



For Unwed Moms, 25 is the New 15

It is no longer teenagers stumbling into pregnancy and parenthood about whom we should be fretting. Those numbers continue to drop, because the kids are having less sex and using more contraception.

No, it is the 20-something women who are putting babies before marriage at a frightening rate — and not because they don't know any better. They are sure the good man and the picket fence are out of reach, but they still want children. Why wait for what they don't think will happen?

That's the picture painted by a new study, "Knot Yet: The benefits and costs of delayed marriage in America," prepared by researchers at the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and the Relate Institute. (More on those benefits and costs in a moment.)

At its conclusion, the report calls for a "national conversation" that might — as has happened with other bad ideas, like smoking, littering, and drinking and driving — change this behavior, which bodes so poorly for the future of both the parents and the kids.

Coincidentally, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg has launched a billboard campaign against teen pregnancy, showing crying babies blaming their unwed mothers for the opportunities they might never enjoy.

"Honestly Mom," one billboard baby says, "chances are he won't stay with you. What happens to me?"

The campaign has drawn criticism from Planned Parenthood, no less, for creating "stigma, hostility and negative public opinions about teen pregnancy and parenthood."

Richard Reeves of the Brookings Institution answered that criticism with an essay in *The New York Times* saying that "shame is an essential ingredient of a healthy society. ... It acts as a form of moral regulation ... encouraging good behavior."

He seems to be advocating for moral pressure to be a pillar in any campaign to prevent young adults from having babies before they have set the economic foundation to take

care of them. When prevention fails, he says, there has to be emotional pain or the behavior won't change.

It is the numbers that make all of this so alarming. Almost half of first births in this country are to unmarried women. Almost half.

And while baby before marriage has not been rare among the most disadvantaged, it is now epidemic among the working class — those with high school degrees and perhaps some college. Exactly those Americans affected most by the loss of stable manufacturing jobs on which to build a middle-class life.

Fifty-eight percent of this group will have the first child outside of marriage.

And these children are vulnerable to the same lousy outcomes of children born to teen mothers: family instability, school failure, trouble with addictions or the law and then another generation born out of wedlock.

Meanwhile, women with college degrees typically marry later and do not have a first child for two years. The child is the "capstone" on a solid financial and emotional foundation.

In addition, the lifetime economic benefit for a mother who has finished her education and established herself in a job or career is enormous — more than \$10,000 a year.

The economy must improve if the lower middle class is to look toward the future and family life with any optimism; that is a given. And work is not only important financially, it organizes the lives of young people and integrates them into society.

But what about this "national conversation?" What about shame?

"I would steer clear of the shame card," said Bradford Wilcox, one of the authors of the study and head of the National Marriage Project.

"That generates a real sense of division. I would talk in terms of aspirations. You want the best for yourself and

your children? Well, there is a sequence for success: education, job, marriage, children.”

But, Mr. Wilcox said, “I tend to think it is more important how parents walk the walk, not just talk the talk.”

Parents who have a respectful relationship with each other and raise their children in a stable, secure family unit and who have lived the “success sequence” themselves, or who demonstrate delayed gratification in their own lives, will influence the kids more than they know, Mr. Wilcox believes.

Perhaps more important that what happens in Hollywood or on Capitol Hill or a New York City billboard is what happens in our own backyards. Literally.