

Overview of Non-Marital Births in Low-income Neighborhoods

De'Mona Reid

Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Georgia

HDFS 4610: The Family

Dr. Jennifer George

August 5, 2022

Introduction

Out-of-wedlock childbearing is as common in low-income households as is a liquor store around the nearest corner. These households have a high childbearing percentage yet often a low marriage rate. According to the CDC, 40% of all births that occur in the United States are non-marital births. Low-income families often participate in cohabiting unions and are large perpetrators of non-marital births. Often times low-income families cohabit due to financial necessity. Children are sometimes brought forth from these unions, but more often than not, they precede these unions.

In low-income neighborhoods like the ones in *Promises I can Keep* and *Doing the Best I Can*, children are born to young teens at an alarming rate. Most of these young teens cite seemingly selfish reasons for having children. One common reason is that a child is a beacon of light and provides hope in their otherwise negative and disadvantaged lives. The cities these teens grow up in, Philadelphia and East Camden, share similar characteristics despite being in two different states. Public waste lines the sidewalks within the community, many residents reside in government housing, and home ownership is virtually nonexistent. Gang violence and substance abuse are prominent scenes within these neighborhoods (Edin & Nelson, 2013).

Residents within these urban communities often experience high unemployment rates and low incomes, typically under or around \$36,000/yr. (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). These statistics are closely linked to suburbanization and limited job security. With the rise in suburbanization, many affluent residents left the cities and began establishing families in more suburban areas. Job security became increasingly difficult with the decline of manufacturing jobs. After the outbreak of riots such as the East Camden Riot of 1971, within these cities, a lot of business owners, who

were affluent white individuals, closed down and relocated to suburban areas (Edin & Nelson, 2013). High unemployment and low household income are also closely related to the low high school graduation rates within the communities. Often times these graduation rates are due to the birth of an unplanned child by two young teens. This paper aims to broaden one's understanding of the intimate relationships that bring about early births, how young parents navigate parenthood and the redefining of marriage for families with low socioeconomic status.

Views of Intimate Relationships

The modern-day understanding of an intimate relationship generally involves mutual trust and understanding, although these qualities vary depending on the individuals involved. Sexual intimacy can occur in intimate relationships but is not always a defining factor. However, sexual intimacy is prevalent in the intimate relationships that form between adolescents in *Doing the Best I can* and *Promises I Can Keep*. Intimate relationships between young teens are vessels that bring about a life viewed as a saving grace. These relationships begin on a stoop or from meeting at school and develop fairly quickly yet rarely evolve past the physical. These young teens are often unsupervised as they grow up in single-parent households and have more freedom to engage in activities their parents may not approve of (Edin & Kefalas, 2005).

Both young boys and girls are eager to form a bond that will bring about the love they desire. At the beginning of these relationships, both parties are often negligent in taking proper precautions to prevent pregnancy. While a child is not always the desired outcome, both parties acknowledge that their “if it happens, it happens” attitude plays a big role in early conception and childbearing (Edin & Kefalas, 2005, pp. 37-39). Young girls over-romanticize their partners at the beginning of the relationship. In their minds, their boyfriend is someone who truly loves

them, makes them feel beautiful, and cares for them in a way they never received from a male, particularly their absent fathers. If their father is present, he is usually abusing substances or being violent towards the family, and they are unable to receive adequate love from him (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). The young boys view their partners as someone who sees the good in them and finds them worthy of love. Many teenage boys encouraged their partners to allow him to impregnate them. Phrases like “I want her to have your eyes” and “I want you in my life for the rest of my life” are easily convincing for young girls who lack self-esteem and are seeking validation from their relationships (Edin & Kefalas, pg. 31, 2005). Not wanting to lose their partner’s affection and attention, the young girls often allowed conception. Whether it was the boy's choice, the girl's choice, or an act of carelessness, both parties reported high levels of joy and happiness upon hearing the news of conception.

Based on Sternberg’s theory of love, most of these adolescent relationships can be classified as “romantic love.” They are full of passion and intimacy early on yet lack commitment (Arnett, 2013, p. 246), which is evident by how quickly these teens engage in sexual activities and conceive a child within six months or less. Many of these sparkler relationships, ones that burn as quickly as they ignite, are riddled with infidelity, which shows a lack of commitment to their partner. Some of these conceptions occur when these children are between 12-15 years old. Developmentally speaking, these adolescents are still learning to navigate their changing bodies and hormones and attempting to establish identity. Most adolescent relationships burn out as quickly as they ignite. Adolescent relationships typically last a few weeks or months. Yet these teens end up being tied together for life due to using a relationship to find the love and validation they should have received from their families. They

also must navigate unsafe neighborhoods and negative life outcomes due to their current disadvantages.

