



Marriage Is The Missing Message

By Scott Phelps

The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) has released new data showing that teen birth rates have fallen once again and now stand at an all-time recorded low. This good news is muted, however, by the fact that many of these teens will eventually go on to bear children out-of-wedlock once they reach their twenties.

According to the NCHS, the U.S. has just reached an all time high for out-of-wedlock births even as teen birth rates reach an all-time low. Today, 37% of all children (more than 1 in 3) are born out of wedlock up from just 5% in 1960. It's not making headlines but this is a quiet crisis. Research clearly indicates that these children will have a much more difficult adjustment in society and will not have the same socio-economical benefits as their peers living in married households.

In 1996, President Clinton signed "Welfare Reform" legislation which recognized that out-of-wedlock birth was one of the leading indicators of poverty and welfare dependency. The statute included a provision to educate young people that abstinence until marriage could help reduce out-of-wedlock births and thus reduce poverty in the long run.

Since then, rates of teenage pregnancies, births, and abortions have all been in steady decline. Among one of the more challenging demographics, teen boys ages 15-17, the percentage of those having "had sexual intercourse" has fallen sharply from 50% in 1988 to 31% in 2002. While this is good news, unless these less sexually active teens continue to resist pressure toward sexual activity, these successes will be short lived.

As for the original intention of welfare reform's abstinence provision to reduce out-of-wedlock births, the only area showing progress is among these teens under the age of 18. In fact, school-aged teens now represent less than 1 in 10 out-of-wedlock births (8.5%) and these numbers keep dropping. Alternatively, young adults ages 18 and above represent more than 9 in 10 out-of-wedlock births (91.5%) and these numbers keep climbing.

The root of this problem is that youth receive little or no encouragement regarding marriage. The popular media, a parallel universe in which our teens now live, has significantly undermined the importance of marriage and family. At the same time schools have, in many cases, failed to educate teens on the objective benefits of marriage for themselves and for their children.

A recent report from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy highlights this problem, saying: "*A robust body of social science evidence on the benefits of marriage has been available to scholars and policymakers for a decade or more but these findings have not moved into the classrooms...*" (Whitehead, B. & Pearson, M. (2006). Making a Love Connection.)

While critics attack the "until marriage" component of the abstinence message, this is necessarily the core of the equation. Indeed, it is precisely because sex education has been taught out of context with no reference to the importance of marriage that so many young adults have failed to appreciate the role of marriage for sexual activity or childbearing. The great tragedy of promoting condoms to school-aged teens isn't that condoms don't always work but that condoms become a substitute for marriage. Teens aren't encouraged to save sex for marriage but rather to save sex for condoms – the results of which we now see.

Marriage rates have been declining sharply for five decades now and at the current rate out-of-wedlock births will reach 50% within 12 years. These are related problems, the answer to which is not merely pregnancy prevention programs but marriage education as well.

Pregnancy is not a problem and it should not be regularly framed as such. A healthy society needs pregnancies, and births, and marriages. And it needs to teach its youth that it is best when these occur together. This is the missing message that is long overdue.

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