

# **TEENAGE PREGNANCY, POVERTY AND THE WELFARE DEBATE IN EUROPE AND THE UNITED STATES**

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## **1 - Preface<sup>1</sup>**

After a period of decline in the 1970s, teenage birth rates in Britain and the United States increased in the 1980s and are now higher than in any mainland Western European countries, most of which have experienced a fall in the number of births to under twenties since 1980 (see Tables 1 and 2). In both countries young mothers have been the focus of a concern that links teenage pregnancy to a decline in morality and family life and teenage births to the availability of welfare and state housing. A central feature of this hostility has been the growing cost of welfare payments to lone parents in both countries. Cuts in benefits to unmarried teenage mothers have been proposed and justified as both reducing public expenditure and removing perverse incentives to extramarital childbearing. Yet the evidence that young women get pregnant to obtain state benefits or housing is hard to find and countries with more generous welfare systems have much lower teenage fertility rates. Most countries of Western Europe have experienced significant declines in teenage births during the last twenty years (Tables 1 and 2)

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<sup>1</sup>. This paper was presented in 1998. Some tables and details of policy and legislation have been updated in 2001, and a few references have been added.

and there has been little sign of the high profile concern about teenage pregnancy as a major social problem and certainly none of the condemnation found in the Anglo-Saxon countries.

Table 1  
Teenage fertility rates: USA, England and Wales  
and other European countries, 1971-1996

Country	1971	1977	1980	1983	1990	1993	1996 <sup>a</sup>
United States	66.1	53.9	54.2	52.4	61.7	61.1	55.6 <sup>b</sup>
<b>England and Wales</b>	<b>50.8</b>	<b>29.8</b>	<b>30.9</b>	<b>26.9</b>	<b>33.3</b>	<b>31.0</b>	<b>29.8</b>
Sweden	34.6	22.1	15.8	11.7	12.7	11.2	7.7
Denmark	29.3	22.1	16.8	10.6	9.8	9.9	8.8
France	27.7	22.1	17.8	13.9	9.1	7.9	7.9
Netherlands	22.2	10.1	9.2	7.7	6.4	7.2	5.6

Sources: US Dept of Health and Human Services (revised data for 1971-1999; from Alan Guttmacher Institute); UN Demographic Year Books (1975; 1980; 1986; 1992; 1994; 1997); Eurostat Demographic Statistics.

a. 1996 or latest available year.

b. US rates continued to decline to 50.5 in 1999.

Table 2  
Teenage fertility rates: Selected countries  
of Southern and Eastern Europe, 1960-1996

Country	1960	1970	1980	1983	1988	1993	1996 <sup>a</sup>
Bulgaria	34.3	71.5	81.0	81.1	73.9	70.5	54.0
Romania	25.5	66.0	73.0	58.2	60.0	47.6	40.5
Hungary	25.8	50.5	69.0	53.9	41.2	34.5	29.9
Poland	17.9	30.0	46.0	34.9	31.6	31.0	21.1
<b>England and Wales</b>	<b>34.0</b>	<b>49.1</b>	<b>30.9</b>	<b>26.9</b>	<b>33.3</b>	<b>31.0</b>	<b>29.8</b>
Portugal	26.6	29.8	41.0	37.5	26.4	22.7	20.9
Greece	17.4	36.2	52.6	43.7	26.3	15.2	13.0
Spain	9.6	13.8	25.6	18.3	16.7	11.0	7.8
Italy	19.1	27.1	15.4	9.8	9.6	8.0	6.8

Sources: UN Demographic Year Books (1965; 1975; 1986; 1992; 1994; 1997); Eurostat Demographic Statistics.

a. 1996 or latest available year.

This paper examines the relationship between teenage pregnancy and poverty in developed countries and the arguments in Britain and America that teenage parenthood is a symptom of social malaise and that young single mothers are the product of a welfare system that encourages irresponsible behaviour. I shall argue that this focus on teenage motherhood as a major social problem is counter-productive in that it distracts both from the need to come to terms with long term changes in the family and the immediate problem of unwanted teenage births which requires solutions that are focused on preventing teenage pregnancy and supporting young single mothers rather than penalising young parents who are not married (Phoenix, 1991).

I shall argue that the high levels of teenage pregnancy in Britain and America are attributable to the continuing social inequalities in those countries: an explanation which fits in with much wider evidence of an association in developed countries between early child-bearing and poverty (Askham, 1975 ; Rainwater and Weinstein, 1960). Such an association has a long history in demography, but was previously seen as problematic in that it led to higher lifetime fertility (Selman, 1977). Today, with a marked decline in large families in all social classes, the focus is on teenage out-of-wedlock fertility rather than early marriage and excess fertility.

