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Bringing Back the Shotgun Wedding

FRANK F. FURSTENBERG, JR.

BACK IN THE late 1950s, at the peak of the baby boom, no one thought that teenage parenthood was a problem in this country. To be sure, lots of adolescents had babies—even more than do today—but almost all were married before or shortly after the pregnancy occurred. As some family sociologists observed at the time, pregnancy was often part of the courtship process, propelling many young couples into marriage at an accelerated pace. Women risked their reputations when they consented to have sex. If they were unlucky enough to get pregnant, their boyfriends were expected to do the honorable thing—which they usually did, whether willingly or reluctantly.

As many as half of all teenage brides in the late 1950s were pregnant when they took their wedding vows. Since nearly half of all women were married by twenty, almost one woman in four started her family as a pregnant teenager. Partly because of the prevalence of shotgun weddings, few babies were born out of wedlock in the late 1950s—at least by today's standards. Less than one-fifth of the births to teens occurred out of wedlock, compared with about three-fifths today. Adolescent parenthood became a public issue only when pregnant teenagers stopped marrying as a matter of course.

Why, then, as Maris Vinovskis and P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale wondered in "Should We Discourage Teenage Marriage?" (*The Public Interest*, Spring 1987), did teenage marriages decline so rapidly? Should we reinstate the time-honored practice of shotgun weddings, as Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale seem to suggest? Their argument admittedly has appeal. It is always attractive to discover a private solution to a public problem. The evidence they muster seems to indicate that if we could induce teens to marry, we might significantly reduce welfare expenditures while increasing the well-being of children. A closer look at the facts, however, suggests that shotgun weddings are not likely to provide much help to the beleaguered policymakers looking for a solution to the problem of teenage pregnancy or, for that matter, to the teenagers themselves.

THERE ARE two parts to the Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale argument. First, they tell us that social-science opinion helped to create a climate that discouraged teenage marriage, and possibly

even contributed to the rise in out-of-wedlock births. If this is true, then changing the *perception* that early marriage is a high-risk strategy for pregnant teens might help promote a less negative attitude about teen marriage. With that aim in mind, they present evidence purporting to demonstrate that teen marriages can benefit young mothers and their offspring, by mitigating the negative consequences of early childbearing.

Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale argue that the sharp decline in teenage marriages following premarital pregnancy (and therefore the accompanying precipitous rise in out-of-wedlock births in the late 1960s and 1970s) might have been retarded had social-science experts held a less negative opinion of teen marriage. Of course Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale recognize that the major sources of the decline in early marriage are the diminishing stigma of out-of-wedlock childbearing, the support services for single mothers, the growing recognition of the need for prolonged schooling, and the inability of young men (especially among minorities) to support a separate household. Yet they contend that, independent of these sources, social scientists contributed to "an atmosphere which minimized the responsibility of the father" by questioning the benefits of early marriage. In a curiously phrased rebuke, Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale assert that social scientists may have generated a bias against marriage because "they did not challenge the view that pregnant teenagers should be discouraged from marrying."

The main evidence supporting this statement is drawn from the testimony of several social scientists at two Congressional hearings, one in 1975 and the other in 1978. According to Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale, by the late 1970s a consensus had emerged downplaying the potential value of marriage. For example, Wendy Baldwin, one of the nation's leading experts on teenage parenthood, contended that "marriage is not a solution, especially for the very young teenager." We'll examine the experts' conclusions later; but first, we must remember exactly what the experts were saying.

Skepticism about the potential benefits of marriage for pregnant teens did not surface until the 1970s, well after the most dramatic changes began to occur. In 1976, in one of the first books on the consequences of teenage parenthood, I examined the responses of teens to pregnancy and parenthood. In a chapter on marriage, which extensively reviewed the existing literature on teenage marriage, I discovered that few experts had ever thought about the negative side-effects of early marriage. When I (and other researchers) began to raise questions about the desirability of teenage marriage, we were confining our skepticism to the value of marriage for *younger* teens, particularly those who had not yet completed high school. Social scientists did not discourage marriage for adolescents in their *late* teens.

To what extent did the experts' views influence the behavior of teens? The demographic data simply don't support Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale's claim that by cautioning against early marriage, the experts encouraged out-of-wedlock births. By the time the ex-

perts were reinterpreting the value of early marriage, young people had *already* concluded that marriage was not a smart move. White youth began to eschew early marriage in the mid-1960s, a decade before the first studies of teenage pregnancy appeared. Black youth began to shy away from marriage even earlier. In fact, as I observed above, the problem of teenage pregnancy first came into public view because growing numbers of teens were electing not to marry when they became pregnant.

Did the pace of change pick up once expert opinion coalesced? A recent report by the National Center for Vital Statistics suggests not. It shows that a somewhat higher proportion of first births to teenagers (26.1 percent vs. 19.1 percent) was legitimated by marriage in 1980 than in 1972. O'Connell and Rogers, drawing on data from census surveys, discover not a decline but rather a leveling-off in the proportion of pregnant teens who elect to marry. In either case, the data do not show that the consensus of professional opinion was affecting teens in any way that would support the trend Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale predict.