The romanticized views of intimate relationships became tainted once the child was born, and certain expectations of their new life were unfulfilled. Once the child is born, the young mother often expects her partner to meet financial obligations that he often times is unable to meet. His inability to step up and provide financially brings about frustration, and young mothers begin to despise the males they once idolized. The constant disappointments and hopscotching out of their lives leave a negative view towards men and intimate relationships. Men are now viewed as untrustworthy, especially by those who experienced infidelity in their relationships, and marriage is placed on the back burner. Young women cite their hesitancy to marry due to their inability to find a faithful and trustworthy man. Marriage is also viewed as ownership, especially when the woman lacks financial independence, another reason for holding off on marriage. The men verbalize the need to feel comfortable opening up and talking to their partner without retribution. They desire trustworthy women who accept them for who they are & not rely on them solely for money or yield their insecurities over them (Edin & Nelson, 2013, pp.95-96).

The young males, no longer feeling the love and adoration of their partners, begin to pull away as they despise being viewed as only a paycheck. Marriage is now feared. "The fear comes in that you get stuck with a wife, she feeds you a game that she loves you, and then next thing you know, you're in court because she doesn't like you anymore. She's found something better" (Edin & Nelson p. 96). Though it is desired, they fear being lied to and no longer adored by their partners. They believe there is no genuine love from the women in their neighborhoods. There is little partner search involved in urban communities. The woman who carries their child is oftentimes the one who was simply there at the time. No thought was put into the character and

personality of their partner prior to conceiving a child. Two people who often barely know each other end up conceiving a child and being tied to each other for the rest of their lives. Due to a lack of intentionality when choosing a partner, the relationship structure breaks down. There is little relationship success once the child is born. Relationships are no longer romanticized as the realities and difficulties of life exasperate the carelessness with which they choose their partners.

Navigating Parenthood

From the early conception of children by children themselves, it can be difficult to assert that these young parents are fully competent and capable of performing their parental duties. The young mothers would argue their partners are not able to perform their fatherly duties in the way they expect. When a young girl becomes pregnant and decides to keep the child, she automatically forfeits her former lifestyle. This lifestyle often consisted of partying, drinking, illicit sex, and delving into drugs. She can no longer “run the streets,” and most now care for the growing fetus in her belly. On the other hand, her partner is still free to engage in these activities; however, their continual engagement is often frowned upon by young mothers. As she is at home contemplating ways to meet the growing financial obligations, she also expects her partner to have some forethought and self-discipline as they enter parenthood.

Most of the young mothers had children before graduating high school and had to forfeit their chances of going to college, which means their job outcomes are minimal. They rely on government welfare to provide for their children and hope their partners will step up and meet their financial obligations. Mothers in urban communities often have limited financial resources. Any extra income they acquire is usually spent on their children. One mother only had \$14 to last for one week. Her son wanted something from Walmart, and she spent \$13 to make the purchase.

Mothers often have to decide to spend money on what their children need versus what they want (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Their child must always come first, and their needs are placed on the back burner.

Once the child is born, the mothers place expectations on the father that they did not have for them in the beginning, mainly financial contributions. It is difficult to understand why these men were constantly unable to meet the mark for their requirements of them. “I’m doing the best I can,” yet their contributions were often less than the mothers' (Edin & Nelson, 2013, p. 119). However, when the second half of the phrase “with what I got” is taken into consideration, it is easier to empathize with the father’s efforts. Most of these young men grew up without a father and were never shown how to perform their role in a healthy, positive, and consistent way (Edin & Nelson, 2013). When one has more to give, the effort is seemingly easier. To hold these fathers to certain expectations without taking into account the level they are at is unfair. Constantly demanding more from one who already has so little to give may cause them to feel dejected. Leading them to abandon their efforts, which have been viewed as not good enough, and flee their responsibilities.

The environment and history of urban areas play a role in unmarried fatherhood. It’s essential to understand the context in which these men were raised and live to fully comprehend the epidemic that causes the breakdown of families. Many children are conceived outside of marriage, and once the child is born, the fathers are excited to be the kind of father they believe other people want them to be. They are determined to cease engaging in “stupid shit” and work hard to care for their child. The beginning excitement and drive wear out as they redefine their fatherly roles. Their new goal is to simply be present, discipline, and offer moral guidance while breadwinning is often times left to the mothers (Edin & Nelson, 2103).

