

NEW YORK POST

UNWED-BIRTH BOOM: BAD NEWS

By CHRISTINE B. WHELAN

November 29, 2006 -- MORE American children are being born to unmarried mothers, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tell us. Don't let anyone convince you this is not bad news.

The CDC preliminary data released last week: A record 37 percent of all U.S. births were to unmarried women in 2005.

It's not a teen issue: The birth rate for under-20 women fell to the lowest on record. But births to unmarried women aged 20 to 44 continued a long-term rise. The fact that these single mothers are older doesn't make their decision to have a baby on their own any wiser - for either them or the children.

The headlines may go on about Hollywood stars who opt to become single moms, but the majority of women having children outside of marriage are on the bottom end of the socio-economic ladder. And the grim fact is that having a child without a husband sinks these women's chances for a stable, prosperous future.

Unmarried moms and their children are *five times* more likely to live below the poverty line.

The CDC data show that more than half of births to women aged 20-24 were outside of marriage, and nearly a third of those to women 25-29. (Among mothers 30-39, the rate was above 15 percent - having more than doubled since 1975.)

It doesn't help much that nearly half those nonmarital births are to women who are cohabitating. The numbers on this are very clear: America's nearly 1.7 million unmarried-couple-with-kids households just aren't as stable as married family homes.

For starters, few parents head to the alter after "baby makes three": A 2004 study in Demography found that, a year after the birth, only 15 percent of cohabitating couples had married. Indeed, having a child out of wedlock decreases a woman's chances to *ever* marry - by up to 30 percent, in some estimates.

UC-Berkeley economists George Akerlof and Janet Yellen trace the boom in out-of-wedlock births directly to the decades-long decline of "shotgun marriages" - that is, to the end of social pressure to get married once pregnancy is obvious.

Indeed, stigmas about extramarital births have receded so far that it's become the norm among some groups. In 2005, nearly 70 percent of black children and 48 percent of Hispanic children were born to unwed mothers.

The media rarely focus on this, of course. The out-of-wedlock births of the rich and famous get plenty of positive ink: When Angelina Jolie had Brad Pitt's child before marriage, few questioned the decision. And the press give lots of attention to career women who, hearing the tick of their biological clock, opt for in-vitro fertilization, sperm donors and other methods to have a child without a spouse.

More than *half* of affluent, well-educated women consider this a possible choice (so found a poll I commissioned this year) - a powerful signal about how prevalent the idea of single-parenting has become. But the truth is that the more education that a woman has, the *less likely* she is to have a child out of wedlock. Some 52 percent of births to women without a high-school diploma were nonmarital, against just 9 percent of births to women with a graduate or professional degree.

Why? Educated women want to raise educated, successful children - and they realize that having a husband in the picture makes it easier to devote time to a child's development, argues Kay Hymowitz. Indeed, she sees it as a new class divide: Her new book is titled "Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age." She even cites research showing that only a small fraction of students at top universities come from single-parent homes.

Children born to unmarried mothers are less likely to have stable living arrangements - or lives. As young adults, they're less likely to achieve academically, more likely to be unemployed.

They're also a better bet to have kids outside of marriage themselves. The *why* is hard to determine here - is it that the child didn't grow up with two parents, or that the child grew up with fewer social and monetary resources? - but the vicious circle is clear.

The gap between separate and unequal families is increasing, Hymowitz notes: Highly educated women are more likely to be married, and less likely to divorce; the opposite holds for lesser-educated women. "It's a self-perpetuating predicament," she says, "and it's very threatening to our most basic values of opportunity, mobility and individualism."

This is not just another variation on the ever-changing American family, and it's not something we should simply accept. It's a social problem of the highest order.

Graduate-educated, 37-year-old, single women going to fancy IVF clinics may get all the

press, but the real story is the millions of women for whom single motherhood is the norm, who reinforce their place - and their child's place - in an increasingly divided American society by having a child outside of a stable family environment.

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