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In 1950, only one in 20 children was born to an unmarried mother. Today, that rate is one in three—usually to those least likely to be able to support a child on their own. This has led some to charge that the marriage norm is dead in poor communities. We entered into the lives of 162 low-income single mothers living in eight destitute neighborhoods across Philadelphia and its poorest industrial suburb, Camden. We spent five years chatting over kitchen tables and on front stoops. In doing so, we gave these mothers the opportunity to speak to the question so many affluent Americans ask about them: Why do they have children outside of marriage when they face such an uphill struggle in supporting them?

We learned that in America's inner urban core, romantic relationships often proceed at lightning speed and conception often occurs within a year of when the pair begins "kicking it." Though conception rarely stems from an explicit plan, the large majority say they were doing nothing to prevent a pregnancy at the time. This is not usually due to a lack of information about birth control; most use birth control in the early days of their relationship with their child's father, though most also soon let these practices lapse. Many say they wanted a child, though they were not sure it was the right time—or the right relationship—for a child. Thus, many let fate take a hand.¹ One 17-year-old white mother of a two year old, said,

I was confused. I wanted to have a baby, but just not at that time, you know. [But] I always loved kids... I mean, I would [go through a time where I would] try [to get pregnant]. But then...I would figure, 'Well how am I gonna raise this baby [I want]?' I was confused. I didn't know whether this week I wanted to try or next week I didn't. ...I was always thinking about it. Always.

Pregnancy puts many still-new couple relationships into overdrive, as the would-be mother begins to scrutinize her mate like never before, wondering whether he will "get himself together"—find a job, settle down and become a family man—in time. Some soon-to-be fathers do rise to the occasion, but others greet the news with threats, denials, and physical violence. Male infidelity is also quite common. Take the case of one 19-year-old white mother of two:

[My boyfriend and I] decided together [to have a baby, but when I told him I was pregnant] he totally denied [our twins]. The first words that came out of his mouth when I told him I was pregnant [were,] "It's not mine." So I said, "All right, well, I guess it's the Pope's, right?"

Frequently, though, the magic moment of birth reunites the new parents, who then resolve to stay together, at least in part for the sake of their child. Most even have plans to marry. As a 20-year-old African-American mother of one recalled,

[After months of calling me a cheater and a whore] he was happy, and it was [his] child then, and he said "Put my [last] name on the birth certificate!

Another, a white 22-year-old mother of three, recounted of her first birth,

[Shortly after my daughter was born] he started changing...he started coming around.

Now you can't take them two apart. Her dad's her favorite. (Of the beatings she received during pregnancy, she says) It's a man thing. They're scared of the responsibility.

The well-known baseline results of the Fragile Families Survey show that most unmarried new parents have marriage plans when interviewed just hours after the birth of their child.² Some have claimed the timing of the survey produced unduly optimistic responses. We have been following 50 new unmarried

¹ Regardless of whether the conception is result of an explicit plan, the vast majority of the mothers we spoke to believe the "responsible" way to respond to such a pregnancy is to bring it to term. Mothers almost universally believe it is unfair to, as one mother put it, "to punish a child for a mother's mistake." A 30-year-old African American mother of three explained, "I don't believe in having abortions. If I didn't want it to happen, I would have protected myself better. It's here. I have to deal with it. So that's what I did. I dealt with it. Because if I didn't want to get pregnant, then I should have done something to prevent it."

² McLanahan, Sara, Irwin Garfinkel, Nancy E. Reichman, Julien Teitler, Marcia Carlson, and Christina Norland Audigier. 2001 (Revised 2003). *The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study Baseline National Report*. Princeton, NJ: Center for the Study of Child Wellbeing, Princeton University.

parents in three cities over the last four years, visiting them in their homes and interviewing them repeatedly, in some depth.³ When we talked with them two to three months after the birth, we too found very high marital aspirations, particularly among cohabiters. But we also learned that though couples do hope to marry, few have made any concrete plans. In fact, most see marriage as four, five, or more years off.⁴

Despite the high marital aspirations around the time of their child's birth, few of these new unmarried parents actually marry each other.⁵ Like their middle class counterparts, poor young women and men now set a high financial bar for marriage. Marriage is an elusive, shimmering goal—one they feel ought to be reserved for those who can support a “white picket fence” lifestyle; a mortgage on a modest row home, a car and some furniture, some savings in the bank, and enough money left over to pay for a “decent” wedding.⁶ Yet the women are not merely content to rely on a man's earnings. Rather, they insist on being economically “set” in their own right before taking marriage vows. This is partly because they want a partnership of equals, and they believe money buys say-so in a relationship. But means of one's own is also insurance against a marriage gone bad.⁷ One white 21-year-old with one child told us,

I'm gonna make sure I have my own stability [before I marry]. I mean, 'cause they're my kids [and I have to be ready] to take care of them with or without their fathers.

Most importantly, though, poor women want partners they can trust. Their relationships with their children's fathers are often fraught with violence and infidelity, drug and alcohol abuse, criminal activity and the threat of imprisonment. On the street corners and front stoops of these poor urban neighborhoods, the social stigma of a failed marriage is far worse than an out-of-wedlock birth, so women feel they must wait several years after the birth of their child to insure the marriage will last.⁸ A white, 30-year-old, mother of five explained,

When you take those vows, up at that altar, I think the vows are very sacred. And if you are not going to abide by them, I don't think that you should get married. [You shouldn't marry] until you've been in a relationship 5 or 6 years. Because by that time you know him and he knows you.

