



# FocusFamilyINSIGHT

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To: Interested Students of the Family

Re: The Historical and International Rise in Unmarried Births

## The Recent Historical Trend Lines in Unmarried Child-Bearing by Decade, Race and Country and a Likely Causes

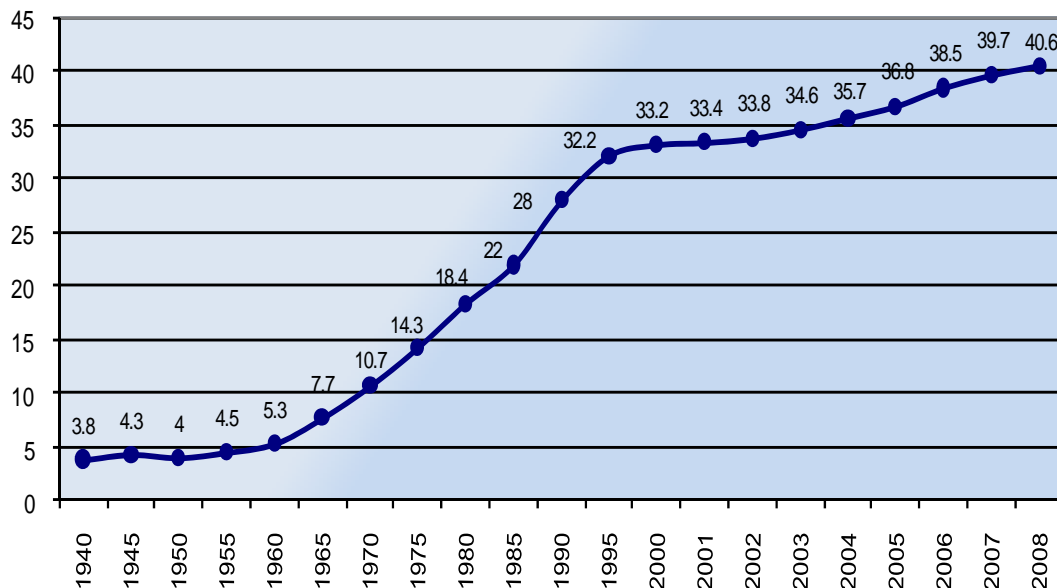
New government data on unmarried child-bearing should have students of the family thinking about a watershed moment from March 1965. It was then that an unknown Assistant Secretary of Labor in the Johnson Administration released a government report which effectively launched the contemporary culture war on family. This report was deeply pro-family and humanitarian.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan's<sup>1</sup> *The Negro Family* was both a family and civil rights manifesto, warning that while the Civil Rights Act of 1964 could do much to lift the fortunes of the Black Americans; these gains could be undercut by another important factor: the crumbling Black Family.

Moynihan, with great passion, warned that the fact that a majority of Black children reach adulthood having lived *apart* from their mother and father was a situation so serious it demanded "national action" to correct it.

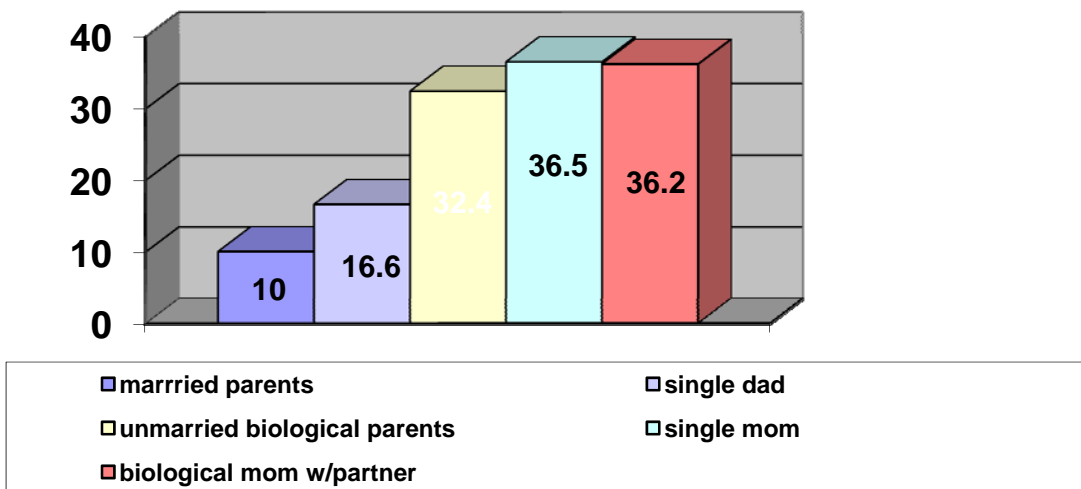
However, data shows that not only has the problem gotten *dramatically* worse in the Black community since the 1960s, but it has also worsened in both the White and Hispanic communities.