## **2 - Poverty, fertility and family planning in Britain**

The history of fertility decline and the spread of contraception in Britain has been well documented (Banks, 1954; Leathard, 1980). It is widely acknowledged that the decline started and proceeded most rapidly in higher socio-economic groups so that by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were wide socio-economic differentials in completed fertility (Haines, 1989; Selman, 1977). By the 1930s eugenic concerns were being expressed about these differentials and as late as the 1950s and 1960s large families were being blamed for working class poverty and in turn attributed to the financial incentives provided by family allowances alongside the fatalistic orientation of lower working class groups, trapped in a sub-culture of poverty. Large families were blamed for producing delinquent children and the wage stop was introduced to make sure that unemployed fathers of many children did not have any disincentive to work. The main reasons for higher fertility

in working class women in the 1960s were the inadequate access to abortion, contraception and sterilisation, compounded by problems of motivation associated with situations of poverty from which no easy escape could be seen (Selman, 1977). Early pregnancy outside marriage often led to a “shot-gun” marriage and such women could have 3 or 4 children by their early twenties. Doctors were reluctant to sterilise younger women so that a tubal tie was more likely to be offered only to mothers in their thirties who already had five or more children.

### **3 - Public hostility towards young single mothers in Britain and America**

During the last term of Conservative government in the UK, ministers were involved in an orchestration of public hostility towards young single mothers, much of which was focused on their abuse of welfare (Selman, 1997a; Selman and Glendinning, 1996; Sinclair, 1994). At the 1992 Conservative Party Conference, the Social Security Minister attacked “young ladies who get pregnant just to jump the housing list” and in November 1992 the Minister of Housing asked “how do we explain to the young couple who wait for a home before they start a family that they cannot be rehoused ahead of the unmarried teenager expecting her first, probably unplanned child?”

This was accompanied by a hostile press campaign culminating in 1995 with reports linking teenage mothers to the collapse of family life in Britain.

The *Daily Express* of August 23 1995 carried the following headlines on its front page:

**“Scandal of teenage mothers as divorces hit a record level.  
End of family life in Britain.”**

Babies were said to be a “passport to better life”. Other papers took up a similar theme. The *Sunday Times* of 24 September 1995 carried a story of a woman with five children by three fathers who was pregnant with twins by a fifth and lived on state welfare:

**“Mother trouble.  
She has five children by three fathers.  
She is now pregnant with twins.  
What should society do with single parents like Sue Simcoe?”**

All these articles focused on young mothers receiving state benefits and on British television a documentary entitled *Babies on Benefit* looked at the relationship between welfare payments and single parents through the example of a woman in her early twenties with four children by two different fathers and pregnant for a fifth time, who would not marry the father because she would be worse off and was living at state expense in a large house!

Though less virulent, the focus on young single parents did not go away with the election in 1997 of the new Labour government. Home Secretary Jack Straw was quoted as facing the dilemma of how to deal humanely with the pregnant teenager while "...at the same time making the environment that creates teenage pregnancy a less friendly one". (*Sunday Observer*, Feb. 1<sup>st</sup> 1998). Six months earlier, just after his election victory, Prime Minister Tony Blair had called for stronger policies to get single parents on welfare back to work:

***"Now Blair gets tough on single mothers.  
Unemployed parents will be hauled in  
and interviewed about their job prospects."***  
(*Observer*, 1<sup>st</sup> June 1997)

A year later in a speech to the Labour Party Conference Blair promised action on teenage pregnancies in "the first government Paper on the Family", which would emphasise responsibilities, "like the belief that if you father a child, that child's got something to do with you, and the child's mother has every right to expect support" (*Times*, 30 Sept. 1998).

In the United States concerns about young mothers were widespread by 1975 when Congress began its hearings on teenage pregnancy - seen as the source of many social evils from school drop-out to family disruption and economic dependency. Teenage pregnancy was described as an "epidemic" (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1976) and "the most serious and complex problem facing the nation" (Vinovskis, 1988). By the late 1980s welfare bills for young mothers were growing rapidly and teenagers themselves were seen as deliberately having children to get welfare payments. This interpretation gained increasing favour in the 1990s, culminating in the Republican Party proposals to prohibit welfare payments to unmarried mothers under eighteen and permit withholding AFDC (Aid for Families with Dependent Children) for those under 21 (see Luker, 1996; Rhode, 1993). A modified version of these proposals became law as part of the Clinton welfare reforms

in the 1996 *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* which replaced AFDC with TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) (see Selman, 1998).

In contrast, attitudes to young single mothers in mainland Europe seem not to carry the same attitude of condemnation. Klett-Davies (1996) has noted that in Germany lone mothers are viewed rather as “helpless and innocent victims who are justified in receiving welfare states’ assistance as long as the child requires this.” In Denmark and Sweden there is concern over teenage pregnancy, but no targeting of young mothers for criticism or withdrawal of state support (Gress-Wright, 1993; Knudsen, 1997). Although this may in part be a consequence of the lower levels of teenage fertility, these lower levels are also the outcome of a much healthier attitude towards teenage sexuality and the problems of young pregnant women.

#### **4 - The demography of teenage pregnancy in Britain and the USA**

##### **4.1 - Levels and trends**

Concern about teenage births in both Britain and the USA reached a peak at a time when numbers were substantially lower than in Britain in the 1960s (Selman and Glendinning, 1996) or the USA in the 1950s (Luker, 1996). The differences in level and outcome of teenage pregnancies in England and Wales in the 1960s and 1980s (Table 4) are examined in detail by Selman (1996a). The number and rates of teenage births peaked in the 1960s and early 1970s (Table 3) and then fell until 1980 since when levels have fluctuated until a new, more rapid decline: numbers have been falling since 1988 and *rates* which peaked in 1991 at 33.1 had fallen to 28.5 by 1995. In 1995 there were just under 42,000 teenage births, less than half the total recorded thirty years earlier in 1966 (Table 5). There has been a steady growth in the proportion of these births which occur outside marriage (from 20% in 1961 to 88% in 1996 - the highest proportion in any country). The high levels of teenage births in the late 1960s and early 1970s caused less concern, because half the births were to women who were married before conceiving and single pregnant teenagers either had a back street abortion, married before the birth or had their child adopted (Selman, 1996a).