One further piece of demographic evidence leads me to doubt Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale's rendering of the facts. Beginning in the late 1960s, premaritally pregnant women in their *early twenties* were also rejecting marriage as a "solution." The decline in the percentage of mature women who legitimated their births was almost identical to the pattern observed among teenagers. Whatever was making young women skittish about marriage was also leading more mature women to the same conclusion. In neither case is there any evidence that expert opinion was a factor in their decisions.

STILL, we should not dismiss out of hand the possibility that both the experts and the teens themselves are wrong. Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale argue that teenage marriages are surprisingly resilient and that marriage protects the economic interests of both women and children. In making their case, they rely heavily on evidence derived from work that my colleagues, J. Brooks-Gunn and S. Philip Morgan, recently completed with me—a follow-up study of some 300 teenage mothers from Baltimore who were first interviewed when they were pregnant in the mid-1960s. There are problems with their selective use of the data from our study, and with their interpretation of its results and of other related research.

Before reviewing the evidence on the long-term effects of marriage based on the recently completed seventeen-year follow-up, let's go back to the initial study, which was done when the young mothers first became pregnant. That was the time when the pregnant teens were deciding whether or not to marry. Why did some young women wed the father of the child while others chose to postpone marriage? At the risk of simplifying a complex story, I would argue that a great deal hinged on the circumstances of the father at the time the pregnancy occurred. Women generally married the father of the child when they were emotionally involved with him

(not all were) *and* when he was both willing and able to support them and their children. Other considerations such as family pressure, age, and educational aspirations entered into their calculations, but the principal determinant of whether or not they married was the economic and emotional desirability of the father as a marriage partner. Inevitably, the older and more emotionally mature women elected to marry. Marriage was a far less attractive proposition for younger girls whose relations with their boyfriends were less secure (as were their boyfriends' financial prospects). The accounts of two women who elected not to marry the father are typical of what I learned from the interviews:

He and I definitely broke up. He doesn't have enough education. Marriage with him wouldn't work out.

Because really I found out if he keeps going the way he is now, there will be no future in marriage for us. He is very unsettled in jobs.

So the women in the Baltimore study were calculating their chances of marital stability and of long-term support. How accurate were their assessments? As Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale report, about one in three of these early marriages survives—a figure that is close to the national average for black females who marry as teenagers. For whites, the odds are somewhat better. About half the teenage marriages of white women survive for as long as fifteen years. (The risks of dissolution are worse for younger teens and better for older teens.)

These figures provide an imperfect guide to the situation facing women who must make the decision today. Current divorce rates are significantly greater than they were for women who married in the 1960s. Thus, it is likely that the risks of marital disruption are much higher today than they were two decades ago. Nevertheless, let's assume the best, as Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale do. Should we encourage teenagers to marry on the basis of the statistics?

If one marriage in three survives (as seems to be true for the women in the Baltimore study), isn't this better than what might have happened had the women elected to postpone marriage? After all, married women are better off than female heads of families. As Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale remind us, "Although a stable marriage for pregnant adolescents is difficult to attain, it offers tangible economic benefits for those who are able to achieve it." Moreover, children clearly derive benefits from the economic and psychological support of having two parents in the home. (Here, too, Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale cite data from the Baltimore study, as well as other recent research, showing that married women and their children are better off.)

None of these data directly speaks to the issue of whether it is wise for teens to marry. To answer this question it is necessary to compare the life situations of pregnant teens who married with those who waited to wed. Here the results of the seventeen-year follow-up are instructive. We report that women who married within a year after the birth of their child were neither more nor less likely to be

on welfare seventeen years later. Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale disregarded this finding, reporting instead that women who were still married at the five-year follow-up did somewhat better in the long run. As we state in our report, this group of women does not include those who had an early divorce—about 40 percent of the women who marry before or shortly after their child is born. In other words, if you can marry and *remain married* you do better on the average. But the corollary finding is that if you marry and *separate*, you do worse on the average.

THE QUESTION remains: Is it better to marry right away or marry later? This question can only be answered by comparing women who married as teenagers with those who waited to wed. I have gone back to the Baltimore data to make this comparison, restricting the analysis to black women, since too few whites remain in the sample to make adequate comparisons. The contrast between the early and later marriers is complicated by the fact that almost all the women who married the fathers of their children married as teenagers, while those who married later, with few exceptions, married men who were not their children's fathers. As I have already mentioned, women who married the fathers tended to marry only when the father was older, better employed, and more emotionally committed to their children. Consequently, we might expect their marriages to be more stable than those of women who waited.

In fact, they are not. Teen marriages are distinctly less stable than marriages that occur after age twenty. (Twenty-three percent vs. 53 percent were intact at the seventeen-year follow-up.) Early marriages, of course, have had more time to break up; but this fact alone does not account for the substantial difference. Because they are also more likely to be currently married, later marriers are somewhat less likely to be on welfare (18 percent vs. 26 percent) and more likely to have family incomes of \$25,000 or more (32 percent vs. 26 percent). And, consistent with the view of the experts, later marriers are more likely to have completed high school (77 percent vs. 68 percent) and to have obtained some higher education (38 percent vs. 26 percent). Finally, later marriers have fewer children (2.0 vs. 2.3). Even if we restrict our comparisons to the women who married the fathers of their children, it remains the case that those women who married within a year of the child's birth consistently did slightly worse on the various outcome measures than those who postponed marriage.

