



End of Denial: Family Structure Predicts Life Chances for Children

A Review of

Generation Unbound: Drifting Into Sex and Parenthood Without Marriage

by Isabel V. Sawhill

Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press: 2014. 209 pp. ISBN 978-0-8157-2558-9 (hardcover); ISBN 978-0-8157-2635-7 (paperback). \$32.00, hardcover; \$25.00, paperback

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0039240>

Reviewed by

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At the very beginning of the 1960s, social rules for gender-based behaviors were fairly clear. Young women were expected to be paragons of virtue, saving their virginity for the wedding night. As the 1960s progressed, fueled by the baby boomer youth-oriented culture, new schools of social thought emerged challenging traditional conventions regarding women's roles as gatekeepers of boudoir activities. At the time, it all appeared so simple, free love, rights for women, etc. Why should people marry to have sex? By the end of the 1960s the bonds between marriage and sex weakened, and by the 1980s nearly completely severed. The 2010 population statistics clearly demonstrate the result of the decline in marriage in America. The percentage of births to unmarried women has dramatically increased with 72% of Black, 54% of Hispanic, and 36% of White births occurring among the unmarried (McLanahan & Jencks, 2015). In addition, 50% Black, 28% Hispanic, and 19% White children under the age of 18 live with unmarried mothers (McLanahan & Jencks, 2015).

Looking beyond those statistics, much more is happening to American life. The sexual revolution and its long-term consequences have been more devastating to the poor and especially to minorities. Unplanned pregnancies and out-of-wedlock births have given rise to a new and deeper poverty, which perpetuates itself, the likes of which Martin Luther King, Jr. could not have imagined.

It is now clear with abundant evidence that the structure of American families is becoming inequitably bifurcated between socially and economically advantaged families, which are more likely to continue the married two-parent family structure, and single-parent, female-headed households, which cluster among the most socially and economically disadvantaged ranks of the population (Cherlin, 2010; DeParle, 2012; Edin & Reed, 2005; Gibson-Davis & Rackin, 2014). Single-parent, female-headed households are disproportionately at risk for lives in generationally perpetuating poverty (McLanahan, 2004; McLanahan, Garfinkel,

Mincy, & Donahue, 2010). In addition, these “fragile families” are associated with a variety of negative social, economic, health and life outcomes including: education failures and dropping out of school, unemployment and underemployment, incarceration of both males and females, substance abuse, mental health challenges, physical health challenges, underweight births, children born with birth defects and developmental delays, disabilities (Halfon, Houtrow, Larson, & Newacheck, 2012), abuse, neglect and abandonment of children, and the list goes on. For decades, scholars have been reluctant to speak plainly regarding the enormous social repercussions of family disintegration for fear of being labeled racist, sexist, mean spirited and insensitive.

However, Isabel Sawhill’s important new book, *Generation Unbound*, provides a data rich (Fragile Families and Child Well Being Study and the Social Genome Project) analysis of these societal trends in the United States, presented with carefully chosen language for an extremely sensitive subject. Sawhill, a current Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution, is especially well suited to provide this information. Many years ago, Sawhill was a colleague of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who linked family structure to negative social outcomes among poor Blacks in the 1960s. The Moynihan Report (1965) prophetically foretold of the potential consequences of widespread prevalence of single-parent female-headed households among Black Americans. Going further, Sawhill has published widely on the American family, social mobility, the well-being of children, and economic policy.

Her book dares to examine the long-term consequences of the relaxed rules regarding sex in society these days, which have created a variety of options for family formation; and dares to confront the issue of change in the American family structure over the past 50 years that have made growing up in the country much more difficult for many primarily poor children.

In the past, most young people regardless of education level or socioeconomic status had clear socially acceptable “scripts” that guided them into adulthood (p. 16), with expectations for completion of education, acquiring a job, getting married and then having children (pp. 16–18). However, changes in social norms for courtship, principally eliminating the requirement of marriage before engaging in sexual intercourse, and changes in the status of and opportunities for women have altered the way Americans view having children, and altered the way Americans view the institution of marriage (p. 19). The stigma of having an illegitimate child is no longer relevant for most people (p. 26). Marriage is no longer a stepping stone in the process of building a life. Rather, it is a status symbol of achieving a successful life (p. 26). Though we see reductions in marriage and increases in out-of-wedlock births across most population groups, these dramatic social changes have not impacted all segments of society equally. Sawhill draws a clear picture of the socioeconomically based bifurcated structure of families currently emerging in the country. Marriage has become an institution associated with well-educated people and socioeconomic privilege (pp. 67–68). College-educated elites are still marrying first and having their children after, albeit at older ages than in years past (pp. 26–37). Single-parent, female-headed households are clustering heavily among those with lower educational outcomes, the poor, and disproportionately among racial ethnic minorities (pp. 68–72).

Sawhill makes an important distinction between the Planners (p. 3), those who plan for having children, and the Drifters (p. 3), young women who simply become sexually active, with no plan to use contraceptives, no plan to care for a potential pregnancy and no plan to take care of herself and raise a child.

