First the good news: the rate of teenage childbearing in the United States has been falling since the 1950s, and it has taken a nosedive in the last decade, plunging by 35 percent between 1991 and 2005. Rates of adolescent childbearing are now at historic lows for all racial-ethnic groups. And this isn’t because more pregnant teens are opting for abortions. In fact, the teenage abortion rate has been falling steadily since the 1980s, a trend that continues today. By 2002, the Guttmacher Institute reports, the teenage abortion rate was 50 percent lower than its peak in 1988.1

But now the bad news: the United States still has the highest occurrence of teenage childbearing in the industrialized world at just over 40 births per 1000 teenage girls aged 15 to 19. To put that in perspective, the comparable rate is 22 births in Canada, 13 births in Germany, and 4 births per 1000 girls in Japan. Our rates parallel those in many developing countries. And in 2006, for the first time in 15 years, there was a new uptick in teen births. These figures are disturbing because teen childbearing is much more of a problem today than it was in the past, when it was less necessary for girls to postpone motherhood to invest in their education and prepare to make their own living in a competitive labor market.2

The birth rates of all American teens except Asian-Americans (17.3 births per 1000 Asian-American girls) outpace teen birth rates in industrialized countries. But there are substantial racial-ethnic differences in teenage childbearing within the United States. In 2005, the U.S. teen birth rate was 81.5 per thousand girls for Latinas, 60.9 for African-Americans, 52.5 for Native Americans and 26.0 for whites.3

These figures lead many people to wonder why American teens are so irresponsible.4 The issue came up recently in a sociology course I teach. We had been discussing how an increasing number of families are feeling the crunch of falling real wages and job outsourcing, especially in areas of concentrated poverty. “I get that these things make life harder if you’re an adult and already have a family,” one student interrupted. “But if you’re a teenager, why would you start a family before you’ve gotten out of poverty? You’re just going to trap yourself and your kid forever. Why don’t you just wait to have a baby?” Many heads nodded in agreement as she concluded, “It seems so selfish!”

At first glance, the causal relationship between teen childbearing and poverty seems self-evident. Teen mothers are more likely to be poor and to receive welfare, and are less likely to finish high school, than women who delay childbearing. Their children are more likely to be born at low birth weights, have behavioral problems, and——
weights, have behavioral problems, do poorly in school, and drop out before graduation. Female children of teen mothers are also more likely to end up as teen mothers themselves, while male children have a greater chance of going to prison. One advocacy group estimates that all this costs U.S. taxpayers around $9.1 billion per year in social services.\(^5\)

But if we are further to reduce the rate of teenage childbirth, we need to understand it more thoroughly, looking more closely at its complicated causes and consequences. The first step in this effort is to see teenage pregnancy in social context. When we look at the problem in context, we see a very different picture than the stereotype of promiscuous girls popping out babies to collect a welfare check. Instead, we see adolescents growing up in neighborhoods with a long history of limited access to adequate schools and secure jobs—teens whose parents or grandparents paid their dues by holding down menial jobs, only to watch their neighborhoods fall deeper into decay and job prospects for their children dwindle. We see that, in the poorest areas of our country, motherhood may be the only way that an impoverished girl can envision having a future, or a measure of control in her life. Looking at the issue in context, it is not that teenage childbirth represents a good choice, but that it is an often understandable one, given the lack of better options.

Rather than being the fundamental cause of poverty, adolescent childbirth is often more a result of pre-existing impoverishment, most especially of growing up in concentrated poverty. Experts estimate that 83 percent of teenage mothers come from disadvantaged backgrounds. In fact, teenage childbirth and poverty are so intertwined that taking the 15 states with the highest rates of poverty in the country and comparing them with the 15 states with the highest rates of teenage pregnancy, we find that 11 states appear on both lists.\(^6\)

Looking at teenage childbirth in context suggests the need for social policies such different than the ones pursued in the last two decades. Offering poor unwed mothers “incentives” for marriage or providing teens with better abstinence-only sex education is unlikely to lower our current rates of teenage childbirth because such programs do not address the simple fact that poor teens often do not have much reason to put off childbirth. If we want to help teenagers make different choices about parenthood, we need to give urgent attention to the appalling quality of education offered in poor—usually segregated—schools, the social isolation, and lack of decent jobs in areas of concentrated poverty, and the tenacious racism that blames the desperate poverty of many urban populations of color on flawed moral values. If we want teenagers to wait to have kids, we need to give them other options for the future, real incentives to wait.