Over thirty years the number of teenage births in England and Wales has more than halved and the number of births to young single mothers registering the birth alone has fallen by nearly a third (Table 5).

The situation in the USA is similar: the overall birth rate for teenagers fell from 91.0 in 1960 to 51.0 in 1985 and even after the rise to 61.7 in 1990, was still less than 70 per cent of the level thirty years earlier (Luker, 1996).

Table 3  
Live births to women under age 20:  
England and Wales, selected years, 1951-1998

Years	Total births		Births inside marriage		Births outside marriage		
	Number	Rate <sup>a</sup>	Number	Rate <sup>b</sup>	Number	Rate <sup>c</sup>	Ratio <sup>d</sup>
1951	29,082	21.3	24,299	427	4,783	3.7	164
1961	59,786	37.3	47,890	449	11,896	8.0	199
1966	86,746	47.7	66,164	489	20,582	12.3	237
1971	82,641	50.6	61,086	434	21,555	14.6	261
1977	54,477	29.4	34,426	305	20,051	11.7	368
1981	56,570	28.1	30,140	325	26,430	13.7	467
1986	57,406	30.1	17,793	361	39,613	21.3	690
1991	52,396	33.1	8,948	277	43,448	28.0	829
1995	41,938	28.5	5,623	444	36,315	25.0	866
1996	44,667	29.8	5,365	445	39,302	26.4	880
1998	48,285	30.7	5,278	463	43,007	27.7	891

Source: ONS/OPCS Birth Statistics - Series FM1.

a. per 1,000 women aged 15-19.

b. per 1,000 married women aged 16-19.

c. per 1,000 single, widowed or divorced women aged 15-19.

d. per 1,000 live births.

In Western Europe levels of teenage births are lower than in Britain and the USA and declines over the past thirty years have been greater and more consistent (Table 1). Changes have been most striking - and best documented - in Northern Europe, where the Dutch and Scandinavian experience has been cited as evidence of the impact of open attitudes towards sex education and the provision of contraception (David, 1990; Ketting, 1994; Selman and Glendinning, 1996). In Sweden and Denmark the overall proportion of births outside

Table 4  
Outcome of teenage conceptions:  
England and Wales, selected years, 1969-1998

Years	Number of conceptions (1,000s)				Rate (per 1,000 women aged 15-19)	
	Inside marriage	Outside marriage		Abor- tions		
		maternity inside marriage	maternity outside marriage			
1969	43.4	43.5	25.3	11.3	123.4	75.0
1971	43.9	39.9	25.7	23.3	132.7	81.3
1975	34.7	23.8	23.7	29.7	111.9	64.1
1980	28.5	20.1	32.2	36.4	117.1	58.7
1986	15.6	11.3	52.3	39.6	118.8	62.3
1990	10.7	5.9	57.5	41.0	115.1	69.0
1994	6.8	2.7	45.5	30.0	85.0	58.6
1996	6.5	2.6	51.7	35.0	94.9	63.3
1998	6.7	2.5	54.5	38.0	101.6	64.9

Sources: ONS/OPCS Birth Statistics - Series FM1; ONS/OPCS Monitors:  
Conceptions in England and Wales.

Table 5  
Teenage fertility, England and Wales, 1966 and 1995

Years	1966	1995
Total births	86,746	41,938
<i>Birth rate</i>	47.7	28.5
Births inside marriage	66,164	5,623
<i>Premarital conceptions</i>	36,761	1,600
Births outside marriage	20,582	36,315
<i>Sole registration</i>	16,600	11,880
<i>Joint registration</i>	4,000	24,435
Rate	12.3	25.0
Ratio	237	866
Births conceived outside marriage	57,343	37,915

Sources: ONS/OPCS Birth Statistics - Series FM1;  
ONS/OPCS Monitors: Conceptions in England and Wales.



marriage is greater than in either Britain or the USA but there is little evident concern over this. In contrast the low teenage birth rates in Italy, Portugal and Greece and the high birth rates of Eastern and Central Europe (Table 2) are associated predominantly with births within marriage - although often with conceptions outside!

#### **4.2 - Illegitimacy and teenage births**

In most Western countries the proportion of births outside wedlock is highest amongst teenagers; but the teenage birth rate tends to be lower than in other age groups and rising teenage "illegitimacy" ratios have accompanied falling rates. American commentator Charles Murray (1990; 1994) has identified illegitimacy as the most important single factor in the emerging British underclass and has argued the need to act while the proportion of births outside wedlock, though high, is - unlike Sweden - still a minority. In England and Wales, this stage was passed in relation to teenage births in the early 1980s and by 1996 the proportion of teenage births outside marriage had reached 88% (Table 3). This proportion has risen steadily over the last twenty years - as is true of births to mothers of all ages - but such births represent only a small and diminishing proportion of all non-marital births. In 1996 teenage births accounted for 17% of all out of wedlock births, half the proportion found in 1976, when 37% of births outside marriage were to women under 20.

