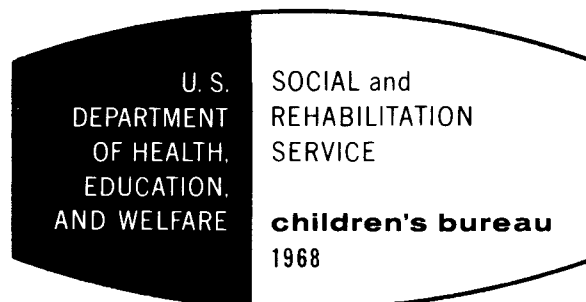


# NATIONAL TRENDS

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# IN SERVICES TO UNMARRIED PARENTS



## NATIONAL TRENDS IN SERVICES TO UNMARRIED PARENTS\*

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From the hue and cry that you hear from time to time about illegitimacy, you would think it was a recent phenomenon, and one that is about to wreck the whole fabric of our society. Of course this is not true. It is true that the number of births out of wedlock has been rising steadily in the United States, with an estimated 291,200 such births in 1965. However, the rate of increase (among unmarried women between 15 and 44 years of age) was only 1.6 percent between 1957 and 1965 as compared with an increase of over 6 percent between 1940 and 1957. Contrary to common belief, the rate for the teenage group has been fairly stable for some years. It is true that the number of births out of wedlock has increased among this group, but there has been a large increase in the teenage population.

Illegitimacy is not confined to any particular level of society, although the highest reported incidence has been among the underprivileged. There is a tendency to turn the spotlight on illegitimacy in this latter group without recognizing that illegitimacy is only one small part of a whole gamut of social evils. Poverty, broken homes, poor housing, inadequate employment opportunities, and limited education represent only a few of the factors associated with illegitimacy within this group.

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The problem is so complex that no single solution is possible. Nevertheless, there are certain guides for community action that will help the individuals involved and may reduce the incidence of births out of wedlock. No one profession can effect such a change. While the result of the problem is placed at the doorstep of the social agencies, the responsibility to alter the situation rests with the whole community. The interest and activity of many professions, agencies, and other citizens are required. Health, social, and other services, with the focus on the individual, and opportunities for economic improvement will help unmarried parents to deal with their problems and move toward more positive patterns in planning for their children.

## Health Services

When one adds to the usual prenatal, delivery and postpartum medical needs of a pregnant girl the psychological and social stress involved in a pregnancy out of wedlock, the special importance of medical care for the unmarried pregnant girl is quite clear.

Several years ago, the Children's Bureau sent a questionnaire to the State welfare departments to determine what needs in services to the unmarried mother were not adequately met. Medical care was among the services lacking in many States. 1/

Pregnant unmarried girls constitute a high-risk obstetric group. Studies, such as two carried out in New York City, 2/ show that mortality is higher among infants born to unmarried mothers than among infants of married women. Other reports and studies, 3/, 4/, 5/ have shown that prematurity, perinatal death, and congenital anomalies are high among the offspring of unmarried women; these findings are definitely associated with a lack of prenatal care.

Maternity and Infant Care projects (M & I) are being developed with the aid of Children's Bureau funds throughout the United States. Through these projects, complete medical care (including prenatal, confinement, delivery, postpartum, and family planning services) is given to pregnant women--both married and unmarried. As of November 1967, there were 52 ongoing projects.

## Education

The educational needs of young unmarried mothers are also highly important. If the girls can resume their schooling and achieve a diploma, it will mean a great deal to them occupationally, socially, psychologically.

During the last few years, our junior and senior high schools have reported a large number of withdrawals from school by girls who become pregnant. Some school systems have had a policy whereby the girl was dismissed as soon as her condition became known. Often the girl never returned to complete her education.

