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Publication Date

2013

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

Youthful Transgressions:
Teenagers, Sexuality, and the Contested Path to Adulthood in Postwar America

By
Julie Solow Stein

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
Requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
History
and the Designated Emphasis
in
Women, Gender, and Sexuality
in the
Graduate Division
of the
University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Paula Fass, Chair
Professor Richard Cándida Smith
Professor Kristin Luker

Fall 2013

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Abstract

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“Youthful Transgressions” examines teenage sexual culture in the United States after World War II. It focuses in particular on the ways that changing notions of childhood and adulthood influenced the place of sexually precocious adolescents in American society. This dissertation argues that between the 1940s and the 1980s, teenage sexuality transformed from a private problem that was seen as leading children into premature adulthood, to a public problem that kept adolescents in a pathologized version of childhood.

This dissertation addresses the question of how Americans decided who was an adult and who was a child, as well as the consequences of those decisions. In the immediate postwar years, sexually active teenagers were reclassified as adults and hidden from public view through hasty marriages and mandatory expulsions from schools. In the 1960s and 1970s, married and pregnant youth took advantage of a newly expansive concept of childhood to fight their way back into schools and reclaim many of the legal and social rights of children. By the late 1970s and 1980s, lawmakers became convinced that teenage childbearing was an epidemic and responded with federal programs that intervened into the personal and sexual lives of youth and redefined teenage mothers as dependent children.

“Youthful Transgressions” draws from a range of institutional, legal, popular and personal sources, including school records, court documents, congressional testimony, newspaper and magazine articles, advice literature, popular music, and diaries. These sources reveal that ideas about age categories and sexuality evolved in tandem. Teenagers created their own definitions of childhood, adulthood, and age-appropriate sexuality that coexisted with adult views, challenged conventional norms, and evolved to meet their needs over the course of the twentieth century.

To my parents, Jenny and Martin

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Acknowledgements

I have been looking forward to writing these acknowledgments for years, not only because it would mean I had finally completed my dissertation, but because it would allow me to thank the community of generous, brilliant, and kind people who helped me along the way. First and foremost, I am grateful to Paula Fass, my advisor, mentor and strongest advocate since the first day of graduate school. Paula read every page and every draft of this project, offered incisive criticism and thoughtful advice, and taught me a great deal about the type of scholar, teacher, and mentor I hope to be. This dissertation began in a seminar with Richard Cándida Smith, and he has served as both a careful reader and a source of great intellectual support throughout this process. Little did I know when he recruited me to work at the Regional Oral History Project that it would lead to some of my favorite experiences during graduate school. There is nothing like listening to a ninety-year-old “Rosie” tell stories about welding deep in the belly of World War II Victory ships to remind a stressed-out graduate student of the importance and joy of doing history. Thank you to Kristin Luker for serving on my dissertation committee and for her brilliant work on teenage pregnancy, which inspired and guided me throughout this process.

I was fortunate to work with many other wonderful professors at the University of California, Berkeley. Mark Peterson, who taught the first seminar I took at Berkeley, made me and my cohort-mates feel at home in graduate school and shared tips that helped us conquer seemingly impossible tasks (like reading multiple books in a week – or a day). I am grateful to David Henkin for our first conversations that convinced me to come to Berkeley, for keeping me sane during orals, and for helping me navigate my way through graduate school. Ruth Rosen nurtured my interest in women’s history with enthusiasm and helped me become a better teacher. I am grateful to Barrie Thorne for her intellectual curiosity and for introducing me to the wonders of sociology and feminist theory. Finally, thanks to Mabel Lee for keeping the history department running smoothly, for answering my endless questions with a smile on her face, and for making sure I got my History Department Alumni pin before I left.

The Designated Emphasis in Women, Gender and Sexuality provided a second intellectual home on campus and introduced me to a community of like-minded scholars from every corner of the University. I owe a huge debt to the members of the Spring 2011 dissertation workshop led by Minoo Moallem. They helped me turn my trepidation into paragraphs, my scrawled notes into a chapter, and they generously engaged with my work at every messy stage of the writing process.

I came to know a remarkable group of scholars as the graduate student representative on the Executive Committee of the Society for the History of Childhood and Youth. Caroline Cox, Ning de Coninck-Smith, Miriam Forman-Brunell, Mona Gleason, Patrizia Guarnieri, Colin Heywood, James Marten, Steven Mintz, Patrick Ryan, Bengt Sandin, Kelly Schrum, Rebecca de Schweinitz, and Luke Springman welcomed me into this vibrant field and showed me what true scholarly engagement looks like. I am particularly grateful to Michael Grossberg, whose insightful comments on my conference paper led me to think about my topic in new and exciting ways. I would also like to

thank Karen Sanchez-Eppler and Laura Lovett, co-editors of the *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*. They saw potential in a conference presentation and helped me wrangle it into an article. Two anonymous reviewers provided valuable feedback and introduced me to 1960s rock songs that made their way into the dissertation and provided the soundtrack for much of the writing process.

This project was supported by the generous funding of UC Berkeley's Department of History, the Graduate Division, the Center for Race and Gender, the Designated Emphasis in Women, Gender and Sexuality, and the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America. Throughout my research, I was impressed by the enthusiasm and knowledge of archivists I met along the way. Particular thanks to Sarah Hutcheon and the rest of the staff of the Schlesinger Library, Kimberly Springle at the Charles Sumner School Museum and Archives, and David Mint at the New York City Municipal Archives.

For the past six years, my friends and classmates created a second family for me as I willed this project into being. Within the history department, particular thanks goes to Alice Goff, Chi Ha, Rebecca Herman, Rebecca Hodges, Gabe Milner, Jacqui Shine, and Jenny Thai for making the endless hours in the history library tolerable and the past six years (despite the odds) a whole lot of fun. I would not have gotten through the last big writing push were it not for Radhika Natarajan and our mini-writing group, Sarah Gold McBride, who stepped in as my pinch hitter and patron saint of last-minute paperwork without missing a beat, and Adrienne Francisco, who provided housing, friendship and an excuse to eat delicious Bay Area food.

Friends outside of my field tolerated more than their fair share of stories about midcentury teenage courtship while also providing a much-needed world apart from it. Thank you to Diana Greenwold for her home-cooked meals, for Friday night writing "parties," and for making me feel wise even when I knew better. Katherine Piggott-Tooke has not only been a great friend and co-conspirator in California adventures, but she helped me navigate WestLaw, showed me the wonders of shepardizing, and helped me decipher the legal cases that became so central to this dissertation.

I owe a huge debt to Karen Weise for convincing me to move to California in the first place, for her steadfast friendship, and for laughing the loudest over the random bits of historical humor I discover in my research. She went above the call of friendship, editing large sections of my dissertation with her masterful journalistic skills and formidable intelligence. Abigail Krasner Balbale has been like a sister to me since the second week of college and showed me how to make it through graduate school (among other life stages) with grace. When we became friends, I had no idea we would travel through our academic lives together. But from the Humanities major at Yale to our respective history Ph.D.'s, she has made this road more fun than it has any right to be.

Finally, I am grateful beyond words to my family for their endless support and love. My oldest brother Josh inspired me to follow in his footsteps and pursue a Ph.D. While he may have chosen a (much) more marketable field, I am thankful to him for being a great role model, for helping me survive grad school, and for providing me with the best niece and nephew in the world. My (younger) older brother Jeff has kept me laughing for pretty much my entire life, and even though he might try to deny it, he has always taken great care of his little sister. I am grateful to my grandparents, Phyllis Stein and Perry and Mary Solow. They instilled in me a sense of history, and in the great

tradition of Jewish grandparents, a reverence for education. They are not here to see this day, but they would certainly be *kvelling* if they were.

Lastly and most importantly, thank you to my parents, Jenny and Martin Stein. My dad's curiosity, intellect and compassion have been an inspiration to me throughout my life. And although I dodged his well-meaning suggestions that I consider medical school, I ended up a doctor in the end! My mom is the most generous person I have ever met and I am incredibly appreciative of her unwavering support of even my most far-fetched adventures (whether they involved biking across the country or writing a dissertation on the history of teenagers). Thank you for proofreading my drafts, for leaving hilarious comments in the margins, and for attempting to read me bedtime stories well into adulthood. You are the most loving parents and enthusiastic cheerleaders a daughter could ask for. Thank you for everything.

Introduction

*My mama said
I can't see you no more
Cause we don't know
what love really means
She says we can't get married
for three years or more
Cause we're only in our teens*

*Oh, no, we're not too young
Young to get married
Not too young
Young to get married
What kind of difference
Can a few years make
I gotta have you now or my heart will break
Not too young, young to get married
Not too young, young to get married
I couldn't love you more than I do today*

– “Not Too Young to Get Married,” Bob B. Soxx and the Blue Jeans, 1963

In the early 1960s, the sounds of rock ‘n’ roll records blared from teenagers’ records players, jukeboxes, and speakers at high school dances. Though adults worried that corrupting rock songs would lead their children into rebellion and delinquency, most popular songs conveyed a more conventional message. Hits like “Not Too Young to Get Married” by Bob B. Soxx and the Blue Jeans, or “Chapel of Love” by the Dixie Cups spoke of love, devotion, and above all, the joys of marriage. For many teenagers, dreams of marriage were just that; but for others, like fifteen-year-old Kathy Ann Cooper, these jukebox tunes hit closer to home.

In 1965, Kathy Ann was a sophomore at Alvin High School in a Houston, Texas suburb close to the Gulf Coast. In the middle of that year, she dropped out of school and married her boyfriend, John. Several months later, the couple welcomed a baby. After a brief and difficult marriage, Kathy Ann sued for divorce less than a year later. A single mother and divorcee before even turning seventeen, she tried to pick up her life where she had left off and reenrolled in high school the following year. The school board, however, denied her request for admission, citing a policy that forbade mothers from attending school. The rule stated:

A pupil who marries can no longer be considered a youth. By the very act of getting married, he or she becomes an adult and assumes the responsibility of adulthood. If a married pupil wants to start her family, she must withdraw from public school.

Undeterred, Kathy Ann resolved to take classes at Alvin Junior College instead and hoped to still attend get to college one day. But the junior college refused her too. This time, she was told, she was too young.

After being rejected for being both an adult *and* a child, Kathy Ann put her last hopes on the courts. In the prior twenty years, ten students before her had brought similar cases against high schools, and all but one had lost. Despite these poor legal odds, Kathy Ann sued Alvin High School in early 1966, citing a Texas law that guaranteed public education to anyone between ages six and twenty-one. Over six months, the court weighed the case's central question: was Kathy Ann an adult, as her school contended, or was she still an adolescent, entitled to education by law? That choice boiled down to whether Kathy Ann's age trumped her sexual experience, marriage, divorce and child. In June of 1966, the Texas Court of Civil Appeals set new precedent by ruling in Kathy Ann's favor, finding that schools could not permanently exclude anyone of "scholastic age." She returned to school the following year, presumably the only divorced mother in the sophomore class, and continued to work toward her goal of going to college.¹

Kathy Ann was just one of an unprecedented number of teenagers, particularly teenage girls, who married and became parents in the three decades after World War II. After the war, the average marriage age dropped to its lowest levels in the century, reaching 20.1 for women and 22.5 for men in 1957. By 1960, half of all first-time marriages involved a bride in her teens. Young brides quickly became young mothers as the fever of the baby boom shrunk the time between marriage and parenthood. Even young people who did not marry were likely to get involved in "steady" relationships that mimicked many of the defining qualities of marriage.²

While teenage marriage and even parenthood were not unusual, Kathy Ann Cooper's successful fight to stay in high school was. Most teenagers who married or had children in the years after World War II dropped out of school. Those who tried to stay were usually expelled or suspended. Married and pregnant students would eventually win their way back into classrooms in the 1970s, but for most of the 1950s and 1960s, schools and judges agreed that a married teenager or a school-age mother had no place in the classroom because, as Alvin High School's code proclaimed, she "could no longer be considered a youth."

The study of postwar youth culture raises important questions about the relationship between age and sexuality in American history. How did Americans decide who was a child and who was an adult? Why did the trappings of adulthood, such as steady relationships, marriage, and parenthood, appeal to adolescents? Why were schools so hostile to the presence of married and pregnant youngsters, and what happened to young people like Kathy Ann who defied age expectations through their sexual behavior? Finally, how did teenage sexual culture transform the ways that Americans understood

¹ Alvin Independent School District v. Kathy Ann Cooper, 404 S.W.2d 76, 1996 Tex. App. LEXIS 3045 (1966); "Teen Mother Battles School," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 27, 1966.

² Teenage marriage was an overwhelmingly female practice. Of all married 15-19 year olds in 1950, 84% were female. Stephanie J. Ventura, T.J. Matthews, and Brady E. Hamilton, *Births to Teenagers in the United States 1940 - 2000*, National Vital Statistics Reports, Vol 49 No 10 (Hyattsville, MD: CDC and Division of Vital Statistics, 2001), http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr49/nvsr49_10.pdf; For more on demographic shifts in marriage and parenthood, see John Modell, *Into One's Own: From Youth to Adulthood in the United States, 1920-1975* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

childhood, adolescence and adulthood, and how did shifting concepts of age shape the lives and choices of sexually precocious teens?

Between the 1950s and the 1980s, teenage sexuality transformed from a private problem that led children into premature adulthood, to a public problem that kept adolescents in a pathologized version of childhood. In the immediate postwar years, Americans defined childhood narrowly, and sexually active teenagers were quickly reclassified as adults. This process took place through hasty marriages, legal decisions, and mandatory expulsions from schools, effectively hiding sexual transgressions from public view. In the 1960s and 1970s, married and pregnant youth took advantage of a newly expansive concept of childhood to fight their way back into schools and reclaim the legal and social rights of children. Sexually active teenagers were no longer hidden as they now shared hallways and classrooms with their peers. But their new visibility convinced Americans that teenage childbearing was an epidemic and spurred a flurry of federal interventions into the personal and sexual lives of poor and minority youth. My dissertation charts the transformation of teenage sexuality from a shortcut into adulthood to a contentious symbol of the seeming “crisis” of youth, families and American culture.

In considering teenage sexuality from World War II through the rise of the New Right, my dissertation provides a new way to understand the postwar period. Until recently, historians characterized the postwar years as a time of stasis and conservatism, wedged between epochs of rapid change and cultural disruption. I argue, however, that young people engaged in revolutionary behavior during this supposedly conventional era. Starting in the late 1940s, teenagers appropriated behaviors that were central to adulthood, including monogamy, sex, marriage, and parenthood. By engaging in conventional practices at unconventional ages, this generation of teenagers quietly undermined traditional sexual norms well before the commonly accepted “sexual revolution.” By the 1960s and 1970s, a revolution did take place among teenagers, but their rebellion had less to do with having sex than with abandoning marriage. As teenagers walked away from marriage and the adult status it conferred, their sexual behavior appeared to be more problematic, more epidemic, and more of a public crisis.

Adolescents were important historical actors in the postwar years even though they operated from a position of relative cultural weakness. Ideas about the passive nature of children and girls have led historians to overlook the extent to which young people challenged social conventions through their personal relationships, their adherence to peer-sanctioned moral codes, and occasionally, through legal action. Suspended or expelled students who sued their high schools in court took great risks by airing their sexual histories in public. While the first generation of litigants in the 1950s and early 1960s did not win their cases, their actions paved the way for successful lawsuits in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and, ultimately, the creation of legislation that protected and supported teenage mothers. In challenging existing sexual ethics and age distinctions, adolescents played a central role in historical transformations that reshaped the private lives of all Americans.

Historiography

This project contributes to a range of scholarly debates. Firstly, it seeks to answer questions associated with the history of childhood and youth: How have ideas about

adolescence changed over time? How did teenagers influence and participate in postwar American culture? How have changing notions of age influenced young people's transition from youth to adulthood? Secondly, my work engages with questions posed by historians of sexuality: When did attitudes about sexuality become more liberal and how did this affect the lives of Americans? How did Americans conceptualize adolescent sexuality? What happened to individuals or groups that defied sexual norms?

My research demonstrates that ideas about age and sexuality were deeply intertwined in the postwar era, and I aim to bring these literatures into closer conversation with one another. Since the turn of the century, children had been defined by their presumed sexual innocence. Children were separated from adult sexuality through an array of social and legal boundaries including age of consent laws, marriage age requirements, and severe taboos against out-of-wedlock pregnancy. From the 1940s through the 1970s, this separation began to break down with consequences that have only been addressed partially by historians in these individual fields.

The History of Childhood

In recent years, a growing number of historians have turned their attention to childhood. Their body of work illuminates the experiences and contributions of children, as well as shifting notions of childhood itself.³ The modern conception of childhood as a time of innocence, protection and dependence emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. Around the turn of the century, children were expelled from the workforce and lost most of their role in the family economy. As middle-class children became "economically useless," Viviana Zelizer argues, they were reconceived as "emotionally priceless,"

³ The history of childhood traces its roots back to Philippe Aries' seminal 1960 text, *Centuries of Childhood*, which located the "invention" of childhood in the early modern period. Though much of Aries' argument has been refuted, his study was the first to present childhood as a social, rather than a biological, category. Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: a Social History of Family Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962) Published in French in 1960; translated into English in 1962. Over the next two decades, scholars of women's history, family history and the new social history showed growing, though still limited, interest in children's experiences. For early examples of children's history, see; John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth; Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Joseph M. Hawes, *Children in Urban Society; Juvenile Delinquency in Nineteenth-century America*, The Urban Life in America Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Lloyd DeMause, *The History of Childhood* (New York: Psychohistory Press, 1974); Of particular note in this era is Joseph Kett's 1977, *Rites of Passage*, the first full-length treatment of the history of American adolescence. Joseph F. Kett, *Rites of Passage : Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977). By the 1990s, the history of childhood and youth emerged as a distinct field. Scholars including Paula Fass, Steven Mintz, Michael Grossberg, James Marten, and Wilma King not only affirmed the importance of studying of children in their own right, but also demonstrated that the history of young people can shed new light on long studied historical eras, transformations, and events. See Paula S Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920's* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (New York London: Free Press; Collier Macmillan, 1988); Michael Grossberg, *Governing the Hearth: Law and the Family in Nineteenth-century America*, Studies in Legal History (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); James Alan Marten, *The Children's Civil War*, Civil War America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Wilma King, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-century America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

fragile, and innocent.⁴ This new notion first took hold in white middle-class families but quickly spread to other groups in American society. As immigrant and working-class children filled public school classrooms in the first third of the twentieth century, Old World notions of children as contributors to the family economy were pushed out by American ideas of childhood as a sheltered time free from adult responsibility. In the 1930s, sentimental notions of childhood began to include African American children as well as white youth. Public policy during the Great Depression and New Deal eras created an infrastructure that allowed most American children to experience a relatively sheltered youth in the postwar years.⁵

Just as the country embraced the notion of children as innocent and protected, a new youth culture sprung from high schools that challenged many of these assumptions. Between 1910 and 1940, high school enrollment grew by nearly four hundred percent. As young people increasingly spent time together and developed shared experiences, they coalesced into an age-based subculture of “teenagers.” The word “teenager,” which was first printed in *Popular Science* in 1941, came into common parlance by the beginning of the 1950s. Teenage girls actively used consumer culture to define and articulate their subcultural identity, including music, fashion, cosmetics and movies. Adolescents also invented new forms of courtship, replacing an older “promiscuous” dating system with the monogamous security of “steady dating.”⁶ High schools celebrated romance on the one hand, while trying to contain the disruptive and dangerous potential of adolescent sexuality on the other hand. Peers monitored each other through normative social standards, yearbooks, and gossip, and heterosexual courtship was ritualized through events like homecoming and prom.⁷ But, as the stories of married and pregnant students illustrate, schools did not always effectively contain teenage sexuality. My project adds to this literature, suggesting that schools expelled non-conforming youths in order to maintain the careful balance between celebrating “teenage” courtship and discouraging “adult” sexual behavior that might lead to early marriage or early parenthood.

Recent scholarship has shown that the sentimental notion of childhood faced a brief but serious challenge in the 1970s from the children’s rights movement and students’ rights movement. As young people fought for (and won) greater access to citizenship rights and the privileges of adulthood, Americans increasingly viewed children as capable,

⁴ The “sacralization” of childhood led to great improvements in the safety and comfort of children’s lives, but it also came with more supervision, more constriction, and less freedom. Viviana A. Rotman Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child : the Changing Social Value of Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

⁵ Stephen Lasseonde, *Learning to Forget : Schooling and Family Life in New Haven’s Working Class, 1870-1940* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005); Rebecca De Schweinitz, *If We Could Change the World: Young People and America’s Long Struggle for Racial Equality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Kriste Lindenmeyer, *The Greatest Generation Grows Up: American Childhood in the 1930s*, American Childhoods (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005).

⁶ Kelly Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls’ Culture, 1920-1945*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Sherrie A. Inness, *Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth-century American Girls’ Cultures* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1997); Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

⁷ Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings : Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

independent, and more similar to adults than past generations. Scholars of the children's rights movement in the 1970s focus primarily on the age of majority, voting rights, free speech and student protest. As my research demonstrates, however, this new understanding of children's rights also had profound effects in the realm of adolescent sexuality. Most importantly, it provided pregnant and parenting teenagers with a newly persuasive way to advocate for their rights. From the 1940s through the 1980s, changing notions of childhood determined the opportunities available to sexually precocious teenagers, and shaped the ways Americans understood and treated these unorthodox young people.⁸

Finally, historians of childhood and youth rarely follow their subjects once they cross the marriage threshold. Scholars tend to look at unwed and married adolescents as fundamentally different groups, using marriage as a marker of adulthood in much the same way that courts and schools did in the 1950s and 1960s. This dissertation erases this false dichotomy by following the stories of individuals who existed on both sides of that line. Some married fathers played on high school basketball teams while others worked on the factory line; some mothers edited the yearbook, while others stayed home to raise kids and keep house. This perspective allows me to find children's history in places that have been overlooked and discounted as realms of adulthood in the past. The story of young people who embodied aspects of both childhood and adulthood complicates and enriches our understanding of the history of childhood.