In the USA in 1995, nearly 70% of teenage births occurred outside marriage (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1995). In 1990 teenage non-marital births accounted for 31% of all births outside marriage, less than in 1970 when half of such births were to women under 20. Over the same period non-marital fertility rates rose from 22.4 to 42.5. Rates for Black teenage mothers fell from 96.9 in 1970 to 89.3 in 1985, but rose again to 110.1 in 1990; rates for White teenagers rose throughout the period from 10.9 in 1970 to 29.5 in 1990 (Luker, 1996).

Elsewhere, the growth in out-of-wedlock births has not been associated with high teenage birth rates. Countries like Sweden and Denmark with very high overall levels of non-marital fertility have low teenage birth rates. The Danish teenage birth rate is now less than 10‰ (Table 1). Most of these births occur outside marriage, but one in five are to married teenagers, although less than one per cent of women under age 20 are married. In Greece and Portugal, where birth rates are higher but

falling (Table 2), more teenagers are married and a majority of births under 20 occur within marriage. This is also true of many countries in Eastern and Central Europe (Table 2) where teenage birth rates remain high, but concerns have a different focus than those current in Britain: the implications of premature marriage and childbearing followed by high rates of marriage breakdown (Alesina, 1996; Vornick and Govorun, 1996). In contrast, the reduction in teenage births in most of Western Europe has occurred predominantly in births within marriage and especially those resulting from extra-marital conceptions.

### **5 - Teenage pregnancy and poverty**

In most developed countries teenage pregnancy rates are highest in poorer and more deprived sectors of society (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1995; Babb, 1994; Botting, 1998; Kiernan, 1980). Families headed by young single mothers are amongst the poorest in both Britain and the USA. In England and Wales there are also wide geographical variations in the incidence of teenage births (see Table 6) which point to a strong association with poverty. In Scotland a study on Tayside (Smith, 1993) showed that the teenage pregnancy rate for girls living in poor neighbourhoods was six times that for those in more affluent areas and that girls in poor areas were more likely to reject abortion. In Denmark, Knudsen (1997) estimates that approximately 25% of all births in 1993-1995 to women under the age of 20 were to ethnic minorities.

One reason for the poverty of young single mothers is their dependence on state benefits as their sole or major income source. In the next section I look in more detail at the welfare debate in Britain and the USA and argue that this has distracted from the real causes of persisting high rates of teenage fertility. I shall then examine the influence on the wider debate on teenage pregnancy of concerns about teenage sexuality and abortion and "solutions" in the form of child adoption. Finally I shall argue that poverty should be seen as a cause rather than a consequence of teenage pregnancy and that success in reducing current rates will depend on attention to the life prospects of young people in poorer areas and the provision of improved access to contraception and abortion rather than a reduction in welfare provision which will only have the effect of increasing poverty amongst an already disadvantaged sector of society.

Table 6  
Teenage fertility and deprivation: Under 20 birth rates for 1997  
and two previous years in North East England and other areas

Local authority area	Under 20 birth rate 1995	Under 20 birth rate 1996	Under 20 birth rate 1997	Index of deprivation <sup>a</sup>
<b>North East Region</b>				
Easington	48.81	66.67	58.89	4
Wansbeck	46.11	58.94	54.48	18
Middlesborough	49.42	49.26	52.58	45
Hartlepool	57.56	59.74	51.00	10
South Tyneside	41.92	37.91	49.50	14
Wear Valley	52.96	47.76	49.04	15
Darlington	46.81	43.96	48.64	104
Sedgefield	38.51	45.97	47.97	40
Derwentside	34.77	43.40	44.97	38
Sunderland	41.02	46.22	40.59	17
<b>England and Wales</b>	<b>28.5</b>	<b>29.8</b>	<b>30.2</b>	[177]
Teesdale	25.72	25.93	25.48	193
Durham City	12.78	13.59	19.80	155
Tynedale	11.60	13.21	15.70	197
<b>HIGH DEPRIVATION AREAS OUTSIDE LONDON</b>				
<i>Hull</i>	52.93	57.68	54.54	13
<i>Sandwell</i>	54.26	44.87	51.23	11
<i>Barnsley</i>	50.26	48.09	44.73	16
<i>Manchester</i>	44.70	49.66	40.07	7
<i>Liverpool</i>	35.28	36.48	32.63	5
<b>Least deprived area</b>				
<i>Hart (nr Basingstoke)</i>	7.73	6.29	12.63	353

Source: Selman and Clarke, 2000.

a. Index of Local Deprivation, produced for Government in January 2000: all 353 areas listed by level of deprivation (1= highest deprivation).

## 6 - Teenage parenthood and the welfare debate

The most manifest demonstration of the association between teenage motherhood and poverty in Britain and the USA is the high and growing number of teenage mothers dependent on means-tested state benefits (Botting, 1998). In both countries there is concern over

the rising cost of welfare payments to single parents and in particular to young single mothers. Sinclair (1994) concludes that a major factor in public hostility towards young single mothers lies in the fact that they do not work and are held to be culpable for their non-employment.

