childbearing, rather than to ask why it is regarded as a problem by such a large proportion of the American public.

As a result, surprisingly little research has been carried out on sexual politics. By this, I mean the puzzle of why Americans refuse to deal openly with the reality that most teens will not remain virgins and many will engage in sex during their mid-teens. I suspect cross-national differences in the approaches that policy makers, schools, family planners, parents, and peers take to teenage sexuality can in part explain relatively high rates of American teenage childbearing. To date, most cross-national research has focused on differences in public policy rather than the cultural sources of policies adopted by other nations.

Sociologists and other social scientific researchers have also given too little thought to how sexuality is treated in the private realm of the family. True, we have countless studies reporting on parental instruction about sex, contraception, and birth control, but few in-depth studies exist on the content of these conversations. What we do know suggests parents today are hardly different from a generation ago when the mothers in the Baltimore Study told their daughters, "Don't do it but if you do, be sure to use something." Families, however, appear to manage sex quite differently in parts of Europe—parents are more likely to regard the transition to sexual intercourse during teenage years as a normal event, and first sex often occurs at home (Alan Guttmacher Institute 2001a). There is also a strong need for more comparative research both across nations and within class and ethnic subcultures. Almost no real ethnographic or even qualitative work exists on how sex is managed on a day-to-day basis in the family, a topic that sociologists of culture should find inviting and informative.

Similarly, relatively little observational work exists on how peer cultures treat sexuality, sexual transitions, sexual relations, contraception, and abortion. I have the impression, mostly based on casual observation, that we are slowly and tentatively moving toward a more open discussion of sexuality in peer relationships. Does this openness, presuming that I am right, imply that sexual partners feel more comfortable in discussing and planning sexual relationships? Survey data provide some purchase on this question though it is not clear whether it can be assessed historically. Qualitative research on how the sexual norms of the larger society are interpreted and applied by teenagers and young adults in their own relationships and the relationships of their friends would also be valuable.

In short, the politics surrounding sex in the United States have constrained the research carried out over the past several decades. As a result, most social scientists have failed to question why early sex is so widely viewed as problematic. In this particular sense, we social scientists have unwittingly been part of the problem because we are part of the culture that considers sex as so problematic and fraught with dangers (for an exception, see the work of Michelle Fine 1988). Treating it so creates a self-fulfilling prophecy as teens and their families treat sex (along with alcohol and drugs) as illicit temptations. True, sex poses dangers for the young as well as the old, but these risks can be managed more successfully by accepting, as other nations do, that sex among the young will occur, rather than trying to prevent its occurrence. We do not have to convince teens that having children early in life is undesirable—most think so before they have sex; we only have to make it easier and more attractive to avoid this outcome.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

After nearly 40 years of working on and thinking about the issue of teenage childbearing, I have come to believe that remaining in an area of research for so long has its advantages if only because you have ample opportunity to challenge and revise your earlier work and respond to fresh information. Teenage childbearing provided a way of observing the destinies of the disadvantaged and brought forth surprising results that still have not been widely accepted by politicians, policy makers, and the public at large. Most importantly, in our zeal to identify troubling issues, we must be wary of becoming part of the problem by fashioning sociological stereotypes that are picked up and reified by others.

In hindsight, it seems apparent that the concerns created by teenage childbearing have been misplaced and inadequately conceptualized. The demography of the moment misled us into thinking that teenage mothers—especially Black teenage mothers—were different from the rest of us, different if not in their motives, then in the lives that they were compelled to lead by virtue of their early childbearing. Now it seems more likely that teenage mothers hardly differ from women in their 20s who drift into parenthood and eschew marriage because the father of their child is not a suitable partner. Marriage has become something of a luxury good, reserved for those who have access to good education, steady employment, and

middle-class lives. The bottom third, if not half, of the U.S. population cannot count on entering a stable union.

I have alluded throughout this essay to policies that might more realistically address families like those that I have come to know. We can do a much better job of preparing young people to make a sexual transition outside of marriage if we accept the fact that most will do so, typically in their mid- to late teens. These teens, as I have argued, are not seeking to become parents; they do so because they are ineffective at preventing conception and often find it difficult or unacceptable to terminate an unplanned pregnancy.

