

Papa don't preach

By Kim Phillips

The consensus is in on teen pregnancy: It's single-handedly responsible for the decline of Western civilization. Charles Murray was the first to sound the alarm in an acclaimed 1993 *Wall Street Journal* editorial that declared that "illegitimacy is the single most important social problem of our time—more important than crime, drugs, poverty, illiteracy, welfare or homelessness, because it drives everything else." California Gov. Pete Wilson concurred: "All of the problems tearing apart the fabric of our society have deep roots in the exploding epidemic of out-of-wedlock births." Jesse Jackson put in his two cents: "Babies having babies is morally wrong." And Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala chimed in: "I don't like to put this in moral terms. But I do believe that having children out of wedlock is just wrong." President Clinton claimed in his 1995 State of the Union Address that "the epidemic of teen pregnancies and births where there is no marriage is our most serious social problem," and his domestic policy adviser William Galston declared an "all-out cultural war" against teen pregnancy.

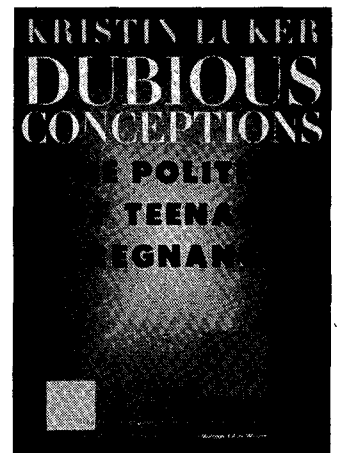
In the midst of so much sanctimony and hyperbole, one might be tempted to ignore a book on teen pregnancy entitled *Dubious Conceptions*—but this would be a mistake. Kristin Luker's new book offers a clearly written, much-needed survey of the recent academic literature on teenage motherhood, as well as an insightful overview of historical attitudes toward early childbearing and single mothers. She does such an effective job of exposing the sloppy scholarship and political calculations driving the debate on teen pregnancy that by the end of the book, the reader is left somewhat mystified: If teen pregnancy is neither new nor responsible for the ills attributed to it, why does the issue resonate with so many people?

The transparency of the teen pregnancy "discourse" becomes clear to anyone who does what Luker does in her book: skip the moralizing and look at the facts about teenage motherhood. Summarizing recent academic research and compiling some statistical data of her own, Luker demonstrates pretty convincingly that the widespread argument that teen pregnancy is the catalyst for deepening inner-city poverty has no basis in reality. First of all, the reports of

an "epidemic" of teen births have been wildly exaggerated. Historically, shifts in fertility rates among teenagers have closely matched those among other age groups: They decreased during the 1930s, sharply increased during the 1950s, and declined steadily during the '70s and '80s, the same years when "teen pregnancy" became the byword for black poverty. The birthrate among black teenagers is much higher than that among white teens, but this has been true for the entire century. In fact, during the '80s the birthrate among black teens decreased slightly, while the birthrate among white teens went up. Most teen mothers aren't Jesse Jackson's "babies having babies"; the overwhelming majority of them are women in their late teens, and only a tiny fraction—2 percent—are women under 15. Birthrates for these youngest women have remained more or less stable over the past 70 years. The conclusion is obvious: Teenage motherhood is nothing new.

Much of the academic research purporting to show that teen parenthood leads to welfare dependency, criminal behavior, low birth weights and (plug your favorite social problem in here) is equally groundless, mainly because researchers have tended to compare teenage mothers to the general population instead of to women of the same socioeconomic class. Eighty percent of the women who become teenage mothers grow up poor; obviously no one would quibble with the idea that poor people are more likely to use welfare. The same confusion of correlation with causality vitiates most other claims about the high costs of teenage pregnancy. For example, it's true that babies born to teen mothers have lower birth weights than those born to older women, and that teens are more likely than adults to experience complications in pregnancy and childbirth. But this is not because they are young, but because—like poor women of all ages—they lack adequate medical care during pregnancy. According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, about a third of all pregnant teens lack adequate prenatal care, as opposed to only about 15 percent of pregnant women in general. In Western Europe, where prenatal care is universally available, teen mothers have fewer complications in pregnancy than older women.