The History of Women and Sexuality

This project is also situated within a second body of literature on the sexual subcultures of young women in the second half of the twentieth century.⁹ After World War II, Elaine Tyler May argues, Americans embraced domestic life, traditional gender roles and conservative sexuality because it offered a refuge from the insecurities of the

⁸ See for example Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), chapter 15; Gael Graham, *Young Activists: American High School Students in the Age of Protest* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006); De Schweinitz, *If We Could Change the World: Young People and America's Long Struggle for Racial Equality*; Sonja C Grover, *Young People's Human Rights and the Politics of Voting Age* (Dordrecht; New York: Springer, 2011); Jenny Diamond Cheng, "Uncovering the Twenty-Sixth Amendment" (Ph.D. Diss, University of Michigan, 2008).

⁹ These scholars build off a rich historiography of sexuality in the early twentieth century. Starting in the 1880s, young working-class women created a new leisure culture that stressed sexual expressiveness, the pursuit of pleasure, and greater interaction with men. Their behavior alarmed reformers, parents and public authorities, who stepped up their efforts to control girls' sexuality through police efforts, reformatories, and juvenile courts in the first decades of the twentieth century. In contrast to working-class women, college girls enjoyed great freedom in the 1920s and defined their own sexual codes that set aside an older Victorian model. During World War II, the government mobilized female sexuality to motivate the "boys" fighting abroad, while stoking fears about the dangerous sexuality of uncontrolled women at home. Sexually active women, particularly those with low social status, were punished and carefully watched during the war years. Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Temple University Press, 1986); Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States, 1885-1920* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful*; Marilyn E. Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-Wackies, and Patriotutes: The Regulation of Female Sexuality During World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

larger world. In a time of international unrest, racial strife, class conflict, and nuclear threat, the family became a “bastion of safety.”¹⁰ Individuals who did not fit into sexual and familial norms - homosexuals, bachelors, childless couples, divorcees, or unwed mothers - were highly suspect. However, as recent work by Amanda Littauer argues, the containment of non-marital female sexuality was imperfect at best. Her study of women who lived at the edges of social respectability, including “victory girls,” “B-girls,” female homosexuals, and juvenile delinquents, demonstrates that non-marital female sexuality exerted a growing influence on mainstream sexuality during the 1950s through the 1960s.¹¹

Postwar restraints on sexuality crumbled further during the “sexual revolution” of the late 1960s, when radical youth, feminists, and gay liberationists openly challenged traditional sexual norms.¹² Beth Bailey complicates the established narrative of the sexual revolution by showing that changes to American sexual ethics did not come solely from radical fringe groups on the coasts, but also from the heartland, from people who had no intention of revolutionizing sex. They made many of the early transformations of sexual life in the name of “responsibility,” not “liberation.” For example, when college students opposed the system of sexual controls (parietal rules and curfews for women), they did so by claiming that they were mature enough to handle the responsibilities of self-governance and citizenship on campus.¹³

My work supports Bailey’s revisionist interpretation of the sexual revolution and suggests that significant transformations to sexual culture took place in the 1950s, well before the commonly understood beginning of the sexual revolution. While youth in the late 1960s overtly questioned and rejected sexual norms, high school students in this early period justified their sexual relationships by claiming they could handle the responsibility of adult behavior. They celebrated responsibility, monogamy, marriage and parenthood – they just claimed they had the right to engage in these traditional behaviors at untraditional ages.

By accelerating the tempo of their life course, postwar youth destabilized traditional sexual morality and challenged a fundamental organizing principle of American society. Unlike Littauer’s subjects whose influence is only apparent in hindsight, postwar teenagers directly challenged sexual morality from within mainstream culture. Some teenagers swooned over advertisements for engagement rings on the pages of *Seventeen Magazine*; others swayed on the dance floor to popular tunes like “Not Too Young to Get Married”; still others sped to Mexico to get married in secret and made it back home in time for curfew. The revolutionary nature of their sexual behavior has been largely obscured over time by the conventionality of their claims. Still, I suggest that *these* changes – which challenged the timing of life events – created a sexual revolution in their own right.

Theorizing Age

¹⁰ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 11.

¹¹ Amanda Littauer, “Unsanctioned Encounters: Women, Girls and Non-Marital Sexuality in the United States, 1941 - 1963” (Ph.D. Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1998).

¹² John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (University Of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹³ Beth L Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

Theoretically, this project conceives of age as a social and historical category rather than a simple chronological descriptor. It draws from an emerging body of historical and sociological work that engages with age as a critical category of analysis. In her 2004 article, “Theorizing Age and Other Differences,” sociologist Barrie Thorne called on scholars to add age to the more familiar trilogy of race, class and gender. “Age adds a distinctive ingredient to the theoretical mix” she writes, “by bringing in ‘processes of temporality’ including biological growth and aging, and the continuing constitution and reconstitution of persons... as they move through the life course.”¹⁴ Ann Solberg adds that age is fluid, negotiated category; one’s social age may “grow” or “shrink” according to place and time.¹⁵

My analysis rests on the notion that “adulthood” can be separated from those legally designated as adults, and “youth” from children. This understanding of youth and adulthood follows sociologist C.J. Pascoe’s ideas about masculinity. Masculinity, she writes, “is a configuration of practices and discourses that different youths (boys and girls) may embody in different ways to different degrees.”¹⁶ Just as masculinity can exist outside of male bodies, adulthood may be embodied or strategically borrowed by younger individuals at different points in their life course. Teens claimed they were adults when they wanted to get married against their parents’ wishes, for example, while married adolescents claimed they were still children in the hopes of getting readmitted to school.

Age categories became more numerous and more meaningful to Americans over the course of the twentieth century, and as age became more important, transgressions of its boundaries became more disruptive. Age stratification and age consciousness in American culture increased dramatically in the first three decades of the twentieth century. During these years, one-room schoolhouses gave way in most places to age-graded classrooms; doctors specialized in pediatrics and gerontology; smaller middle-class families provided children with separate bedrooms; and psychologists popularized theories of standardized age-based stages of development.¹⁷

Age segmentation brought about greater age consciousness. Howard Chudacoff argues that age became a means of organizing and understanding the complexities of modern life and personal identity. Age “replaced the rituals and symbols of the past as a means of defining an individual’s status” and became “a substitute for, and even a predictor of, characteristics that society expects to be related to age.”¹⁸ By the early twentieth century, Americans of all classes spent an unprecedented amount of time with their age-peers, and age became a central part of the way that people thought about their lives and identities.

By the postwar years, age stratification became increasingly meaningful to Americans. For example, the process of growing up was broken down into smaller units.

¹⁴ Barrie Thorne, “Editorial: Theorizing Age and Other Difference,” *Childhood* 11 (2004): 403.

¹⁵ Anne Solberg, “Negotiating Childhood: Changing Constructions of Age for Norwegian Children,” in Allison James and Alan Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* (London; Washington, D.C.: Falmer Press, 1997).

¹⁶ C. J. Pascoe, *Dude, You’re a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 5.

¹⁷ Howard P. Chudacoff, *How Old Are You?: Age Consciousness in American Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

Doctors and psychologists subdivided childhood into “early,” “middle,” and “late” stages. Junior high schools split off from regular high schools in the 1950s, dividing older and younger teenagers into their own spaces and cultures. Adulthood was not just a life stage during the postwar years; it was also a cultural ideal. As Stephen Lassoode argues, “maturity was cast as the proper object of every individual’s self-actualization.”¹⁹ People strived to be grown up, to own a home, marry and have children.

Influential mid-century psychologist Erik Erikson did more than any other figure at the time to convince Americans of the importance of age segmentation and life sequencing. He theorized that humans went through eight distinct life stages. In order to become healthy adults, individuals had to resolve the central conflict of each stage, in sequence. To Erikson, adolescence was a time of identity exploration during which individuals attempted to integrate themselves into the roles and opportunities offered by society. Successful resolution of the “Identify vs. Role Diffusion” crisis entailed settling on a job path, establishing moral beliefs and deciding what types of relationships to pursue.²⁰

Teenagers themselves, however, ascribed to a different understanding of age categorization. They refused to see themselves as works-in-progress or as incapable of having meaningful relationships because of their psychological development. Instead, they insisted that they were emotionally mature, autonomous, and capable of making independent decisions. The emergence and diffusion of teenage culture encouraged young people to see themselves as part of a national cultural cohort. Messages from consumer culture and high school peer culture told teenagers that they were important, mature and capable of making their own decisions, and teenagers brought this sense of confidence into their sexual culture as well. Teens appropriated aspects of adult culture, insisting that they were ready to have serious relationships, all the while tailoring adult models to fit their teenage needs.

Despite their growing cultural importance, locating the voices of teenagers in history can be challenging. This study draws from a wide range of sources. These include published materials (newspapers, magazines, advice literature, academic journals, sociological studies), cultural artifacts (novels, educational films, popular songs), institutional documents (conference records, legal cases, state and federal law, congressional hearings, public school archives, records of advocacy groups) and personal documents (diaries, oral histories). This archival range presents a breadth of opinions and voices, although it over-represents those of adults, the middle class, whites and cultural elites. These voices were not representative of the entire nation, but they set the tone and the agenda for the national debates about age and sexuality due to their cultural power and prominence.

Chapter Organization

This dissertation explores transformations of childhood, adulthood, and American sexual morality by examining a spectrum of teenagers’ transgressions of the boundary

¹⁹ Stephen Lassoode, Paula Fass, and Michael Grossberg, eds., “Ten Is the New Fourteen: Age Compression And ‘Real’ Childhood,” in *Re-Inventing Childhood after World War Two* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

²⁰ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, 1st ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968).

separating youth and adulthood. Chapter One begins with the least severe: going steady. This courtship practice of long-term, monogamous pairings rose to prominence in the 1940s. Invented by teenagers, steady dating was modeled on marriage, and immediately ignited a generational conflict over age-appropriate sexuality. Opponents of steady dating believed that it put life events in the wrong order, forcing young people to commit to one person during a developmental stage in their lives when they should be exploring multiple options. Heavily influenced by psychologist Erik Erikson, adults argued that early serious relationships would prevent young people from successfully fulfilling their “human potential” and lure them into early sexual activity. In contrast, young people vigorously supported the practice. The debates over going steady allowed adolescents to articulate their own theory of adolescent development, claiming that they were mature, responsible and entitled to appropriate aspects of adulthood to meet their own needs.

Chapter Two explores the rise of adolescent marriage after World War II, as well as the backlash against this increasingly common practice. Marriage was seen as a symbolic portal into adulthood, and a primary source of self-fulfillment and personal happiness. Historians have written at length about the postwar marriage fever and baby boom, but few have recognized teenagers’ role in these important demographic trends. I explore how teenage marriage – and the pregnancies that often preceded or came soon after a young wedding – profoundly disturbed the sexual and age order of American society. A significant number of marriages among youth of high school age – perhaps as many as fifty percent - were prompted by unplanned pregnancies.²¹ In these cases, marriage legitimized teenage sex that would have been seen as extremely deviant in any other context. But in other cases, marriages were motivated not by pregnancy, but the lovers’ desire to be together, to be “grown up,” or to escape from the difficulties of adolescence.

The popularity of youthful marriage was also a critical factor in the flurry of marriage reform in the twenty-five years after World War II. When discrepancies in state marriage laws met the increased mobility of adolescents, it transformed teenage matrimony from a local to a national problem. Young people crossed county, state, and even international borders to obtain a marriage license. During the 1950s and 1960s, state lawmakers responded by increasing the minimum age of marriage, tightening parental consent laws and lobbying for uniform marriage laws across the nation. Their efforts failed to stop the teenage marriage trend, which continued through the 1960s. Though lawmakers could not succeed in keeping teenagers out of wedding chapels, they were much more effective at keeping married teenagers out of schools.

In Chapter Three, I explore the efforts of married and pregnant students to regain admission to schools. From the 1940s through the mid-1960s, high schools routinely expelled and suspended married and pregnant students. Schools and courts developed a strategy of reclassifying these minors as “adults” who were by definition beyond the purview of public education. They did this, I argue, in an attempt to establish schools as places free of the confusion that reigned outside their walls. A small number of students,

²¹ Sociological studies in Iowa, California and Nebraska reported that between thirty-one and fifty-seven percent of high school brides were pregnant on their wedding day. Premarital pregnancy rates were even higher when *both* spouses were high school students; a 1959 Iowa study found that 87 percent of these marriages involved premarital pregnancy. Lee G. Burchinal, “Research on Young Marriage: Implications for Family Life Education,” *The Family Life Coordinator* 9, no. 1/2 (December 1960): 9.

both boys and girls, protested their exclusion in court. Drawing on a legal archive that spans from the 1920s through the 1970s, I show that courts narrowed their definition of childhood after World War II and supported school claims that married and pregnant minors were legally adults. Until the early 1970s, courts routinely ruled against student plaintiffs, affirming the right of public schools to control their student population however they saw fit. Nevertheless, legal action was one of the few tools students had to contest strict constructions of childhood.

Chapter Four follows this story through the 1960s and 1970s when married and pregnant adolescents successfully fought their way back into classrooms. This was made possible by new understandings of childhood and children's rights that grew out of the students' rights movement. This influential view rejected the idea that children were vulnerable, innocent, and in need of adult protection; instead, it saw young people as capable, entitled to autonomy, and endowed with extensive rights of citizenship. Pregnant girls used these newly articulated rights to secure their place back in the classroom, reversing a twenty-five-year policy of exclusion. I follow the stages of this transition, starting with experimental school-based programs, through successful legal cases invoking the Fourteenth Amendment, to the passage of Title IX, which enshrined the educational rights of married and pregnant teenagers in national law. This transition not only brought pregnant girls back into schools, but it also brought them back into a newly expansive concept of childhood itself, granting them access to many of the rights, protections and social benefits that came with that status.

The fifth and final chapter explores the significant changes in popular perceptions of pregnant teenagers and the relationship between young mothers and the state in the 1970s and 1980s. During these years, teenage pregnancy transformed from a *private* issue that was dealt with by families, husbands, and communities, into a *public* issue that was largely overseen by the federal government and national policy. This important transition was fueled by new teenage behaviors that brought their sexuality into plain view. As teenage girls largely abandoned marriage and adoption for abortion and unwed motherhood, lawmakers leapt into action. This chapter examines federal debates and public policy pertaining to teenage pregnancy, from the first congressional debates in 1975 to welfare reforms in the late 1980s. I focus in particular on the *age* assumptions embedded in these policies. The first federal laws envisioned teenage mothers as potential adults in need of support in order to attain independence. They were soon replaced by policies that viewed teenage mothers as dependent children in need of moral guidance from adults. On the one hand, teenage girls gained unprecedented autonomy over their sexual and reproductive choices, but on the other hand, the government developed an unprecedented interest in influencing and shaping those choices.

When scholars have examined the contested boundary between childhood and adulthood, they have generally accepted adult views of the difference between these age categories. This oversight has led to an inadequate understanding of the multiple meanings of childhood, adulthood and adolescence that existed at any point in American history. My work, instead, demonstrates that young people created their own definition of adolescence, and changed that definition over time to meet their evolving needs. When teenagers were eager to assert their maturity, gain autonomy and enter adulthood, they used marriage as a tool to accomplish these ends. With the expansion of children's rights, however, teenagers could exercise more autonomy over their lives without "leaving"

childhood. In response, they eschewed marriage, stayed in school, and slowed their transition into adulthood. This investigation of the sexual transgressions of teenagers reveals much more than a history of uncontrolled hormones or rebellious youth; it illuminates a fundamental shift in the way Americans determined who is an adult and who is a child, and the ways in which young people manipulated those boundaries to meet their own needs.

Finally, this dissertation seeks to bring ideas about adulthood more fully into the study of childhood. My research underscores the fact that childhood is constructed in constant relationship to adulthood. Just as women's history inspired studies on masculinity, and African-American history led to investigations into whiteness, I expect that the history of childhood will open up new and important inquiries into what it has meant to be an adult.

“I’m Going Steady With a Dream”: Steady Dating, Autonomy and Postwar Youth Culture

*I'm going steady with a dream.
The boy who's the hero of the team.
The other girls all tease me
They're jealous cause they know
The school's Prince Charming is my beau.*

*He gave his pin to me
Then tenderly taught me what it is to kiss
And when he parks his car beneath our star
We wish we'll always love like this.*

*I'll be a lucky girl indeed
The girl most likely to succeed,
The day when I will marry the dream that I adore,
The boy that I've been getting ready for
And we'll be going steady evermore.*

– “Going Steady,” Molly Bee, 1958

In February of 1957, St. Anthony’s High School in Bristol, Connecticut made national headlines when it expelled four students. While high school expulsions were common, the particular nature of the students’ offense was quite unusual. The two male and two female students were forced to leave school because they were going steady. Like many other Catholic high schools in the 1950s, St. Anthony’s had a “no steady dating” policy on the books since it opened in 1949, but few schools enforced the regulation. During the first half of the school year, administrators at St. Anthony’s had tried to convince the offending students to “adjust themselves.” They issued warnings against going steady at school assemblies, in sermons, and at parent-teacher meetings. Still, the students refused to see other people and soon found themselves expelled from school. St. Anthony’s principal explained, “We want the students’ minds on their school work and not on their boy or girl friends.... We want to make clear that company keeping is a preparation for marriage and that none of the students in this school has as yet reached that stage.”

In the following month, other Catholic groups joined St. Anthony’s campaign against steady dating. The National Catholic Family Life Convention declared that going steady was a “pagan” practice and “will have to be stopped if the concept of Christian marriage is to be saved.” The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Cincinnati directed clergymen to use “all prudent means at your disposal to effect a cure of this evil.” The Catholic Church was not the first group to oppose going steady; in fact, they were

relatively late to the game. However, they distinguished themselves through their fervor of their rhetoric as they sought to reform the courtship patterns of adolescents.¹

Adults had vociferously opposed steady dating ever since it emerged as a popular practice in the 1940s. Prior to World War II, young people had engaged in so-called “promiscuous dating,” casually going out with many partners before settling down in their late teens or early twenties. But soon after the war, teenagers embraced “going steady” – namely, dating a single partner in long-term, emotionally intense, exclusive pairings. One might expect that adults, who were themselves in the midst of the marriage and baby boom, would be happy that their children had embraced monogamy and commitment. But, in fact, quite the opposite happened. Parents, journalists, sociologists, and religious leaders decried the practice as a pernicious influence on the nation’s youth. They counseled adolescents to avoid steady dating at all costs, fearing it would ruin their chance for a happy adulthood. Young people, on the other hand, largely embraced steady dating, claiming that it was not only harmless, but provided good training for their future relationships. Why exactly was going steady so controversial, and why did these seemingly *conservative* behaviors cause such uproar?

The debates over going steady were part of a larger dispute over age categories and age-appropriate behavior in the years after World War II. The emergence of teenage culture in the 1930s and 1940s unsettled the boundary between childhood and adulthood as Americans struggled to decide whether teenagers were more like children or adults. While adolescents argued that they were mature, responsible and entitled to date as they pleased, most adults disagreed, warning that there were dangerous psychological consequences to acting too old, too soon.

Opponents of steady dating believed that it put life events in the wrong order, forcing young people to commit to one person during a developmental stage better suited to exploring multiple options. Heavily influenced by popular psychology, these adults argued that early serious relationships would prevent young people from successfully fulfilling their “human potential.” Steady daters, they explained, would miss the opportunity to meet different kinds of people. Their own identities would be insufficiently developed, which would prevent them from choosing the right person to marry. Further, they feared that “steadies” would likely be lured into premature sexual behavior, compounding the threats to their future marital happiness. The idea that an individual’s capacity for love, relationships and personal responsibility was directly correlated to their developmental stage – what I refer to as “developmental logic” – permeated popular thought in the 1940s and 1950s.²

Young people, on the other hand, largely prescribed to a different understanding of age categorization, which informed their defense of going steady. They rejected the

¹ “Dating Without Marriage Plan Pagan, Priest Says,” *Washington Post*, March 20, 1957, A3; “Steady Dating Denounced,” *New York Times*, March 20, 1957, 27.

² In a similar analysis, Stephen Lasonde refers to the rise of a “developmental paradigm” in the twentieth century. He explains that this paradigm was “a way of comprehending and forecasting the ordinary course of children’s physiological, cognitive, moral and psychological growth” made popular by psychologists, psychiatrists and pediatricians, and adopted by eager middle-class parents interested in the latest parenting techniques. By the developmental paradigm, he is referring to a general organization of society along age-graded lines. When I refer to “developmental logic,” I mean the more specific notion that an individual’s psychological, emotional and mental capabilities can best be predicted by their age. Lasonde, Fass, and Grossberg, “Ten Is the New Fourteen: Age Compression And ‘Real’ Childhood.”

notion that they were psychologically unformed and incapable of having meaningful relationships. Young people insisted that they were emotionally mature, autonomous, and capable of making independent decisions. Through the practice of going steady, teenagers appropriated aspects of adult culture, insisting that they were ready to have serious relationships, all the while adapting the adult model to fit their teenage needs.