In historical perspective, the concern over the birth rates of impoverished girls is nothing new. Pundits have always worried about the wrong sort of people—especially the poor and immigrants—having too many children. What sets contemporary teenage parents apart from their historical counterparts is that most births to teenagers today occur outside of marriage. But teenagers are hardly unique in this regard. Nonmarital childbirth has doubled in the last 25 years, and currently 37 percent of all births in the U.S. are to unmarried mothers.\(^7\)

Nevertheless, the rise in unmarried childbirth, its high visibility in many African-American communities, and the socioeconomic consequences attributed to teenage pregnancy fueled the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which famously ended “welfare as we know it.” At the time, public concern over unmarried teenage childbirth was at its peak. In 1995, a year before he signed PRWORA into law, President Clinton called teenage pregnancy “our most serious social problem.” Welfare was seen as spawning the rise in female-headed families and encouraging a “culture of poverty” that promoted unwed childbirth, especially among African-Americans. Unmarried teenage pregnancy was singled out for special consideration under PRWORA and its state-controlled block assistance program, Temporary
Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Specifically, TANF mandated that teen mothers live with their parents and stay in school to receive benefits. It also limited them, along with other welfare recipients, to a maximum of five years during which they could receive assistance. Proponents hoped that “getting tough” on welfare recipients would end teen childbearing and reduce poverty.8

The fact is, however, that prior to the passage of PRWORA, scholars had been in “widespread agreement” that welfare did not cause unmarried childbearing, teenage or otherwise. It is true that there was a rise in unmarried female-headed families from the 1960s to the 1980s. But the real value of welfare payments declined significantly during this same period. If mothers could buy increasingly less with their monthly welfare checks, it’s hard to imagine that this was an incentive to create more mouths to feed. Sociologist Mark Robert Rank studied 3,000 welfare recipients over eight years; they simply laughed at the suggestion that they would have additional children in order to collect an extra $60–90 a month in benefits. Although such research did not receive much attention in the popular press, the government was well aware of it. As early as the Reagan administration, the White House Working Group on the Family acknowledged that when it came to claims that welfare encouraged women to bear more children, the “statistical evidence does not prove those suppositions.”9

When we look at the United States in global perspective, the welfare incentive argument makes even less sense. If welfare encourages teens to bear children out of wedlock, many European countries offering more generous welfare benefits should be overrun with the children of unmarried teen parents by now. Instead the opposite is true: the rates of teenage childbearing are so low in France, Germany, and Sweden that public health officials in these countries neglect to see teenage childbearing as much of a problem at all.10

The rate of U.S. teen childbearing has fallen markedly since 1991, prompting some to proclaim the welfare reform of 1996 a success. It’s a politically convenient coincidence, but research does not support the conclusion that welfare reform is responsible for the recent decline in teen fertility. To study the relationship between welfare reform and adolescent childbearing, social demographers compared the fertility of teenage girls before and after welfare reform, using several methods to control for subtle differences in family background and socioeconomic disadvantage. When they compared rates of teenage fertility in the pre- and post-reform eras, they found that “welfare policy has little effect on the decisions of teenage girls to have births.”11

In another study, researchers compared teenage pregnancy and birth before and after PRWORA and found no statistically significant differences between the two time periods. They concluded that none of their data “suggests that welfare reform had its intended effect of reducing teenage fertility.”12

Arguments that welfare is the cause of teenage pregnancy generally fail to consider teen mothers’ socioeconomic backgrounds prior to getting pregnant. Study after study has shown that when background characteristics such as poverty, neighborhood, and social isolation from job networks are controlled for, welfare and race-ethnicity cease to explain variations in teenage pregnancy at all. For example, Christopher Jencks and Susan Mayer found that, controlling for race and family background, sixteen- to eighteen-year-old girls were considerably more likely to bear children while unmarried if they lived in poor neighborhoods than if they lived in economically average neighborhoods.13

Casting further doubt on the notion of a racialized “culture of poverty,” Jonathan Crane found that the white teens living in the poorest areas of the largest cities demonstrated patterns of teenage childbearing that were “more like [those of] black teens than other whites in terms of childbearing.”

