

Aligning Policy with Social Responsibility

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When thinking about the relationship between personal responsibility and teen and unplanned pregnancy, we ought to keep in mind that Americans don't have much confidence in values-neutral social policies. And they positively hate government programs that seem to undermine the middle class ethic. Consider the case of welfare.

The disappearance of "welfare queens" as stock characters in America's culture wars is no accident. In "ending welfare as we know it" back in 1996, a Democratic President and Republican Congress did not simply tighten restrictions on public assistance, they changed its underlying ethos. Welfare reform — along with new efforts to make work pay and hold absent fathers accountable for supporting their children — aimed explicitly at reconciling U.S. social policy with America's creedal values of work, self-reliance, and individual responsibility. Consequently, "welfare" has lost its value as a wedge issue in political debates because it no longer connotes dependence and public subsidy for dysfunctional behavior.

Unfortunately, we're having a harder time engineering a similar normative alignment around policies aimed at reducing teen pregnancy and out-of-wedlock births. Americans these days are gun-shy about making value judgments about sexual behavior, even among

adolescents. To reduce teen pregnancy, conservatives prescribe teaching sexual abstinence, while liberals stress including contraception in sex education. Nor is there consensus about whether the government should — or can — promote marriage. And many progressives remain silent in the face of the media's relentless marketing of sex down the age scale, lest they be accused of being sexual reactionaries or moral censors. If parents can't even agree on basic norms of sexual behavior, no wonder their kids are so confused!

Researching teen pregnancy years ago, I was struck by the moral vacuum in which the issue was discussed on the front lines, especially in health clinics and schools. Authorities spoke only in therapeutic terms, never in the language of morality or personal responsibility. Of course kids were encouraged to use contraception — some schools featured bowls of free condoms. But most of the teen moms I spoke to admitted they wanted to have a baby. No one seemed to object much to that choice; on the contrary, a whole array of programs kicked in to help them, from prenatal care to day care for their children at school.

There is no sense in post-modern America in trying to resurrect old stigmas on early or out-of-wedlock sex. But bringing children into the world when you don't have the maturity or means to care for them properly is a different matter. That's not just a mistake, it's wrong. When teens deliberately have babies to make themselves feel special or needed, or to make their friends envious, it's tragically wrong. It's wrong because it condemns their children to repeat their mistakes, and condemns the rest of us to pay for those mistakes.

The social science is absolutely clear about the impact on children born to unwed teens. In the aggregate, kids growing up in one-parent households are much more likely to fail in school, drop out, take up

street crime, and get themselves or somebody else pregnant. Teen pregnancy isn't just a matter of personal irresponsibility, it's a matter of social irresponsibility. And society should say so.

Public policy isn't the only channel for conveying that message, but it's an important one. Welfare reform, for example, sent an important normative signal when it barred teen mothers from setting up independent households on the public's dime, and when it toughened enforcement of child support payments by "deadbeat dads." As teen birth rates start rising again, we should make sure that the government's prevention programs also are sending the right moral message.

Policymakers also need to confront the media's culpability. We now have hard evidence, thanks to a breakthrough Rand Corporation study, that viewing the growing volume of sexual content on TV leads to an increased risk of pregnancy among girls and boys. What you rarely see in films or on television, however, is gritty realism about the core of the problem: disadvantaged black and Latino girls of 14, 15, or 16 getting pregnant, dropping out of school, and renewing the dreary cycle of failure and poverty.

At a time when unfettered capitalism is being blamed for nearly wrecking the global economy, it seems odd that so many progressives accept arguments for laissez-faire in the realm of pop culture and entertainment. Artistic freedom is obviously important, but it doesn't give anyone the right to condition teenagers' behavior in ways that are individually and socially injurious. And if asking the media to police itself with rating codes and the like isn't working — and it's obviously not — policymakers need to step into the breach.

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