Questions about courtship echoed throughout American society in public forums such as newspapers, magazines, and advice columns; in academic literature from sociologists, psychologists and educators; and on the private pages of diaries. The views of white, middle-class, professional adults are the best preserved, and though they did not speak for all Americans, they set the tone for the national debate. They shaped school curricula, offered advice to large readerships, and set psychological norms that parents and professionals referenced. Despite the limitations of the source base, the public debates over going steady were an important first battle in the war over defining age-appropriate sexual behavior for adolescents that raged in the mid-twentieth century.

Age, Gender and Sexuality in Postwar America

Steady dating emerged during a time of significant change in gender norms and sexual behavior brought about by World War II. During the war, women left their homes and served the nation in the expanding wartime workforce. Their strong performance in shipyards and factories expanded ideas about the kinds of work women could handle. The military also “enlisted” women’s sexuality to motivate G.I.s in the form of pin-ups or devoted girlfriends and wives who represented everything the boys were fighting for. At the same time that the nation celebrated women’s contributions to the war effort, authorities also worried that wartime disruptions might tempt women to abandon their sexual morals. The military launched campaigns warning soldiers against prostitutes who might spread venereal disease; police officers arrested young girls for sexual crimes; journalists wrote sensational stories about young “victory girls” or “khaki-wackies,” girls were so enamored of G.I.s that they were lured into casual sex.³ These dislocations made it easier for young people to create new courtship patterns and also caused cultural critics to be suspicious of any unfamiliar sexual patterns, steady dating included.

Historians who have written about courtship have focused their analysis on changes to gender and sexuality, but these factors fail to explain the degree of opposition to steady dating. It is only by adding a critical analysis of *age* to this mix that we can fully appreciate why going steady captured the nation’s imagination in the 1940s through 1960s. Critics did not object to the behaviors implicit in going steady – monogamy, long-term relationships or even a degree of premarital sexual experimentation. They did, however, hold strong and specific views about appropriate *timing* of these events.

Age, much like race, gender and class, is a socially constructed, fluid category of identity. As historian Howard Chudacoff argues, “In the past century or so, age has come to represent more than a chronological, biological phenomenon. It has acquired social meaning, affecting attitudes, behavior, and the ways in which individuals relate to each other.” The shifting paradigms of age shaped individuals’ understandings of their own

³ For information on government attempts to regulate female sexuality during World War II, see Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-wackies, and Patriotutes : the Regulation of Female Sexuality During World War II*.

experiences, and molded societal views of childhood, adulthood, and most importantly for this study, adolescence.⁴

The meanings attached to adolescence changed dramatically over the twentieth century, particularly in the years surrounding the Second World War. Until the turn of the twentieth century, Americans did not think of the years surrounding puberty as being particularly distinctive, in part because people in their teenage years did not share common institutions, cultures or spaces. Separate adolescent institutions did not proliferate until the 1930s, but *ideas* about adolescence began to change with the 1904 publication of psychologist G. Stanley Hall's 1,400-page book, *Adolescence*. Hall was the first psychologist to portray adolescence as a critical and distinct developmental stage, and his theories were enormously influential in defining the concept of adolescence. He understood adolescence as characterized by "storm and stress," when young people experienced a tumultuous and radical break from childhood. In the first half of the twentieth century, adolescence was deeply associated with a psychological, developmental subject.

Hall's understanding of childhood was based on recapitulation theory, which posited that every individual moved through developmental stages that mirrored the development of the human race, from savagery and dependence to civilization and autonomy. Adolescence, Hall argued, corresponded to ancient and medieval civilizations. It was a critical moment during which individuals succeeded or failed to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for full evolution.⁵ While later psychologists abandoned Hall's recapitulation theory within a few decades, the notion of age-graded psychology profoundly influenced his successors.

Over the next fifty years, psychologists proposed revised models of individual development. Viennese psychologist, Charlotte Buhler expanded on Hall's idea of life stages in the 1930s. She split the life cycle into ten age-bounded stages that corresponded to specific personality and behavioral patterns. Buhler argued that each stage had "basic tendencies" and specific requirements for "need satisfaction" and self-fulfillment.⁶

Erik Erikson, who emigrated from Europe to the United States in 1938, elaborated on Buhler's ideas of staged personality development in his landmark *Childhood and Society*. This 1950 work helped him become the most influential and important developmental theorist at mid-century. Erikson posited that individuals developed their "human potential" through the successful negotiation of a series of psychosocial tasks. Each of his eight life cycle stages corresponded to a central developmental crisis and psychosocial task. The successful resolution of each crisis was necessary for a healthy adulthood. Conversely, the failure to resolve even a single crisis would stunt the individual's human potential and result in psychological deficits. Adolescence, Erikson argued, was a time of identity exploration, when individuals attempted to integrate themselves into the roles and opportunities offered by society. Young people resolved its

⁴ Chudacoff, *How Old Are You?*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 67. Hall's view of adolescence was also fundamentally *male*. He believed that only adolescent boys could achieve the highest levels of evolution, and portrayed females as inherently inferior. In *Adolescence*, he warned that women's rights, education and suffrage "would not belong to the progressive evolution of mankind." G. Stanley Hall, *Adolescence; Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904), 568.

⁶ Chudacoff, *How Old Are You?*, 160.

central crisis – “Identity vs. Role Diffusion” –by settling on a job path, establishing moral beliefs and deciding what types of relationships to pursue. Failure to do so led to identity confusion and a poor adult sense of self.⁷

Erikson’s ideas on sexuality and relationships fit perfectly into the debates surrounding going steady. In his view, adolescent relationships were primarily an attempt of each partner to understand his or her *own* identity. In adolescence, he argued,

not even ‘falling in love’ is entirely or even primarily, a sexual matter. To a considerable extent adolescent love is an attempt to arrive at a definition of one’s identity by projecting one’s diffused self-image on another and by seeing it thus reflected and gradually clarified.⁸

Erikson claimed that adolescents were too mired in their own identity crisis to share a meaningful relationship with another individual. Their relationships were *self-directed*: they dated in order to better clarify their own identity. According to this logic, it was important to date many people in order to learn about and eventually successfully solidify one’s own identity.

According to Eriksonian psychology, individuals could only experience intimacy after they left adolescence and entered “young adulthood.” During this stage of life, individuals confronted the crisis of “Intimacy vs. Isolation.” This was the appropriate time to choose a partner and the earliest time at which individuals could form mature, intimate bonds. Erikson wrote, “it is only when young people emerge from their identity struggles that their egos can master the sixth stage, that of intimacy.”⁹ His rigid model of love and relationships exerted strong influence on American society during the postwar years. A range of adults, from psychologists to educators to parents, adopted Erikson’s view that adolescents were developmentally incapable of serious relationships and mature emotional attachments.

From Adolescents to Teenagers

Although developmental psychology offered a popular paradigm for understanding adolescents, it was challenged by an alternative concept that grew out of high schools and teenage culture. Driven out of the labor force by the Great Depression, young people flocked into the rapidly expanding public school system. Between 1920 and 1940, high school enrollment soared by fifty percent, from 4.3 million to 6.5 million.¹⁰ On the eve of World War II, 65 percent of teens between 14 and 18 were enrolled in high school, and a majority of seventeen-year-olds held high school diplomas.¹¹ The time teenagers spent in high school encouraged them to identify by their age group, enhancing their separation from the adult world. High school became a

⁷ Ibid., 161.

⁸ Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, 132.

⁹ Ibid., 229.

¹⁰ Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, 1st Perennial (New York: Perennial, 2000), 215.

¹¹ Grace Palladino, *Teenagers: An American History* (New York: BasicBooks, 1996), xvi, 5.

veritable breeding ground for new fashions, music, dances and language, and this unique youth culture quickly caught the eyes of marketers, merchandisers and advertisers.¹²

Building on the budding youth culture that was taking root in high schools, savvy marketers gave teenagers their name, recognized their potential as an untapped market, and spread their cultural fads across the country. The women's fashion industry was the first to tap into the consumer potential of teenagers. Junior sizes appeared in department stores in the 1920s, and separate teenage departments became a common sight by the beginning of the 1940s. The music, cosmetics, and movie industries would soon follow.¹³

The most ubiquitous arm of teenage marketing was *Seventeen Magazine*, which debuted its first issue in 1944. The magazine was the first tailored specifically to teenage girls. Its first printing of 400,000 copies sold out in just six days, and readers flooded the magazine's office with letters of thanks. *Seventeen* played into young women's desire for autonomy, and told its teenage readers that their tastes, ideas and trends mattered. The editor, Helen Valentine, told readers in the first issue, "too many adults underestimate you teenagers...but we expect you to run this world a lot more sensibly than we have."¹⁴ She encouraged them to be confident in their abilities. "Never for a moment think: I'm only a girl in my teens, what can I do? You can do plenty."¹⁵

Basking in the attention of marketers, teenagers began to embrace the notion that they were responsible and independent. Historian Kelly Schrum explains that as high school students "developed a separate peer identity and began to recognize their collective strength, they established themselves as important arbiters of clothing, beauty products, music and movies – consumers with decided opinions and preferences."¹⁶ Teenage culture developed a unique ethos that stressed autonomy, valued the opinions of peers over adults, and stressed independence from the adult world.

Starting in the 1940s, teenager culture offered an alternative to psychological theories of adolescent developmental health. These competing models of youth – the adolescent versus the teenager – and the attitudes, behaviors and assumptions that accompanied them, animated the debates over going steady. Teens in the immediate postwar years were not in rebellion against adult culture. In many ways, they were asking to be seen as *more* adult, *more* mature, and *more* included in the responsibilities of adulthood. As gender roles, sexuality and age categories changed, Americans of all ages fought to articulate their own definitions of youth. This fight came to a head over the issue of going steady.

The History of Courtship

Modern dating first emerged at the turn of the century, when courtship moved out of private family parlors into the public spaces of commercial entertainment. "Going out" originated among working-class urban youth who lacked the private living space required

¹² For a detailed description of early teenage culture, see Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox*.

¹³ For the development of the teenage girls' clothing industry, see *ibid.*, 23–68.

¹⁴ Helen Valentine, "The World Is Yours," *Seventeen*, March 1945; Helen Valentine, "Seventeen Says Hello," *Seventeen*, September 1944.

¹⁵ Helen Valentine, "Your New Year," *Seventeen*, January 1945.

¹⁶ Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox : The Emergence of Teenage Girls' Culture, 1920-1945*, p. 3.

to receive “callers” under the prevailing courtship system. Instead of entertaining potential suitors in their homes, these girls literally went out with boys to dance halls, movie theaters and other public leisure sites. This public version of courtship soon caught on among middle-class youth as well, and by the 1920s, dating became the dominant courtship norm.¹⁷ Sociologists dubbed this system “rating and dating” in 1937 because of its reliance on competition. Historian Beth Bailey explains, “you competed to become popular, and being popular allowed you to compete.”¹⁸ Young people were expected to go on dates with as many people as possible, switch partners for every dance, and generally demonstrate their desirability through the number of people they kept company with. Long-term commitments would come later in engagement and marriage. For the first third of the twentieth century, promiscuous dating was the dominant courtship model, but mid-century changes ultimately ushered in a new system.

By the early 1940s, young people started going steady. This new dating model eschewed promiscuous dating in favor of long, exclusive couplings that fostered more intense emotional and often physical involvement. Instead of changing partners for every date, young people limited their dates to one person and often continued dating exclusively for several months or even years.¹⁹ A 1957 *New York Times* article tried to explain steady dating to its readers: “Going steady varies in emotional intensity from a long-term relationship in which marriage is contemplated by at least one of the partners, to a very casual twosome with partners shifting three or four times a year.”²⁰

What caused the shift from promiscuous, competitive dating to monogamous, long-term relationships? Historians argue that steady dating emerged in response to large-scale cultural and emotional shifts triggered by the onset of war. Steady dating offered security during a time of great disruption. As Bailey explains, “going steady represented a secure niche in a competitive and uncertain world.” The urge for security was intensified by the scarcity of men during and after World War II. The American military suffered over 400,000 casualties during the war, and by the end of the conflict, women outnumbered men on a national level. The popular press stoked fears that wartime losses would eventually become homefront heartache: if the 400,000 American casualties were not bad enough, they would also doom 400,000 young women to perpetual spinsterhood. Fearing that there would not be enough men to go around, some young women preferred to hang onto the man they had, rather than risk ending up

¹⁷ Historians including Kathy Peiss, Beth Bailey, Ellen Rothman, and John Modell have reconstructed the history of American courtship. They have situated dating patterns within changing notions of marriage, gender relations, sexuality, consumption and distinctions between public and private activities; they say significantly less, however, about age categories. But, as I argue, understandings of *age* were critical to understanding courtship in the postwar era. In addition, historians have tended to focus more on the evolution of behavioral norms rather than cultural *resistance* to these changes. This story adds to the historiography by providing a detailed look at the cultural debate over a new form of courtship as well as a highlighting the centrality of age categories to this national discussion. See Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*; Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1984); Modell, *Into One's Own*.

¹⁸ Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*, 30, 26.

¹⁹ Shailer Upton Lawton and Jules Archer, *Sexual Conduct of the Teen-Ager* (New York: Spectrolux Corp.; distributed by Greenberg, 1951), 70.

²⁰ Jane Whitbread, “The Case for Going Steady,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1957.

dateless, and later, husbandless. In other words, going steady offered girls the security of having *somebody*.

Historians also attribute the rise of going steady to the emotional intensification that accompanied World War II. Many couples rushed down the aisle before men went off to war or immediately upon their return. Consequently, the national marriage age plummeted and marriage rates skyrocketed during and after the war. From 1937 to 1951, men's average age of first marriage dropped from 26.7 to 22.6; women's fell from 23.3 to 20.4. Marriage rates, on the other hand, jumped 25 percent in just four years, to an all-time high of 16.4 per 1,000 people in 1946.²¹ Historian Ellen Rothman argues that the emotional intensity that drove adults to marry also compelled young people to change their courtship patterns. "With people rushing into marriage in response to the threat of separation and perhaps of death during war time, symptoms of the 'war disease' began to appear in even younger people."²² This "trickle down" theory of dating norms, from adult culture to youth culture, is largely persuasive in explaining the shift from playful promiscuous dating to more serious steady relationships. However, these historians underplay the role of teenage culture in the emergence of this new dating pattern.

Young people of the 1940s began to see themselves as part of a national age cohort that shared certain fashions, ideas, morals and goals. In addition to sharing an affinity for bobby sox and the jitterbug, teens also embraced a common ethos of self-determination and autonomy. The war also gave young people a heightened degree of independence. As John Modell points out, the war years brought "lessened supervision of adolescents by their parents entailed by war absences and war work, and the much increased amounts of money available to adolescents."²³ In the absence of adults, and with more spending money in their pockets, young people took on a greater role in determining their behaviors, and moral standards. Young people did not see themselves as working through an identity crisis, but as mature individuals who could handle romantic relationships. In the context of the newly emerging category of the teenager, the mid-century shift in dating patterns can be better understood as not only as a desire for *security*, but as a desire for *autonomy*.

The reaction against going steady can also be seen as a reaction against excessive youth autonomy. Many adults resented the fact that commercial culture seemed to pander to youth's fickle tastes and feared the effect of teenage values on American culture.²⁴ Jules Archer and Shailer Upton, authors of sexual advice literature, observed that "adolescent influence has made itself felt in every sphere of our society – so much so that a great many disgruntled grown-ups feel that the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction."²⁵ Many adults who expressed their opinions in academic and advice literature complained that teens tried to assert too much independence and influence on American society. In order to swing the pendulum back, teenage inventions like going steady would have to be curbed.

Midcentury debates over going steady pivoted around a fundamental disagreement over the definition of youth in American culture. One side asserted that

²¹ Ibid., 41–42.

²² Rothman, *Hands and Hearts*, 299.

²³ Modell, *Into One's Own*, 227.

²⁴ Ibid., 223.

²⁵ Lawton and Archer, *Sexual Conduct of the Teen-Ager*, 3–4.

teenagers were mature, independent, self-directed teenagers, while the other insisted that they were precocious youngsters in psychosocial crisis, playing with emotions and relationships they could not yet understand. The question of youth's place in American culture would only become more pressing in the following decades; but in the postwar years, the discourse about going steady became a way for Americans, young and old, to articulate their ideas about teenagers' sexuality, maturity levels and gender roles.

“They Act Like Married People!”: Teenagers and Monogamy

What precisely was going steady, and why did it fuel, in the words of a 1957 journalist, “hysterical palpitations that have been passing for serious ‘discussion’ about going steady?”²⁶

Going steady was a codified system that took many of the qualities of marriage and downsized them to fit teenage customs. The most important aspect of steady dating was monogamy. “Steadies” only dated each other and were expected to forsake other dates and flirtations. Going steady often implied a long-term commitment and a degree of emotional closeness, but these varied widely from relationship to relationship. Most adolescents expected that they would go steady several times before settling down. Still, steady relationships had a level of intensity unmatched by promiscuous dating. As several teenagers told journalist Maureen Daly in 1951, going steady meant “no dates with anyone else.’ ... ‘It’s a partnership – a mutual agreement to go together exclusively. Sort of giving your time to each other;’ ‘It means you like each other but aren’t necessarily engaged – that can come later if you’re still in the mood.’”²⁷

Steady dating shared many qualities with conventional adult marriages. Steady relationships typically began with the boy giving the girl a gift, typically a class ring or pin; sometimes the partners exchanged friendship rings that they wore on the third finger of their left hand. When steadies broke up, they often referred to themselves as “divorcees.” As John Modell explains, “going steady was no trial marriage, but it was a trial on relatively familiar ground of some of the sentiments and qualities one sought in marriage.”²⁸

While not all teens supported going steady, it rapidly became a common and normative practice among high school students. A large number of high school students participated in steady dating. A poll conducted at a Connecticut high school in the late 1950s reported that fifty-five percent of high school freshman had or were currently going steady, and that figure rose to seventy-five percent by senior year.²⁹ Still, a surprisingly large number of young people were ambivalent about the practice. When the 1948 Purdue Opinion Poll for Young People asked 10,000 high school students whether they believed in going steady, forty-two percent said yes, thirty-five percent said no, and a full twenty-three percent were undecided.³⁰

²⁶ Whitbread, “The Case for Going Steady,” 166.

²⁷ Maureen Daly, *Profile of Youth*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1951), 28–9.

²⁸ Modell, *Into One’s Own*, 239.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 240.

³⁰ Paul Henry Landis, *Coming of Age: Problems of Teen-agers*, 1st ed. (New York: Public Affairs Committee, 1956), 23.

Support for steady dating was closely correlated to age. A 1955 Gallup poll posed the following question to adults over the age of twenty-one: “Do you think boys and girls in high school should be allowed to ‘go steady’ or should they date different boys and girls?” Sixty-nine percent of respondents said that high school students should date different people, while only 17% favored going steady. However, the answers split along age boundaries. Nearly a third of respondents in their twenties supported going steady whereas support fell to fifteen percent among people between the ages of thirty and forty-nine. Similarly, three-fourths of the older cohort opposed steady dating, whereas less than two-thirds of those in their twenties rejected the practice.³¹

Adults, including psychologists, journalists and concerned parents, banded together in their opposition to steady dating. Their primary complaint was its similarity to marriage, which at the time was the defining institution of adulthood in the postwar years. Steady dating seemed like an inappropriate encroachment to many critics. Two mothers interrupted a *New York Times* journalist who was interviewing a fifteen-year-old girl about going steady. “I think it’s the most ridiculous – they act like married people!” *Ladies’ Home Journal* columnist Maureen Daly worried that going steady was so similar to matrimony that young people’s eventual marriages would already be tarnished. “According to psychologists, unless a couple plans to marry, going steady can have a permanent emotional effect that makes later marriage anticlimactic, since it is ‘make-believe’ – based on a concept of romantic love even when that love does not exist. Many teenagers decide *first* to go steady and *then* play at being in love.”³² Daly feared that the young people ruin their chances at a successful marriage because they would not understand real love. Furthermore, she cautioned that teenagers were too immature to be in committed relationships. They were “playing at being grown up, like wearing your mother’s clothes. It’s more a matter of words than of feeling, and has no deep significance.”³³

Advice books also echoed this sentiment. *Better Ways of Growing Up*, a 1948 advice book tried to dissuade teenagers from going steady. “Looking forward to marriage when you are in your teens is somewhat like taking a vantage point halfway or two-thirds way up a high hill. ... As you make the journey the rest of the way you find it is longer than you had thought and that there are many more things to see and learn than you ever imagined from your halfway station.”³⁴

Teenagers, however, readily acknowledged the differences between going steady and marriage, and they altered the adult relationship model to fit their own needs and interests. Most importantly, steady relationships were not permanent. Teens moved freely in and out of steady relationships, and back and forth between casual and steady dating. Ronnie Baker, a popular boy from an Iowa farming town, recounted to journalist Maureen Daly that he had gone steady with a girl for two years. After she moved away, he resumed casually dating other girls about three times a month. Joanne Holt, an eighteen-year-old from North Carolina, was going steady for the seventh time when she

³¹ George Gallup, “‘Going Steady’ Voted Down,” *Washington Post*, April 17, 1955.

³² Daly, *Profile of Youth*, 33.