In another study of the frequency with which they married, and the likelihood of socioeconomic disadvantage.

Other researchers have found that teenage attitudes about whites—evaporated by welfare reform. In their results, they concluded that a substantial proportion of the explanation for the decline in teenage childbearing.14

So concentrated on the welfare receipt.15 Among the problems that the economic downturn, teenage mothers are forced out of school, and to have babies. Almost all of that variation remains. Northern white boys are more likely repeat a grade, and overall, kids of teenage parents. In a 2007 study of the effect of welfare reform, the primary factor in children’s standardized test scores, sociologists Judith Henig and Mary Jane Shanahan state, “we find that for the first time, there is a positive correlation between poverty and family background.”

While advances in understanding the effect of poverty on children’s school performance, it is worth noting that the effects can be mitigated by programs and policies that address the root causes of economic disadvantage. It’s worth noting that the effects can be mitigated by programs and policies that address the root causes of economic disadvantage. For example, programs that provide access to education and job opportunities, that determine the family’s socioeconomic status, can help to narrow the gap between rich and poor. Class is not just a matter of family background; it is a social relation defined by a combination of race, ethnicity, and gender. These factors interact, and they affect individuals differently, depending on their race, ethnicity, and gender. desks, that determine the family’s socioeconomic status, and the community in which they currently live. In other words, the effects of poverty on children can be mitigated by programs and policies that address the root causes of economic disadvantage.

The idea of class is complex, and the relationship between children’s school performance and class in our society is not straightforward. It is not simply a matter of family background or race; it is a social relation defined by a combination of race, ethnicity, and gender. These factors interact, and they affect individuals differently, depending on their race, ethnicity, and gender.
In another study of the effect of neighborhood on teenage sexual activity, researchers found "the frequency with which youth engage in sexual intercourse, the number of partners they have sex with, and the likelihood of engaging in unprotected intercourse all increase with the level of socioeconomic disadvantage of their communities."14

Other researchers found that what had first seemed to be a strong racial-ethnic difference in teenage attitudes about childbearing—with African-American teens far more approving of it than whites—evaporated when they controlled for neighborhood economic disadvantage. Based on their results, they concluded that in fact, "neighborhood economic disadvantage accounts for a substantial proportion of the racial difference in sexual attitude[s]. . . . In short, race is not the explanation for the observed racial differences" in attitudes about adolescent sexuality and childbearing.15

So concentrated poverty is a better explanation for teenage childbearing than race-ethnicity or welfare receipt.16 And scholars have also found that socioeconomic disadvantage explains most of the problems that the children of teen parents are assumed to inherit. Recall that the children of teenage mothers are more likely to do poorly in school and on standardized tests, to drop out of school, and to have more behavioral and health problems than kids born to adult mothers. Some of that variation remains after controlling for socioeconomic background: kids of teen moms are more likely to repeat a grade in school, for instance, even after controlling for poverty. But on the whole, kids of teen parents are less disadvantaged by their mother's age at birth than first assumed. In a 2007 study of the well-being of kids born to teen mothers, researchers found that once socioeconomic background was controlled for, teenage pregnancy itself had little or no effect on children's standardized test scores or a variety of negative behavioral outcomes. In another study, sociologists Judith Levin, Harold Pollack and Maureen Comfort come to similar conclusions. They state, "we find that early motherhood's strong negative correlation with children's test scores and positive correlation with children's grade repetition is almost entirely explained by the individual and family background factors of teen mothers themselves."17

While advances in statistical methods have allowed scholars to control for more subtle background variance, and neighborhood disadvantage is a reasonable control for class background, it is worth noting that there is no perfect way to separate racial-ethnic factors from those associated with economic disadvantage in the U.S. Structural and economic forces have consigned people of color to economically disadvantaged and socially isolated neighborhoods over long periods of time, subjecting them to the material consequences of racial-ethnic discrimination.