Fathers in urban communities experience many barriers while trying to be involved in their children's lives, from limited transportation, lack of job security, criminal records, or the mother's own efforts to keep him out of the child's life, known as gatekeeping (Edin & Nelson, 2013, p. 169). The greatest barrier they face is their own limitations. As they transition from adolescence to parenthood, these fathers do not always live up to the expectations of fatherhood. Continuing in the fast life, increasing involvement in criminal acts, and substance abuse up into their late early thirties leaves little time to interact with their children. Understandably, young mothers are hesitant to allow fathers to jump in and out of their children's lives (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Being present in their child's life despite all barriers that present themselves is said to be a sign of good fatherhood. While it is an admirable trait, one can argue presence is not enough to raise a child.

In agricultural times the family worked together as a unit. Men, women, and children played a part in tending to the farm and selling goods in town. With the shift from an agriculture industry to a manufacturing industry, men were now seen as the breadwinners. This viewpoint falls in line with the Structural Functionalism theory. According to structural functionalism, the differing gender roles provide a structure the family needs to succeed within society (Cohen, 2014, p.18). With women joining the workforce and demanding their partners assist with the "soft tasks" of child-rearing—changing diapers and developing deep empathic relationships with children—men are now embracing the softer side of fatherhood. However, these young men are eagerly trying to get away from being seen as only a paycheck, "If men don't do, women don't love" (Edin & Nelson, 2013, p.100). Society and the women men conceive children with demand financial contributions for their children. It is not enough for a man to provide emotional and social support to their children. Modern times call for a two-income household, especially for those

who live in urban communities. Only embracing the softer side is not an acceptable contribution for young men in urban communities (Edin & Kefalas, 2005).

Mothers in urban communities face many challenges in keeping their children on “the straight and narrow.” As they try to implement good qualities and characteristics into their child, they feel the neighborhood influences erase everything they try to teach them. Raising children in crime and drug-ridden neighborhoods, often without their fathers' assistance, is a difficult challenge. While they hope for favorable outcomes such as college, these outcomes are not always guaranteed, unlike those who live in suburban neighborhoods with high SES (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Their children's father is not as concerned with their child's future outcomes as he struggles to overcome his limitations and show up for his family financially, physically, and emotionally (Edin & Nelson, 2013). Young fathers have the freedom to be in and out of their child's lives while they “get it together,” while young mothers are left with the primary responsibility of attending to their child's daily needs (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Parenthood tends to mature a young girl quickly while their counterparts struggle throughout adulthood.

Marriage Redefined

There has been a major shift in family formation due to the redefining of marriage. Cultural shifts in America have played a big role in the new definition of marriage. Prior to the 1960s, marriage was seen as an institute where one engages in sex, bears children, and establishes a common household. This was typically done between two heterosexual individuals. Now marriage can consist of same-sex couples, and there is little to no opposition to non-marital sex and childbearing (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Young mothers in urban communities are hesitant to marry as marriage is respected and highly valued. Marriage is revered by young women. They

rather have children outside of marriage than marry and divorce. Divorce is seen as a worse outcome than bearing children out of wedlock (Edin & Kefalas, 2005, pp. 8-9). Rather than risk the possibility of divorce, they refrain from marriage altogether. The hesitation to marry stems from a lack of financial stability and a limited pool of good & trustworthy partners from which to choose (Edin & Kefalas, 2005).

Another factor in the reluctance for marriage is a profound mistrust between men and women in urban communities. As stated previously, men believe there is no genuine love for them. To test their theory, they consciously and oftentimes subconsciously put their partners through tests to prove their love. Going in and out of jail, struggling to overcome addictions, engaging in criminal activity, yet expecting loyalty from the woman they claim to love. When their partner finally decides to rid themselves of him, these young men view it as abandonment and feel they were never loved by them to begin with. To them, a testament of genuine love is friendship qualities, best friend vibes, and the willingness to remain loyal through all things. Once their partners can prove their loyalty, they are willing to enter into marriage but not a moment before (Edin & Nelson, 2013).

Economic factors also play a role in the redefining of marriage. There is little to no difference in attitudes and values toward marriage between low-income and affluent individuals. Both groups have a high standard for marriage. However, the poor are less likely to achieve their “white picket fence dream” Individuals often put off marriage due to economic reasons. They desire the American dream of a white wedding and a white picket fence. Marriage is typically entered into once both individuals reach economic stability. Poor women desire to ensure economic independence before marrying their partners. They desire economic equality within their relationship in hopes that will mitigate future ownership/domineering characteristics they

see in marriages where women lack financial independence (Edin & Kefalas, 2005, pp.117-119). “I believe that marriage just messes up relationships. I mean, some men believe they own the woman after that” (Edin & Kefalas, 2005, p. 118). Middle-class women are also delaying marriage and no longer jump into marriage start after college graduation. They, too, are pursuing economic stability prior to marriage (Karney, 2020).