In Britain most unmarried teenage mothers are dependent on state benefits and many continue to be for many years after they leave their teens (Burghes and Brown, 1995). The number of single mothers dependent on welfare is greater today than in the 1960s. Lone parents who have never married are most likely to be in receipt of state benefits and it is this group which is currently the fastest growing category incorporating as it does those who become single parents following the breakdown of cohabitation (Haskey, 1993). Most never-married lone mothers are not teenagers, but Burghes and Brown (1995) have shown that about half of such mothers had their first child before the age of 20.

However, what has given the welfare debate a particularly problematic twist in both Britain and the USA has been the assertion that young women are deliberately getting pregnant in order to get benefits or subsidised housing and that the progressive reduction in benefits to this group will both reduce the costs to the taxpayer directly and have a significant impact on the number of births to unmarried teenagers. Charles Murray (1990; 1992) has suggested that any "solution" to the rising number of extramarital births must acknowledge that a key factor in the increase in such births has been the welfare state and the implicit approval of non-marital fertility. In a short article in the *Sunday Times* of 11 July 1993, he floated the idea that the whole pattern of demographic change might be reversed by restricting welfare and reintroducing stigma: "Turn back the clock, restoring the benefit system for single mothers that Britain had in the mid-1960s, and there is every reason to think that you will turn back the proportion of babies born to single women as well" (Murray, 1993).

In 1998 a similar message came from former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who hit the headlines with her call for young unmarried mothers to be sent to convents:

**"Outcry as Thatcher says: Send single mothers to convents"**  
(*The Express*, Wednesday October 21<sup>st</sup> 1998)

Her comments, made during a speaking tour in the United States, noted the rising number of children born to never married women and included the admission that:

“Some would say that we took the wrong steps many years ago when there were only a few such children... We wanted to do our best for them. Our best was to see that the young mother had a flat of her own... and also had an income to look after the child.”

She now conceded that this had been wrong and that:

“...in tackling the situation in that way we were unwittingly multiplying the number of people who had illegitimate children.”

Yet the assumption that pregnant teenagers are cynically seeking a council house or welfare payments remains unsubstantiated and most studies show teenagers to be amazed at such suggestions or to be largely unaware of such possibilities (Phoenix, 1991). Preliminary findings of research carried out under the ESRC Household and Change Programme (Allen *et al.*, 1998; Berthould *et al.*, 1998) show no evidence to suggest that teenagers become pregnant to get council housing or additional social security benefits. The reality is that young single mothers who are re-housed ahead of “more deserving” cases are likely to be placed in poor accommodation on sink estates. In Britain, lone parents aged under 18 receive reduced rates of income support and those under age 16 have no entitlement to claim means-tested assistance (Selman and Glendinning, 1996), so that the idea that state benefits act as incentives to early parenthood is inherently implausible.

The association of illegitimacy with welfare provision is not a new idea. Thirty years ago an article in the American journal *Social Forces* entitled “The amazing rise of illegitimacy in England” (Hartley, 1996) charted the rising proportion of births occurring outside marriage in the early 1960s and saw the rise as encouraged by the availability of social assistance for unmarried mothers, which might “reduce motivation to prevent conception”.

### **6.1 - The welfare debate in America**

Similar debates have been raging in the USA for many years (Luker, 1996; Wilcox *et al.*, 1996), fuelled by arguments tied to a belief that the benefits system is thus contributing to the creation of a dependent underclass. It has been estimated that half of all families re-

ceiving AFDC (Aid for Families with Dependent Children) began with a teenage birth, although teenagers account for less than 10% of those on welfare at any time. Families on AFDC account for about 3% of the annual federal budget (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1995), but numbers on welfare have increased as a result of the growth in lone parent families so that it is perhaps not surprising that they have become a focus of concern despite the very low level of payments.

The welfare system is seen as perpetuating the very problem it was set up to solve, encouraging an increase in the number of single mothers and poor families. Pragmatic concerns blend with moral concerns. AFDC is said to encourage young unmarried women to have babies they would not otherwise have had. As in Britain the evidence to support these ideas is wanting (Wilcox *et al.*, 1996). If welfare benefits encourage teenage births, we should expect more young single mothers in Sweden where the welfare system is generous rather than in the USA which provides less support for single mothers than any other industrialised country (Luker, 1996).

Most recent reviews of research on welfare and fertility (Duncan and Hoffman, 1990; Moffit, 1992; Wilcox *et al.*, 1996) conclude that there is no evidence that welfare is a major influence on adolescent childbearing. There appears to be no clear correlation between the level of benefit and the level of teenage pregnancy in individual states (Wilcox *et al.*, 1996), although one study by Lundberg and Plotnick (1995) concluded that welfare generosity was "significantly associated with non-marital childbearing but not pregnancy", for White teenagers. It has also been pointed out (Moffit, 1992) that the real value of AFDC payments and food stamps declined throughout the period during which non-marital births to teenagers has been rising.