Class is not just defined by a person's income or educational status at a particular point in time. It is a social relationship that places one group of people in a certain pattern of interaction with other groups and gives group members a set of shared experiences, expectations, problem-solving habits, vulnerabilities, and privileges. It is one's long-term options, not just a particular income or job, that determines class status. This is why a college student who is broke is in a higher and more secure class, with completely different dynamics, than a resident of an inner city, even one who is currently flush. In our country, class has been constructed not just by economic processes but also by racial exclusion and ethnic stratification over a long period of time.18

The idea of class as a social relationship must inform our understanding of why teenage childbearing occurs disproportionately among some segments of the population. It is true, for instance, that Latina and African-American teens experience higher rates of childbearing than their white counterparts. But this fact demonstrates first of all the embedded relationship of race, ethnicity, and class in our country, not that racially or ethnically derived values cause disadvantage, as "culture of poverty" proponents maintain.
Contrary to the history most people are raised on, the historical oppression of African-Americans did not end with slavery. In the late nineteenth century, they were driven out of skilled trades, exploited in Southern agriculture, confined to the oldest, most dilapidated sections of Northern cities, and excluded from industrial jobs and union work. After World War II, thousands of African Americans moved North to seek work. As late as the 1950s, African Americans were the frequent target of organized mob actions and riots. Nevertheless, despite facing continuing violence and segregation, many managed to gain footholds in manufacturing, especially in the then-heavily-unionized automobile, rubber, and steel industries. These occupational improvements, combined with the struggle for civil rights, opened up new employment and educational opportunities in the 1960s.19

For many African Americans, however, these victories were offset by losses in “foothold industries” and the simultaneous transition of goods-based to service-based industries. As technological advances led to a constriction of blue-collar jobs and the labor market began to divide into low-wage and high-wage sectors, the “window of opportunity” that had opened in the 1960s slammed shut.

African-Americans were particularly hard hit in the 1970s and 1980s by the relocation of many industries from central-city locations to more remote suburban sites. Sociologist William Julius Wilson reports that the relocation of over 2,300 companies from Illinois cities to suburbs in the 1970s resulted in a 24.3 percent drop in that African-American employment, while the white employment rate declined by just 9.8 percent. Furthermore, the manufacturing industries in which blacks were heavily concentrated have gone through tremendous restructuring and consolidation since the 1970s. The movement of jobs to the suburbs in the 1970s combined with racially biased housing patterns to leave working-class blacks clustered in poor, segregated neighborhoods in which there were few connections to job networks. Most middle- and working-class families relocated during this time period, leaving the remaining inner-city residents all the more isolated, and with few tangible examples of neighbors experiencing successful employment or economic security.20

In recent decades, the percentage of Latinos in our country’s poor has risen sharply. Although Latinos face many of the same factors that have historically constrained job opportunities for African-Americans, their situation is also significantly shaped by immigration. Undocumented Latinos are overrepresented in the low-wage, unregulated service sector of our economy and have few legal routes to pursue workplace and social equity.21

Due to a mutually reinforcing cycle of discrimination and economic inequality, people of color are not only more likely to be more poor than whites, but are also more likely to reside in areas of concentrated poverty. While only 7 percent of all poor whites live in what are termed “extreme poverty areas,” 32 percent of all poor Latinos and 39 percent of all poor African-Americans reside in such areas. Here residents face substandard housing, ill-funded schools, and social isolation, although they do get more than their fair share of liquor stores and landfills.22

Despite historical differences in the occupational patterns and cultural adaptations of various racial-ethnic groups, socioeconomic disadvantage is more important than race-ethnicity in explaining rates of teenage pregnancy. Cultural explanations of teenage childbearing are, all too often, thinly disguised appeals to racial and ethnic prejudices. As Thomas J. Sugrue argues (this volume), the emphasis on an independent causal role of values ignores the matrix of economic isolation and discrimination in which people absorb and modify generally held social values on the basis of practical experience. Politically, the culture-of-poverty thesis systematically ignores social class, appealing to racial-ethnic prejudice to justify meager social spending, reasoning that funding will be worthless until there are fewer depressions. The knowledge that teenage pregnancies were positively associated with Moore and Lindsay’s work report more working-class than white

The tendency to a cycle to break. For the result of cultural practitioners work could pursue educational opportunities with regard to female confinement.

But while all too often more compulsively men in Los Angeles than their daughters to go sexually dangerous two-thirds men than preserve.