Marriage is out of the question for most of these young people. The fathers of their children are typically not appealing marriage partners either in the short run or long term. If they are to become so, we must craft policies to bring low-income minority men back into society by giving them the added resources to become educated and able workers as well as capable mates. At the present, potential mothers, whether in their teens or their 20s, would rather go it alone than enter a marriage that has a poor prospect of lasting. Unless American society is prepared to provide more support for fragile families, we can expect to do no better than what was accomplished by the families in the Baltimore Study.

I often think of the teenage mothers and their children whose lives have become so intertwined with my own. I find myself wondering whether I have given voice to their concerns in ways that have improved their lot in life, or if I have merely profited professionally by recounting their misfortunes and triumphs. I believe that we incur an obligation to those who share their stories with us both to tell it accurately and to tell it to those whose privileged position in society leads them to invent and often distort the reasons why others do not share in their blessings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This review draws from an earlier chapter that I wrote for *Looking at Lives: American Longitudinal Studies of the Twentieth Century* (pp. 37–57), edited by Erin Phelps, Frank F. Furstenberg, and Anne Colby. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. This review benefited from the excellent editorial comments of my students, Janel Benson, Adair Crosley, and especially Sheela Kennedy, who provided assistance and criticism on the final draft.

The Annual Review of Sociology is online at <http://soc.annualreviews.org>

LITERATURE CITED

- Abrahamse A, Morrison PA, Waite LJ. 1988. *Beyond Stereotypes: Who Becomes a Teenage Mother*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corp.
- Alan Guttmacher Inst. 2001a. *Teenage Sexual and Reproductive Behavior in Developed Countries*. Occas. Rep. No. 3. New York: Alan Guttmacher Inst.
- Alan Guttmacher Inst. 2001b. *Teenage Sexual and Reproductive Behavior in Developed Countries*. Occas. Rep. No. 3. New York: Alan Guttmacher Inst.

- Countries—Country Report for the United States. Occas. Rep. No. 8.* New York: Alan Guttmacher Inst.
- Banfield EC. 1974. *The Unheavenly City Revisited.* Boston: Little, Brown
- Becker HS. 1994. Foi por acaso: Conceptualizing coincidence. *Sociol. Q.* 34:183–94
- Campbell AA. 1968. The role of family planning in the reduction of poverty. *J. Marriage Fam.* 30(2):236–45
- Cherlin AJ. 1992. *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press
- Cherlin AJ. 1998. Marriage and marital dissolution among Black americans. *J. Comp. Fam. Stud., Special issue: A Black Family Life Comparative Perspective* 39(Spring):147–58
- Cloward RA, Ohlin LE. 1960. *Delinquency and Opportunity: A Theory of Delinquent Gangs.* Glencoe, IL: Free
- Ellwood DT, Jencks C. 2001. *The growing differences in family structure: What do we know? Where do we look for answers?* Pap. New Inequality Program, Russell Sage Found.
- Elo I, Furstenberg FF Jr, King RB. 1999. Adolescent females: Their sexual partners and the fathers of their children. *J. Marriage Fam.* 61:74–84
- Fine M. 1988. Sexuality, schooling, and adolescent females: The missing discourse of desire. *Harvard Educ. Rev.* 58(1):29–53
- Furstenberg FF Jr. 1976. *Unplanned Parenthood: The Social Consequences of Teenage Childbearing.* New York: Free
- Furstenberg FF Jr. 1995. Fathering in the inner city: Paternal participation and public policy. In *Fatherhood: Contemporary Theory, Research, and Social Policy*, ed. W Marsiglio, pp. 119–47. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Furstenberg FF Jr. 1998. When will teenage childbearing become a problem? The implications of the western experience for developing countries. *Stud. Fam. Plan.* 29(2):246–53
- Furstenberg FF Jr. 2001. The fading dream: Prospects for marriage in the inner city. In *Problem of the Century*, ed. E Anderson, D Massey, pp. 224–46. New York: Russell Sage Found.
- Furstenberg FF Jr. 2002. *From teenage mother to middle-age matriarch: a journey between two racial stereotypes.* Presented at Race/Ethn. Self/Cult., Inequal. Conf., Princeton Univ., Princeton, NJ
- Furstenberg FF Jr, Brooks-Gunn J, Morgan SP. 1987. *Adolescent Mothers in Later Life.* New York: Cambridge Univ. Press
- Geronimus AT. 1990. *Why teenage childbearing might be sensible.* Annu. Meet. Am. Assoc. Adv. Sci., New Orleans. Washington, DC: AAAS
- Geronimus AT. 1991. Teenage childbearing and social and reproductive disadvantage: the evolution of complex question and the demise of simple answers. *Fam. Relat.* 40: 463–71
- Geronimus AT, Korenman S. 1992. The socioeconomic consequences of teen childbearing reconsidered. *Q. J. Econ.* 107(4):1187–214
- Geronimus AT, Korenman S, Hillemeier MM. 1994. Does young maternal age adversely affect child development? Evidence from cousin comparisons in the United States. *Popul. Dev. Rev.* 20(3):585–609
- Goode WJ. 1961. Illegitimacy, anomie, and cultural penetration. *Am. Sociol. Rev.* 26(6): 910–25
- Goode WJ. 1963. *World Revolutions and Family Patterns.* New York: Free
- Hardy JB, Welcher DW, Stanley J, Dallas JR. 1978. Long range outcome of adolescent pregnancy. *Clin. Obstet. Gynecol.* 21(4): 1215–32
- Hayes C, ed. 1987. *Risking the Future: Adolescent Sexuality, Pregnancy, and Childbearing.* Washington, DC: Natl. Acad. Press
- Hoffman SD, Foster EM, Furstenberg FF Jr. 1993. Reevaluating the costs of teenage childbearing. *Demography* 30(2):291–96
- Kaiser Family Found. 2000. *Sex Education in America: A View From Inside the Nation's Classrooms.* Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Fam. Found.
- Klerman LV, Jekel JF. 1973. *School-Age*