Both men and women in urban communities keep their options for marriage open even when they are cohabitating with a current partner. The willingness and ease with which they move in and out of relationships to provide for their needs can be linked to the Exchange Theory. The exchange theory states that an individual cannot provide for all of their needs, so they enter into an exchange with others. Often times these exchanges occur in intimate relationships. Hesitation to marry does not stop individuals from living together. Cohabitation rates have steadily increased, with nearly 70% of first marriages between 2010-2014 beginning with cohabitation (Harris, 2020). Cohabitation became more popular once common-law marriage lost its “legal standing as marriage.” Most individuals who participated in common-law marriages were low-income Black and Latina women, who now comprise a large portion of those who practice cohabitation (Kuperberg, 2018). Women who are less educated partially cohabit at higher rates than those who are highly educated. However, these disparities are dwindling as well-educated, middle-class women cohabit, oftentimes due to financial reasons. White, Black, and Latina women all cohabit though Black and Latina women cohabit for longer periods of 5+ years (Kuperberg, 2018).

Implications and Recommendations for Families

The family as an institution has changed drastically. Two-parent households are rare for children in urban communities. The cycle continues to perpetuate as children model their parent's behavior and enter into parenthood in their early teenage years. Without the proper resources and social training, these communities will continue to be riddled with broken families. For low-income parents to be successful, programs centered around emotional wellness, family planning, and financial literacy need to be implemented within their communities. There is an unbalanced sex ratio in poor communities. The men available for marriage are not equipped to provide and maintain quality relationships. Social programs that focus on job training and employment for unskilled men are being advocated for. Waiting for men to “get it together” when the child is born leads to great disappointment. Early intervention would be best. There are some social programs that aim to reduce pregnancy among at-risk teens that have been showing promise. Programs that engage youths in service learning have been shown to be effective. It will allow them to feel useful by caring for another/the community. Feeling useful and needing to care for something is one main reason young girls have children (Edin & Kefalas, 2005).

Conclusion

While it is ideal for individuals to be economically stable before birthing children, that is not always feasible for all individuals of differing socioeconomic status. Individuals in urban and poor neighborhoods often lack the financial resources to further their education which would propel them to a higher financial level—increasing one's human capital by pursuing education allows for greater future earnings. Poor women do not desire to put off childbearing until they are in their forties. For those with low socioeconomic status reaching economic stability can seem impossible, especially those at a greater disadvantage, such as Black and Latino Minorities. Having children young and deciding to cohabit allows women to experience motherhood without

being tied to the social norms of marriage. Young teens in urban communities produce children out of the need to feel loved and be useful. Their disadvantaged lives do not give them the hope they need to aspire for greatness. Children are beacons of light; however, the responsibilities of parenthood are not realized until it is too late. To combat teenage pregnancy and broken families, more attention must be put towards providing low-income parents with emotional skills to help them love their children. Doing so will limit non-marital births in the teenage years. Focusing on training partner selection, emotional wellness, and financial literacy will be helpful mitigate negative outcomes in family formation for individuals in low-income neighborhoods.

References

- Arielle Kuperberg (2019) Premarital Cohabitation and Direct Marriage in the United States: 1956–2015, *Marriage & Family Review*, 55:5, 447-475, DOI: [10.1080/01494929.2018.1518820](https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2018.1518820)
- Arnett, J. J. (2013). *Adolescence and emerging adulthood: A cultural approach*. Pearson.
- Cohen, P. N. (2014). Chapter 1: A Sociology of the Family. In *The Family: Diversity, Inequality, and Social Change* (3rd ed., pp. 18–19). essay, W.W. Norton & Company Inc.
- Edin, K., & Kefalas, M. (2011). *Promises I can keep: Why poor women put motherhood before marriage*. University of California Press.
- Edin, K., & Nelson, T. J. (2014). *Doing the best I can: Fatherhood in the inner city*. University of California Press.
- Harris, L. E. (2021). Committing Before Cohabiting: Pathways to Marriage Among Middle-Class Couples. *Journal of Family Issues*, 42(8), 1762–1786. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X20957049>
- Karney B. R. (2021). Socioeconomic Status and Intimate Relationships. *Annual review of psychology*, 72, 391–414. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-051920-013658>