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will be worthless until inner-city residents acquire the right values. But values can’t explain why there are fewer decent jobs in inner-city areas, even though the link between employment and teenage pregnancy is clear. Lopoo and DeLeire found in a 2006 study that state unemployment rates were positively and statistically significantly related to teen birth rates, while sociologists Mignon Moore and Lindsay Chase-Lansdale found that “the risk of pregnancy is reduced when adolescents report more working adults in their social networks.”

The tendency to explain teen pregnancy through the lens of “culture” or “values” is itself a hard cycle to break. For instance, researchers often explain Latino teens’ lower contraceptive use as a result of cultural patterns or religious beliefs. For example, a qualitative study of teenage-pregnancy practitioners working with Latino youth reported that counseling teens to avoid pregnancy so they could pursue education seemed to be “at odds with traditional Hispanic cultural values,” especially with regard to female self-sufficiency.

But while all teens make choices about sex and childbearing in a cultural context, that context is often more complicated than such statements imply. Gloria González-López interviewed immigrant men in Los Angeles about their daughters’ sexual activity. She found that while most fathers wanted their daughters to wait to have sex until they were married, “protecting their daughters from a sexually dangerous society and improving their socioeconomic future is of greater concern to these men than preserving virginity per se.”

Buttressing an economic rather than cultural reading of Latina teen childbearing, a recent study found that many Latino immigrant youth experience significant structural hurdles to obtaining contraceptives: language barriers make finding and using family planning services difficult, and undocumented teens, in particular, worry that seeking such services will alert the authorities to their illegal status in the country and put their families at risk of deportation. While many non-Latino sexually active teens worry that their parents will disapprove of their actions, most don’t have to consider their family’s legal and residential security when they seek contraception.

Class, culture, and family background interact in complicated ways. In many studies, poor academic skills and low prospects for educational attainment rank as high as poverty in predicting the incidence of adolescent childbearing. One study finds that the likelihood that a teen will have a child while unmarried is significantly reduced if she has high grades, high standardized test scores, and plans to graduate from college. Linda Waite and her colleagues at the Rand Corporation found that teen birth rates were highest among girls who had the greatest economic disadvantage and the lowest academic ability. Again, however, educational attainment is difficult to disentangle from class and from the long and continuing history of racial segregation in public schools. Although terms such as “academic ability” and “educational aspirations” have a neutral ring, they are factors highly tempered by social privilege.

Most people believe that able and committed children will automatically stay in school, and that their efforts will pay off in an economically stable future. But the social isolation of the poorest of the poor creates neighborhoods with few connections to the job market and few opportunities to get a decent education. To be sure, a gifted student can occasionally, with a little luck, get a good education. But many equally intelligent students run into dead ends, while average students, or less-able students who might have succeeded with the extra help available in more affluent communities, fall further behind.

The correlation between educational discouragement and bearing a child in one’s teens is striking: high school dropouts are six times more likely than their contemporaries who remain in school to become unmarried parents. In a state-by-state study of school segregation, researchers at Harvard University’s Civil Rights Project found that in 2001, only 50 percent of African-American...
students, 51 percent of Native American students, and 53 percent of Latino students graduated from high school (the comparable rates for whites and Asian-Americans are 75 percent and 77 percent, respectively). A high school teacher in a poor school in East St. Louis explains the connection between poverty, dropping out of school, and bearing a child as a teenager:

I have four girls right now in my senior home room who are pregnant or have just had babies. When I ask why this happens, I am told, "Well, there’s no reason not to have a baby. There’s nothing for me in public school." The truth is, that’s a pretty honest answer. A diploma from a ghetto school doesn’t count for much in the United States today. So, if this is really the last education that a person’s going to get, she’s probably perceptive in that statement. Just how little does a diploma from a poor high school count? Designs for Change, a Chicago-based research center, found in a survey of the eighteen poorest schools in the country that only 3.7 percent of the students both graduate and can read at the national level. In other words, if 6,700 students enter the ninth grade in these eighteen schools each year, only 300 will make it out with both a diploma and adequate reading skills. Due to inequitable and antiquated systems of school funding, most schools in impoverished minority communities do not possess the funds to offer college preparatory or advanced classes, even though residents of such communities often tax themselves at higher rates than more affluent areas. Residents of New York’s underprivileged Roosevelt school district have one of the highest property tax rates in the state, for example.