However, Conservative claims, despite all findings to the contrary, appeal to "a public worried about two different things - the cost of welfare and changing family structures - in a way that knits these two concerns together" (Luker, 1996, p. 180). The rhetoric is winning and many Americans are saying that "It's time to change the incentives and make responsible parenthood the norm not the exception." This quote is from the Republican Party's 1994 *Contract with America*, which proposed eliminating all welfare payments to children whose mothers were unwed teenagers as well as denying them access to food stamps and public housing. Earlier legislation had allowed states to require underage mothers to live with their parents as a condition of receiving

AFDC and then assess eligibility on the basis of household rather than individual income (Pearce, 1993; Selman and Glendinning, 1996).

Meanwhile, Senate has passed the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act*, which was signed by President Clinton on August 22 1996. This gives states increased discretion over their welfare programmes and encourages action to reduce teenage and other out of wedlock births, as long as such action does not involve an increase in the number of abortions. States are allowed to “cap” benefits for a woman who has an additional child while in receipt of welfare and to deny benefits to unmarried parents until they reach the age of 18 (Wilcox et al., 1996). Several states have already limited benefits to a maximum of 24 months or introduced “family cap” proposals and requirements for young parents to live at home and enrol for high school.

### **6.2 - The welfare debate in Britain today**

In Britain, the criticisms of young single mothers described earlier became increasingly evident in the later years of the last Tory government, culminating in the decision to freeze lone parent premium and one parent benefit, a proposal implemented by the new Labour government. In a speech in 1998 Home Secretary, Jack Straw, argued that:

“There is not much doubt in the minds of a lot of us that a combination of the collapse of unskilled and semi-skilled male employment, the availability of housing for single people from the age of 16 (...) and the benefit system has created an environment in which the natural checks that existed before on teenagers having children and keeping them has gone in some areas.” (*The Observer*, Feb. 1<sup>st</sup> 1998).

In Germany where there have been no proposals to cut or withdraw benefits, 61% of never-married lone mothers are in employment, twice the level recorded in Britain (Klett-Davies, 1996). The wider availability of good child care in Scandinavia is a key factor in the higher proportion of lone mothers who work there.

The real test for new Labour is whether the encouragement of single mothers to work can be achieved through positive measures which make it financially worthwhile by providing affordable child-care. For younger mothers the issue will be more about providing positive chances to resume education. If denial of benefit becomes a major tool, it will be a sign of the failure of this wider policy and is likely to cause considerable suffering. In December 1997 the Prime Minister

announced the setting up of the *Social Exclusion Unit* (SEU) to work on specific projects aimed at reducing social exclusion by producing “joined up solutions to joined up problems”. The issue of teenage pregnancy was referred to the Unit which produced a long and detailed report in June 1999 (SEU, 1999), which has led to the development of a well-funded teenage pregnancy strategy to cut rates of teenage parenthood and propose better solutions “to combat the risk of social exclusion for vulnerable teenage parents and their children”. The Report (p. 17) notes that poverty is a key risk factor for teenage conceptions, but finds the assertion that pregnant teenagers choose to keep their baby so that they can claim benefit and housing both improbable and unprovable (p. 31).

### **7 - Teenage pregnancy and teenage sexuality**

I have argued that there is no convincing evidence that welfare provision in Britain and the USA has been a major factor in the rise in non-marital births to teenagers and that the increased proportion of births occurring outside marriage is not primarily about teenagers. The public concerns have been fuelled by the welfare debate but also reflect the difficulties both countries face in coming to terms with teenage sexuality. Adolescent pregnancy is seen as the outcome of inappropriate sexual behaviour, so that a decline in teenage birth rates will not diminish these concerns, unless accompanied by a reduction in levels of teenage sexual activity. This concern is strongest in respect of younger teenagers for whom the welfare arguments have least relevance. In Britain the *Sun Newspaper* of 4 July 1997 carried the following headlines:

**“Sex at 11, Mum at 12.  
A story to shock Britain.”**

Luker (1996) argues that the increased sexual activity of American teenagers during the last two decades should put some context on the failure of US teenage pregnancy rates to fall. However, such an increase in teenage sexual activity is not unique to the USA. In Britain the median age of first sexual experience has fallen sharply in the last forty years (Wellings, 1994) and this appears to be equally true of those countries cited earlier which experienced even greater declines in birth



rates. In all industrialised countries the highest rates of teenage births occurred when the number of sexually active teenagers was much lower than today.

The Netherlands is frequently cited as a country with a unique pattern of low teenage birth rates achieved with less recourse to abortion than in most other countries (Ketting, 1994). Dutch commentators attribute this to the highly effective use of contraception by sexually active teenagers and this is in turn associated with early sex education and continuing media provision of information, such as the TV programme *Sex with Angela*. It is also argued that this approach has deferred age of first intercourse - a view supported by the widespread review of effects of sex-education on young people's sexual behaviour carried out by Grunseit and Kippax (1994).

Yet Luker (1996) shows that the progress towards improved contraceptive service for young people in America was threatened by the rising concern over teenage pregnancy as people argued that sex education and contraceptive availability encouraged teenage sex and so was counterproductive.