³³ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁴ John Edmund Crawford and Luther Ellis Woodward, *Better Ways of Growing up; Psychology and Mental Hygiene for Youth* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), 216.

talked to *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1951.³⁵ Some experts warned that teenagers would have emotional breakdowns if they broke up with their steady, offering sensational stories of violent or suicidal episodes, but the vast majority of teenagers weathered the end of steady relationships without significant emotional problems. Most teenagers expected their steady relationships to be practice for the “real thing” later in life. A 1950 survey of an Eastern suburban high school reported that eighty percent of the class were going steady or had gone steady in the past. But they were quite realistic about the chances of these relationships turning into marriage. Out of the 565 high school seniors *currently* in a steady relationship, only eleven said they expected to marry their “steady.”³⁶

Teenagers shaped steady dating so that it was relevant to the competitive and performative nature of high school social life. Going steady allowed teenagers to participate more fully in teenage trends and social events and alleviated some of the stresses of high school social life. Steady couples often displayed their status with playful visual markers. They often wore matching clothing, including identical plaid shirts, reindeer sweaters, corduroy jackets and Argyle socks. Other couples bleached matching blond streaks into their hair. Many high school newspapers published lists of steady couples, congratulating them on their pairing.³⁷ Going steady gave high school students social prestige, and visibility. Rather than placing them in the adult world, it allowed them to succeed in teenage life.

High school culture largely centered around social events that required a date. From ever-important high school dances to weekend excursions to the movies, teenagers were expected to pair up or stay home. Having a “steady” lessened the anxiety of high school life. As one teenager commented in *Ladies' Home Journal*, “only the most popular girls can get along without [going steady]” because they had little trouble finding dates. A girl who wrote to a newspaper advice column in 1949 explained this phenomenon: “I like to be in on everything that happens around school, and I know that most of the social fun necessitates having a date, and the girls who go steady really are the only ones who are sure of their men.”³⁸

Some experts believed that going steady caused teenagers to retreat from normal social interactions. In his classic 1949 work, *Elmtown's Youth*, sociologist August Hollingshead noted that steady daters tended to lose contact with their peers.

They separate themselves from their fellow students, lose interest in normal clique activity, the school and the opposite sex except the boy or girl friend. For all practical purposes, they are lost to the adolescent world with its quixotic enthusiasms and varied group activities.³⁹

While this may have been true in some cases, the majority of steady daters seem to have maintained an active social life and strong friendships. While going steady may have

³⁵ Daly, *Profile of Youth*, 216.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 29–30.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 27; “Date Insurance Is Girl’s Object in Going Steady,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 26, 1949, A4.

³⁹ August de Belmont Hollingshead, *Elmtown's Youth and Elmtown Revisited* (New York: Wiley, 1975), 175.

isolated some teenagers, it allowed others to participate in mainstream high school social life. Young people adapted an adult convention to their own social realities, coming up with a less binding, more casual alternative system of their own making. While it was by no means a universal practice among young people, going steady was a mainstay of high school and teenage culture by the 1940s.

Steady Date or Circulate?: Sociability and Development in the Going Steady Debates

In the 1951 instructional film, “Going Steady?” produced in collaboration with sociologist Justin Landis, followed the story of two teenagers, Jeff and Marie, as they contemplate going steady. The film, which was intended as educational material for high school students, shows Marie and her friend Diana talking about dating as they do one another’s hair. Marie asks, “Why go steady at all? Why not circulate a little?” Diane explains that she and her boyfriend can “depend on each other. I never have to worry whether I’ll have a date. It’s so good to know that you belong to somebody.” Marie looks unconvinced and stares into a mirror as we hear her inner dialogue: “Do I have to decide? Can’t I just wait and see what happens?”⁴⁰

The question of whether to “steady date or circulate” was hotly debated between teens and adults. The “date security” that made going steady appealing to some teens made it equally unappealing to most adults. The most frequently cited objection to going steady was that it prevented teenagers from dating a wide range of people, which would allow them to make an informed choice when it came time to pick a marriage partner. If they settled down with one person in a steady relationship too soon, how would they ever learn about which types of people they liked best? Only by circulating through dates could they learn about themselves, become healthy adults and pick an appropriate spouse. On the other side of the debate, adolescents and a few supportive adults saw teenagers as independent, capable of love, and able to make decisions about who to spend their time with. They believed that spending time in a serious relationship was the best preparation for marriage. Instead of valuing a high quantity of dates, they sought high quality relationships, which would prepare them for the real challenges of marriage.

Sociologist Paul Landis, who wrote prolifically about teenage sexuality in the mid-twentieth century, posed the question of whether young people should “steady date or circulate?” He argued that “through dating, the young person comes to see that there are a number of people with whom he or she could be happy in marriage and that there are others with whom he or she could not possibly get along.”⁴¹ One concerned mother

⁴⁰ *Going Steady* (Coronet Instructional Films, 1951) <http://archive.org/details/GoingSte1951>.

⁴¹ Paul Henry Landis, *Your Dating Days; Looking Forward to Happy Marriage* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1954), 11. Social scientists were among the most influential opponents of steady dating. The numbers of psychiatrists, psychologists, sociologists, and scientists expanded rapidly after World War II and exerted extraordinarily influence on society and individuals’ lives from the 1940s through the 1960s. Historian Elaine Tyler May argues that the uncertainties of postwar American life and the weakening of traditional neighborhood and kinship networks led Americans to embrace scientific, expert advice. “The wisdom of earlier generations would be of little help to postwar Americans who were looking towards a radically new version of family life and trying self-consciously to avoid the paths of their parents.” Psychologist Joseph Veroff explained that “experts took over the role of psychic healer, but they also assumed a much broader and more important role in directing the behavior, goals, and ideals of normal

who wrote to a Chicago advice column explained her opposition to going steady: “I believe girls of sixteen should not limit themselves to any one boy, but should go out with all the boys and have a good time.”⁴² A 1952 *Washington Post* article, “Steady-Dating Offers Danger,” dramatized what could happen when teenagers limited themselves too soon. The article told the cautionary story of Ruth Fields, a nineteen-year-old divorcee, who got married at seventeen to Phil, the only boy she had ever dated. After she left school to get a job, she started meeting all kinds of people. “She began comparing Phil to them, found herself restless and dissatisfied. Finally she decided she needed an entirely different type of man to make her happy and asked her husband for a divorce.” The writer blames her marital problems on her lack of dating experience. “How could she be sure that he was the right man for her when she had never tested her responses to any other? By confining herself to one beau during her growing-up period, she arrested the development of her personality, which develops only through interplay with a wide variety of people.”⁴³ Like Ruth Fields, the article’s author concluded that teenagers who dated steadily were “limiting the knowledge they will need to make a wise marital choice.”

Popular advice columnist Sheila Daly made a similar, but more affable argument in 1951. In response to a girl’s question of whether or not she should agree to go steady with the first boy she had dated, Daly suggests that she keep dating him, as well as other boys. “Ideally, going steady should mean that you’ve shopped around among the tall, dark and available, and decided that one particular fellow is the boy you’d like to spend the rest of your date time with.” Girls who were new to dating, like the advice-seeker, hadn’t “had a chance to discover what kind of boys really appeal to you” and Daly advised them to “date a few of them before settling down to a coosome twosome arrangement.”⁴⁴ Daly had taken over the syndicated advice column, “On the Solid Side,” in 1945, when she was just seventeen.⁴⁵ Her tone was friendlier and more youthful than that of many columnists, but her advice was the same as more traditional voices: going steady harmed young people’s ability to choose an appropriate mate later in life because it limited their sociability in high school.

Other advice columnists were much more didactic. Mary Hawthorne, who wrote for *The Washington Post* in the thirties and forties, complained that going steady limited teens’ ability to *compare* different dates. She wrote that steady daters were “too young to marry, too immature to understand the emotions with which you are playing, too lacking in social experience to have any standards of comparison by which to judge your essential incompatibility, each of you is stifling his own personality and wasting time that could be much better spent.”⁴⁶

people. They became the teachers and norm setters who would tell people how to approach and live life.” May, *Homeward Bound American Families in the Cold War Era*, 20; Joseph Veroff, *The Inner American: a Self-Portrait from 1957 to 1976* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 194.

⁴² Maureen Daly, “‘Going Steady’ in High School: What About It?,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 10, 1944, 19.

⁴³ Lee Graham, “Steady-Dating Offers Danger,” *Washington Post*, September 29, 1952, 17.

⁴⁴ Sheila Daly, “Girl Must See Many Boys to Decide on One,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 18, 1951, B3.

⁴⁵ “On the Solid Side,” *Time*, October 10, 1949.

⁴⁶ “Mary Hawthorne’s Mail,” *The Washington Post*, February 28, 1938, X11.

Furthermore, experts warned that young people were not developmentally prepared to deal with the end of a steady relationship. A journalistic book on teenage life reported extreme and sensationalistic cases of emotional distress after breakups. One girl fainted when her steady broke up with her; another took twenty-four aspirin in a suicide attempt when she found out her steady went out with another girl; a boy threw bricks at his ex-girlfriend's house when he saw her out with another boy.⁴⁷ Experts used rare cases like these to argue that teenagers did not yet possess the emotional stability to deal with relationship problems without resorting to antisocial behavior.

None of these cultural critics opposed serious, monogamous relationships as a concept; in fact, they advocated for promiscuous dating during adolescence precisely so that young people could have successful engagements and marriages later in life. To many teenagers and a few adults, however, this prohibition against serious relationships seemed unrealistic, belittling, and contrary to the goal of ending up in a successful marriage. The minority of adults who supported steady dating believed that teenagers could have emotionally mature relationships and argued that steady relationships would train young people for marriage *better* than circulating.

According to a handful of advice columnists and journalists, going steady allowed young people to get to know someone of the opposite sex in a much more involved, emotional way. Steadies spent more time together, so they saw each other during exciting, fun times, as well as mundane, boring moments. They got the chance to learn about their partner in a more comprehensive manner that probed beneath the regulated behavior on dates. A 1948 advice book by psychologists John Crawford and Luthar Woodward argued that going steady would provide a more useful means for choosing a marriage partner precisely because it did resemble matrimony. They encouraged parents to let their children spend enough time with their steadies so they could decide whether they were truly compatible, not only when they were dressed up but “clad for work too, not only on dates, but at home where you can see the degree of consideration shown to other members of the family.”⁴⁸ The authors did not go so far as to fully endorse going steady, but they acknowledged that a steady relationship could allow young people to better assess their compatibility.

A 1957 *New York Times* article by author and mother Jane Whitbread titled “The Case for Going Steady” was more enthusiastic. She explained, “with all this proximity in fair weather and foul, kids get a pretty full exposure to each other’s attitudes, strengths, weaknesses, wearing qualities, breaking points.” Whitbread continued, “the steady relationships gives a boy a chance to see a girl in pin curls. It gives them both a chance to see each other through bad times with their families, when their hearts show wounds. There is time to comfort, encourage, listen, help, be helped, quarrel, make up, or decide there’s nothing to repair.” Furthermore, steady daters still got to know different people, she argued, through the normal social outlets of teenage social lives, like school, group dates and parties. In many ways, going steady seemed to offer teenagers of the 1940s and 1950s a glimpse of both the emotional closeness and the banality of mature relationships.

Embedded in the debate over going steady was a parallel discussion over the nature of teenage love. Most sociologists and psychologists discounted teenage emotional relationships, labeling them as “puppy love.” In a society that fetishized

⁴⁷ Daly, *Profile of Youth*, 29.

⁴⁸ Crawford and Woodward, *Better Ways of Growing up; Psychology and Mental Hygiene for Youth*, 226.

romantic love, the stakes of this debate were high. If experts could convince teenagers that they were not mature enough to feel real love, they were certain to see that they were not mature enough to be in exclusive, steady relationships.

A 1950 instructional film, “How Do You Know It’s Love?” directly addressed this question of love and maturity. The film, created in collaboration with sociologist Reuben Hill, followed a young steady couple as they tried to decide if they were in love. The girl asked her mother how you know you’re in love. The mother explained that people progress through successive stages of love as they grow older. Eventually, after growing out of possessive love, love for friends, crushes and puppy love, an individual arrived at “mature love.” “Mature love,” the mother explained, “is more settled... it’s tender, unselfish, cooperative.” This was the type of love married people have for one another, and, as the film suggests, this was the kind of love required for a serious, steady relationship. In order to check whether one had mature love, the mother suggested asking yourself the following questions: “Are we really interested in the same things? Do we feel at ease together? Are we proud of each other? Do we agree on the basic things, such as religion, marriage, children, money?” The young steadies in the film each realized that they were not fully at ease with each other, had different interests and had never discussed the “adult” concerns of religion, marriage, children, and money. At the end of the film, the teenage couple decided that they were “not ready for that attachment, but we can still have a lot of fun!” They settled on a roller skating date for the next weekend.⁴⁹ This film, which was shown in public high schools, painted “mature love” in adult terms. While it did not say teenagers could *never* be in love, it encouraged high school students to question their emotional maturity. Indeed, some young people agreed with the sentiment. In the words of a student enrolled in a high school marriage course, “it looks like as though if you got married on puppy love, you’d be apt to lead a dog’s life.”⁵⁰

Seventeen Magazine offered a less age-bracketed definition of love. A 1946 article, “This Strange Thing Called Love,” explained that love was simply an extreme version of liking, unconnected to any adult criteria. “Love is nothing more than a concentrated form of like, and the only difference between liking and loving is in degree. ... Loving is exactly the same as liking in its *quality*. Love is more concentrated. That’s all.”⁵¹ Unlike the film, “How Do You Know It’s Love?” this article did not tie the concept of love to adult concerns, like marriage and money. Love, defined as an intense form of liking, was something that young people could easily imagine experiencing. Young people growing up in the 1940s and 1950s were presented with multiple, incongruous definitions of love. Each boy and girl had personal and unique dating experiences, but the discourse around love and age shaped the ways in which they made sense of their feelings.

Detailed personal recollections of steady relationships are difficult to find, but they are particularly revealing about the ways in which teenagers experienced love and understood their relationships in the context of the debates over age and love. Sixteen-year-old Georgie K., a high school student in Queens, New York, kept a diary from

⁴⁹ *How Do You Know It’s Love?* (Coronet Instructional Films, 1950)
<http://archive.org/details/HowDoYou1950>.

⁵⁰ Ralph Eckert, *So You Think It’s Love! Dating, Necking, Petting, Going Steady*, 1st ed. (New York: Public Affairs Committee, 1950), 4.

⁵¹ Robert Doty, “Experts Told to Prepare Teen-Agers for Marriage,” *New York Times*, July 7, 1965, 146.

March through September of 1946. She described her relationship with her steady boyfriend, George, in rich detail. The first thing that stands out in her writing is the intensity of her feelings for him. She ended nearly every diary entry with the words, “I love him so very much.” She wrote in a romantic style, and her entries are almost entirely devoted to her activities with George and her feelings toward him. One excerpt from July illustrates both her style and the serious nature of their relationship to her.

I shall never be anything without him. I couldn't accomplish the merest feat without the knowledge that his love, unfailing is with me incessantly. This doesn't sound much like me. It sounds like someone much older but mentally I've grown more than I or anyone realizes. I try to prolong every minute with George for just to have him near me make me inexpressibly happy. I love him so very much.⁵²

She not only noted that she felt much older than her sixteen years, but that she had grown up more than “anyone realizes,” suggesting that outsiders could not appreciate her newfound maturity. Georgie understood that the intensity of her feelings for George did not fit into cultural notions about age and love, and she reconciled this tension by explaining that she saw herself as emotionally older than her sixteen years.

She also wrote about the difference between steady dating and circulating in the context of her close emotional relationship. Having a deep emotional connection to George, dating other boys made little sense to her. “I remember the fun I used to have drifting from one boy to another and now it doesn't appeal to me in the least. The only thing that can satisfy me and make me happy is being with George – always.” To Georgie, her emotional commitment to George made the thought of promiscuous dating entirely unappealing. She was aware of the societal disapproval toward steady dating, but justified her behavior by the emotional her closeness to George. The written record of Georgie's love affair suggest that teenagers understood their experiences in the context of contemporary debates; they did not always cede to expert wisdom, or change their behavior, but they worked to reconcile their decisions with a larger, disapproving adult public.

While the debate over going steady still swirled in public, some adults and teenagers proposed an alternative dating pattern that combined going steady and circulating. Some of these ideas came from adults who realized they were fighting a losing battle against going steady, and instead, tried to modify the practice so it was less permanent. The educational film, “Going Steady?” suggested this type of solution. The film follows a boy and girl trying to decide whether or not to go steady. At the end, the boy comes to a decision, which we hear through his inner monologue as he grooms himself in the mirror: “Go steady for a while with several different girls. Enjoy it. Learn about yourself and about different kinds of girls. But don't expect too much. Don't make any commitments. That makes sense.” The film espouses a semi-steady arrangement that still allows young people to go out with others.⁵³

Other advice books suggested “the test of separation,” or a “variation” on going steady in which steady couples take periodic breaks in order to decide whether the

⁵² Georgie K., “Diary 1946” (Alexandria Street Press, July 4, 1946), July 4, 1946.

⁵³ *Going Steady*.

relationship is what they really want.⁵⁴ Some adolescents felt that going steady was too committed for their liking, or limited their social lives, and they suggested alternative dating models that would alleviate some of these pressures. Seventeen-year-old Barbara Case proposed at a 1951 *Los Angeles Times* Youth Forum that high school students “go steadily.” Barbara explained, “I think ‘going steadily’ is a better idea – just dating some person more than others so that you get to know him pretty well and make it sort of a test of affections. But you still ought to be free to date others and get to know them and mix well.”⁵⁵ These compromises certainly worked for some individuals, but they never fully silenced adult disapproval of going steady, or fully solved teenagers’ anxieties. They nonetheless offered alternatives to the formerly dominant dating model of circulating, and the newly popular model of going steady.

The “Cult of Physical Pleasure”: Going Steady and Sex

While cultural critics talked most frequently and openly about steady dating’s affect on sociability, the most impassioned opinions arose over the issue of sex. To Americans living in the postwar era, sex seemed to be everywhere: in advertisements, movies, magazines and newspapers. As one marriage expert wrote in 1950, “after centuries of suppressing the physical aspects of attraction between the sexes, we have in the last quarter century gone to the opposite extreme and are now overemphasizing it.”⁵⁶ While sexuality was increasingly discussed in the media and public life, mainstream attitudes on sex were still relatively conservative.⁵⁷

This increasingly sexualized but still conservative culture was jolted by the publication of Alfred Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* in 1948, followed by *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* in 1953. Kinsey’s books challenged public notions of common sexual behavior and launched heated debates about sexuality in the public forum. While Americans were surprised by his reports on married adults’ sexual lives, readers were most startled by his information about *premarital* sexual behavior. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* reported that half of women had sex relations before marriage, with two thirds of them experiencing sexual satisfaction.⁵⁸ Even young people who abstained from intercourse were still more sexually active than many had imagined. Kinsey reported that forty percent of females had “heterosexual petting experience by fifteen years of age” and “between 69 and 95 per cent had had such experiences by eighteen years of age, which is at the end of high school,” he added with dramatic flare.⁵⁹ To an extent, Kinsey’s reports liberalized American views of sexuality, but they also fomented a conservative backlash against permissive sexuality among

⁵⁴ Eckert, *So You Think It’s Love! Dating, Necking, Petting, Going Steady*, 5, 19.

⁵⁵ Mary Ann Callan, “Teen-Age Forum Decries Idea of Early Marriage,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 12, 1951, B1.

⁵⁶ Eckert, *So You Think It’s Love! Dating, Necking, Petting, Going Steady*, 21.

⁵⁷ The rapid sexualization of American society and the more deliberate liberalization of sexual behavior is discussed in D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* See chapters 12-14.

⁵⁸ “Kinsey Releases Report on Women,” *New York Times*, August 21, 1953, 15.

⁵⁹ Alfred C. Kinsey and Institute for Sex Research., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female by the Staff of the Institute for Sex Research, Indiana University, Alfred C. Kinsey ... et Al. ; with a New Introduction by John Bancroft* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1998), 233.

American youth. Marriage and dating experts took up the question of appropriate teenage sexual behavior with a strong focus on going steady. Teenagers were in a precarious position in the immediate postwar years, confronted with sex everywhere, but told to abstain until they were married. How would going steady affect the sexual behavior of this already tempted demographic? And how would teenagers themselves reconcile conservative sexual conventions with a progressive dating pattern of their own making? Adults imagined the worst – that teenage steady daters would abandon their sexual morals. But just as they borrowed aspects of marriage, teenagers appropriated adult sexual codes and adapted them to the social realities of their peer culture. They created new sexual codes that were more permissive than most adults would have liked, but still were constrained by fears of pregnancy and peer disapproval.