Because educational opportunities are so unequal in the U.S., some experts have argued that schools do much more than prepare kids for future jobs or education, but in fact sort children by their probable class destinations. In schools, both rich and poor, children are instilled with a sense of the opportunities available to them, of their place in the social order. Children who attend poor, segregated schools soon learn to doubt their capabilities as well as their opportunities, giving them little incentive to engage in what middle-class Americans would consider rational planning for the future. Jonathan Kozol, author of some of the most incisive work on public school inequity, found many “industry-embedded schools” in the poor and segregated districts he studies. For example, one inner-city school in Chicago offers a comprehensive “culinary arts” educational track to its high school students to prepare them to work in restaurant kitchens (the program is co-sponsored by Hyatt Hotels, which offers jobs to students upon completion of their training). Sociologist William Julius Wilson argues that most inner-city schools “train minority youth so that they feel and appear capable of only performing jobs in the low-wage sectors.”

Such training starts young. One kindergarten Kozol visited had a retail corner in its classroom, complete with a “poster that displayed the names of several retail stores: JCPenney, Wal-Mart, Kmart, Sears, and a few others. ‘It’s like working in a store,’ a classroom aide explained. ‘The children are learning to pretend that they’re cashiers.’”

Children in inner-city schools are well aware of the inequity of their situation. Students in suburban schools, they realize, don’t have to put up with rat infestations, sewage and heating problems, or chronic shortages of books and supplies. They get the message quite quickly about society’s assessment of their relative worth. As this Puerto Rican student at a poor high school in New York points out:

If you threw us into some different place ... and put white children in this building in our place, this school would start to shine ... They’d fix it fast, no question. People on the outside may think that we don’t know what it is like for other students, but we visit other schools, and we have eyes and we have brains. You cannot hide the differences. You see it and compare ...
The differences are glaring. For instance, in 2002–2003, the wealthy (and 90 percent white) district of Highland Park, Illinois, spent $17,291 per pupil, while the Chicago school district (87 percent black and Latino) spent just $8,482 per pupil. Similar disparities were reported in the cities and suburbs of Philadelphia, New York, Detroit, and other U.S. metropolitan areas. While economically disadvantaged students should be getting high-quality and amply-funded schooling to help assuage the deficits of growing up in poverty, in reality they get less than half the resources that affluent suburban kids receive.35

The public may be more willing to change public school financing than politicians believe. A 1998 Gallup poll found that only 21 percent of people think that public schools should be financed by local property taxes; 60 percent said they would be willing to pay more taxes to provide funds to improve the quality of the nation’s inner-city public schools. But despite such polls, few politicians have shown willingness to tackle school finance reform.37

Poverty, racial-ethnic discrimination, and unfair school funding are great enough burdens for any child or adolescent to shoulder. But teens must also make decisions about sex in a culture that inundates them with sexual commodification at every turn, yet allows them few socially acceptable ways to engage in responsible sex while unmarried.

All adolescents face conflicting messages about sex, responsibility, and future goals. Laurence Steinberg argues that contemporary adolescents have gained access to adult consumption patterns but have lost access to responsible adult roles, a condition he terms “adolescent rolelessness.” Furthermore, teens become sexually mature earlier than in the past (currently, menarche occurs at 12 years of age), while the average age at first marriage has risen to almost 26 for women and 28 for men. This presents adolescents with a simple time-management problem. Most will face a decade or more in which they are both sexually mature and unmarried.38

Expecting teens to remain abstinent for a decade, or until they are married, is naïve at best.39 Nevertheless, from 1996 until 2007, this was the form of “sex education” singled out for special government promotion and funding (as this book goes to press, a new bill—the Responsible Education About Life Act—is being debated in Congress and may change funding streams for sex education). According to the Washington, DC-based Advocates for Youth, under the abstinence-only sex education of the past decade, Congress funneled more than $1.4 billion to abstinence-only-until-marriage programs and zero dollars to comprehensive sex education. States had to agree to promote abstinence as the major component of their sex instruction in order to receive federal funding for sex education (some states refused funding in protest).40