- Mothers: Problems, Programs, and Policies.* New Haven, CT: Shoe String
- Lawson A, Rhode DL, eds. 1993. *The Politics of Pregnancy: Adolescent Sexuality and Public Policy.* New Haven: Yale Univ. Press
- Lewis O. 1966. *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty: San Juan and New York.* New York: Random House
- Luker K. 1991. *Dubious Conceptions.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press
- Martin JA, Hamilton BE, Ventura SJ, Menacker F, Park MM. 2002. *Births: Final Data for 2000.* Hyattsville, MD: Natl. Cent. Health Stat.
- Maynard RA, ed. 1997. *Kids Having Kids: Economic Costs and Social Consequences of Teen Pregnancy.* Washington, DC: Urban Inst. Press
- Moore KA, Simms MC, Betsey CL. 1986. *Choice and Circumstance: Racial Differences in Adolescent Sexuality and Fertility.* New Brunswick, NJ: Trans. Books
- Moynihan DP. 1965. *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.* Washington, DC: Off. Pol. Plan. Res., US Dept. Labor
- Murray C. 1984. *Losing Ground: American Social Policy.* New York: Basic Books
- Nathanson CA. 1992. *Dangerous Passage: the Social Control of Women's Adolescence.* Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press
- Natl. Campaign Prevent Teen Pregnancy. 2002. *Not Just Another Single Issue: Teen Pregnancy Prevention's Link to Other Critical Social Issues.* <http://www.teenpregnancy.org>
- O'Connell M, Moore MJ. 1980. The Legitimacy Status of First Births to U.S. Women Aged 15–24, 1939–1978. *Fam. Plan. Perspect.* 12(1):16–23+25
- Placek PJ, Hendershot, GH. 1974. Public welfare and family planning: an empirical study of the "Brood Sow" myth. *Soc. Probl.* 21(5):658–73
- Rainwater L, Yancey WL. 1967. *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Singh S, Darroch JE, Frost JJ. 2001. Socioeconomic disadvantage and adolescent women's sexual and reproductive behavior: the case of five developed countries. *Family Plan. Perspect.* 33(6):251–58, 289
- Smith HL, Morgan SP, Koropecykj-Cox T. 1996. A decomposition of trends in the non-marital fertility ratios of blacks and whites in the United States, 1960–92. *Demography* 33(2):141–51
- Ventura SJ, Mathews TJ, Hamilton BE. 2001. *Births to Teenagers in the United States, 1940–2000.* Hyattsville, MD: Natl. Cent. Health Stat.
- Vincent CE. 1961. *Unmarried Mothers.* New York/Glencoe, IL:Free
- Vinovskis MA. 1988. *An 'Epidemic' of Adolescent Pregnancy?* New York: Oxford Univ. Press
- Vleminckx K, Smeeding T, eds. 2000. *Child well-being, child poverty and child policy in modern nations: what do we know?* Bristol, UK: Policy Press
- Weeks JR. 1976. *Teenage Marriages.* Westport, CT: Greenwood
- Wilson WJ. 1987. *The Truly Disadvantaged.* Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press



