

Why Kids Have Kids

Don't blame welfare, blame "technology shock."

By George A. Akerlof and Janet L. Yellen

Does welfare spawn out-of-wedlock babies? The architects of the recently passed welfare reform believe it does. They hope that curbing payments for additional children and enforcing parental work requirements will reverse the 25-year trend that has brought large numbers of unmarried mothers onto the welfare rolls.

In 1965, 24 percent of black infants and 3.1 percent of white infants were born to single mothers. By 1990, the rates had risen to 64 percent for black infants and 18 percent for whites. Every year, about 1 million more children are born into fatherless families, at an enormously increased risk of growing up in poverty.

Efforts by social scientists to explain the rise in out-of-wedlock births have been unconvincing. Conservative Charles Murray, for example, blames overly generous federal welfare benefits. But as David Ellwood and Lawrence Summers have shown, cash welfare benefits rose sharply in the 1960s and fell in the 1970s and 1980s, when out-of-wedlock births rose most.

Liberals have tended to favor the explanation offered by William Julius Wilson, who, in a 1987 study, attributed the increase in out-of-wedlock births to a decline in the marriageability of black men, due to a shortage of jobs. But Robert D. Mare and Christopher Winship have estimated that at most 20 percent of the decline in marriage rates of blacks between 1960 and 1980 can be explained by decreasing employment.

A better theory might be called "Reproductive Technology Shock." In the late 1960s and very early 1970s (well before *Roe vs. Wade* in January 1973), the availability of both abortion and contraception increased dramatically. Many states, including New York and California, liberalized their abortion laws. In July 1970, the Massachusetts law prohibiting the distribution of contraceptives to unmarried people was declared unconstitutional. Many observers expected liberalized abortion and contraception to lead to fewer out-of-wedlock births. But the opposite happened, because of the decline in the custom of "shotgun weddings."

Before 1970, the stigma of unwed motherhood was so great that most women would only engage in sexual activity if it came with a promise of marriage in the event of pregnancy. Men were willing to make (and keep) that promise, for they knew that even if they left one woman, they would be unlikely to find another who would not make the same demand. In the 1970s, women who were willing to get an abortion, or who used contraception reliably, no longer found it necessary to condition sexual relations on a promise of marriage in the event of pregnancy. But women who found abortion unacceptable, or who were unreliable in their contraceptive use, found themselves pressured to participate in premarital sexual relations as well. These women feared, correctly, that if they refused sexual relations, they would risk losing their partners.

By making the birth of the child the *physical* choice of the mother, the sexual revolution has made marriage and child support a *social* choice of the father. And while only a few unmarried mothers once kept their babies, only a few put them up for adoption today, because the stigma of unwed motherhood has declined. Once shunned by their peers and whisked out of town, pregnant teen-agers now receive both encouragement and support to keep their babies, stay in school, and participate in other social activities.

Although doubt will always remain about what causes a change in social custom, the technology-shock theory does fit the facts. The new reproductive technology was adopted quickly, and on a massive scale. Marital and fertility patterns changed with similar drama, at about the same time.

The use of birth-control pills at first intercourse by all unmarried women jumped from 6 percent to 15 percent in just a few years, and probably much more among sexually active unmarried women. The number of abortions among unmarried women grew from roughly 100,000 a year in the late 1960s (compared with some 322,000 out-of-wedlock births) to more than 1.2 million a year (compared with 715,000 out-of-wedlock births) in the early 1980s. During the same period, births per unmarried woman roughly doubled for whites, while the fraction of white unmarried women rose about 30 percent.

America's Reproductive Technology Shock		
	1965-69	1970-74
Births (in thousands)		
Total	3599.0	3370.0
White	2990.0	2760.0
Black	542.0	583.0
Birthrates per 1000 married women, age 15-44		
White	119.4	103.6
Black	129.1	110.3
Birthrates per 1000 unmarried women, age 15-44		
White	12.7	12.6
Black	91.0	94.6
Women married, age 15-44 (percent)		
White	67.8	65.3
Black	55.9	52.9
Out-of-wedlock births (in thousands)		
Total	322.0	406.0
White	144.0	166.0
Black	189.0	230.0
Women age 16 with sexual experience (percent)		
White	13.8	23.2
Black	35.0	42.3
Unmarried women using the pill at first intercourse		
Total	5.7	15.2
Abortions, unmarried women 15-44 (in thousands)		
Total	88.0	561.0
First birth shotgun marriage rate (percent)		
White	59.2	55.4
Black	24.8	19.5
Adoptions (in thousands)		
Total	158.0	156.0
Ratio of adoptions to mothers not married within th		
Total	49.0	38.4

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Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population and Vital Statistics of the United States

For black unmarried women, the birth rate actually fell by between 5 percent and 10 percent, but this was offset by an increase of about 40 percent in the number of unmarried black women. Meanwhile, fertility rates for married women of both races declined rapidly, making the out-of-wedlock birth ratio even larger.

The shotgun-marriage rate itself declined only gradually, but that is not surprising. Social conventions change slowly. It took time for men to recognize that they did not have to promise marriage in the event of a pregnancy in exchange for sexual relations. It may also have taken time for women to perceive the increased willingness of men to leave them if they demanded marriage.

One final puzzle, however, requires explanation. The black shotgun-marriage ratio began to fall earlier than the white ratio and shows no significant change in trend around 1970. Here, federal welfare benefits may play a role. Because blacks, on average, have lower incomes than whites, they are more affected by changes in welfare benefits. As a result, the rise in welfare benefits in the 1960s may have resulted in a decline in the black shotgun-marriage rate, and thus, in an increase in out-of-wedlock births.

What should be done? Even if possible, attempts to turn back the technological clock by restricting abortion and contraception would now be counterproductive. Besides denying reproductive freedom to women, such efforts would increase the number of children born and reared in impoverished single-parent families. Most children born out of wedlock are reported by their mothers to have been "wanted," but "not at that time." Some are reported as not having been wanted at all. Easier access to birth-control information and devices and to abortion could reduce the number of unwanted children and improve the timing of those whose mothers would have preferred to wait.