The results of abstinence-only education have not been encouraging for proponents. According to sociologists Hannah Brückner and Peter Bearman, the majority of teens in grades 7 to 12 who vowed to remain virgins until marriage had nonmarital sex before their follow-up survey six years later. Furthermore, “vow breakers” were less likely than other teens to use condoms when they did have sex. In another study, researchers at Mathematica Policy Research followed middle-school students enrolled in four abstinence programs for five years and found that they had sex at roughly the same age as peers who had not had abstinence education. The two groups initiated sex at the same mean age and had similar numbers of sexual partners. While researchers allow that a small percentage in the recent drop in teenage pregnancy may be explained by fewer teens having sex overall, studies show that approximately 85 percent of the decline in teen pregnancy rates is due to more consistent and effective contraceptive use among teens, not abstinence education.41

Yet despite the availability of contraceptive information, impoverished teens continue to have children at much higher rates than other adolescents. A 2005 ethnographic study by Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas provides a compelling possible explanation for this variation. Over a five-year
period, Edin and Kefalas interviewed 162 low-income black, Latino, and white mothers, most of whom had children as teens. Edin and Kefalas lived in the poor Philadelphia neighborhoods they studied and followed their respondents (and their partners) through the early days of their relationship, through pregnancy, and after the birth of their child(ren).

Only a small number of the women Edin and Kefalas studied planned to get pregnant in their teens (nationally about 82 percent of teenage pregnancies are not planned). But neither were their pregnancies entirely unplanned. Most women Edin and Kefalas interviewed described their pregnancies as somewhere in between: "not exactly planned" and "not exactly avoided" (only a few of their respondents were using contraception when they conceived their child).42

The explanation for this lack of consistent effort to avoid pregnancy lies in understanding how the social location of these young women shapes their sense of current and future options. With seriously limited opportunities for continued education and future employment, carrying a baby to term is often the only avenue through which low-income girls can assert their grown-up status. Many mothers Edin and Kefalas studied said they wanted someone to love and take care of, while others reported wanting to seal a romance by having a child. For many of these young women, moreover, raising children is the one job for which they've had ample training—most poor kids have had to care for younger siblings. As one eighteen-year-old white mother of two toddlers explained: "When we was living with my mom, I was taking care of my little sister and my little brother anyway. She was working two jobs, so I was taking care of them mostly."43

The women interviewed by Edin and Kefalas reported having easy access to contraception, but many stopped using it when their romantic relationship became serious. Although they got pregnant earlier than they wanted, many mothers say their timing was off by only a year or two. Most now claim there are advantages to being young and energetic mothers and, in the absence of plans or possibilities for higher schooling, they see few costs to having had a baby in their teens.

Indeed, the "cost" of motherhood for poor teens in terms of later outcomes in life is much less than is often assumed. Arline Geronimus and Sanders Korenman did a study comparing a large group of sisters in which one had a child in their teens and the other waited, reasoning that because sisters come from the same socioeconomic and family background, many "unobserved" characteristics that might affect their life chances are effectively "controlled" for. They found no significant differences in economic outcomes later in life for the women who had a child in their teens and those who did not. Another study compared the later life outcomes of teen mothers with teens who got pregnant but miscarried, reasoning again that this controls for background factors that may differentiate teen mothers from their childless peers. They found that ten years later, teen mothers were doing as well as, or better than, teens who had miscarried. Put another way, the women who had not had a child as a teen had not managed to achieve any greater social and economic mobility than those who had. For individuals already living in poverty, the researchers concluded, "delaying childbirth until the end of the teenage years seemed not to produce better adult outcomes than having a child as a teenager."44

It is not that the teens Edin and Kefalas studied do not see pregnancy and motherhood as a challenge. But it is one of the few challenges they believe they can meet. Most residents of the neighborhoods Edin and Kefalas studied said that learning one is pregnant is the first "test" of one's capacity for motherhood. Having an abortion is seen as taking the "easy way" out or as punishing the baby for the mother's mistake. Carrying the pregnancy to term signals that the mother is taking responsibility for her actions and is ready to "grow up." Pregnancy thus symbolizes the beginning of the transition to adulthood for many poor women. Since children are not seen as a roadblock to future success, there is often no reason not to rise to the challenge.45
While it is important to acknowledge the complex motivations and personal agency of teens who have babies, we also need to recognize the constrained and deprived situations in which they make their choices. These constraints are not only economic but often sexual. In two out of three births to unmarried teen mothers, the father is not a teen at all but twenty years of age or older, often much older than the mother. It is highly probable that many of these relationships involved some measure of sexual coercion for young teen mothers. One research team estimates that “more than a quarter of teens who had intercourse before age fourteen said they didn’t want their first sexual experience to happen.” In other cases, much younger women may simply not feel able to negotiate the terms of their sexual relationship, including contraceptive use.66