Does early marriage pay off? Apparently not—at least if we contrast women who married before or shortly after the birth of their child with those who waited until they were at least twenty. This is not to say that none of the early marriages panned out. As my collaborators and I concluded from examining the results of the seventeen-year follow-up, “Marriage is a high-risk strategy, but stable unions bring huge dividends in terms of higher economic status.”

Generally speaking, however, early marriage is a poorer bet

than waiting to wed. The dissolution rate of early marriages is so high that women who marry in their early teens would do better to stay in school and marry later, even if it means not marrying the father of their child. Moreover, it is highly dubious to extrapolate, as Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale do, from the Baltimore data or even from census figures to calculate the odds of success among teenagers who marry. Though one in three of the Baltimore women who wed as teenagers was still married a decade and a half later, it does not follow that the odds would be as high for everyone. As we have seen, the women who marry early are a self-selected group: they have the best shot at making it. Their peers who might follow them into early marriage would undoubtedly face still stiffer odds of staying married. And as we have seen, the costs of a wrong decision—namely, divorce—*increase* a woman's chances of economic destitution in later life.

Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale are right in one respect. Women who marry, whether early or late, do somewhat better than women who never marry. Although they were better educated, had fewer children, and were just as likely to be employed, women who never married were somewhat more likely to be on welfare and poor at the seventeen-year follow-up. They did about as poorly as their peers who got married and subsequently separated. Being a single mother is disadvantageous whether you get there by a marriage that does not work or by not marrying at all.

So I do not take issue with Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale's contention that it would be desirable to promote stable marriages and greater paternal support for single parents. Unfortunately, their discussion includes no concrete proposals for attaining either objective, and we should recognize that both of these goals have continually eluded policymakers.

I WOULD ADVISE that we concentrate our efforts on trying to ensure that both never-married and formerly-married fathers provide a fair measure of support to their offspring. In two separate studies, I discovered that never-married and formerly-married fathers are about as likely—or in this instance unlikely—to provide economic support to their children: only about a third of the members of either group can be counted on for any kind of regular support. Many policymakers have come to recognize that this is an unacceptably low number; the Child Support Act passed by Congress in 1984 was designed to remedy this situation. And while it is still too early to assess the effects of this sweeping legislation, initial indications suggest that its success is only modest. There is room for a great deal of tightening-up in the system of child-support collection. Most European countries successfully induce fathers to pay child support, as a recent book by Alfred Kahn and Sheila Kammerman demonstrates. Clearly there is some room in this country for improvement through administrative innovations, and perhaps through mobilization of public sentiment.

On the matter of promoting marriage and marital stability, there is less cause for confidence. For reasons that are not completely understood, marriage rates are dropping in all developed nations in the West. As the rate of marriage declines and marriage age rises, persuading—not to mention pressuring—pregnant teenagers to marry is probably going to become increasingly difficult.

Changing sexual patterns among young people also reduce the chances that they will marry in the event of a pregnancy. Two decades ago, women who initiated sex in their mid- or late teens were usually formally or informally engaged to their sexual partner. Now that sexual activity occurs earlier and marriage later, teenagers are not nearly so likely to expect to marry their first sexual partner (or even their second or third). We have recently been interviewing the children of the women in the Baltimore study. By their mid-teens, almost all are sexually active; about a third of the girls have become pregnant before eighteen. Virtually none of these young women contemplates marriage before her twenties. And the young men who have fathered children, even when they assume a large measure of responsibility for their offspring, are equally unready to commit themselves to marriage. As one nineteen-year-old father in this situation told us:

I feel as though if I get married right now, I don't know how to deal with it. All the people I know that got married at a young age, they may be still married but they're not together. If I marry a person, I want to spend my whole entire life with that person.

Should (and could) we encourage teenagers like those in the Baltimore study to rethink their decision to defer marriage? We could, for example, create incentives for pregnant teens to marry by providing preferential placement in job-training programs or child care for their offspring if they are willing to wed. I doubt whether such policies would coax many teens into marriage before they feel ready. Furthermore, incentives would have the negative feature of discriminating against single parents who need jobs and child care even more than those who marry in order to attain economic self-sufficiency.

Unless Vinovskis and Chase-Lansdale are able to come up with some plausible proposals to make early marriage more viable, they are left in the untenable position of arguing that rhetoric alone can make a significant difference in reversing powerful demographic trends. I think they are mistaken in their belief that social-scientific opinion had anything to do with the trend away from early marriage among pregnant teens over the past decade. If they want to persuade social scientists to reassess their views on the desirability of early marriage, they must produce more convincing evidence than that offered thus far. I still think the pregnant teens are right: a hasty marriage usually makes a bad situation even worse.

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