Another, a 24-year old white mother of two, told us,

I'd rather say, “Yes, I had my kids out of wedlock” than say, “I married this idiot.” It's like a pride thing.

Ironically, most of the mothers and fathers we spoke to believe that bearing children while poor and unmarried is not the ideal way to do things. Yet given their already limited economic prospects, the poor have little motivation to time their births as precisely as middle class women often do. While well-heeled suburban youth envision the professional kudos and chic lifestyles that await them, to the poor, these aspirations are little more than pipe dreams. So the dreams of poor youth often center instead on children. Girls coming of age in inner-city slums value children highly, anticipate them eagerly, and believe strongly that they are up to the job of mothering—even in circumstances far from ideal.⁹

When we asked these young mothers what their lives would be like if they hadn't had children, we thought they'd express regret over forgone opportunities for schooling and careers. But instead, most believe their children “saved” them. Many describe lives before conception that were spinning out of

³ These couples are a stratified random subsample of respondents to the Fragile Families survey in Chicago, Milwaukee, and New York.

⁴ Gibson, Christina, Kathryn Edin, and Sara McLanahan. 2004. “High Hopes but Even Higher Expectations: The Retreat from Marriage Among Low-Income Couples with Children.” Working Paper 2003-06-FF. Princeton, NJ: Center for the Study of Child Wellbeing, Princeton University.

⁵ Center for Research and Child Wellbeing. 2003. “The Retreat from Marriage among Low-Income Families.” Fragile Families Research Brief No. 17. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University.

⁶ Edin, Kathryn and Maria Kefalas. 2005 (in press). *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women put Motherhood before Marriage*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. See also Gibson et al., 2004.

⁷ Edin and Kefalas, 2005.

⁸ Edin and Kefalas, 2005; Gibson et al., 2004; Reed, Joanna. 2004. “The Meanings of Marriage and Cohabitation for Unmarried Couples With Children.” Northwestern University.

⁹ One national survey found that high school drop outs were *five times* as likely as the college educated to agree with the statement “childless people lead empty lives,” controlling for race, parental status, and other characteristics. See Sayer, Liana C., Nathan Wright and Kathryn Edin. 2003. “Class Differences in Family Attitudes.” The Ohio State University.

control—struggles with parents and peers, “wild” risky behavior, depression, and school failure. Their children, they say, offer an opportunity to make meaning and create relational intimacy when few emotional resources exist elsewhere. One 25-year-old Puerto Rican mother expresses this sentiment as follows:

[My son is] my heart.... Even if I get that rock on my finger, that white picket fence, and that deed that says the house is mine, [I’ll still have my son] just in case anything goes sour. I’ll say to my husband, “You leave! This boy is mine!”

In sum, the poor already believe in marriage—profoundly so. Given the often perilously low quality of their romantic relationships, it is hard to argue that programs aimed at improving the relational skills of poor couples who aspire to marriage is not a worthy goal. Better relationship skills might even prove useful in the aftermath of the breakup, as a mother and father attempt to forge a positive co-parenting relationship. However, relationship skills training must address the very serious relationship problems alluded to above. For when these couples break up, it is usually due to one of the following: domestic violence, chronic infidelity, criminal behavior and incarceration, or severe drug and alcohol abuse.¹⁰

But relationship skills alone are unlikely to move many poor unmarried parents into stable marriages. We live in an America where the gap between the rich and poor continues to grow. This economic reality has infused poor youth with the sense that they have nothing to lose by an early or ill-timed birth. Nationally, four in ten mothers who ever give birth while unmarried begin bearing children while still in their teens.¹¹ A recent study shows that the number of American children living with two parents increased quite significantly over the course of the 1990s, and the decline in teen pregnancy during those years was responsible for 80 percent of the change.¹² Teen romances, even between those who share a child, are notoriously unstable. Thus, reducing the teen childbearing rate further should remain a key policy goal.

Marital standards have risen for all Americans, and the standards the poor hold are no different from what everyone wants out of marriage. The poor want to marry, but they insist on marrying well. This, in their view, is the only way to avoid an almost certain divorce. The divorce rate in the U.S. rose until 1980, and has declined only slightly in the two decades since. However, overall trend masks the fact that during the 1980s and 1990s, the marriages of college-educated women became far more stable than they had been in the 1970s, while marriages among those at the bottom of the educational distribution actually became less stable over time.¹³ Some might charge that the marriage standards of the poor are too high, but those ideals correspond to the marital relationships most likely to last.

Until poor young women and men have more access to jobs that lead to financial security—until there is reason to hope for a rewarding life pathway outside of bearing and raising children—the poor will continue to have children far sooner than most Americans think they should, and in far less than ideal circumstances. Meanwhile, they will probably continue to defer marriage. An agenda aimed at enhancing relationship skills and improving access to economic resources, on the other hand, might help more new unmarried parents achieve their own stated goal; a healthy, lasting marital relationship.

¹⁰ Edin and Kefalas, 2005.

¹¹ Unpublished figures calculated by Stephanie J. Ventura. National Center for Health Statistics are cited in Terry-Humen, Manlove and Moore (2001). Terry-Humen, Elizabeth, Jennifer Manlove and Kristen Moore. 2001. “Births Outside of Marriage: Perceptions versus Reality.” ChildTrends Research Brief.

¹² Committee on Ways and Means Democrats. 2004. “Steep Decline in Teen Birth Rate Significantly Responsible for Reducing Child Poverty and Single-Parent Families.” Issue Brief, April 23rd.

¹³ Unpublished calculations by Steve Martin, University of Maryland.