But even for couples whose relationships are truly consensual, there are fewer obstacles to getting pregnant than there are to getting married. Experts estimate that over 50 percent of babies born officially to “single mothers” are actually born to cohabiting couples. Mirroring these findings, Edin and Kefalas report that most of the women in their study lived with their child’s father at the time of the birth. And most intended to marry their baby’s father … later. Indeed, one of the most surprising findings of this study is the high regard for marriage that the women Edin and Kefalas interviewed expressed, and this attitude holds across all racial-ethnic groups they studied. Respondents see marriage as a serious, lifelong commitment that should only be entered into if one plans on staying the course permanently. Given the uncertain and often dangerous economic conditions in which they live, this permanence is hard to come by, and many women reported that they did not intend to marry until they had enough economic security with their partners to improve their chance of making it in the long run.67

Thus, while motherhood is, as Edin and Kefalas put it, the “primary vocation for young women” in inner-city neighborhoods, marriage is something that should only be entered into if a couple can do it right, and this means attaining a certain level of financial stability and social respectability. Said one young mother of two children, currently living with—though not married to—the father of one of her children, “I want my kids to be stable before I do anything to alter their lives … I wanna have an established environment for my kids so that my kids are happy, my kids are healthy, they’re safe, they have their own house, their own toys, their own couch, their own television.”68

In a later study of unmarried couples, Paula England and Edin asked women what their minimum economic standards were for marriage. Few were unrealistic about what was needed to achieve a measure of stability. Most couples defined such stability as one or both of them having a good enough job so that they could pay their bills each month without asking for assistance from family, friends, charity, or the government. Many also said they’d like to be able to afford to rent or buy a house. But the majority of England’s and Edin’s respondents were not able to meet these modest hopes even four years after their child’s birth.69

In the earlier study by Edin and Kefalas, the women reported that most fathers try to stay employed at the low-wage semi-stable jobs available in nearby neighborhoods. But if they lose them or are laid off, even short-term, “the continuing pressure to bring in money makes the street corner [drug dealing] hard to resist.” With spotty employment records and intermittent involvement in the underground economy of drugs and crime, such fathers can become an economic liability to their child’s mother. While teen mothers are often mature enough to care and provide for their children, it appears that teen fathers have a harder time achieving adulthood through similar actions. Staying home and caring for her baby “brings [the mother] social recognition for behaving the way a good mother should.” But a teen father “wins no points with friends for staying home in the evening and on weekends, no matter how good a father he desires to be.”690
Clearly, such a difference in socially valued avenues of attaining adult status in poor communities puts a strain on teenage relationships. And this strain reinforces the obstacles that women see to getting married, even as it increases the emotional meaning of motherhood in their lives. Contrary to the “culture of poverty” argument, however, this disconnect between marriage and motherhood in impoverished communities reflects the socioeconomic dilemmas facing these young men and women more than it reflects deviant or irresponsible values. Indeed, it is precisely because impoverished young women share so many mainstream values about the importance of marriage and the centrality of breadwinning to a man’s “marriageability” that they are reluctant to marry. And it is their lack of access to other fulfilling and rewarding social roles that reinforces their attraction to motherhood and their ambivalence about avoiding pregnancy.

At the end of the class where we discussed teen motherhood, I turned the question around and asked my students when they thought poor women should have children. “When they’re stable,” several answered, “when they can provide for their kids.” “If they can wait for marriage until they can afford it, why can’t they wait for kids until they marry?” asked another.

But recall that England and Edin found that only a minority of the couples they studied were able to subsist without handouts four years after their initial interviews, and that other studies have shown that little if any economic advantage accrues to poor women who delay motherhood. With financial stability so difficult to attain and so precarious in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, it is understandable that putting off having children until they achieve that elusive goal is a risk many poor women are not willing to take. And any public policy based on the idea that the way to end poverty is to convince impoverished Americans to not have children is unrealistic and inhumane.

NOTES

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16. Ibid., p. 248.


