

A Closer Look at Welfare

Summary

The breakdown of marriage and unwed childbearing are closely associated with poverty and welfare dependence, which can have lasting consequences on the next generation.

- **Men who grow up in a welfare family are less likely to marry the mother of their baby.** In the event that they father a child outside marriage, white men were 39 percent less likely to marry the baby's mother and black men were 6 percent less likely to marry the baby's mother if they had grown up in families that had received welfare, when compared with peers whose families had not received welfare.¹
- **Welfare dependency has an intergenerational effect: Women whose families receive welfare are more likely to be on welfare themselves.** Compared with daughters of families that never received welfare cash benefits, daughters from families that had received welfare were 2.5 times more likely to give birth and three times more likely to receive benefits themselves within three years of their first child's birth.²
- **Early sexual activity is linked to higher levels of child and maternal poverty.** 27 percent of mothers who began sexual activity at age 13 or 14 were living in poverty at the time of the survey. By contrast, 11.7 percent of mothers who began sexual activity at age 21 or 22 were poor at the time of the survey.³
- **Women are more likely than men to live below the poverty line after a divorce.** Three months after divorce, 45.2 percent of custodial mothers not receiving child support were living below the poverty line, as were 38.0 percent of those receiving child support; non-custodial fathers, in contrast, exhibited poverty rates of 9.5 percent before paying child support and 10.5 percent after making those payments. At 16 to 18 months after divorce, 42.5 percent of custodial mothers not receiving child support lived in poverty, as did 35.4 percent of those receiving child support. In contrast, 10.5 percent of the non-custodial fathers (whether paying child support or not) lived in poverty.⁴
- **Parental divorce increases the likelihood that a daughter will be on welfare later in life.** Women whose parents divorced during childhood were more likely to be less educated, earn a lower income, be on welfare, and live in social housing at age 33 than women whose parents did not divorce during childhood.⁵
- **Women who have children in their teens are less likely to marry and more likely to live in poverty.** When compared to those who did not first give births as teens, those who did first give birth as teens were also less likely to receive a high school diploma and more likely to have four or more children.⁶
- **Among mothers on welfare, an increase in their work hours lowers their teenage daughters' likelihood of becoming pregnant.** Among a sample of adolescent females whose families had

received public assistance, a 1,000-hour increase in the mother's yearly work hours (an additional 20 hours per week) was associated with a 33 percent decrease in the likelihood that their teenage daughters would give birth at age 17 or 18.⁷

- **Compared to single mothers who remain unwed, single mothers who marry are less likely to be on welfare.** Women who first had a non-marital birth but then married and had a subsequent marital birth were statistically indistinguishable from women with two marital births on measures of family income, full time employment, and welfare receipt. On the other hand, mothers who first had a non-marital birth, followed by an additional non-marital birth were significantly more likely to be receiving welfare and had significantly lower incomes at a later point when compared to mothers whose subsequent birth was a marital birth.⁸
- **Children are less likely to live in poverty when their mothers remarry after a divorce, compared to peers whose mothers remained single or entered into a cohabiting relationship.** There was a 66 percent reduction in poverty among children whose divorced single mothers remarried and a 40 percent reduction in poverty among children whose mothers cohabited following a divorce. The poverty rate of children whose divorced mothers remarried was 9.4 percent, while the poverty rate

of children whose divorced mothers cohabited was 28.8 percent. The poverty rate of children whose divorced mothers remained single was 42.4 percent.⁹

Endnotes

- 1 Madeline Zavodny, "Do Men's Characteristics Affect Whether a Nonmarital Pregnancy Results in Marriage," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61 (August 1999): 764-773.
- 2 Molly A. Martin, "The Role of Family Income in the Intergenerational Association of AFDC Receipt," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 65 (May 2003): 326-340.
- 3 Robert E. Rector *et al.*, "The Harmful Effects of Early Sexual Activity and Multiple Sexual Partners Among Women: A Book of Charts," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo*, No. 303, (June 26, 2003):1-29, http://s3.amazonaws.com/thf_media/2003/pdf/wm303.pdf.
- 4 Judi Bartfeld, "Child Support and Postdivorce Economic Well-Being of Mothers, Fathers, and Children," *Demography* 37, No. 2 (May 2000): 203-213.
- 5 Frank F. Furstenberg and Kathleen E. Kiernan, "Delayed Parental Divorce: How Much Do Children Benefit?" *Journal of Marriage and Family* 63, (May 2001): 446-457.
- 6 U.S. Government Accounting Office, *Families on Welfare. Teenage Mothers Least Likely to Become Self-Sufficient* (GAO/HEHS-94-115, May 1994), <http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/contentdelivery/servlet/ERICServlet?accno=ED386513> (accessed on January 24, 2011).
- 7 Leonard M. Lopoo, "Maternal Employment and Teenage Childbearing: Evidence from the PSID," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 24, No. 1 (2005): 23-46.
- 8 Anne Driscoll, "Nonmarital Childbearing Among Adult Women," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61, No. 1 (February 1999): 178-187.
- 9 Donna Ruane Morrison and Amy Ritualo, "Routes to Children's Economic Recovery After Divorce: Are Cohabitation and Remarriage Equivalent?" *American Sociological Review* 65, (August 2000): 560-580.



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