Some boards of education are giving closer attention to the educational needs of these girls and are expanding tutoring programs for the homebound girl, and have even provided special day-school programs for pregnant unmarried girls. The school curriculum usually includes academic courses, vocational training, courses in child care, and courses which aim to increase self-esteem and improve goals for everyday living. For some time now, in a number of maternity homes, arrangements have been made for the girl to receive full credits for courses given through a designated public school in the city. In this way, many girls who have gone to maternity homes have been able to keep up with their classes or to receive their high school diplomas. A good example of this type of service is the program at the Florence Crittenton Home in Toledo, Ohio. An educational program has been in operation at the Home for over 25 years, during which time a close relationship was developed with the board of education.

There is still more work to be done to help improve attitudes among educators so that a pregnant unmarried girl will not be deprived of an opportunity to complete her education. Educators must also appreciate the importance of education in the prevention of illegitimacy. Today, in many schools, certain aspects of family-life education are included in the biology course, some are tucked into the home economics sequence, or elsewhere as isolated bits of information. Training courses in which teachers can learn to handle such emotionally laden material have been rare and development of such courses will need far more attention. Improved methods for teaching of sex and family-life education are being developed, however, and this should lead to salutary results in terms of better informed, more responsible young people.

## Social Services

Over the years, the Children's Bureau has made studies concerning unmarried mothers and has given consultation to the States on development of social services. A number of publications have been written to help in improving total services, among which is "Unmarried Parents--A Guide for the Development of Services in Public Welfare." 6/

Services for unmarried mothers include residential care in maternity homes, foster family homes, or group homes, as well as services to girls who remain in their own homes. The social worker determines the need for outside resources and makes them available; provides counseling regarding important relationship problems and decisions for the future; helps develop a plan for keeping or placing a child, and, in addition, coordinates the contributions of all the professions.

A trend today is toward expanding services so that girls who do not need residential care may live at home or make their own living arrangements and receive social services, medical care, and education. Often girls in the low socioeconomic group have not sought out social services, and some effort is now being made to make the services known to them and to encourage their use.

Many pregnant girls leave their home communities and seek refuge in maternity homes. These homes provide a "safe" place to live, medical care, psychiatric service if needed, and help to the girl in making a plan for her baby. Of recent years, maternity homes have begun to develop their programs along therapeutic lines, and efforts are made to help the girl understand herself, improve her relationships with peers and others, and determine what she wants in her future life. Many homes have extended their services to include outpatient care. Casework and groupwork services are provided, together with opportunities for learning to live with others, developing latent talents, managing practical problems, and improving self-image.

The use of wage homes 7/ has become popular. However, this facility is frequently used because of lack of space in a maternity home or inability of the unmarried mother to pay for care, without giving consideration to the girl's ability to function in such a situation.

Unfortunately, some social agencies focus solely on adoption service without seeing the unmarried mother as a person who needs help for herself as well. For example, when adoptive facilities are lacking for a child of an unmarried mother, some agencies will not plan for termination of the mother's rights. The mother's "readiness" is ignored and the focus is on the availability of the adoptive home. Obviously, such practice ignores the damage to the unmarried mother when she is placed in this position of uncertainty. We should plan for the child in a way that will not be destructive to the mother's mental health.

Some social agencies carry on group treatment sessions for unmarried mothers under the leadership of a psychiatrist or a social worker. Presently one such group I know of wished to continue their treatment after placing their babies and volunteered to pay the fee themselves. Such service after an unmarried mother has had her baby is still rare, however.

While services are still lacking to those unmarried mothers who keep their babies, many States are beginning to focus on this group. Without the physical, financial, and moral support of a husband, caring for the baby presents a serious problem for many girls. Many work to support themselves and the child; some receive support from relatives or the father of the child. Probably only about a fifth of the women in the population who have borne children out of wedlock receive Aid to Families With Dependent Children.

In some sectors of the country, a lack of understanding exists of the problems faced by unmarried women who become pregnant, particularly those who do not give up their children for adoption and require public assistance. A punitive attitude has become apparent in respect to illegitimacy without an appreciation of the total social and environmental situation which lies behind it.

Inadequate grants, lack of opportunity for nonwhite males to support a family, lack of parental supervision in a world of sexual enticements--these factors, singly or in combination, go to provide a conducive setting. Punishment of the mother and child through denial of public assistance or removal of her children will not alleviate the situation but rather will bring new problems.