When it comes to completing high school, social class—rather than the simple fact of having given birth as a teen—again seems to be the decisive factor. (Never mind that in the good old days, pregnant teenagers were forbidden to attend



Dubious Conceptions:
The Politics of
Teenage Pregnancy
By Kristin Luker
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school, on the grounds that their presence would corrupt the morals of the nice girls.) One study Luker cites showed that while only 55 percent of all teenage mothers received high school diplomas, nearly 75 percent of the ones who were middle class did. Speaking from personal experience, at the University of Chicago I knew one wealthy girl who had given birth at age 18; her parents bought her an apartment in a co-op and paid for a full-time live-in nanny, and she's now on her way to medical school.

Researchers who compare teen mothers to women of the same economic background find few differences between teen mothers and women in the control population. Studies by psychologist Arline Geronimus of pairs of sisters, one of whom became a mother as a teen and one of whom didn't, showed that the sisters had about equal chances of graduating from high school. And work done by sociologist Joseph Hotz comparing teen mothers to women who miscarried as teenagers found that the teen mothers actually had higher rates of employment and made more money than the women who waited to have children; he hypothesized that this might be because low-end jobs emphasize seniority rather than credentials, and taking time off work to have children in your 20s sets you back on the pay scale. In other words, having children as a teenager is a strategy for dealing with being poor; if you're not poor to begin with, you and the baby will probably muddle through fine, and if you start out poor, waiting to have kids won't do you much good.

As Luker debunks myth after myth about teen pregnancy, public policy purporting to deal with the issue seems increasingly ludicrous. For example, Luker argues that we should have seen an explosion of teen births over the past 25 years, as more teenagers have become sexually active at earlier ages. The fact that the teen birthrate has actually decreased over this time period can be chalked up to the success of family planning clinics, many of which are publicly funded, in dispensing low-cost or free birth control to adolescents. What has been the reward for publicly funded contraceptive programs, arguably the single most successful check on teenage pregnancy? Reductions in funding all through the '80s. Making abortion accessible to teenagers is another tried-and-true means of keeping them from becoming mothers; before *Roe v. Wade*, three-quarters of all pregnant teens gave birth, but after the legalization of abortion, the proportion fell to one half. The result? Parental notification forms and the federal government's refusal to pay for the abortions of poor women. Overall, public policy on teen pregnancy has probably *increased* the number of births to teenage mothers.

When a social calamity is invented in complete defiance of the evidence, and when the measures supposedly intended to combat it in fact have the opposite

effect, one can't help wondering if something different is really at stake. Unfortunately, for all its thoroughness in debunking the myths surrounding teen pregnancy, *Dubious Conceptions* doesn't give a satisfactory explanation of what more rational anxieties might underlie the hysteria. But it's not hard to come up with one. As a symbol, teenage motherhood derives much of its power from the suggestion of reversed family roles: a child taking the place of a parent, a little girl with the sexuality of an adult. But the real target of the hostility toward the teenage mother is the woman she will become: likely to be single, to raise her kids alone or with other women, to rely on something besides a husband for a steady source of income. If teen mothers would only get married, no one would care about their tender age at first birth. After all, for Charles Murray the real test of welfare reform isn't the number of women who get off the rolls by going to work but whether the rate of out-of-wedlock births declines.

A thorough treatment of teen pregnancy would have to focus explicitly on several major changes in family organization during the course of this century. First of all, even before World War I, the family had ceased to be the central productive unit; the number of people working in family businesses has declined throughout the century, and the family farm is so irrelevant that the Census Bureau has stopped keeping statistics on the farming population. Over the past century, women's participation in the labor force has dramatically increased; today, about 60 percent of the female population works for wages. Second, with the exception of an upward blip in the wake of World War II, birthrates have declined steadily, and are now the lowest they've ever been in the nation's history. Meanwhile, fewer people have been getting married and more of them have been getting divorced. The result is that families are smaller and less stable today than at any point in the country's past. Third, there are more single mothers today than ever before; the proportion of births to single women tripled between 1970 and 1990, rising from 10 to nearly 30 percent. Trends in Europe are remarkably similar. The majority of Americans still get married (though in countries like Sweden this is no longer the case), and the two-parent family is, of course, far from obsolete. But as a central organizing principle of society, the two-

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parent family's days are clearly numbered. Increasingly, it is simply one option among many.