Below is the historic trend line for the percentage of all U.S births to unmarried mothers from 1940 to the most recent data released this month.



More than 40 percent of our children today are born to mothers either having no or no well-defined relationships with their fathers. Consider the practical consequences of this on childhood well-being when we compare this dramatically rising trend line with recent Census data.<sup>2</sup>

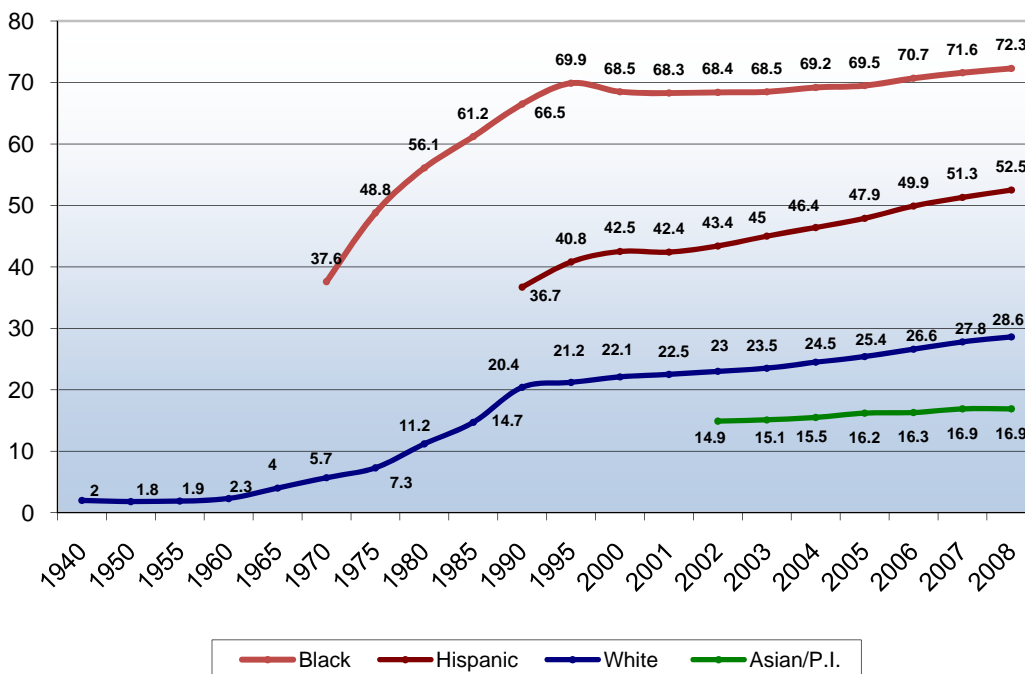
### Percentage of Children Living in Poverty by Family Form