CONTENTS

Frontispiece— <i>Raymond Boudon</i>	xii
PREFATORY CHAPTERS	
Beyond Rational Choice Theory, <i>Raymond Boudon</i>	1
Teenage Childbearing as a Public Issue and Private Concern, <i>Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr.</i>	23
THEORY AND METHODS	
The Science of Asking Questions, <i>Nora Cate Schaeffer and Stanley Presser</i>	65
The Changing Picture of Max Weber's Sociology, <i>Richard Swedberg</i>	283
SOCIAL PROCESSES	
The Sociology of the Self, <i>Peter L. Callero</i>	115
INSTITUTIONS AND CULTURE	
Relationships in Adolescence, <i>Peggy C. Giordano</i>	257
Still "Not Quite as Good as Having Your Own"? Toward a Sociology of Adoption, <i>Allen P. Fisher</i>	335
The Economic Sociology of Conventions: Habit, Custom, Practice, and Routine in Market Order, <i>Nicole Woolsey Biggart and Thomas D. Beamish</i>	443
FORMAL ORGANIZATIONS	
Covert Political Conflict in Organizations: Challenges from Below, <i>Calvin Morrill, Mayer N. Zald, and Hayagreeva Rao</i>	391
POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SOCIOLOGY	
Skills Mismatch in the Labor Market, <i>Michael J. Handel</i>	135
Day Labor Work, <i>Abel Valenzuela, Jr.</i>	307
The Lopsided Continent: Inequality in Latin America, <i>Kelly Hoffman and Miguel Angel Centeno</i>	363
Associations and Democracy: Between Theories, Hopes, and Realities, <i>Archon Fung</i>	515

DIFFERENTIATION AND STRATIFICATION

- The Dynamics of Racial Residential Segregation,
Camille Zubrinsky Charles 167
- Racial and Ethnic Stratification in Educational Achievement and
Attainment, *Grace Kao and Jennifer S. Thompson* 417
- The Intersection of Gender and Race in the Labor Market, *Irene Browne
and Joya Misra* 487
- Cognitive Skills and Noncognitive Traits and Behaviors in Stratification
Processes, *George Farkas* 541

INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

- The African American “Great Migration” and Beyond, *Stewart E. Tolnay* 209
- The Potential Relevances of Biology to Social Inquiry, *Jeremy Freese,
Jui-Chung Allen Li, and Lisa D. Wade* 233
- Racial Measurement in the American Census: Past Practices and
Implications for the Future, *C. Matthew Snipp* 563

DEMOGRAPHY

- Population and African Society, *Tukufu Zuberi, Amson Sibanda,
Ayaga Bawah, and Amadou Noubbissi* 465

URBAN AND RURAL COMMUNITY SOCIOLOGY

- The Urban Street Gang After 1970, *Brenda C. Coughlin and
Sudhir Alladi Venkatesh* 41
- Transitions from Prison to Community: Understanding Individual
Pathways, *Christy A. Visher and Jeremy Travis* 89

POLICY

- Welfare-State Regress in Western Europe: Politics, Institutions,
Globalization, and Europeanization, *Walter Korpi* 589

INDEXES

- Subject Index 611
- Cumulative Index of Contributing Authors, Volumes 20–29 635
- Cumulative Index of Chapter Titles, Volumes 20–29 638

ERRATA

An online log of corrections to *Annual Review of Sociology* chapters (if any, 1997 to the present) may be found at <http://soc.annualreviews.org/errata.shtml>