Despite evidence of the effectiveness of public service contraception clinics and major advances in sex education, funding for federal contraceptive services was halved in the early 1990s and there was growing opposition to sex education that incorporated contraceptive advice, as activists called for their replacement by abstinence-based programmes (Brindis, 1993; Luker, 1996), a policy adopted in a Republican amendment to the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act*, which has been pursued with enthusiasm by new American president George Bush (Williams, 2001).

Britain too has not been immune from such controversy. Contraceptive provision to young teenagers was set back for many years by the Gillick judgement (Durham, 1991). Even after the House of Lords had endorsed the right of doctors to give confidential advice to girls under 16, uncertainty prevailed (Francome, 1993). It was not until the 1990s and the publication of the Department of Health's *Health of the Nation* (1992) with its target of halving the under 16s pregnancy rate by 2000, that serious attention was paid to improving contraceptive services for the younger teenager and even then controversy dogged implementation. Sex education has also been a matter of controversy: in March 1994 the Health Education Authority proposed to publish *Your Pocket Guide to Sex*, described by critics as an "explicit sex guide for

teenagers". On 24 March 1994 the London *Evening Standard* carried the following headlines on its front page:

***"Advisers kept in dark on explicit handbook.  
Outrage over sex guide for children."***

The guide was withdrawn after the Health Minister had described it as "smutty", but was later published commercially as a paperback.

Elisa Jones' study of teenage pregnancy in industrialised societies (Jones *et al.*, 1986) identified an open attitude to sex as a key correlate of low teenage birth rates. The confused handling of sex education issues in Britain and the USA suggests that such an attitude is still not present in either country and that explicit sex education will continue to be viewed with suspicion. Furstenberg (1998) has argued that "the inability of Americans to accept teenage sexuality as normal remains a barrier to lowering rates of teenage fertility". This is not to say that the early onset of sexual activity in younger teenagers should be treated as unproblematic. Several studies have shown how few such young girls enjoy such early sexual activity, how they are subject to double standards (Lees, 1993) and how many have been subjected to forced sex with older men (Taylor *et al.*, 1995).

## **8 - Teenage pregnancy and the abortion debate**

Opposition to liberal sex education in the USA has been associated with the pro-Life movement and for such groups abortion is the worst manifestation of teenage pregnancy. Restriction on public funding of abortions since the Hyde amendment has had an effect on access to termination for poor women (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1995) and Lundberg and Plotnick (1995) report a significant relationship between abortion funding and the teen abortion rate in American states. Fewer pregnant teenagers in the USA resorted to abortion in the 1990s than twenty years earlier (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1995). In England and Wales, the number of legal abortions to women conceiving under age 20 rose from 11,000 in 1969 to 42,000 in 1989, but teenage abortions account for only a small and declining proportion of all abortions. A majority of teenage pregnancies end in maternities and the proportion is highest in regions with higher overall pregnancy rates (Table 6).

Table 7  
Abortions, births and ratios: Women aged 15-19 and under 15,  
selected European countries, 1991

Country	Under 20s			Under 15s		
	Legal abortions	Live births	Ratio <sup>a</sup>	Legal abortions	Live births	Ratio <sup>a</sup>
Denmark	2,892	1,615	179	52	2	2600
Sweden	5,994	3,557	169	158	7	2143
Romania	48,642	45,896	106	2,046	630	325
Hungary	13,028	15,396	86	412	212	194
Bulgaria	14,028	22,015	64	503	316	159
UK	36,171	59,453	61	964	264	365
Italy	12,252	21,270	58	103	21	490

Source: UN Demographic Year Book 1994.

a. Legal abortions per 100 live births.

Legal abortion can contribute to reductions in teenage births. In Denmark a clear majority of teenage pregnancies end in abortion (see Table 7). In 1991 there were 179 abortions for every 100 births to young women aged 15-19 - and only 2 births were recorded to girls under 15. Similar high levels of abortions are found in Sweden, but not in Holland (David and Rademakers, 1996; Ketting, 1994). The country where abortion might seem least likely to affect teenage birth rates is Ireland where abortion is illegal and proscribed by the Constitution. However, the steady move of women "across the sea to England" (Francome, 1991) means that the abortion rate in Irish women may well be similar to that of the Dutch!

### 9 - Alternative solutions to the welfare costs of young single mothers

Jack Straw's comments on the disappearance of checks on single teenagers having children "and keeping them" reminds us that until the 1970s adoption was an accepted solution to birth outside marriage and that one "logical" follow on to the withdrawal of welfare benefits from teenage mothers is the removal of their children and the provision of alternate care or parenting. If abortion is not acceptable, adoption offers a low cost alternative.

In America, Republican Newt Gingrich has proposed that orphanages be established for children whose mothers cannot take care of them and in Britain Conservative Minister Virginia Bottomley proposed that young mothers should no longer be offered their own housing:

**“Put single parents in hostels, says Bottomley.”**

(*Observer*, Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> Jan. 1994)

These ideas were picked up in the call from Margaret Thatcher for single mothers to be sent to convents, which was mentioned earlier (section 6). Both are similar to arguments put forward in the USA in favour of “*second-chance*” homes (see e.g. writings of Sylvester, 1994; 1995). They survive in a modified form in the proposal of the SEU Report (p. 102) that by 2003 all under 18 teenage lone parents who cannot live with family or partner should be placed in supervised semi-independent housing with support, not in an independent tenancy, an idea summed up in the *Daily Mail* of 30<sup>th</sup> January 1999 as:

**“LONE MOTHERS HOSTEL PLAN”**

and launched by Prime Minister Tony Blair in a later edition of the same paper under the headline:

**“Why we should stop giving lone mothers council homes”**

(*Daily Mail*, Monday Feb. 1<sup>st</sup> 1999)

Some of these ideas are reminiscent of those presented many years earlier for “*mother and baby*” homes in England in the 1960s, where many single mothers were pressured into relinquishing their babies for adoption – the preferred solution for more than 1 in 5 “illegitimate” births in England before the 1967 *Abortion Act* (Selman, 1976).

