

The Black Tragedy — Children Having Children

by Yvonne Whaley

The advent of the 80's highlighted some serious considerations as to the health of the traditional family structure for America's 28.6 million Blacks. Only 41% of Black children lived with both parents, while almost 50% of those under 18 years of age were living in households headed by women. An even more disturbing and frightening statistic: close to 60% of the children born in this decade were born to unmarried women—many themselves under eighteen.



Over 50% of Black children live in households headed by women.

Why is this so? There are a number of reasons, but the most often cited is economics. Black unemployment has remained high in spite of governmental statistics that seem to state the opposite. While those statistics out of Washington do admit to higher teenage unemployment figures, the true figure for many Blacks is 47%! And—prospects for many of the Black youth are exceptionally dim—many are virtually unemployable. Our economy has shifted to a technological one requiring skills that hosts of young Blacks do not have, and are educationally unequipped to get. In addition, companies are moving into industrial parks in suburban areas, making it difficult for urban Blacks to get there. Thus, with the father of her unborn child unemployed, there is little reason for a pregnant girl to marry.

Furthermore, with one of every six young Black men in jail, others strung out on drug addiction along with the inordinate incidence of early death among Black males, there are few marriageable men. Black women outnumber their men by 2:1.

How then are these new young families supported? Some women work, and their mothers or grandmothers are responsible for child care. Some receive public assistance—food stamps and/or welfare checks validate their existence. Those families on public assistance (commonly called welfare) with underaged children also receive assistance from an agency whose primary clientele are those children.

One notion that flies in the face of fact is that welfare is an incentive for unmarried women to have children. If this were true, then those states having more generous benefits should have higher birthrates. This is just not so. Research has also shown that most recipients received benefits for a short time. Only one in four children from families heavily dependent on welfare applied for benefits upon leaving home.

All of this may become moot, for there is an evergrowing pool of unwed mothers under 18 years of age. This, of course, is most destructive to the traditional values found within the strong extended family that has been the

backbone for Blacks since the time when oral history was our major form of communication. Children should learn their values, discipline, and responsibilities from their parents, but without a male role model, many teenage boys grow up without knowing what a father is supposed to do or be. In some households, three and four generations live together with no males exhibiting permanency or available for the young to look up to in a positive, constructive way. Great grandmothers as young as fifty are not so unusual anymore.

The effects of such living arrangements are far reaching. Some mothers are burdened with negative feelings about their circumstances and take it out on their children. Verbal and physical abuse becomes a life style that can lead to alienation. Male children (and to a lesser degree—female children) can then turn to a life of crime or drug and/or alcohol addiction. Girls, hungry for affection, become pregnant. The cycle is endlessly repeated.

What Can Be Done About This?

The single, most important factor is education. When we speak of education, it is not just in the area of basic skills, although they are extremely important and necessary in order to achieve. Education, though, has many facets that impact upon an individual's self-esteem. It provides the ability to communicate effectively verbally or in written form, to seek job opportunities, to comprehend information, and to have and make viable choices and decisions. Lack of education thus limits an individual's chances to function in a society that demands an ability to process information productively and creatively.

Traditionally, we think of education as something we get in school. This is true as far as it goes. Children also process information from home, the street, the media—and they're getting mixed signals. The media constantly stresses sexuality—teenagers are encouraged to "turn it on" "aved it up"—"let it on"—just "don't hang on to it." The theme of love to a love-starved girl living in a fantasy world of softness and gentleness while her reality is a vermin infested crowded tenement, makes her extremely vulnerable to any sweet talking young man who walks into her life.

Let's get back to the schools. The public schools especially in the urban areas of this country, have sorely failed our youth. They will continue to do so unless community leaders, churches, social organizations, etc., make demands upon the system. Curricula must be designed that not only focus upon the 3 R's, but technology, life and family, and the consequences of early pregnancy.



We must continue the learning process.

One school district in Chicago received national attention when it addressed the issue of human sexuality through their health program. This program included dispensing of birth control information and devices to the students upon request. While it was a highly controversial approach, statistics show that it may be impossible to prevent a sexually active youth from continuing the practice. The administration thus felt it wise to launch a strong offensive against children having children. Preliminary findings appear to justify this unusual approach—more students are remaining in that high school to finish their education—fewer pregnancies have been documented.

Some of the consequences of early pregnancy have already been noted.

Perhaps the most detrimental to the survival and strength of our race is the weakness of so many of the newborn to underage mothers. Poor prenatal care often produces babies with birth defects or increases the incidence of high infant mortality. Inadequate postnatal care can handicap a child for the rest of his life. Poor nutrition often stunts the child's growth both mentally and physically. It is not surprising that the majority of children in pre-school programs, such as "Head Start", are children from unwed mothers or mothers who are heads of households with limited funds. Many of these children have had unacceptable socialization and must learn how to function in a group.

It has been said that one of the problems of Blacks is that we have no common culture; the only thing uniting us is the fact that our ancestors came from the same continent. If this is true, we need to ensure our youth that we care enough about them to see that they are equipped to enter into the mainstream. They must be motivated with realistic goals, counselling and a support system that will boost their self-esteem. No longer must we allow young girls to seek an identity or validate their existence through a

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defenseless child who is doomed to repeat its mother's or (often unknown) father's mistakes. It is incumbent upon those of us who have, to show those who haven't, how to get "it." This is most delicate and must be attempted without a superior attitude. (This will be difficult for some of us. We still can adopt that field/house slave "attitude".) As one young man so succinctly asked his caseworker, "Are you gonna give me more of that social worker b... s..., or are you gonna help me?"

There are a number of national Black organizations that are doing just that. Notable among them are The National Council of Negro Women, The National Coalition of 100 Black Women, The March of Dimes, The Children's Defense Fund, and The Association of Leagues. For more information on how to combat teenage pregnancy, contact any of the mentioned organizations.

In addition, working through your own church, social or fraternal organizations, form a group within your own community that incorporates that which has worked elsewhere, and your own community's uniqueness. We must create a groundswell, mount an assault upon a system that has perpetuated perhaps the greatest threat to the future of all Blacks, early pregnancy, or children having children. It is also critical that we encourage young people to stay in school—or to return to finish an interrupted education. It is true—the more education a woman child has, the lower her chances of delivering an out-of-wedlock baby. For the future of our children and the strength of the Black family, we must reverse the trend.

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