Opponents of going steady claimed that, above all, the practice led teenagers to engage in more permissive sexual behavior than they would in older dating arrangements. Many adults cited excess time spent together as the greatest threat to sexual abstinence. Journalist Maureen Daly reported that the more time teens spent together, the greater their emotional desire for petting. “Since they see each other with greater frequency and for longer hours than most nonsteady couples, ‘heavy necking’ or ‘a big court’ on every date may become more of an emotional necessity.” One of Daly’s interviewees recounted that before she started going steady with her boyfriend, they just kissed goodnight. After going steady, however, they “bat it out for an hour or more every time we go out.”⁶⁰ A 1952 *New York Times* article warned that “by throwing a young couple together too often, it usually leads to a flaring of physical desires, which may result in a forced marriage because of pregnancy.”⁶¹ Popular advice columnist Ann Landers told her readers in 1963, “It is unrealistic to assume that healthy, red-blooded high school kids can be together, day in and day out, month after month - sometimes year after year - and keep their physical urges under perfect control.”⁶² Parents also believed in the connection between going steady and increased sexual behavior. In *Elmtown’s Youth*, sociologist August Hollingshead noted that parents feared that “young people going steady are likely to become ‘too intimate,’” and that “love, steady dates and sex go together.”⁶³

Most critics of adolescent petting focused on its risks to healthy psychological development rather than the threat of premarital pregnancy. They argued that teenagers with early sexual experience would grow into maladjusted, unhappy, unhealthy adults. A 1948 advice book discouraged petting and sexual experiences so that adolescents could avoid making unhealthy lasting associations with sex that would doom their future relationships. Crawford and Woodward’s 1948 *Better Ways of Growing Up* warned teenagers against early sexual experiences:

[They] rarely satisfy either partner in the union, ... disgust[ing] the girl and the boy with each other. Both are likely to feel strongly that sex is an experience coupled with considerable fear, pain and unhappiness. ...

⁶⁰ Daly, *Profile of Youth*, 33.

⁶¹ Graham, “Steady-Dating Offers Danger,” 17.

⁶² Ann Landers, *Ann Landers Talks to Teen-agers About Sex* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 31.

⁶³ Hollingshead, *Elmtown’s Youth and Elmtown Revisited*, 175–6.

Earlier association of these negative reactions and feelings with sex functions accounts for much of the miserably unhappy marriage relationships frequently observed later on in people's lives.⁶⁴

Wielding their psychological training, Crawford and Woodward cautioned teenagers that early, unsatisfying sexual experiences would undermine their sexual happiness for the rest of their lives.

Seventeen explained the developmental dangers of petting in more evocative language. "To the person who nibbles so much at the hors d'oeuvres, he cannot possibly enjoy the main course. His taste is blunted, his appreciation ruined. And as an adult, he will wind up with a succession of shoddy, unsatisfactory affairs, simply because he has never given himself a chance to evaluate himself and his needs."⁶⁵ The author cautioned the readers to remember "that the men who are burnt-out at forty, and the women who are frantically, pathetically afraid of growing old are the ones who crammed their growing-up years with experiences they weren't ready for."⁶⁶ Experts asked teenagers to think about their future, and to prevent lifelong problems by changing their behavior today. As sociologist Paul Landis summed up, "wise choices and careful behavior in the dating years point toward happiness in the years ahead."⁶⁷

If future unhappiness was not enough of a deterrent, marriage and family experts also argued that petting would cause significant emotional distress to teenagers in the present. These cultural authorities stressed that feelings of guilt, shame, and sadness often accompanied petting. *Seventeen* explained that petting led to disappointment. "You feel unbearably let down, and you hope you don't have to see that boy for weeks. That wasn't love, that wasn't fate. That was necking and it was all wrong."⁶⁸ A 1958 educational film created by Paul Landis, *How Much Affection?*, also emphasized the negative emotional consequences of sexual behavior. The film opened with a teenage girl, Laurie, running from her steady boyfriend's car to her door. Once inside, she collapsed against the door in tears. Laurie explained to her concerned mother that she and her boyfriend had gone parking, started petting "until we nearly... well it was so close." She felt guilty, distraught, and upset. Laurie's mother cautioned, "if these strong feelings lead you into behaving unwisely, the outcome can be guilt and frustration."⁶⁹ Even though Laurie did not have sex with her boyfriend, the close encounter still wreaked havoc on her emotional state.

Other educational material went even further, asserting that sexual experimentation could lead directly to emotional breakdowns. Lest teenagers think petting was just harmless fun, a 1950 Public Affairs pamphlet explained that it could lead to uncontrolled sadness. It recounted the story of one girl who came home from a date and "she had sobbed and sobbed before she could get quieted down and she couldn't understand why, because she wasn't unhappy." He explained, "Her crying was a method of releasing tension that resulted from too much petting."⁷⁰ According to Eckert, her

⁶⁴ Crawford and Woodward, *Better Ways of Growing up; Psychology and Mental Hygiene for Youth*, 94–5.

⁶⁵ "Stardust or Indigestion," *Seventeen*, April 1945, 130.

⁶⁶ "Stardust or Indigestion."

⁶⁷ Landis, *Your Dating Days; Looking Foreward to Happy Marriage*, 22.

⁶⁸ "Stardust or Indigestion," 97.

⁶⁹ *How Much Affection?* (Crawley Films, 1957), <http://archive.org/details/HowMuchA1958>.

⁷⁰ Eckert, *So You Think It's Love! Dating, Necking, Petting, Going Steady*, 29–30.

petting incited pent up sexual excitement that could only be released through emotional outburst. In the name of developmental health and emotional happiness, cultural experts spoke out against the temptations of petting, particularly within steady relationships.

Some experts explicitly connected young people's sexual precociousness to the emergence and autonomy of teenage culture. In their 1951 advice book, *Sexual Conduct of the Teen-Ager*, Jules Archer and Shailer Lawton blamed the sexualization of youth on the collective power of the teenage age cohort:

What has happened is that teen-agers, recognizing the strength and bargaining power of numbers, have banded together in many different ways to command public attention and consideration. Thus we have the bobby-soxers, the jitterbugs, the teen-age fan clubs, the sex clubs and the teenage gangs.... Adolescents seem to be primarily concerned with the earnest pursuit of sexual expression.... Can these be our children?⁷¹

The authors later went on to attack steady dating, but they situated their critique within a larger denunciation of teenage culture. Archer and Lawton said what others only hinted at: that inappropriate sexual behavior was inextricably linked to the dangerously empowered world of teenage culture.

The most vociferous and vocal opposition to going steady came from the American Catholic Church, which positioned itself as a worldwide moral authority. Its spokesmen lambasted what they saw as an overly liberal, sexualized American culture. While religious opposition was rare in a public debate dominated by secular voices from the social sciences, it also relied on developmental logic to make its arguments.

In March of 1957, Irving A. DeBlanc, the director of the National Catholic Welfare Conference's Family Life Bureau, addressed eight hundred delegates gathered in Milwaukee for the twenty-fifth National Catholic Family Life Convention. "Going steady," he proclaimed, "is pagan unless there is a reasonable chance of getting married within two years." Young people were being drawn into the "cult of physical pleasure" and ignoring the Christian concept "of uniting love and procreation in marriage."⁷² Reverend John R. Cavanaugh followed up later that day, saying that going steady would harm young people's relationships for the rest of their lives. Going steady, he explained, "is likely to promote at best a brother-sister relationship in marriage. In addition, it may lead to a consummated sin even in their early teens." As he describes it, going steady reversed the "natural" order of sexual life: instead of being chaste before marriage and sexually satisfied after, steady daters would have lustful premarital sex in their youth, but end up in a passionless marriages for their later lives.⁷³

Catholic magazines also joined in the tirade against going steady. Jesuit writer Philip Mooney explained in the monthly magazine, *Today*, that going steady put teenagers in a paradoxical bind. "Teenagers going steady are enkindling mutual love in much the same way as courting couples do. ... But the sacrament of union is not within their reach as the natural term of their desires. The resulting tension [puts] a heavy strain

⁷¹ Lawton and Archer, *Sexual Conduct of the Teen-Ager*, 4-5.

⁷² "Dating Without Marriage Plan Pagan, Priest Says," A3.

⁷³ "Steady Dating Denounced," 27.

on the observance of God's law of chastity."⁷⁴ Mooney does not question the seriousness of teenagers' emotions; he compares steady relationships to a courtship heading for marriage. Instead, he argues that teens in steady relationships will fall in love and want to have sex, but because they are too young to marry, they cannot satisfy their desires in a Christian way. Other magazines were more expansive in their condemnation of going steady. *Information*, a Catholic magazine published by the Paulist Fathers, called going steady "one of the most dangerous crises ever to confront our youth." Author Roma Rudd Turkel blamed the dating practice for a vast range of ills.

In the social order, going steady can do lifelong harm in robbing a child of the widespread contacts and companionships upon which he learns and grows, in stunting his emotional development as surely as it harms his physical and spiritual growth, in paving the way for ill-advised marriages and consequent broken homes. Aside from the breakdown of homes, the church has seen a breakdown of faith among the going steady partners.

More specifically, she argued, "It is impossible (not improbable but impossible) for a boy and a girl to be alone together in an intimate and exclusive companionship for any length of time without serious sin."⁷⁵ Given the clear threat of sexual sin, she concluded that parents must stamp out the practice, "whether we use gentle persuasion, sweet reason, or stern parental command backed by force if necessary."⁷⁶ These authors felt that teenagers were willingly putting themselves in a position that would make resisting sexual sin impossible. In this context, going steady became an imminent threat to purity, morality, and future health, and Catholic leaders took practical steps to eliminate it from the lives of young Christians where it started: high schools.

Catholic authorities brought their fight against steady dating to parochial schools through school regulations. High schools in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York and Pennsylvania all instituted "no steady dating" rules. St. Mary's High School in Lynn, Massachusetts joined their ranks in October of 1956, outlawing going steady on the grounds that it could lead to "serious sin ... and forced marriage." Any couple found in discordance with the rule would be banned from all office in student organizations and "positions of leadership or honor."⁷⁷ Denis Haley, the superintendent of Boston Public Schools, argued that parents supported the ban, and moreover, steady dating "robbed a teen-ager 'of the finer experiences of growing up – the friendship and companionships of as wide a circle of acquaintances of both sexes as possible."⁷⁸

As mentioned above, St. Anthony's High School in Bristol, Connecticut caught the nation's attention for expelling four students, but other schools also threatened steady daters with expulsion. Sacred Heart Academy in Buffalo, New York told fifty female students to stop going steady or face expulsion. These students apparently agreed to obey

⁷⁴ "Religion: Going Steady," *Time*, March 11, 1957.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Joan Beck, "'Going Steady' Becomes a Growing Problem," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 20, 1957.

⁷⁷ "Catholic School Asks 'Steady Daters' to Go," *The Washington Post*, February 10, 1957, A3; "Steady Dating Is Banned by Catholic Schools," *Washington Post*, October 20, 1957, C13.

⁷⁸ "Dating Ban Supported," *New York Times*, October 20, 1956, 21.

the rule because no one was kicked out.⁷⁹ Only in 1960 did the Church back down, when a team of Catholic sociological researchers from St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas published a study concluding that going steady posed no serious social problem.⁸⁰ The Catholic Church had exhibited the most draconian response to going steady and the most extreme fears that it would lead teenagers into sin. While the Catholic backlash against going steady was largely rooted in religious convictions against premarital sex, their rhetoric often echoed the developmental logic so common among secular objectors, demonstrating the widespread influence of development psychology, even within religious institutions.

Amid the clamor of authorities condemning teenage sexual behavior, a handful of adults disagreed, insisting that petting could actually be *beneficial* to teenagers. Alfred Kinsey endorsed premarital petting, dismissing beliefs that "pre-marital petting may make it difficult for the female to be satisfied with coitus in marriage. The statement has never been supported by any accumulation of specific data, and we have not seen more than three or four such cases." His sample of a thousand women who had experienced premarital petting "responded excellently in marriage." Kinsey argued that premarital sexual contact would allow young women to choose better mates when they were ready to marry. "Pre-marital petting experience provides an opportunity for the female to learn to adjust emotionally to various types of males. Thus she may acquire some wisdom in choosing the particular male with whom she hopes to make a permanent, life-long adjustment."⁸¹ He used developmental logic just as his detractors did, but he stressed the emotional benefits that could come from earlier experiences. A 1957 *New York Times* article took a slightly different angle, arguing that sexual experimentation within steady relationships would help young people develop a healthy attitude toward sex and monogamy. Going steady encouraged its participants to "feel sexual attraction developing from growing understanding, appreciation and compatibility with one boy."⁸² This way, they would learn to associate sex and emotional closeness for their adult lives. These proponents of petting relied on developmental reasoning, but unlike Erikson and his followers, they assumed that adolescents *could* form intimate relationships. They praised petting because it would help with marital selection, improve future sexual health and reinforce monogamy.

Despite the widespread cultural panic over teenage sexual behavior, the majority of teenagers seem to have been relatively conservative in their physical relationships. Sociologist Ira Reiss forwarded this thesis in his 1961 article, "Sexual Codes in Teen-Age Culture." Reiss argued that adolescents were actually much more responsible than most adults imagined. Teenagers, he argued, "are not as wild as their parents or they themselves sometimes think. Teen-agers do want independence. But, judging by their sexual codes, they want independence from their parents, not from the total adult culture." He noted that "teen-age sexual codes reflect quite clearly the bold outlines of adult sexual

⁷⁹ "Catholic School Asks 'Steady Daters' to Go," A3.

⁸⁰ "No Problem Seen in 'Going Steady'," *New York Times*, September 1, 1960, 29.

⁸¹ Kinsey and Institute for Sex Research., *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female by the Staff of the Institute for Sex Research, Indiana University, Alfred C. Kinsey ... et Al. ; with a New Introduction by John Bancroft*, 266.

⁸² Whitbread, "The Case for Going Steady."

codes,” namely, disapproval of premarital sex.⁸³ He described the prevailing teenage sexual code as “petting-with-affection,” or “permissiveness-with-affection,” which dictated that heavy petting was acceptable for (and only for) steady couples who were in love, or at least extremely fond of each other. Reiss looked at sexual codes not in terms of the liberties they granted, but in terms of their restraints. Teenage peer culture did not accept premarital coitus, and it did not accept heavy petting outside of affectionate, exclusive relationships. Instead of seeing “petting-with-affection” as a lax sexual code, he saw it as “a modern day subtype of our formal abstinence standard.”⁸⁴ Teenagers were not in direct revolt against adult society; they kept the “bold outlines” of adult sexual codes, and adapted them to a new, teen-centered dating system. In this context, teenagers insisted on their agency to determine their own sexual rules that would still keep them within the realm of “acceptable” behavior.

Teenage sexual codes had drastically different effects on young people’s behavior depending on their gender. Winston Ehrmann conducted an exhaustive empirical study of the sexual behavior of college students in his 1959 work, *Premarital Dating Behavior*. He concluded that whether or not a student was going steady “is profoundly related to variations in heterosexual activity” and “appears to be the most significant [factor] of all those thus far examined in this book.” Ehrmann classified his subjects in three categories: dating a steady, dating a steady and others, and dating only others.⁸⁵ He found that boys and girls in steady relationships had remarkably similar sexual patterns. In Ehrmann’s sample, twenty percent of “steady” boys and nineteen percent of “steady” girls had had sexual intercourse. Despite the congruence of steady daters across gender, boys and girls who were not going steady had practically opposite sexual patterns. Ehrmann found that boys in a steady relationship were significantly *less* sexually active than their non-steady peers; conversely, girls going steady were significantly *more* sexually active than their non-steady peers. Going steady halved the likelihood that a boy would have sex. Forty percent of “non-steady” boys had had sex, as had fifty-six percent of boys who were dating a steady and others (compared to twenty percent of the steady daters). Among girls, the results were reversed. Only nine percent of “non-steady” girls had had intercourse, as had six percent of girls seeing a steady and others (compared to nineteen percent of steady daters). Going steady doubled the likelihood that a girl would have sex. Ehrmann wrote, “The most interesting and significant feature of [this data] is the convergence in the patterns of the males and females who were going steady and the divergence of those who were not going steady.”⁸⁶ As parents suspected, going steady and sexual behavior were correlated, but they tended to miss the fact that it affected boys and girls in an opposite manner. For boys, going steady restrained their sexual experimentation to one girl with whom they ostensibly had an emotional connection. For girls, going steady created a more permissive space in which sexual and emotional expression were welcomed, within limits.

⁸³ Ira Reiss, “Sexual Codes in Teen-Age Culture,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 338 (November 1961): 62, 54.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁸⁵ Ehrmann explained that the “steady and others” category did not always imply that the partners were cheating on their steadies. “Deception does occur, but probably just as frequently, the partners have dates with other persons with the implicit or explicit consent and knowledge of the steady.” Winston W. Ehrmann, *Premarital Dating Behavior*, 1st ed. (New York: Holt, 1959), 132.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 134–5.

Sources on sexual behavior from teenagers themselves are more difficult to find, but they tend to reveal ambivalence about physical relationships. On the one hand, steady daters often felt very close to each other and wanted to express their feelings physically. In addition, steady relationships were appealing in large part because they were one of the few places petting was socially accepted, particularly for girls. On the other hand, acceptable sexual behavior was strictly demarcated by the threat of social disgrace and pregnancy. Going steady influenced the sexual lives of boys and girls, but the vast majority of concern over teenage sexuality, among adults and youth, focused on females. Going steady allowed girls to be more sexually expressive while maintaining the approval of their peer group, as long as they avoided pregnancy.

Sexual behavior among steady daters was shaped by their attempts to stay within the boundaries of respectability. According to the 1951 book, *Profile of Youth* by Maureen Daly, the majority of teenagers said that “they personally prefer to reserve sexual intercourse for after marriage.” They gave varied reasons: “I think that’s the way boys really want it,” “I know both my girl and I would be happier that way” and “If I knew a girl has done it, I feel so funny about her, I just couldn’t date her again.” All of their reasons for abstinence referenced gender relations. Boys sought to “protect” their girlfriends from the shame of a “bad reputation,” and girls tried to avoid sex so they would be desirable. One boy explained that he did not have sex with his steady girlfriend because he “couldn’t think of doing anything to get her in trouble.” Daly suggested that “even among the boys and girls who show at least a verbal tolerance for petting and sexual intercourse for unmarried fellows and girls ‘in love,’ pregnancy itself is still considered a social disgrace and personal disaster. That fear alone... is often enough to keep many couples within conventional bounds.”⁸⁷ Even among teenagers, the discourse surrounding sex focused on the girl’s behavior and reputation. Teenagers may have been more sexually active than adults wanted, but they adopted a similar concern about “protecting” female purity, which caused their peer sexual codes to resemble those of adult culture.

Georgie K’s diary from 1946 offers a fascinating glimpse into the way that teenage steadies experienced and regulated their sexual relationship. Georgie wrote about the end of her night on April 5, 1946:

Looked up at him and kissed me outside. Sat down. *Did something* and then put head on his shoulder and he said *I always did something* and then *do that* and *he always forgives* me that he has no will power he just melts like butter. Kissed me and kissed me hard and long. *** Held me very tight. Got up. Kissed me and kissed me. *** He said "What a case." Kissed my face and neck and held me very tight. He was so sweet and protecting. I love him so very much. I love him for keeps. [emphasis added; asterisks represent passages blacked out by author]⁸⁸

The diary entry describes the evening in extremely opaque language, noting only that she and George “did something.” A historian can only guess whether the blacked out passages were more explicit descriptions of their interaction, or discarded attempts to tell

⁸⁷ Daly, *Profile of Youth*, 153.

⁸⁸ K., “Diary,” April 5, 1946.

her story correctly. Perhaps she did this out of fear that her diary might be found, or perhaps she was not comfortable describing her evening with George. Most interestingly is George's assurance that he "always forgives" Georgie, suggesting the potential of shame that existed alongside physical and emotional enjoyment, as well as the ways in which couples got past this roadblock. Even within the bounds of a loving relationship, and even if they did not have intercourse or get pregnant, girls were seen as being vulnerable to disgrace based on their sexual behavior.

Going steady offered girls the possibility of somewhat more expressive heterosexual relationships, but it also brought with it constraints and social dangers. Specifically, fears of teenage pregnancy exerted a significant influence on the sexual lives of young girls, as well as many boys. Teenage pregnancy came up surprisingly frequently in the oral histories, journalistic accounts, and literature that deal with teenage dating. Unwed pregnant teenagers became an "other" against which girls could reassure themselves that they were "good." Anita Christianson, who grew up in the 1940s in Richmond, California recalled that a girl in the neighborhood got pregnant out of wedlock and became "an example of what you don't do. She was just ostracized, just unmercifully."⁸⁹ Maureen Daly reported that York High, a Pennsylvania school of 1,093 girls, had twenty-three pregnancies reported to the school nurse in one year. Girls who became pregnant were socially banished during the course of their pregnancy, and faced a steep road ahead if they tried to rescue their reputations. A girl from York High School who returned to school after giving birth attempted to win over her peers. She joined as many school activities as possible and "refus[ed] to neck at all". However, she still faced harsh criticism from classmates, including one female student who claimed that "the [pregnant] girls were so weak-kneed, they'd let the boys do anything."⁹⁰

The fear of pregnancy often motivated girls' behavior, in and out of steady relationships. Almina Small, a working-class African American teenager from Washington, D.C., explained to sociologist Edward Frazier in that her sexual standards were dictated by her fear of pregnancy and respect for her mother's rules. "My mother trusts me and lets me go with boys because she thinks I won't do wrong. I don't want to disappoint her. ... So far, none of us sisters have had sex relations. I guess the reason is that mother trusts us. We don't want her to think we don't know how to act." Almina, like many teenagers, articulated her own moral and behavioral standards. She referenced her mother's moral teachings, but the mention of the sisters' collective decision to avoid sex suggest that she also referenced a peer culture of her own making. She explained, "I like my boyfriend because he doesn't ever ask me for anything like that."⁹¹ Her personal sexual code mirrored Reiss' "permissiveness-with-affection:" she saw no "harm in kissing boys," but drew the line at anything that could betray her mother's trust or get her pregnant. Teenage sexual codes were not an outright rejection of adult standards, but an adaptation that served the needs of teenage peer culture.

