

# THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

Reviews of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad

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## *Shotgun Solutions for the Family Crisis*

A Survey of Recent Articles

Roughly a quarter-century ago, many states liberalized their laws on abortion and made it easier for unmarried people to obtain contraceptives. Instead of declining, however, the rate of out-of-wedlock births increased sharply—from less than 11 percent of live births in 1970 to nearly 33 percent in 1994. This veritable explosion of illegitimacy, adding to the fallout of children separated from their fathers by divorce, has prompted much alarm in recent years, and with good reason, since children who don't live with two parents are more likely to get caught up in crime, drug use, promiscuity, and other ills. (See *WQ*, "The Vanishing Father," Spring '96.) Often overlooked in all the hue and cry, though, is one of the chief culprits in the dramatic rise in illegitimacy: the virtual demise of that storied institution, the "shotgun wedding."

Writing in the *Brookings Review* (Fall 1996), George A. Akerlof, an economist at the University of California, Berkeley, and Janet L. Yellen, a member of the Federal Reserve System's Board of Governors, calculate that about 75 percent of the increase in births out of wedlock among previously childless white women between 1965 and 1990 is directly due to the decline in shotgun marriages. About 60 percent of the increase among comparable black women can be explained in the same way. If the rate of shotgun unions—in which conscience and social pressure may often have been as compelling as any firearm—had remained steady over that period, the authors say, white out-of-wedlock births would have risen only one-fourth as much as they have, and black ones, only two-fifths.

What made the shotgun wedding a thing

of the past? Akerlof and Yellen argue that it was the increased availability of contraception and abortion, which enabled women to safely engage in sexual relations without an implicit promise of marriage from the man in the event of pregnancy. When some women took advantage of this new freedom, it put pressure on all single women to have sex before marriage. If they refused, they risked losing their partners to more willing women. Since the technology made pregnancy, or carrying it to term, a woman's choice, it made the prospective fathers less willing to take responsibility for unplanned pregnancies. "By making the birth of the child the physical choice of the mother, the sexual revolution has made marriage and child support a social choice of the father," the authors observe.

This "reproductive technology shock" may have opened the door to social disaster, but Akerlof and Yellen believe there is no going back. Their prescription: stronger efforts to make the fathers pay child support. But that is not enough, contends John J. DiIulio, Jr., director of the Brookings Institution's Center for Public Management. "Bring back the shotgun wedding," he writes in the *Weekly Standard* (Oct. 21, 1996).

How can that be done? There are various direct and indirect means of influencing behavior, DiIulio points out. Teenage single mothers on welfare should be obliged to live under adult supervision. (No such requirement is included in Washington's recent welfare reform.) Society should insist not merely on monetary child support but on the "positive, permanent presence [of biological fathers] where women and children need them and their entire earnings." He

would have churches put pressure on absent fathers, have police “crack down hard” on domestic abuse of women and children, and have “the statutory rape of poor black girls [treated] with the same moral seriousness that liberal elites now lavish on ‘date rape’ on college campuses.”

The worst consequences of the illegitimacy outbreak are yet to come, DiIulio warns: “The 68.1 percent of blacks and 22.6 percent of whites born out of wedlock in 1992 will not reach the all-hell-breaks-loose age of 14 until the year 2006.” Already, he pointed out in an earlier issue of the *Weekly Standard* (Nov. 27, 1995), the youth crime wave “has reached horrific proportions from coast to coast.” Between 1985 and 1992, the rate at which males ages 14 to 17 committed murder increased by about 50 percent for whites and more than 300 percent for blacks. And just around the corner is “a sharp increase in the number of super crime-prone young males.”

Some scholars argue that the problem is not single-parent families per se but incompetent child rearing in general. Jack C. Westman, a psychiatrist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, goes so far in *Society* (Nov.–Dec. 1996) as to suggest that parents be licensed. Parenthood should be viewed as “a privilege, as it is now for adoptive and foster parents, rather than a biological right,” he maintains. To get a license, a parent would have to be an adult, pledge to care for the child, and have “basic knowledge of child-rearing,” as evidenced by completion of a course in the subject. Parents under 18 would be placed, along with the child, in the care of licensed foster parents. A parent denied a license would be required to give up the child, who would be “placed for adoption in accordance with existing child-abuse and neglect laws.”

David T. Lykken, a psychologist at the University of Minnesota, endorses Westman’s proposal. But other contributors to *Society’s* symposium on the subject are aghast. “Can it be that crime has pushed Americans to the end of their democratic tethers?” asks Howard G. Schneiderman, a sociologist at Lafayette College. To give the state the power to license parents, he says, “is only a short step away from giving the state control over all aspects of family life.” Efforts “to raise the educational and income levels

of all Americans,” he believes, “may ultimately do more to reverse our present patterns of family disorganization and, by association, crime than will moral crusades.”

Byron M. Roth, a psychologist at Dowling College in Oakdale, New York, contends that the whole child-rearing issue is largely irrelevant. Recent studies of identical twins, involving thousands of cases in Europe, America, and Australia, he says, support the “long despised [idea] that criminals are born rather than made; genes appear to count far more than upbringing.” However, there is one environmental factor that concerns Roth. Over the long term, he argues, the logic of evolutionary psychology suggests that women who do not count on men for stability and financial support may find males with less socially desirable traits more attractive, thus passing along the genetic bases of those traits to more children.

Roth and others may have interesting theories, says William M. Epstein, author of *The Dilemma of American Social Welfare* (1993), but social scientists have failed to demonstrate what the causes or cures of sociopathy are. “The issue of whether dysfunctional parents and their children are the products of dysfunctional environments, bad seeds, or perverse, antisocial, psychopathic wills has not been resolved,” he writes in *Society*. In his view, sociopathy “may be the result of broad cultural failure.”

Since the late 1960s, Howard Schneiderman observes, “the authority of American social institutions has come undone,” with the explosion of illegitimate births, high divorce rates, and other social ills among the results. Yet, turning to the state to restore the family to health, as in proposals to license parents, is not the answer, he insists: “State interference in the family can do little in the long run but to destroy the family altogether.”

Amid the gloomy analyses and prognostications, some rare good news has recently surfaced: for the first time in a quarter-century, the rate of live births out of wedlock has fallen—from 32.6 percent of all births in 1994 to 32.0 percent in 1995. The rate declined a tenth of a point among whites, to 25.3 percent; among blacks, it dropped from 70.4 percent to 69.5 percent. These numbers hardly represent a dramatic transformation. But they at least allow one to hope that a change in cultural course is beginning.