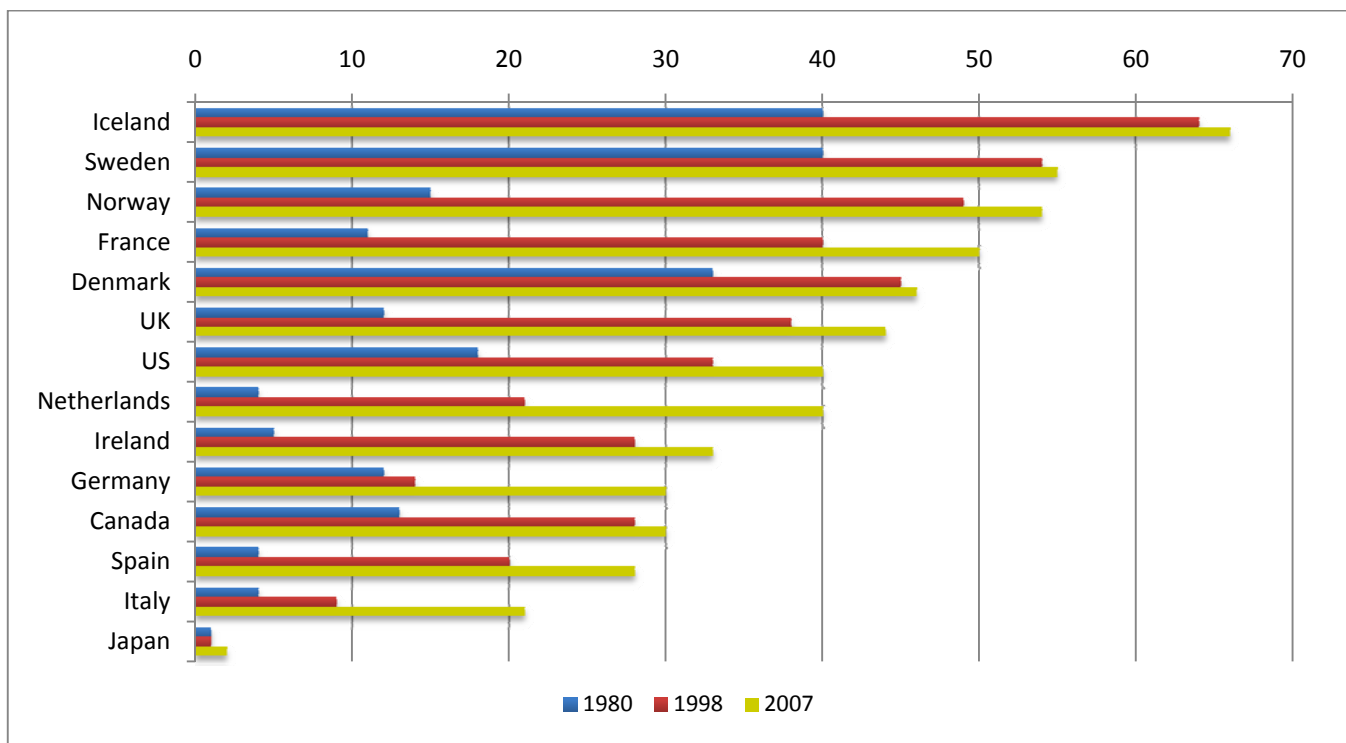
The increase in children born to unmarried mothers raises their likelihood of living in poverty by up to three-fold.

And as we work as a nation to help all racial groups improve their fortunes in America, we cannot ignore how race plays in these steadily rising out-of-wedlock birth rates.

This graph shows the percentage of all U.S. births to unmarried women by year and race.



Consider as well how the problem of unmarried child-bearing is not just a U.S. problem, but one largely of the Western World. This graph shows how unmarried child-bearing has grown exponentially in various countries from 1980 to present.



### Dramatic Rise the Decline of Shotgun Weddings?

A critical question is why we are seeing these rises in unmarried child-bearing and it must be answered if we are going to do something about it. The bottom line is that no one knows for sure. Conservatives tend toward the Charles Murray theory that a growing welfare state is responsible. Liberals gravitate towards William Julius Wilson’s theory that the lack of work for young black men in particular makes them less marriageable.

However, another explanation is offered by Nobel Prize winning economist (and UC Berkeley professor) George Akerlof. He believes a “major role in the increase of out-of-wedlock births has been played by the declining practices of ‘shotgun marriages’” and this has been true for both whites and blacks.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, he says that three-fourths (for whites) and three-fifths (for blacks) of unmarried births can be linked to the decrease in the fractions of premaritally-conceived first births that were resolved by the subsequent marriage of the couple.

Shotgun marriages in this case should not be understood so much as “forcing” a couple to get married, but rather the man seeing it “as doing the right thing” by his child and his child’s mother. Akerlof explains this declining sense of responsibility on the part of the man is the result of what he calls a “reproductive technology shock” created by increased availability and use of abortion and female contraception which made it more difficult for women to insist their men do right by them. And women and children lose.

<sup>1</sup> Moynihan of course went on to serve as a long-standing Senator from NY, replaced by Hillary Clinton upon his retirement.

<sup>2</sup> Rose Krieder, “Living Arrangements of Children: 2004” *Current Populations Reports*, (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008), table 2, page 6.

<sup>3</sup> George A. Akerlof, An Analysis of Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing in the United States, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 111 (1996) 277-317.