⁸⁹ Anita Christianson and Mary Highfill, Oral History, 2005, conducted by Nadine Wilmot. Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Rosie the Riveter: WWII American Homefront Project, 32.

⁹⁰ Daly, *Profile of Youth*, 61.

⁹¹ Edward Franklin Frazier, American Council of Learned Societies, and American Council on Education. American Youth Commission., *Negro Youth at the Crossways Their Personality Development in the Middle States* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 247–8.

To teenagers, petting and sex were dangerous, not because of their developmental consequences in the future, but because of social consequences in the present. High school students aimed to keep the approval of their peers *and* their parents, which often deterred them from serious sexual interactions. As a group, teenagers were not as sexually promiscuous as many experts claimed; nor were they as sexually innocent as many parents hoped. Instead, they constructed their own sexual codes based on their teenage peer culture; one that allowed petting within the bounds of steady relationships, discouraged sexual intercourse, and demonized pregnancy.

Just as young people adapted going steady from the model of adult marriage, they tailored adult sexual codes to their own lives. Youth culture allowed for more petting than adults liked, but it upheld the larger societal prohibition against premarital intercourse, particularly for girls. Teenagers of the postwar years actively constructed their own version of youth identity, using and discarding adult culture as they saw fit. Even though teenagers arrived at a relatively conservative sexual code, their autonomous *attitude* shocked cultural experts. As the discourse over going steady and sex demonstrate, adults and young people were not only debating teenagers' sexual behavior, but also the ways in which they each defined youth, and whether or not young people should have the autonomy to create their own rules.

...

At its core, the disagreement over steady dating came down to different understandings of youth. Cultural experts tended to look at adolescents through psychological models similar to if not directly influenced by the one popularized by Erik Erikson. Adolescents, as they understood, were in the midst of identity crises, incapable of experiencing intimacy until they progressed to early adulthood. They believed that young people could only harm their future health and happiness by engaging in monogamous relationships or early sexual experimentation. Teenagers, on the other hand, tended to see themselves as members of a culturally important, largely autonomous cohort. They did not aim to reject adult culture; instead, they created their own version of it. They appropriated aspects of adult culture and adapted them to fit their own needs. They modeled going steady on marriage, but transformed it into a more casual system that allowed teens to participate fully in high school social life. Similarly, they took the adult proscription against premarital sex and tailored it into a system that allowed petting within affectionate relationships but prohibited premarital sex. Despite adult fears that steady dating was the first of a series of dangerous decisions that would lead teenagers into sexual depravity and mental distress, it became an accepted part of teenager culture by the mid-1960s. Over time, adults realized that going steady was *not* marriage, and it was not a license for sexual intercourse for most young people.

However, for some teenagers, steady dating did become a gateway to what were seen as even more troubling behaviors. In the following chapter, I explore the rapid rise in teenage marriage and teenage pregnancy in the twenty years after the war. If going steady *threatened* the boundary between youth and adulthood, teenage marriage wholly *transgressed* this important cultural dividing line, and ignited a fierce cultural struggle over the meaning of adolescence, maturity and adulthood.

Early To Wed: Teenage Marriage in Postwar America¹

In the fall of 1957, Myra Brown began eighth grade in Memphis, Tennessee. She had spent the summer months traveling around the South, watching her father and her older cousin Jerry play in their rock band. Myra had fallen in love with Jerry, and to her surprise, he fell in love with her too. After a few weeks of secret courtship, the pair drove to Hernando, Mississippi, where they married on December 12, 1957. Jerry was twenty-two and Myra was thirteen – so young that she had to lie about her age on the marriage license.

When Myra's father learned of his young daughter's marriage, he vowed to kill his new son-in-law and searched for him with a loaded shotgun. His search, however, was unsuccessful, and Jerry Lee Lewis continued his ascent as one of rock 'n' roll's fastest rising stars. Despite her family's objections, the first few months of Myra and Jerry's marriage went smoothly. Myra dropped out of eighth grade to become a housewife, and Jerry rapidly became one of the most influential forces in rock 'n' roll music. His records sold by the millions, his singles "Great Balls of Fire" and "Whole Lotta Shakin'" topped the charts, and his rousing performances electrified live audiences and television viewers alike.

In May of 1958, Jerry traveled to England for a six-week tour with his new wife in tow. It was supposed to be his international breakthrough. When reporters revealed Myra's age, however, the British public reacted with horror. Fans abandoned the singer, leaving him to play to half-empty auditoriums amid catcalls of "baby snatcher" and "cradle robber." The British Home Office considered expelling Jerry from the country, while the police contemplated charging him with kidnapping. After several unsuccessful shows, Jerry's manager canceled the rest of the tour and the singer fled London literally chased by an angry mob.

Jerry was baffled by England's reaction to his marriage, which seemed unremarkable to the Louisiana native. He had married for the first time at age fifteen, and again at age eighteen. When his twelve-year-old sister wed her sixteen-year-old boyfriend, Jerry happily served as a witness after their uncle had falsified her age on court documents. At a press conference on their way home from England, the singer optimistically explained, "Back home they take a different view of this sort of thing. I expect to get a great reception when I get back . . . My fans will understand."²

Jerry was wrong. Americans, it turned out, were just as offended by the news of Jerry's "child bride." Within weeks of the canceled tour, the American music industry

¹ Copyright © 2013 The Johns Hopkins University Press. Sections of this chapter first appeared in *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, Volume 6, Issue 2, Spring 2013, pages 359-382.

² Myra Lewis and Murray Silver, *Great Balls of Fire: The Uncensored Story of Jerry Lee Lewis*, 1st Quill (New York: Quill, 1982), 175, 83 British and American fans were also troubled by the fact that Myra and Jerry were cousins and that Jerry was not legally divorced from his second wife until weeks after his third marriage (to Myra). Still, the majority of news coverage and public outrage focused on the young age of Jerry's so-called "child bride."

blacklisted Lewis based on his questionable moral reputation. Radio stations refused to play his records, television programs and concert halls declined to book his band, and stores shipped his records back to the distributor. One of the greatest names in rock ‘n’ roll was unemployable. By June of 1958, Jerry Lee Lewis’s career had come to a screeching halt, where it remained for a decade.³

On the one hand, Jerry and Myra’s marriage was unusual both because of his celebrity and her extremely young age. But on the other hand, it was representative of larger trends occurring in the nation. In the twenty years after World War II, teenage marriage became a common practice in the United States, particularly among girls. Adolescent girls married at higher rates during these two decades than at any other time in the century. In 1950, nearly forty percent of all first marriages involved a bride in her teens. In 1960, fifty percent of first-time brides were under the age of twenty, and over half a million teenage brides walked down the aisle. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the pages of *Seventeen Magazine* were littered with ads for engagement rings, hope chests, and wedding china. As late as 1970, over forty percent of first marriages involved a teenage bride.⁴

Why were postwar teenagers in such a rush to get married? And why were adults so vigorously opposed to the practice given how common it was? I argue that teenage marriage was just one of a spectrum of adolescent behaviors that transgressed the boundary between childhood and adulthood in ways that were deeply troubling to adults. For adolescents of the 1950s and 1960s, recognition of their burgeoning maturity was long in coming. Cultural changes in the mid-twentieth century, particularly universal high school education and the emergence of teenage culture, increased young people’s period of dependence and prolonged the transition out of childhood. For those who found the wait too difficult, marriage was one way of laying claim to adulthood without waiting for societal approval. For others, marriage legitimated behaviors that would have otherwise seemed deviant, including sex, pregnancy, running away from an unhappy home, and cohabitation. To adults, however, teenage marriage blurred the dividing line between youth and adulthood in dangerous, unsettling ways. Marriage was a powerful symbol of adulthood, and young people’s encroachment threatened to make a farce of a hallowed institution. At a time when a vibrant new youth culture had adopted alarmingly mature sexual trends – necking, petting, and going steady – marriage went too far. Teenage marriage became a battleground over the meanings of childhood and adulthood, and a tug of war over the boundary between youth and maturity.

...

The postwar era was not the first time that Americans agonized over the behavior of its youth. Cultural critics in the 1920s expressed similar concerns over the sexual

³ Ibid., 48; “Jerry Lee Lewis Won New Wife, Cousin, 13, Before He Shed First,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 25, 1958; “Rock ‘N’ Roll Marriage: Britain Urged to Expel Lewis and Bride, 13,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 26, 1958; “Singer Flying Home With His Child Bride,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 28, 1958; “Weigh Deportation of Jerry Lee Lewis,” *Daily Defender*, May 28, 1958.

⁴ *Vital Statistics of the United States, 1960*, vol. 3 (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1964), Table 2–6, Table 1–T; Ernest Havemann, “Should Seventeen and Eighteen Year-Old Girls Marry?,” *McCall’s*, February 1965.

behavior, courtship patterns, and moral standards of young people. As Paula Fass argues, college students (and to a lesser extent, high school students) took advantage of changes in the family and educational institutions after World War I to create a self-consciously modern and liberated peer culture that embraced values and morals that were distinct from adult society.⁵ Although the protestations of social critics in the 1920s resemble those of their counterparts thirty years later, youth culture in the 1950s differed from the earlier period in important ways. High schools took over from colleges as the breeding ground of peer culture after World War II, bringing a larger number and broader swath of young people into this subculture. Precocious sexuality also took also root among younger children. When twenty-year-old college students engaged in necking and petting, their behavior seemed inappropriate to most adults in the 1920s; but when fifteen-year-old high school students did the same thirty years later, it provoked altogether new levels of dismay.

However, the most important difference between these two eras lay in the goals of their youth. Young people in the Jazz Age accepted the boundary between youth and adulthood as they sought to remake the social world into one that was more modern and exuberant. “There was no hostility toward the world of elders,” Fass explains, “only a sense of difference.”⁶ In contrast, youth in the 1950s sought to *obscure* the boundary between youth and adulthood, while asserting their right to participate in traditionally adult behaviors like marriage. Journalist William Graham Cole explained the difference between these generations of youth in *The Nation* in 1958:

The moral responsibility of today’s students compares favorably with the irresponsibility of the ‘flaming youth’ of the twenties. They want freedom, but they do not confuse liberty and license. They are lax by Victorian standards, but far less Bohemian than their counterparts of the years immediately following World War I. They want sexual outlet, but in marriage, not outside of it.⁷

As Cole notes, teenagers after World War II were willing to play by the rules to a greater extent than their predecessors. But postwar teens’ demands to participate in adult responsibilities and privileges still represented a significant challenge to the status quo. Further, these demands occurred at a time when age categories had become increasingly meaningful to Americans and central to the organization of society, making the behavior of young people all the more controversial.

The uptick in young marriages in the 1950s caused great alarm among adults. By the 1960s, professionals and parents agreed that they were in the midst of a social crisis and responded accordingly. Newspapers and magazines detailed the perils of adolescent marriage as a warning to their readers. School boards banned married teenagers from classrooms and extracurricular activities in hopes of discouraging their unmarried students from following their lead. Parents dragged recently wed children to court for annulments in the hopes of reasserting control over their headstrong children. In state and local legislatures across the country, lawmakers raised the minimum marriage age and bolstered the requirements for a marriage license. In 1961, *Coronet Magazine* went

⁵ Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 376.

⁷ William Graham Cole, “Early Marriage,” *The Nation*, February 8, 1958, 114.

so far as to declare teenage marriage to be “America’s most menacing blight.” While *Coronet* may have overstated its case, teenage marriage was an important and contentious cultural issue in postwar America, in part because of the groups it affected.

Young marriage almost exclusively involved girls. In 1950, for example, girls made up eighty-four percent of all married fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds.⁸ Sociologist Evelyn Mills Duval found that in high schools in the 1950s, ten times as many girls as boys married before graduation. Teenage marriage moreover became more common among white, middle-class girls. Early marriage had long been associated with lower class, non-white and rural communities, and these groups had indeed married earlier than the general population since the 1920s.⁹ However, rates of young marriage among white, middle- and high-status, suburban and urban dwelling youth increased significantly after World War II. In 1940, for example, black girls were nearly twice as likely to marry early as white girls; by 1960, their rates were nearly identical. In the same years, teen marriage doubled in urban areas.¹⁰ Teen brides in the years after World War II were much more likely to come from a higher class (as defined by income, reputation, and occupation) and have better grades than those who married young in the years before the war.¹¹ Teenage marriage in the 1950s and 1960s increasingly affected privileged groups that had high aspirations for their children.¹²

Although the weddings of very young girls like Myra Brown were the ones that made headlines, most teenage brides were significantly older than thirteen. Between 1940 and 1970, three-quarters of teen brides were eighteen or nineteen years old. In 1960, one-third of eighteen- and nineteen-year-old girls were married, compared to only five percent of girls between the ages of fourteen and seventeen.¹³ The important difference

⁸ Susan B. Carter, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Earliest Times to the Present*, vol. 1, Millennial (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Table Aa614–83, pp. 1–74 to 1–100.

⁹ The most notorious instance involved the marriage between a twenty-two year old man and a nine-year old girl in rural Tennessee in 1937. Their wedding sparked national outrage, a spate of reforms to marriage laws, and even a Hollywood movie called *Child Bride*. “Child Marriage Stirs Protests,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 2, 1937; “America Has Its Child Brides: Evil of India Repeated Here,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 14, 1937.

¹⁰ In 1940, 10.7% of white girls age fifteen to nineteen were married versus 18.3% of black girls. In 1960, 15.7% of white girls age fifteen to nineteen were married versus 15.8% of black girls. *Vital Statistics of the United States, 1960*, 3:Table 1–L; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Characteristics By Age* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1943), Table 8; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Characteristics of the Population* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1953), Table 104; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Characteristics of the Population* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1964), Table 176; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Characteristics of the Population* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1973), Table 203. Marriage rates of sixteen-year-old girls from 1940 to 1960 changed from 2.3% to 5.4% in urban areas, 5% to 6.8% in rural nonfarm areas, and 5.7% to 4.2% in rural farm areas.

¹¹ Carol Morgan, “Social Background and High School Student Marriages before and after World War II,” *Marriage and Family Living* 25, no. 4 (November 1963): 481–483.

¹² Although teen marriage increased among the white middle class in the 1950s and 1960s, the most common young marriage involved a teenage bride who was non-white, farm-dwelling, and working-class and a groom who was several years older, out of school, working as a laborer with no further plans for education. These marginalized groups generally lived in poverty, ended their schooling early, and had little upward mobility. Evelyn Millis Duvall, “Research Finds: Student Marriages,” *Marriage and Family Living* 22, no. 1 (February 1960): 76.

¹³ Carter, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Earliest Times to the Present*, 1:Table Aa614–83.

between these age cohorts was that the older group had most likely graduated from high school – an important step toward socially recognized adulthood.

But becoming an adult involved more than getting a high school diploma or a marriage certificate. Young people often discovered that marriage did not magically confer adulthood upon them, nor did it necessarily bring about independence. Plenty of youthful unions were annulled in court by angry parents. Many newlywed couples continued to live in their parents' homes, and others remained financially dependent on their parents long after the wedding bells. This reality of dependent and immature husbands and wives clashed with the long-held American idea that marriage marked the official beginning of adulthood.

Historian John Modell argued in his 1989 book *Into One's Own* that youthful marriages actually diminished the cultural importance of marriage as a marker of adulthood: "In a curious fashion, the very ease – and earliness – of marriage now marked it out as less the moment of entry to the status of adult than as a continuation of the prior stages along that road."¹⁴ Parenthood, instead, became the true mark of one's arrival as an adult. While I agree with Modell that marriage lost some of its power as a "moment of entry" into maturity, he understates its continued significance to young people. Marriage certainly did not transform teenagers into adults overnight, but they *believed* that it could. Young people went to great lengths – forging official documents, driving across state or even national borders, and risking the ire of their parents – just to get married. Further, a significant number of young brides were pregnant on their wedding day, which conflated marriage and parenthood in this cultural debate. The rancorous clashes over teenage marriage indicate that marriage retained its ideological power as a symbol of adulthood, even as it wavered in practice. The teenage "invasion" of marriage meant that a wedding ring was no longer sufficient evidence of maturity, but both adolescents and adults agreed that the institution was well worth fighting for.

High School, Teenagers, and the Long Road to Adulthood

Over the first half of the twentieth century, cultural, legal, and educational changes reshaped adolescence and lengthened the transition to adulthood. The most important of these was the spread of high schools, the great normalizing institution of adolescence in the United States. The first three decades of the century witnessed a rapid expansion of public high schools and a stunning spike in secondary school attendance. This growth was fueled by the energies of Progressive reformers, who hoped to prepare young people for the demands of the new white-collar job market and incorporate immigrants into American culture. In 1910, less than fifteen percent of American high-school-aged adolescents were enrolled in high school; in 1960, ninety percent were enrolled.¹⁵ By the middle of the century, high school had become the defining feature of adolescence for the

¹⁴ Modell, *Into One's Own*, 256.

¹⁵ Thomas D. Snyder and National Center for Education Statistics., *120 Years of American Education: a Statistical Portrait* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics, 1993), 27, figure 7.

majority of Americans across race, gender, class, and ethnic groups, as well as the minimum amount of education necessary to compete in the postwar economy.¹⁶

High school structured not only the daily lives of teenagers, but the ways in which Americans *thought* about teenagers as well. By splitting young people into narrowly defined age cohorts, high schools reinforced the idea that age was the best indicator of a young person's ability and maturity level. Students studied in classrooms divided by age and in buildings split into elementary, junior, and high schools. In the 1940s, most schools instituted automatic promotion based on age, rather than mastery of academic material, believing it was more beneficial to students.¹⁷ Thus, chronological age shaped the physical and social worlds of twentieth-century adolescents. As a result of this new order, deviations from age-based expectations of "normal" behavior, including marriage and pregnancy, became far more stigmatized.

Young people also embraced a new age-consciousness. The time teenagers spent in high school enhanced their separation from the adult world, and teens increasingly began to self-identify by their age group. High school became a rich breeding ground for new fashions, music, dances, and slang, and this unique youth culture quickly caught the eyes of marketers, merchandisers, and advertisers. Marketers recognized teenagers' potential as an untapped market and helped spread their cultural fads across the country. Fashion companies, the film industry, cosmetics companies, and magazine publishers hopped on the teenage bandwagon, competing for the dollars of the newest consumer segment.¹⁸ Young people, egged on by marketers, embraced their feelings of independence. They came up with strikingly mature courtship patterns, like going steady, and sexual rules that allowed for more "necking" and "petting" than their parents would have liked.¹⁹ Despite their youth, teens insisted that they were mature enough to appropriate the behaviors, benefits, and responsibilities of adulthood, including marriage.

Historian Stephen Lassonde identifies the twenty years after World War II as the last moment in which "there was broad agreement about the integrity and significance of the threshold between childhood and adulthood."²⁰ This did not stop teenagers from trying to grow up as quickly as possible, however, upsetting this cultural boundary in their youthful wake. Teenagers occupied an uncertain space between childhood and adulthood. They were on their way to social maturity, but still bore many of the markers of childhood and dependence. During the postwar years, these contradictory trends – greater devotion to strictly-defined age categories and the emergence of precocious teenage culture – clashed most dramatically in the debates over teenage marriage.

¹⁶ The one exception was poor African Americans in the rural south. Decent schools were not built until the 1960s due to extreme racism and poverty. For more on the geographical spread of high school education, see Claudia Goldin, "America's Graduation From High School: The Evolution and Spread of Secondary Schooling in the 20th Century," *Journal of Economic History* 59 (June 1998).

¹⁷ Maris Vinovskis, *Education, Society, and Economic Opportunity: A Historical Perspective on Persistent Issues* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

¹⁸ For a detailed study of early teenage girls' culture and the role of marketers in defining teenage identity, see Schrum, *Some Wore Bobby Sox*.

¹⁹ For more on the history of teenage dating, see Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-century America*.

²⁰ Lassonde, Fass, and Grossberg, "Ten Is the New Fourteen: Age Compression And 'Real' Childhood," 52.

The Roots of Teenage Marriage

When Myra Brown fell for Jerry Lee Lewis, parents could easily blame Jerry. What thirteen-year-old could resist the life of fame and fortune that came with being the wife of a rock ‘n’ roll star? But what about the more typical marriage of fifteen-year-old Frances Headley to an eighteen-year-old factory worker, or the nuptials of seventeen-year-old Jane Haughey, daughter of a Wall Street broker, and a twenty-year-old gas station attendant? Without the lure of stardom and riches, what did marriage have to offer a teenager?²¹ A wide range of cultural and economic causes contributed to the rise of teenage marriage – widespread affluence, the celebration of domesticity, and new sexual patterns.

The booming postwar economy enabled young men to support a family at a young age. During the Great Depression, millions of Americans delayed marriage and childbearing because of their financial struggles. World War II jolted the depressed economy into a state of extraordinary growth for the next twenty-five years. After the war, factories churned out a glittering array of consumer goods as Americans enjoyed plentiful jobs, high wages, and subsidized homeowner loans. A man with a high school education or even less could find a unionized factory job, earn a good living, and support a wife and children.