In discussing the problem of illegitimacy, naturally the unmarried mother and her child are the main objects of concern. However, some agencies, mostly voluntary, are now beginning to consider the full roles of others involved in the situation.

Efforts to establish paternity and seek the father's financial support are of course not new. A recent trend, however, is to help the father develop responsibility and to gain insight into his relationships with others. Demonstrations of the effectiveness of this approach to the father are now in progress in Los Angeles and San Francisco. The Children's Bureau has supported a special project on services to the father at Vista Del Mar Child-Care Service, Los Angeles. 8/ A number of social agencies throughout the country are more conscious about including the fathers in their casework program and have been encouraged to learn of the father's interest and gratitude for being given help rather than punishment.

Counseling services to parents of unmarried mothers who are minors are provided as a matter of course by a number of agencies, but the importance of reaching out to both the parents of the young girl and boy is not always recognized.

### Combined Services

An extremely important new pattern in services to teenage unmarried mothers is the program of combined health, education, and social services. The first such program was sponsored by a Children's Bureau demonstration grant for a 3-year period in Washington, D.C. Many of the 530 girls served during this period were highly motivated to continue their schooling, and the large majority did continue their education after the birth of the baby. Recognizing the value of the program to the community, as of September 1966 the D.C. Board of Education assumed responsibility for the program and expanded its facilities to accommodate 175 girls at one time.

We understand that there are now nearly 40 such programs furnishing comprehensive services to pregnant unmarried girls of junior and senior high school age. Some are school-centered, others are health-centered, and still others social-agency-centered; but all combine essential services. Most are located in large cities, including Los Angeles, San Francisco, Minneapolis, Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, New York, Syracuse, New Haven, Hartford, and Boston. The sources of funding include Federal grants or demonstration funds from the Children's Bureau, the Office of Education, Office of Economic Opportunity, and the Department of Labor, as well as State and local sources.

### Interprofessional Cooperation

Interprofessional cooperation among medical, educational, and welfare groups in regard to meeting the needs of the unmarried mother is a continuing trend. The Children's Bureau, health and welfare departments, the Florence Crittenton Association of America, Salvation Army, National Council of Catholic Charities, National Council on Illegitimacy, and other agencies are encouraging such cooperation.

Examples of these efforts include collaborative planning in respect to adoption and services to unmarried mothers by the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Bar Association, American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, American Medical Association, Child Welfare League of America, and the Children's Bureau. "A Guide for Collaboration of Physician, Social Worker, and Lawyer in Helping the Unmarried Mother and Her Child" 9/ was developed through joint efforts of all these organizations, spearheaded by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. The guide points out the respective areas of responsibility in helping the unmarried mother and her child, supports assignment of the placement function to the social work profession, and stresses the importance of cooperative efforts.

The American Academy of Pediatrics this year published a second edition of their manual, "Adoption of Children," 10/ which offers excellent interpretation of the adoption process and also concerns itself with the needs of the unmarried mother. Clarification of the role of the physician in adoption is most important. In the past, there has been much confusion as to how far he should become involved, both in the adoption process and in counseling unmarried pregnant girls.



A good example of interprofessional cooperation at the State level was the First Statewide Conference on Children Born Out of Wedlock, which was held in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on April 30, 1965. 11/ Social workers, doctors, attorneys, judges, nurses, clergymen, and parents participated. As a result of that conference, most of the State's counties started activity to help alleviate the problem, including formation of a number of citizens' committees to develop various services.

Each professional person--the physician, nurse, educator, clergyman, psychiatrist, and social worker--has a specific contribution to make in helping the unmarried mother work out her problems and plan for her child. No doubt our distinguished panel will further explore the different responsibilities of the professions.

Finally, the social agencies cannot fill the gaps in services without the understanding and support of the community. With such support, the various agencies and professions can work together effectively to help the unmarried mother attain the health care she needs, education suited to her abilities, emotional maturity, and a suitable plan for her future and that of her child.

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