

Half of young mothers unmarried, study finds

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The "Leave It to Beaver" image of the family has largely disintegrated in favor of a new norm.

Andrew Sum, an economist at Northeastern University in Boston, reported his 2006 calculations, which showed that 50.4 percent of babies born to women younger than 30 were born to unwed mothers. That figure is a stark contrast to 1960, when the same statistic was reported to be 6 percent.

Doug Abbott, a professor in child, youth and family studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, believes a variety of factors have contributed to this change, including the weakening of religion in America and the sexual revolution of the 1970s. Together, these aspects have changed the values of society, encouraging a more liberal view of sexuality.

"Society is more accepting today of single women having children and keeping children," said Bobbie Kierstead, vice president of public affairs at Planned Parenthood at 22nd and O streets.

She noted that, in the past, young unmarried pregnant women had to disappear from the public eye until they gave birth. Even then, they typically had to give their children up for adoption.

While the number of unwed mothers itself may be startling, the effect it has may be even more so.

"The inequality of incomes in these families is unbelievable," Sum said in a recent interview with the Kansas City Star. "Forty percent are poor or near-poor. A large fraction is dependent on public assistance.

"Unless the mother is very well-educated and has a bachelor's degree or above, there's a huge fiscal cost to the rest of us."

A strong inverse relationship exists between education and out-of-wedlock births: The further women progress in school, the more they tend to have children within a marriage. This contributes to the significant inequality of incomes between single- and two-parent families.

With lower incomes, single-parent families must seek public assistance and tax breaks. This way, the troubles of an individual family become a burden on the public. Sum estimates that taxpayers must pay \$7,000 each year to help support a typical family with an unwed mother without a high school diploma.

The well-being and development of the child in these out-of-wedlock births is also of concern.

"On average, children do better in a two-parent family than a single-parent family," Abbott said.

"Fatherless children do poorer in school, have less job success after school, are more likely to show irresponsible sexual behavior, and they're more likely to report psychological problems and relationship problems."

Abbott emphasized this is just an average and doesn't apply to all single-parent homes. Despite what researchers, scientists and psychologists may say, though, he said a father is important in a child's life.

Kierstead said a large number of single women become pregnant unintentionally, which is preventable.

"The most effective way (to avoid unwanted pregnancies) is a combination of sex education and access to contraception," she said.