Eli Ginzberg, a professor of economics at Columbia University, explained at a conference on teenage marriage in 1966, “As individuals who can support themselves, young people can – if they want to – say goodbye to their parents and ignore their wishes.”²² Even young people who could not support themselves were often able to wed because their parents “subsidized” the marriage. A 1955 *New York Times* article explained, “A generation ago parents couldn’t afford to contribute to the support of married children. Now they can.” Today, it noted, “The prejudice... against parents’ helping a young couple has all but vanished.”²³

While the strong postwar economy made early marriage possible, the postwar cultural climate made it enticing. In the two decades after World War II, Americans celebrated domesticity and family life with near-religious fervor. As Elaine Tyler May argued, Americans turned toward domestic life after World War II because it offered a refuge from the insecurities of the larger world. In a time of international unrest, racial strife, class conflict, and nuclear threat, the family became a “bastion of safety.”²⁴ The *New York Times* explained, “Few generations have been so aware of forces beyond their grasp that can sweep away in a single night all possessions, plans, and hopes.” In the midst of this grim knowledge, “they feel deeply the need for something that they can do themselves, for something they themselves have created. Thus, paradoxically, the very uncertainties of the future drive young people toward early marriages and young

²¹ “Girl, 15, Plays ‘Hookey,’ Husband Is Reason; Judge Quotes Bible to Support ‘Acquittal,’” *New York Times*, June 10, 1941; “Eloper Wins Right To Visit Wife, 17, At Her L.I. Estate,” *New York Times*, August 25, 1961.

²² Seymour M. Farber and Roger H. L. Wilson, eds., *Teen-Age Marriage and Divorce; A Symposium* (Berkeley, CA: Diablo Press, 1967), 9.

²³ Sidonie Gruenberg, “Why They Are Marrying Younger,” *New York Times*, January 30, 1955.

²⁴ May, *Homeward Bound American Families in the Cold War Era*, xviii.

families."²⁵ Anthropologist Margaret Mead connected young marriage to the threat of nuclear conflict. "The fear of atomic war – which is not being faced but is only being felt as a vague shadow – is also the sort of thing, just as war itself, that drives young people into 'snatching' at happiness out of a sense that it's going to disappear if not taken."²⁶ In an uncertain world, marriage provided a sense of stability and respite.

Young marriage was also driven by fears of spinsterhood. In the postwar period, women faced considerable pressure to marry while they were still young lest they miss their chance. This pressure was partly based on demographic shifts. The 1950s witnessed what John Modell called "a devaluation of older women in the marriage market." If a woman reached the age of twenty-five without marrying, her chances of ever marrying fell off substantially.²⁷ A 1952 *Chicago Tribune* headline spelled out the stark options facing single women: "Consider the Single Girl; She Must Compete for Husband or Risk Loneliness of Spinsterhood." Americans expressed distrust and pity toward unmarried adults. Bachelors were described as deviant, narcissistic, or pathological. Single women, or "old maids," were pitied for missing out on the psychological, biological, and emotional fulfillment that came from family life. Any marital behavior that differed from the norm, including late marriage, was considered deviant. So while teenagers were chastised if they married too *early*, they also faced tremendous pressure to marry before it was too *late*.²⁸

Popular culture idealized marriage as the pinnacle of romance while minimizing its challenges. Sitcoms like *The Donna Reed Show* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* portrayed an idyllic portrait of married family life, and advertisements featured apron-clad housewives, gleefully and gracefully cooking or cleaning the house for their husbands and children. Sociologist Lee Burchinal bemoaned "the highly romanticized, over-glamorized, naively simple view of marriage imparted by our mass media," and domestic relations judge Willard Gatling complained that "Hollywood romanticizes marriage – it's a girl getting a new party dress and going on a lark."²⁹ Educational films created by marriage counselors and professors of family life tried to debunk the rosy image of marriage in popular culture. One film explained that real marriage is "not [like] the kind in movies and most popular songs," while another reminded viewers that "married life isn't all Hollywood moonbeams and honeysuckle, but it can be mighty satisfying at times."³⁰

Even rock 'n' roll music aimed at youth celebrated the joys of marriage, and many songs directly addressed teenage marriage. The 1963 chart topping hit "Hey Paula" by Paul & Paula told of lovers desperate for school to end so they could marry:

²⁵ Gruenberg, "Why They Are Marrying Younger."

²⁶ Margaret Mead, "New Look at Early Marriages," *U.S. News and World Report*, June 6, 1960.

²⁷ Modell, *Into One's Own*, figures 18 and 19, 246–7.

²⁸ Marion Odmark, "Modern Woman's Problem - Man Shortage!," *Chicago Tribune*, April 27, 1952; Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005), chapter 14; See also Elaine Tyler May, *Barren in the Promised Land: Childless Americans and the Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995).

²⁹ Burchinal, "Research on Young Marriage"; Edward Clark, "The Costly Hazard of Young Marriage," *LIFE*, April 13, 1959.

³⁰ *Marriage Is a Partnership* (Coronet Instructional Films, 1951), <http://archive.org/details/Marriage1951>; *Are You Ready for Marriage?* (Coronet Instructional Films, 1950), <http://archive.org/details/AreYouRe1950>.

Hey, hey, Paula, I wanna marry you
Hey, hey, Paula, no one else could ever do
I've waited so long for school to be through
Paula, I can't wait no more for you.

The 1963 tune “Not Too Young to Get Married” by Bob B. Sox and the Blue Jeans expressed a young lover’s determination to get married despite his mother’s advice:

She says we can't get married
For three years or more
'Cause we're only in our teens.
Oh, no, we're not too young, young to get married,
Not too young, young to get married.
What kind of difference can three years make?
I've gotta have you now or my heart will break.

Chuck Berry’s “You Never Can Tell,” which charted in 1964, told the story of a “teenage wedding.” To the surprise of the “old folks,” the young couple ended up doing well, with enough money, “a souped up jitney,” and “seven hundred little records, all rock, rhythm and jazz.”³¹

“Even Kids Can Be Serious About Love”: Adolescent Sexuality and Early Marriage

Amid widespread prosperity and popular portrayals of marital bliss, early marriage was both feasible and exciting to many teens. But what arguably made it most desirable was that it offered a shortcut to maturity, one of the postwar era’s most powerful cultural ideals. In the decades after World War II, Americans viewed adulthood as the pinnacle of self-fulfillment and celebrated its trappings, including marriage, parenthood, and home-ownership. Unlike later generations of youth who rejected adult culture, teenagers of the 1950s and early 60s rebelled by appropriating aspects of their parents’ generation, including, most controversially, their courtship and sexual codes. Teenage marriage was at the far end of a spectrum of behaviors that mimicked adulthood and tried to escape the limits of childhood.

Teenagers’ in the postwar years adopted new rules of courtship that imitated adult relationships. Their most notable romantic invention was “going steady,” which debuted in the 1940s. Steady dating led in turn to a new sexual code that allowed different behaviors based on the seriousness of a relationship. Contemporary sociologist Ira Reiss, an expert in adolescent sexuality, labeled this peer-based code “permissiveness with affection.” Couples who were exclusive and emotionally intimate could “go farther” than those who were casually dating without invoking the censure of their peers. This teenage

³¹ Bob B. Sox and the Blue Jeans, *Not Too Young To Get Married*, 7” Vinyl Single, By Ellie Greenwich, Jeff Barry and Phil Spector (Phillies Records, 1966); Paul & Paula, *Hey Paula*, 7” Vinyl Single, By Ray Hildebrand (Philips Records, 1962); Chuck Berry, *You Never Can Tell*, 7” Vinyl Single (Chess Producing Company, 1964).

code of behavior still prohibited premarital sex, but it created a more flexible system that equated the degree of sexual contact with the degree of emotional closeness.³²

Most parents opposed steady dating because they feared that it would lead to dangerous sexual experimentation or even young marriage. Indeed, contemporary sociologists found evidence that steady dating and early marriage were related. A two-year study in 1957 examined the dating behavior of Nebraska high school girls. Girls who spent more time in steady or exclusive relationships were significantly more likely to marry in their teens compared to girls who dated several people. Similarly, sociologist Rachel Inselberg reported in 1962 that early-married girls had started going steady a year and a half before unmarried girls.³³ In part, this was because steady dating promoted strong emotional bonds that could lead to marriage, but it also had a great deal to do with sexual behavior.

Many steady couples found it difficult to remain chaste while in exclusive, emotionally intense relationships. Some married so that they could engage in sexual intercourse without guilt or the risk of an unwed pregnancy. A minister in Tucson, Arizona explained that young people in his community had “been taught that it is wrong to have sexual intercourse outside marriage. But if I get married it will be all right.”³⁴

More commonly though, steady couples ended up married because they were already “in trouble.” Pregnancy, long associated with adulthood, was a critical motivating factor in many, if not most, young marriages. Sociologists estimated that between thirty-one and fifty-seven percent of high school brides were pregnant on their wedding day according to studies in Iowa, California and Nebraska. In cases where *both* husband and wife were in high school, pregnancy rates were even higher: a 1959 Iowa study found that eighty-seven percent of these marriages involved premarital pregnancy.³⁵

The long-standing taboo against premarital sex began to weaken after World War II. Kinsey’s landmark studies, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, in 1948 and 1953 respectively, upended common assumptions about the incidence of premarital sex. He reported that ninety percent of men and fifty percent of women had engaged in premarital intercourse. His work highlighted the chasm between moral standards and actual behavior, making premarital sex seem less taboo and more normative. A number of other publications gave a public face to premarital sexual experimentation in the 1950s and 1960s. *Playboy*, which was first published in 1953, championed bachelorhood and sexual permissiveness. In between photographs of naked women, the magazine’s articles celebrated bachelorhood as a time of sexual freedom, self-indulgence and carefree pursuits. In 1962, Helen Gurley Brown’s

³² Reiss, “Sexual Codes in Teen-Age Culture.”

³³ J. Joel Moss and Ruby Gingles, “The Relationship of Personality to the Incidence of Early Marriage,” *Marriage and Family Living* 21, no. 4 (November 1959): 373–377; Lee G. Burchinal, “Does Early Dating Lead to School-Age Marriage?,” *Iowa Farm Science* 13 (February 1959): 11–12; Rachel M. Inselberg, “Marital Problems and Satisfaction in High School Marriages,” *Marriage and Family Living* 24, no. 1 (February 1962): 74–77.

³⁴ Betty Coe Spicer, “Teenage Secret Marriage Epidemic,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, March 1960. Similarly, teenagers in steady relationships engaged in more sexual experimentation than casual daters. Youth culture created its own rules for sexual permissiveness, but it mirrored adult notions that greater commitment and emotional involvement warranted greater sexual expressiveness.

³⁵ Burchinal, “Research on Young Marriage,” 9.

book *Sex and the Single Girl* offered women a similar image of unmarried life. Brown argued that unmarried women should enjoy sex with as many men – married or unmarried – as they could before settling down.

In reality, few Americans fully embraced Hefner and Brown's lifestyle of plentiful and casual sex before marriage, but these influences did lead to important changes in sexual behavior. Starting in the 1950s, young people increasingly had sex within committed or engaged relationships. In 1960, about forty percent of unmarried women had sex before their twentieth birthday; the majority of these sexual encounters took place within steady relationships or engagements.³⁶ Most premarital sex was "engagement" sex. For example, among Kinsey's sample of women who had engaged in sex before marriage, half had sex with their fiancée only, for less than two years before their wedding.³⁷

These blows to premarital abstinence did not do away with cultural taboos overnight. Polls conducted in the 1950s reported that less than a quarter of Americans approved of premarital sex. Only in the 1970s did a majority of respondents support sex before marriage. As historians Estelle Freedman and John D'Emilio argue, sexual liberalism from the 1920s through the 1960s was accompanied by greater policing of the boundaries between "good" and "bad" sexual behavior. Americans embraced sexuality to a greater extent than before, but primarily in the context of marriage or a heterosexual, monogamous relationship that could easily turn into marriage in case of pregnancy.³⁸

Indeed, sex before marriage was risky business without access to reliable birth control. In her history of the sexual revolution on a college campus in Kansas, Beth Bailey argued that the introduction of the birth control pill in 1960 had little impact on most women's lives until doctors began prescribing it to unmarried women in the 1970s. For most of the 1960s, women had to either pretend they were married, or find a sympathetic doctor who did not ask questions. Bailey based her study on college women who had relative independence and access to communities of like-minded peers; the challenge of obtaining birth control for a high school student would have been significantly more difficult. A recently married high-school student in 1966 explained her predicament. "Sure, I knew about diaphragms and coils and the pill, but I didn't know where to get them. What good is just knowing about them?" Additionally, access to abortion was extremely limited until *Roe v. Wade* legalized the practice in 1973.

Given the limited access to birth control and abortion, teenage pregnancy rates skyrocketed in the 1950s and 1960s.³⁹ Between 1945 and 1957, the birth rate of teenage women doubled, from 51.1 births per 1,000 women to 96.3 births per 1,000 women. For most of the late 1950s and early 1960s, nearly one in ten babies was born to a teenage mother.⁴⁰ Teenage pregnancy, however, did not register as a social problem in the way that it would in the 1980s and 1990s because nearly all young mothers were married by

³⁶ Sandra Hofferth, "Premarital Sexual Activity Among U.S. Teenage Women Over the Past Three Decades," *Family Planning Perspectives* 19 (March 1987): Table 3.

³⁷ Kristin Luker, *Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 87.

³⁸ D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* For a discussion of midcentury sexual liberalism, see chapter 12. Poll information on p. 333.

³⁹ Arlene Silberman, "The Pregnant Bride," *Redbook*, November 1966, 146; See chapter 4 in Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland*.

⁴⁰ Ventura, Matthews, and Hamilton, *Births to Teenagers in the United States 1940-2000*.

the time their babies arrived. From the 1940s through the early 1960s, the vast majority – over eighty-five percent – of pregnant teenagers was married by the time they gave birth.⁴¹

Although the taboo against premarital sex showed its first signs of weakening in the 1950s, the stigma against premarital pregnancy was harsh and intransigent. Pregnancy could shatter an unmarried girl's life, ruin her reputation, and bring disgrace upon her family. But for a married woman, even a young one, pregnancy was celebrated as a joy. Given these options, those who could marry did marry.

Mary Beth, married at age fourteen, explained to *Ladies Home Journal* in 1963 that she “hadn't particularly talked or thought about getting married ... but, well, we *had* to get married.... I belong to this card club with nine girls, and out of the nine, only one got married because she wanted to.”⁴² Journalist Ernest Havemann investigated teenage marriage for *McCall's* in 1965 and was surprised to find that even girls from “good” backgrounds were forced into marriage by an unexpected pregnancy. “Some of these girls were undoubtedly tramps,” he explained. But “some girls were lured into promiscuity by the pressure of the ‘wild crowd’ in high school. But pregnancy before marriage also happens in the best of families and to the otherwise most circumspect of girls.”⁴³

Although teenagers rarely talked about premarital pregnancy in the context of adulthood, marriage (and the adult status it conferred) instantly transformed a devastating crisis into a socially acceptable, celebrated event. Wisconsin went so far as to pass a law in 1955 allowing the state to force boys to marry teenage girls they had gotten pregnant.⁴⁴ Even staunch opponents of early marriage agreed that marriage was the best solution for pregnant girls, regardless of their age. In the words of an Iowa county clerk in 1961, “If these kids are in trouble, we should help them out, give them a chance to start off on the right foot by permitting their children to be born legitimately.”⁴⁵

On rare occasion, young couples used the powerful stigma of unwed motherhood to their advantage. Eighteen-year-old Georgia explained to *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1958 that she and her boyfriend initially begged their parents for permission to marry without success. Desperate to wed, the couple decided to start having sex, knowing that a pregnancy would tip the scales in their favor. It worked. After Georgia became pregnant, her parents felt they had no choice but to give their approval to the union. “I knew it was wrong. But still I'm glad it worked out the way it did.”⁴⁶

When teenagers described their own marriages, they frequently described wanting to escape from childhood and gain the independence and respect that adults seemed to have. Peggy, an eighteen-year-old bride in 1958, saw marriage as a way to create her own family, free of conflict and belittlement. Starting when she was fifteen, Peggy found herself in constant disagreements with her parents. “All this time the fighting was going on at home, with my daddy criticizing me all the time. Jim would comfort me and say,

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Jean Anderson, “Teen-Age Marriage Craze,” *Ladies' Home Journal*, March 1963, 120.

⁴³ Havemann, “Should Seventeen and Eighteen Year-Old Girls Marry?,” 156.

⁴⁴ “Ban Marriage For Girls 15, In Wis.,” *Chicago Defender*, January 15, 1959.

⁴⁵ Norma Lee Browning, “Marriage Mill for Teens,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 23, 1961.

⁴⁶ Margaret Parton, “Why Do They Marry So Young?,” *Ladies' Home Journal*, November 1958, 164.

‘It won’t be like this after we’re married.’ ... Jim has given me more of a feeling of home and of belonging than I ever had in my life before.”⁴⁷

Barbara, who dropped out of school in 1957 to marry her boyfriend, also longed for a more adult, meaningful experience. Her husband was “something to hang on to, something to make life worth living, in a way that high schools and colleges and fraternities and sororities never could. He’s *real* and he loves me.”⁴⁸ These young people longed for an escape from adolescence – the fights with parents, the challenges at school, and the feelings of loneliness – for what they saw as the respect and autonomy that came with adulthood. Kenny Brown, who eloped at age sixteen in 1955, explained that he was mature enough to handle marriage. He and his fifteen-year-old wife “were in love, as desperately as any older people [and] wanted to get married.... Even kids can be serious about love.” Kenny’s words illustrate the liminality of married teens in the 1950s: he identified as a “kid” but insisted that his emotions were as legitimate as those of “older people.”⁴⁹

The transition from adolescence to adulthood could be a difficult and protracted one for young people. Professors and marriage counselors Emily Mudd and Richard Hey believed that teenage marriage was a misguided attempt to declare adulthood in a society lacking in meaningful ways to transition out of adolescence.

There would be far fewer teen-age marriages but for the fact that our teen-agers today find social recognition of their near-adulthood too long in coming... Marriage represents to many teenagers a way of gaining adult status, of getting out from under, of being independent. It is almost as if they are saying, “See I am grown up. I really am an adult. I’m *married!*”⁵⁰

They called for “wholesome ways in which adolescents can express this healthy and natural desire to move into social adulthood as they approach physical and mental adulthood.” So long as society continued to treat teenagers as children, teenagers would claim adulthood in rebellious ways, including marriage. Mudd and Hey were sympathetic to adolescents’ desire to feel grown-up but cautioned that matrimony was an unhealthy way to express these needs.⁵¹ The transition to adulthood was already fraught with challenges, and marriage would only add to this stress.

Sociologist Mervyn Cadwallader also felt that Americans needed a shared rite of passage out of adolescence “to take the guesswork out of growing up.” He asked, “Does the adolescent become an adult upon passing a driver’s test, a drinking test, a sexual test or a domesticity test?” Without guidance into adulthood, he lamented, “Our adolescents become men when they kill Peter Pan at the altar and move into an apartment with a real

⁴⁷ Ibid., 173.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 178.

⁴⁹ Cal Bernstein, “Runaway Marriage,” *Washington Post*, June 26, 1955.

⁵⁰ Emily and Richard Hey Mudd, “When the Young Marry Too Young,” *National Parent-Teacher Magazine*, September 1960.

⁵¹ Sue Grafton, “Why Teen-Age Marriages Are Falling Apart,” *McCall’s*, November 1959, 119.

life wife.” Young people held tight to the belief that “a little marriage poured over raw teen-ager yields instant maturity,” but most were quickly disabused of this notion.⁵²

An unhappy teenage wife discouraged others from following in her footsteps in 1965: “Being a teen-ager is the most confusing time of life, anyway – and certainly no time to make the most important decision of your life. The trouble with my husband and me is that we didn’t give ourselves time to find ourselves. We married before we had any idea what we really were or really wanted – and now we’ve discovered that what we wanted is certainly not each other.”⁵³

The Case Against Teenage Marriage

In 1952, twenty-three-year old Charles Ellis and seventeen-year-old Mary Frances Lyons eloped in Wilson, North Carolina, where girls her age could marry without parental approval. Mary’s parents were appalled when they heard the news. Her father, an investigator for the Park Police, happened to be in a position to do something about it. With the help of local police, he located his daughter on her honeymoon, arrested her, and threw her in jail. The police later released Mary into her father’s custody, and a bitter legal battle between her father and her new husband ensued.⁵⁴

Most parents did not throw their married children in jail, but the majority of adults were strongly opposed to teenage marriage. Parents, educators, psychologists, legislators, and reporters spoke out about its dangers and took steps to stop underage unions when they could. Their arguments against early marriage were wide-ranging, but they all shared a belief in rigidly defined age categories and the importance of “acting your age.” Adults argued that teenage marriages were dangerous because they threatened the very institution of marriage with their instability; further, they endangered the potential of the next generation; finally, they impeded the healthy development of youngsters.

Experts had not always been opposed to early nuptials. Earlier in the twentieth century, American scientists and journalists saw youthful marriage as the solution to a variety of problems. Eugenic scientists in the Progressive Era encouraged early matrimony among white native-born women in order to increase the reproductive productivity of the white race, while combating high birth rates among immigrants. Intellectuals including Edward Ross and Theodore Roosevelt worried that whites were heading toward “race suicide” because of low birthrates. They blamed women’s education, career opportunities and feminism for curtailing the reproductive desires of white middle-class women, and looked to varied pronatalist strategies, including younger marriages, to reverse this trend. Historian Laura Lovett shows that after 1915, experts increasingly argued that young mothers produced healthier babies, and advised women to marry in their late teens and early twenties. Scientists insisted that delayed childbirth could have disastrous consequences, both for the child and the white race. Eugenicist

⁵² Mervyn L. Cadwallader, “In Search of Adulthood” in Farber and Wilson, *Teen-age Marriage and Divorce; a Symposium*, 15, 18.