It shouldn't be surprising that for many people this is a frightening development. Sociologists have observed that people turn to ethnic solidarities or family loyalties—indissoluble bonds with the authority of blood—when society and the state can't be depended on for support, for example when migrating to a new country or in times of economic hardship. *Nation* columnist Alexander Cockburn quoted a disgruntled worker a couple of months ago who supposedly responded to a sectarian denunciation of the nuclear family with the pithy statement, "The family's all we've got, man." But one might say that that's exactly the problem—poor and working people in this country don't have anything *but* the family to help care for young children, to pay hospital bills, to pass along word of a job, to provide for education, to give protection in old age. In a country without a decent social safety net, many people will, not unreasonably, see anything that tends to undermine the nuclear family as a threat to their well-being. The rich get their investment portfolios, and workers can have the family.

In a sense, it's ironic that the anti-welfare crowd uses the rhetoric of a "lifetime of dependency." The social worker may be an unsympathetic bureaucrat, but he won't try to hit you, or spend the money for food on alcohol, or refuse to allow you any role in family finances. People may be good or bad, but dependence on a single individual means relying on grace or whim for your most basic needs and giving up a vast measure of control over your life. Christopher Lasch enthusiasts to the contrary, the creation of a strong welfare

state doesn't mean the dissolution of personal ties, or the intrusion of the state into all aspects of intimate life; people still bring each other flowers in Sweden, and parents still love their children. But it does remove some of the potential for violence and coercion from familial relationships by ensuring that while people may form all kinds of affective bonds and psychological ties, some other source will at least guarantee their material well-being.

Certainly the young women in Luker's study, while expressing real love for their children and an occasional wistful longing for a husband and a house with a white picket fence, have good reasons for not wanting to marry the fathers of their children. As one young woman said, "He's a child. He whines. He expects people to do things for him. He's nasty to me. He doesn't like to do dishes and he thinks I'm supposed to do them all for him. He likes to sleep and watch TV. He likes people to cook for him, and he irritates me. No, I would not marry him. He acts like a baby and I have two of my own." A striking aspect of recent accounts of young men growing up in the inner city—like *Makes Me Wanna Holler* by Nathan McCall and *In Search of Respect* by Philippe Bourgois—is the premium poor young men place on "being a man." What

this means in practice is a public display of contempt for women; not incidentally, both books contain graphic descriptions of gang rape and domestic violence. Not, of course, that gang rape, grotesque macho rituals, and a desire to have women act as domestic and emotional servants are pathologies of the inner city—rich white frat boys act just the same way. One of the biggest problems many young mothers face isn't the absence of a husband—it's a history of relationships with men who are violent, abusive, or simply more of a hassle than a help to have around.

At times, Luker expresses surprise that liberals and conservatives alike upbraid and abuse teen mothers. From her point of view, young mothers have unfairly been made scapegoats for an anxious society, whipping girls and poster children for end-of-century anomie. After all, aren't young women having babies doing just as they've always done, choosing family over self, putting faith in love rather than in cold, calculating reason? The difficulties teens face as parents aren't intrinsic to early birth, but are the problems of any poor mother—even, in some ways, of any working mother. Why, then, should anyone single them out? But if you listen to the young women in Luker's book—nervous, courageous, standing alone—the anger of the conservatives and the anxiety of the liberals make perfect sense: One of the pillars of bourgeois society is crumbling. Short of massive retrenchment—never out of the question—the "traditional two-parent family joined by marriage" mourned by Alan Keyes won't go back to reigning unquestioned and triumphant anytime soon. So much the better for us all. ◀

Kim Phillips is a freelance writer based in Chicago.

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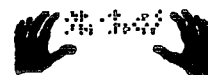
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