Such placements have almost ceased in mainland Europe and are rare in Britain, although there has been a rise in the number of placements of older children, often against the wishes of their mother (Mason and Selman, 1997), and some of these may have been born years earlier to a young single woman. A similar pattern is described in the United States by Bachrach (1986). There have recently been specific calls in both countries for a greater use of adoption to place babies of young single mothers in stable two-parent families (Morgan, 1998). In England a draft Adoption Bill, with a wide range of clauses covering all aspects of domestic and inter-country adoption, was seen by some

Tory spokespersons as an opportunity to encourage adoption as a solution both to the costs of teenage births and the need for children to have two parents. In America those seeking to restrict abortions to unmarried teenagers argue that this will encourage them to give up their child for adoption, thus giving hope to infertile couples and a second chance to themselves, but it is now clear that the price paid by birth mothers who have relinquished their children in the past has often been a lifetime of regret (Howe *et al.*, 1992).

### **10 - Alternative perspectives on the relationship between poverty and teenage pregnancy**

Much of the discussion of teenage pregnancy in Britain and the USA has focused on welfare as a cause of the rise in births out of wedlock and this in turn as a cause of family poverty, school dropout, child neglect and rising crime. However, Stern (1997) has pointed out that “the fact that early pregnancy is often *associated* with poverty does not imply that it is a phenomenon that *leads* to poverty, nor that per se it tends to perpetuate it”. Many girls who become mothers in their teens have a prior experience of poverty, school dropout and educational failure and for these deferred childbearing may have only a marginal effect on future life chances (Furstenberg *et al.*, 1987). If this is so, the question we should be asking is why so many young women seem to see early motherhood as an attractive option (Zabin and Hayward, 1993). In their study of Black adolescents, Duncan and Hoffman (1990) concluded that decisions about childbearing were much more likely to be influenced by career opportunities than the availability of AFDC benefits and that the best way to affect key decisions would be to find ways of increasing economic opportunities for young people. If high rates of teenage births are a consequence rather than a cause of poverty, further reductions in teenage birth rates in Britain will depend on New Labour’s success in improving child care facilities, spreading educational and job opportunities and developing contraceptive services, rather than any changes in the welfare system.

In the United States, Plotnick (1993) has argued that policies to improve educational and job opportunities for teenagers could contribute indirectly to reducing teenage pregnancy and childbearing and Kristin Luker (1996) has written forcibly that:

“Society should worry not about some epidemic of ‘teenage pregnancy’ but about the hopeless, discouraged and empty lives that early childbearing denotes. (...) Making the United States the kind of country in which - as in most European countries - early childbearing is rare would entail profound changes in public policy and perhaps even in American society as a whole.”

The obsession with the welfare costs of teenage mothers and the view that it is welfare which explains the high levels of teenage pregnancy is at best unhelpful and at worst a distraction from the real issues. The emphasis on welfare has carried with it the assumption of perverse incentives and cynically planned pregnancy and ignored the fact that most pregnancies to younger teenagers are unplanned, that many are unwanted and that some are clearly the result of sexual violence (Taylor *et al.*, 1995). Concentration on the removal of perverse incentives from welfare - and the introduction of clear disincentives to not seeking work - have led to a neglect of other barriers to independence such as the high cost and limited availability of good quality child care. For schoolgirl mothers the challenge is to ensure that pregnancy does not mean an end to education - as evidenced by the success of special schools, which allow mothers to bring their children to classes - but also to tackle the reality that it is school failure and drop-out which precedes pregnancy in many cases.

## **11 - Conclusion**

If we accept that the high rates of teenage pregnancy found in Britain and the USA are maintained by the social inequalities which have increasingly characterised those countries in the past fifteen years, it is clear that much of the discussion of teenage pregnancy in the UK has been very damaging and runs counter to a rational solution. In Britain Health of the Nation initiatives were threatened by opposition to explicit sex education and the emphasis on teenage women deliberately seeking a birth to get welfare distracted from the majority who had not wanted to be pregnant. Even if we see teenage births as a symptom of the underclass it would seem that a twin attack on social deprivation and improved contraception holds out more hope for young mothers than a withdrawal of benefits. The success of the Scandinavian countries in achieving both a more just society and much

lower levels of teenage births, despite high welfare payments and high non-marital fertility, shows the narrowness of the focus of much of the recent British and American debates. This is a reminder that we must see family policy as needing to move on a broad front - tackling child poverty and embracing the rights of all to reproductive freedom and sexual health - and not narrowly focused on bolstering the traditional family.

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