The Planners, primarily college-educated young adults, follow the traditional script for family formation. The difference is that marriage and children occur later (ages late twenties to thirties) than in past years. Divorce is down and family stability is up among the planners. Planners have fewer children, on average, and invest significantly into their up-bringing. Planners are likely to mate assortively; or rather they marry educated and successful people like themselves.

The Drifters are much younger, primarily socioeconomically and educationally disadvantaged, and “drift” into parenthood with unplanned pregnancies, without the benefit of marriage, and before they are ready for relationship or parental commitment. The Drifters’ relationships are unstable, generally ending before the offspring reach school age and their parents are free to enter into other sexual relationships and create additional children with no strong family of orientation (pp. 70–72). The families created by the Drifters are likely to be poor. In 2012, 47% of children in single-parent female-headed households lived with incomes below the poverty line (p. 54). Racial/ethnic minorities are over represented among the Drifters. On average, the Drifters have more children and are the least able to provide an adequate home life for them. The children of Drifters are least likely to complete high school, achieve further education or occupy self-supporting jobs; least likely to marry and more likely to be abused or neglected, more likely to be involved in criminal activities and more likely to have children out of wedlock (pp. 56–57).

Sawhill’s remedy for this social problem appears straight forward: Turn the Drifters into Planners (pp. 105–128). One step toward turning Drifters into Planners is to help young girls take control over results of their introduction to sex and expanding the utility of long-term birth control methods. This suggestion in and of itself is controversial. In some circles, long-acting birth control methods such as Depo provera are viewed as reproductive violence against women (The Rebecca Project for Justice, 2014).

Sawhill explains that the old norm was “Don’t have a child outside of marriage.” New norm should be “Don’t have a child before you want one and are ready to parent” (p. 14).

A paradox is that countries in Europe have significant rates of out-of-wedlock births and those countries do not see the kinds of education and health disparities among children raised in single-parent homes present in the United States. Though out-of-wedlock births are significant in European countries such as Sweden and Norway, couples that produce children generally stay together and behave as married couples (p. 19). In stark contrast, single couples that produce children in America generally do not stay together. They move on to romantic involvement with others, and often times produce additional children (pp. 70–71).

For the past 50 years, the United States has witnessed dramatic changes in the lives of its rank and file, ordinary citizens. The country’s education systems that serve average- and low-income communities have failed and that story has been a constant feature of media news reports. Many American students have fallen from their former place as high achievers in reading, mathematics and science. The academic achievement gap between minority and majority, poor and affluent has also remained constant, and in some cases has widened. Pundits continue to debate appropriate remedies for poor-performing schools, including curricula selection or how much homework is appropriate. Criminal justice issues also plague the country. The number of persons detained in jails and prisons in the United States has also increased exponentially, making the nation one of the most incarcerated on the

planet. Abuse, neglect and abandonment of children are on the upswing. It is my opinion that these social ills can be linked to one single unifying issue: the unforeseen consequences of the sexual revolution, out-of-wedlock births and the collapse of family structure and responsibility. Many have forgotten the family's central role in socialization of children—the life-long process by which people learn to become a functioning member of society. Daniel Patrick Moynihan predicted the collapse of poor Black families in 1965 when only 25% of Black children were born out of wedlock. His findings linking family structure and social outcomes were reviled and the subject of intense debate. In 1987, William Julius Wilson's book *The Truly Disadvantaged* echoed Moynihan's findings regarding the link between family structure and social and economic disadvantage. Even with additional evidence accumulating, his work was dissected and debated. Now 72% of Black children and 36% of White children are born out of wedlock (p. 69), and educational and health disparities are worse than ever among the poor. It should be clear to scientists, policy makers, government officials, teachers and school administrators and many other decision makers that the "have nots" within our society do not possess the economic and social advantages that can overcome generation after generation of unplanned pregnancies and family instability. And, as Amy Wax (2007) put it, "Disparities in family structure are now adding to other trends that are widening the gap between rich and poor, and between Whites and Blacks. Family diversity has become a potent engine of inequality" (p. 599). The work presented here is evidence that this issue has reached a critical mass and must rise to the top of national priorities.

Sawhill's book should be a staple in university schools of anthropology, economics, education, public policy, sociology, social work, law, public health and even business. Furthermore, I recommend using this work to start a national discussion on how to reverse the trend toward irresponsible procreation and encourage marriage and family formation. The evidence to support the link between family structure and socioeconomic and other outcomes is overwhelming. We can no longer deny the obvious facts regarding the impact of unplanned pregnancies and out-of-wedlock births on families and on the nation.

For further reading, the Spring 2015 issue of *Education Next* (<http://educationnext.org/journal/>) contains a series of articles revisiting the implications of the Moynihan Report. I highly recommend reading the entire series; one article is authored by Sawhill. In addition, consider reading resources from The Social Genome Project (<http://www.brookings.edu/about/centers/ccf/social-genome-project>) and The Fragile Families and Child Well Being Study (<http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/>).

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