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The Real Pregnancy Crisis

By W. BRADFORD WILCOX

Earlier this month, Bristol Palin turned herself into a poster child for the nation's continuing effort to prevent teenage pregnancies. She made the rounds on the morning TV show circuit and spoke at town hall meetings to drive home the point that other teens shouldn't make the same mistake she did. Ms. Palin's campaign could not have come at a better time. According to a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control, the U.S.—after witnessing a 14-year decline in teenage childbearing from 1991 to 2005—saw the number rise from 2005 to 2007. In 2007, the latest year for which data are available, about 450,000 adolescents gave birth.

The recent uptick in teenage childbearing has public-health experts, scholars and government leaders concerned. "Let's hope this sobering news on teen births serves as a wake-up call to policymakers, parents and practitioners," said Sarah Brown, CEO of The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, "that all our efforts to convince young people to delay pregnancy and parenthood need to be more intense, more creative and based more on what we know works."

Out-of-wedlock births on the rise among 20-somethings.

But the nation's intense focus on teenage childbearing has obscured a more fundamental problem in childbearing trends. Last week, the CDC reported that about 40% of American children were born out of wedlock in 2007, more than triple the 11% who were in 1970. This means that more than 1.7 million children were born outside of marriage in 2007. Moreover, the vast majority of these babies—60%, to be precise—were born not to teenagers but to women in their 20s (only 23% of nonmarital births were to teens). Furthermore, the CDC reports that nonmarital childbearing has been rising much faster among adults than among teenagers.

None of this should come as a surprise, given that a 2003 Gallup Survey found that 64% of young adults age 18 to 29 thought that having a baby out of wedlock was "morally acceptable."

But a number of academics and advocates who track family issues are more than willing to provide intellectual cover to contemporary young adults' laissez-faire approach to childbearing and marriage. For instance, Stephanie Coontz, the director of research at the Council on Contemporary Families, wrote on the New York Times "Room for Debate" blog that "policymakers and researchers need to discard one-size-fits-all generalizations about the causes, consequences, risks and benefits of different family forms. Average outcomes from married and single parenting hide huge variations" in child well-being. Likewise, Silvia Henriquez, the executive director of the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, urged readers to resist the temptation to "present single motherhood as a problem in itself."

Ultimately, though, the arguments put forward by Ms. Coontz, Ms. Henriquez and other academics and advocates do not have science on their side. For instance, Sara McLanahan at Princeton University and her colleagues have found that boys who are raised by single mothers are twice as likely to end up in prison by age 32, that girls who are born outside of marriage are three times as likely to have a teenage pregnancy, and that teens born out-

side of marriage are about twice as likely to drop out of high school, compared with their peers who are raised in intact, married families.

Moreover, we should take cold comfort from the fact that many of these nonmarital births are, in Ms. Henriquez's words, to "women [who] may be living with a partner." It is true that most of the recent growth in nonmarital childbearing has been driven by births to cohabiting couples. But cohabiting couples are notoriously unstable, in large part because their relationships are not anchored by the legal, social and moral commitments associated with marriage. One study by Pamela Smock at the University of Michigan and Wendy Manning at Bowling Green State University found that 50% of children born to cohabiting parents saw their parents part by age 5, compared with only 15% of children born to married parents.

And as both parents and scholars know, such instability is hard on young children. Not surprisingly, a growing body of research on cohabitation and child well-being indicates that kids who spend time in cohabiting unions are significantly more likely to experience emotional problems, school failure and physical and sexual abuse than children in intact, married homes—in part because they are much more likely to be exposed to a revolving series of romantic partners, usually unrelated adult males, who do not have their best interests at heart.

So what is driving the upward spike in nonmarital childbearing? Some groups, such as the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, have been focusing on contraceptive failures among young adults. It is true that most nonmarital pregnancies are unintended. But the percentage of unmarried, sexually active women who have been using contraception has increased significantly over the past four decades, according to a study by the National Center for Health Statistics.

Here are three more likely explanations: First, young Americans have been postponing marriage, but they are not postponing sex and cohabitation. Indeed, my own research indicates that cohabiting couples are much more likely to get pregnant than couples who do not live together. Second, working-class and poor men have seen their real wages fall since the early 1970s, which makes them less attractive as husbands to their girlfriends and to the mothers of their children. This also helps explain why nonmarital childbearing is concentrated among blacks, Latinos, and working-class and poor whites.

Third, the meaning of marriage in the U.S. has changed over the past 40 years. As sociologist Andrew Cherlin has noted, marriage used to be the "foundation" for adulthood, sex, intimacy and childbearing. Now, marriage is viewed by many Americans as a "capstone" that signals that a couple has arrived—financially, professionally and emotionally.

This also helps to explain why college-educated mothers are bucking the trend toward having children out of wedlock. It is easier for these women to attain the level of achievement that the newer, luxury model of marriage before childbearing requires. Only 7% of college-educated women are having children out of wedlock, compared with more than 50% of women with a high-school degree or less, according to a recent Child Trends study.

So the next time you hear a college-educated academic or advocate talking about marriage and motherhood, do as they do, not as they say.

Mr. Wilcox, a professor of sociology at the University of Virginia, is a senior fellow at the Institute for American Values.