⁵³ Havemann, “Should Seventeen and Eighteen Year-Old Girls Marry?,” 154.

⁵⁴ “Young Husband Sues Irate Father-in-Law For Custody of Schoolgirl Bride of 8 Days,” *Washington Post*, January 19, 1952.

Edward Ross even proposed that schools raise their standard of education for women so that they could finish college in two years, marry and start bearing children sooner.⁵⁵

Later in the century, some saw early marriage as a way to reverse the low marriage rate and high marriage age caused by the financial woes of the Great Depression. Between 1929 and 1933, the marriage rate fell by twenty-two percent, and couples had fifteen percent fewer children.⁵⁶ While experts fretted about the effects of delayed family formation on the nation's future, some journalists appealed directly to their readers to marry even if their bank accounts were not as full as they would like. In 1947, journalist Howard Whitman argued in *Better Homes and Gardens* that young people should stop worrying about "such-and-such-a-job or so-much-money-in-the-bank" and start getting married. In order to "break down the economic blockade," he suggested that parents offer financial support, or even dowries to their children. "If marriage is in a foggy, never-never land with economic barbed wire surrounding it, we neatly destroy the very institution we want to preserve." He explained that marriage would turn young people into responsible citizens and save them from promiscuity, sexual deviance, and venereal disease. He concluded, "There is nothing wrong with marriage. The thing that is wrong is the *denial of marriage*."⁵⁷

By the early 1950s, experts had uniformly changed their tune. With rare exceptions, journalists and sociologists from 1950 through 1970 argued that teenage marriage was a dangerous practice that should be avoided. Sociologist Lester Kirkendall published the first peer-reviewed article that called attention to the dangers of high school marriage in 1951.⁵⁸ In 1955, the *New York Times* published its first articles on the "marriage crisis of youth," as did the *Washington Post*. Popular magazines picked up the topic en masse around 1960.

One of the most common arguments against early marriage was that it threatened the institution of marriage by creating unstable unions likely to end in divorce. Concerns about marital instability and divorce were well supported by statistics: young couples *were* more likely to divorce and experience marital strife than those who married later in life. Evelyn Mills Duvall released a study in 1960 showing that marriages in which both spouses were under age twenty were twice as likely to divorce than those in which both partners were between twenty and twenty-five years old.⁵⁹ In 1959, the *New York Times* reported that the divorce rate for women who married between age fifteen and nineteen was two-and-a-half times greater than it was for women who married between age twenty-one and twenty-five. The contrast was even greater in the case of annulment.⁶⁰

Parents and child experts wanted to save teenagers from marital strife and save the institution of marriage from degradation at a time when it appeared to be unstable.

⁵⁵ Laura L. Lovett, *Conceiving the Future: Pronatalism, Reproduction, and the Family in the United States, 1890-1938*, Gender and American Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 100–06.

⁵⁶ David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 165.

⁵⁷ Howard Whitman, "Sex and Early Marriage," *Better Homes and Gardens*, August 1947.

⁵⁸ Lester A. Kirkendall, "High-School Student Marriages Increasing," *The Clearing House* 26, no. 4 (December 1951).

⁵⁹ Duvall, "Research Finds: Student Marriages."

⁶⁰ The divorce rate for 15- to 19-year-old women was 12.6 per 1,000, versus 4.8 per 1,000 for women between 21 and 25. Bess Furman, "Marriage Trend To Youth Still On," *New York Times*, June 14, 1959.

Despite the low divorce rate during the baby boom years, Americans increasingly worried that the institution of marriage was growing weaker. Divorce rates spiked during World War II, declined sharply after 1947 and remained low until the early 1970s. As Nancy Cott argues, however, growing acceptance of no-fault and out-of-state divorce in the late 1950s stoked fears that marriage was under attack.⁶¹ Sociologist Robert Lynd claimed that the growing acceptance of divorce emboldened young people to marry in haste. “Another thing that encourages teen-age marriages” he wrote, is “the fact that marriage itself need not be final since divorce is no longer a serious disgrace.”

The high divorce rate among teenage spouses inspired Catholics to become some of the most vigorous opponents of early marriages. Church doctrine taught that marriage was a sacred bond that could not be dissolved, and priests tried to discourage hasty or premature marriages. Churches often required marriage counseling and the publication of banns (public announcements of an upcoming marriage) on three Sundays preceding the wedding in order to encourage caution and ensure that fiancées understood the gravity of the marriage relationship. John J. Kane, professor of sociology at University of Notre Dame, explained that husbands and wives were called to their positions by God, just as priests were called into religious life: “For the married, marriage is the most important state of life” and should be entered into by mature adults as a lifetime commitment. “Even if marriage is entered into in a socially acceptable way,” Kane continued, “both parties may be too young, at least in the cultural sense, to accept the responsibilities of married life. Early pairing off therefore is generally to be discouraged.”⁶²

A 1966 conference on teenage marriage and divorce held in San Francisco offered a range of expert opinions on the marital problems of youngsters. Economics professor Eli Ginzberg believed that the growing acceptance of divorce was fueling the teenage marriage trend. People used to enter marriage after reaching maturity “because one had to live with that decision for a very long time.” Now that divorce was an option, “people approach marriage as a place in which one matures or through which one matures.”⁶³ Dr. Ben Ard, a marriage psychologist from San Francisco, went so far as to suggest legalizing “trial marriages” for the very young. This argument, first advanced by family reformers in the 1920s, claimed that married couples should be able to dissolve their union easily and without consequence as long as they remained childless. “Should much effort be made to hold those marriages which show strain early in the marriage together?” he asked. “Wouldn’t we be better off to let them break early, before children come?”⁶⁴ Sociology professor Mervyn Cadwallader argued that young marriage was a symptom of the larger decay of the institution of marriage: “It is not teen-age marriage that is the problem, it is the institution of marriage that has failed. In the hands of teen-agers it simply becomes a travesty of an absurdity.”⁶⁵

The instability of early marriages, including the high divorce rate, was not necessarily caused directly by *age*. Other related circumstances compounded the

⁶¹ Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 196.

⁶² John J. Kane, *Marriage and the Family: A Catholic Approach* (New York: Dryden Press, 1952), 98–9.

⁶³ Eli Ginzberg, “Work and Life Plans” in Farber and Wilson, *Teen-age Marriage and Divorce; a Symposium*, 13.

⁶⁴ Ben Ard, “Gray Hair for the Teen-Age Father” in *ibid.*, 102.

⁶⁵ Mervyn Cadwallader, “In Search of Adulthood” in *ibid.*, 20.

challenges young couples faced, including financial strain, limited schooling, parental involvement, and social pressure. The most common source of stress was tight finances. Inselberg found that the annual income of young couples was forty percent lower than their older counterparts and that young husbands were more likely to be unemployed.⁶⁶ In the words of a teenage wife in 1962, “My husband didn’t finish high school, [so] he could never get a good enough job to support us.... Early marriage cut off our higher education.”⁶⁷ Journalist Shirley Welton warned that early marriage could have disastrous consequences for young couples down the road in a 1964 article for *Parents Magazine & Better Homemaking*. “The teen marriage explosion is frightening to parents and sociologists alike, for they are aware of the chain reaction of problems such marriages can ignite – starting with school dropouts and progressing through unemployment, disillusionment, desperation and defeat.” A young husband looking back on the financial difficulties of his marriage in 1960 said, “Marriage involves certain obligations and responsibilities, most important of which – to the man, at least – is to earn enough money to support his wife and family. At eighteen, I wasn’t ready for that. I still wanted to play baseball and football.”⁶⁸

Although sociologists, religious leaders and journalists painted a dismal portrait of young marriage, the majority of these unions lasted. Sociologist Lee Burchinal wrote extensively about the obstacles facing young couples, but he also attempted to portray a realistic vision of a young couple’s prospects. “Overall, youthful marriages are less stable and less satisfying than marriages entered into at older ages; however, the majority of young marriage do survive intact, and it would be nice if adults would stop trying to make young marriages fail and take measures to support them.” One of the reasons many young couples were able to survive their early years was that they received significant help from their families.

Young spouses were likely to need parental assistance, which came most often in the form of housing. Two-thirds of the young couples in Inselberg’s study had lived with one or both sets of their parents, usually immediately after their marriage. These couples frequently clashed with their in-laws and reported high levels of marital stress brought on by excessive family involvement in their marriage. One young wife complained, “If I didn’t cook the way [my mother-in-law] wanted me to, why it was hell!” A 1959 *Life* article went inside the home of a family who had taken in their seventeen-year-old daughter Betty’s new husband. Betty’s parents were initially heartbroken over the marriage, but eventually, as her father explained, “We figured we ought to help as much as possible.” The family squeezed Larry into the home by moving Betty’s three teenage sisters into the attic. “In the morning,” according to the reporter, the small house took on “the aspect of a bus terminal,” as the household of eight attempted to share one bathroom. Cramped quarters and a resentful family did little to help ease the couple’s transition into

⁶⁶ Inselberg, “Marital Problems and Satisfaction in High School Marriages.”

⁶⁷ Evelyn Seeley Stewart, “When Teens Marry in Haste,” *Parents’ Magazine and Better Homemaking*, November 1962, 88.

⁶⁸ Shirley Welton, “Heading Off Those Risky Teen Marriages,” *Parents Magazine & Better Homemaking*, March 1964, 47; Norma Lee Browning, “Teen Marriage,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 18, 1960.

married life.⁶⁹ Whether because of their age, limited resources, or continued dependence on their families, young spouses often faced a difficult and rocky road ahead.

A second important criticism of early marriage was that it would distract young people and prevent them from fulfilling their full potential as individuals, community members and Americans. Much of this ideology was derived from Erik Erikson's theories of developmental psychology. He argued that adolescence was a time of identity confusion that needed to be resolved before one could settle into a long-term relationship. Young people who were distracted from completing the psychological tasks of adolescence would be unable to fulfill their full human potential.⁷⁰

There was concern, particularly among middle-class adults, that early marriage endangered the class status and earning potential of their children. Although early marriage was common among lower-class adolescents starting in the 1920s, wealthier families feared that their premature wedlock might doom their children to a life of limited opportunity. Indeed, young brides tended to marry men with lower-status jobs and were less likely to "marry up" than their older counterparts.⁷¹ Married students usually dropped out of school, those who tried to stay were frequently expelled by their school boards. As *Parents' Magazine* argued, "the teen-agers who quit high school to support families are...condemning themselves to the economic underworld."⁷² In an era in which wages were rising rapidly, especially for educated workers, less education meant substantially diminished prospects for lifetime earnings.

This fear was illustrated in the popular 1950 young adult book *Going Steady* by Anne Emery. Sally, the eighteen-year-old protagonist, visits her newlywed classmate, Millie. Millie and her husband lived in a small, messy apartment that contrasted sharply with Sally's spacious, sparkling home. Millie looked "limp and bedraggled, with shadows under her eyes and a tired droop to her mouth." Sally had been thinking about marrying her steady boyfriend, Scotty, but this visit quickly dissuaded her. "I don't want to have a dingy kind of home, and no time or money or strength to fix it up... All this talk about money and budgets and expenses and bills," said Sally, with a sober recognition. "I guess you can't get away from it."⁷³

A 1958 instructional film, "How Much Affection?" also reflected on the long-term economic dangers of young marriage. It portrayed a group of school friends talking about Eileen and Fred, a couple who married, dropped out of school, and had a baby five months later. One boy explained that he feels "kinda sorry for Fred. He always wanted to be a lawyer. Now I guess he's gotta keep any job just so he can look after Eileen and the baby." Indeed, Fred took a job at a steel mill, settled into an unhappy routine, and shelved his plans for law school indefinitely. Fears of girls marrying into unstable financial conditions and boys never realizing their economic potential animated the opposition to early matrimony. But lost potential could stretch beyond the individual family unit; it could affect the nation as a whole.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Inselberg, "Marital Problems and Satisfaction in High School Marriages," 76; Clark, "The Costly Hazard of Young Marriage," 121.

⁷⁰ Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*.

⁷¹ Burchinal, "Research on Young Marriage," 11.

⁷² Welton, "Heading Off Those Risky Teen Marriages," 47; Browning, "Teen Marriage."

⁷³ Anne Emery, *Going Steady* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), 171, 178-79.

⁷⁴ *How Much Affection?*

In 1960, renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead argued that young marriage would cripple the geopolitical future of the nation: “Early marriage is premature imprisonment of young people.” She warned that it would turn Americans into “a settled, security-loving, unadventurous people” at a time “when the people of countries like China and Soviet Russia feel that the future belongs to them, that it’s worth sacrificing for, worth working for.” Early matrimony would “curtail seriously the contribution that we can make as a nation to the development of civilization on this planet.”⁷⁵ The 1957 Sputnik launch stirred up fears that the Soviets were winning the “brain race.” As Mead argued, young people who married abandoned the classroom for the living room, leaving American high schools, colleges, and graduate programs to compete with a diminished team.⁷⁶ American citizens owed it to the country, and perhaps to the future of democracy, to delay marriage and devote themselves to school, work, and innovation during their most dynamic years.

This particular concern – that early marriage would compromise the promise of youth – resonated strongly among black adults engaged in the struggle for civil rights. They implored young people to postpone marriage and focus on fulfilling their duty to their race through education, work, and political activism. In a 1961 *Ebony* article, journalist Carl Rowan explained that teenagers’ personal choices were a crucial part of a larger political movement against racism. The black freedom struggle was at a critical juncture in the early 1960s – the civil rights movement was in full swing but the legal victories of the mid-1960s were by no means secured. During this uphill battle for citizenship rights, anything that derailed young black minds from attaining success and stability was highly suspect. To Rowan, married teenagers had essentially dropped out of the collective struggle for equal rights, as each retreated into his individual family life. He wrote, “These marriages constitute one of the major barriers to the Negro’s march to first-class citizenship . . . There are far too many Negro youngsters of vast leadership potential who today are deserting the war against ignorance for what they assume, foolishly, are only the endless ecstasies of marriage.”⁷⁷ Rowan believed that every black American had a duty to fulfill his or her full educational, intellectual, and career potential in order to combat racism and fight for full citizenship. Early marriage not only harmed the individual; it harmed the entire race.

Rowan warned that blacks could ill afford the negative effects of early marriage when so many forms of discrimination conspired against their success: “Many white youngsters may be able to ‘afford’ the loss of education, the stunted earning power, that almost inevitably goes with a teenage marriage, but the Negro, struggling in a hundred ways for equal status in a predominantly white society, simply cannot afford the luxury of ignorance and of unexploited potential.” Finally, he argued that black teenagers should postpone marriage because of their duty to future generations to create stable

⁷⁵ D Landman, “Tragic Trap of Teenage Marriage,” *Coronet*, February 1961; Margaret Mead, “Student Marriage: Good or Bad?,” *Reader’s Digest*, September 1960.

⁷⁶ Married teenagers were more likely to leave school than their unmarried peers, whether at the high school or graduate level. A 1958 New York Times survey showed that married college students were much less likely to pursue graduate degrees after college because of their family responsibilities and because they could find a good job with a bachelor’s degree. “Early Marriage Hinders Advanced College Study,” *Science Digest*, February 1962.

⁷⁷ Carl Rowan, “Tragedy of Teen-Age Marriage,” *Ebony*, August 1961, 62.

families and to be competent parents. Teenagers “owe it to this coming generation to postpone marriage long enough to get the education, the understanding of and respect for family life, that will enable them to be adequate parents.” He concluded, “It is essential that our youngsters be convinced that marriage for the ‘new Negro’ cannot be merely a yielding to raw emotions; it also must be an intellectual decision, made with the realization that the Negro family, too, is a major link in our new chain of freedom.”⁷⁸ Rowan’s argument – that black youth should avoid early marriage so that they could fulfill their full potential and fight for racial equality – may have been specific to the black community. But it fit right into a broader group of arguments by psychologists and sociologists that focused on the threat teenage marriage posed to young people’s future.

The final cluster of arguments against early marriage focused on teenagers’ *youth* and tried to protect them as “children.” Most adults believed that adolescents were developmentally and psychologically unprepared to handle the responsibilities and sexual expectations of marriage. In the words of Fred Hechinger, educational editor at the *New York Times*, “The rushing of physiological maturity, or rather the adoption of the trappings of such maturity, has had the effect of depriving children all over the nation of their childhood. This, it seems to me, is nothing short of sinful.”⁷⁹ In other words, protecting children meant keeping them single.

Married teenagers themselves were sometimes the strongest opponents of early marriage. When young husbands and wives discussed their own marriages, they often stressed their naiveté and immaturity. Sherry, a young girl who told her story to *Ladies Home Journal* in 1958, married, had a baby, and divorced, all by age seventeen. She blamed her predicament on her immaturity: “We were both just too young. Please tell the other girls not to get married in their teens – they just don’t have the maturity for it. Even if you think you’re really, truly in love, it’s better to wait. At least that’s what I found.”⁸⁰ A nineteen-year-old husband and father who reflected on his marriage in *Ladies’ Home Journal* in 1963 saw his sexual behavior as a symptom of his immaturity: “If I had been mature emotionally – been able to control myself on a date – I would not be married today. I don’t think you should take on the responsibilities of a family when you are so young . . . It makes you grow up quickly, but maybe you miss something in growing up too fast.”⁸¹

A young couple who married in 1965 recalled their difficulty adjusting to marital intimacy in the early years of their marriage. Dee Dee explained that John walked in on her once while she was changing, prompting her to yell, “Well, just walk in on me next time, just walk *in!*” He replied, “Good gosh, what do you expect me to do? You *are* my wife!” And then we both looked at each other and just burst out laughing.”⁸² Dee Dee recalled her modesty in a jovial manner, but other couples faced more serious problems. A young woman who married when she was eighteen and her husband was twenty struggled with her husband’s immaturity for the first few years of their marriage. “I had assumed he was ready to settle down and give up his old pals and pleasures. When it

⁷⁸ Ibid., 62, 68.

⁷⁹ Fred Hechinger, “Tradition: Security or Restriction?” in Farber and Wilson, *Teen-age Marriage and Divorce: a Symposium*, 2.

⁸⁰ Parton, “Why Do They Marry So Young?,” 174.

⁸¹ Anderson, “Teen-Age Marriage Craze,” 119.

⁸² Barbara Lang, “The Teen-Age Marriage: Love Finds a Way,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, June 1965, 100.

suddenly dawned on me that he wasn't – that he still wanted to run with the pack – it almost smashed our marriage.”⁸³

Educational materials intended for adolescents stressed the importance of maturity to a successful marriage, including a 1950 Coronet Instructional film entitled “Are You Ready for Marriage?” The film showed Mr. Hall, a marriage counselor, cautioning a young engaged couple against marrying before reaching adulthood, because “a person you marry at 18 or so might seem like quite a different person to you a few years later.” He asked whether they understand real everyday marriage, not the kind in movies, the young man naively responded, “Well golly Mr. Hall, I don't know . . . I just know I'm in love with Sue.” The counselor explained, “when the two of you are ready for marriage, you'll sense a new feeling between you . . . Your sense of preparedness,” Hall advised, “shows up in the way you consider what's best for the pair of you, over what you want for yourself.” The couple thought over Mr. Hall's advice and decided to postpone their engagement. The film gently discouraged early marriage by insisting that developmental maturity, not just young love, is necessary to make a union work.⁸⁴

The popular television program *The Patty Duke Show* came to the same conclusion in a 1966 episode called “Fiancée for a Day.” The episode began after Patty and her boyfriend, Richard, visited their friends, Sally and Bob, who had married six months after graduating from high school. Inspired by their example, Richard asked Patty to marry him. She agreed and launched into the first of two daydreams about married life. In the first, she was a perfect housewife dressed in polka dots. She greeted Richard with food, a pipe, and slippers when he returned from work. Their luxurious, blissful domestic scene was interrupted when Sally showed up, complaining of her financial troubles, her crumbling marriage, and her unhappiness. This led Patty into her second fantasy, in which her husband was a destitute old man who hated his children and beat his wife. Patty woke from her daydreams convinced that young marriage was much too difficult and they had better wait. Richard came to the same conclusion after talking to Bob about his tight finances. Richard and Patty agreed not to marry any time soon to the relief of their concerned parents. Ironically, the episode's director was Harry Falk, who had married the actress Patty Duke in 1965 when he was thirty-one and she was eighteen.⁸⁵

Critics viewed youthful marriage as a symptom of a larger cultural breakdown of generational boundaries. Influential child expert Benjamin Spock believed that young marriage reflected adolescents' lack of respect for parents: “Half a century or more ago if parents decided to block their child's marriage, they often got away with it . . . because children were more in awe of their parents . . . Nowadays parents aren't granted nearly as much wisdom or authority – by their children, by society generally or even by themselves.” To Spock, this weakened form of parenting allowed teenagers to taste maturity long before they were ready.⁸⁶ Journalist Norma Browning agreed, “The most astonishing phenomenon in recent years has been what [sociologists] call the 'social

⁸³ “Playing at Marriage,” *Good Housekeeping*, April 1969, 28.

⁸⁴ *Are You Ready for Marriage?*.

⁸⁵ “Fiancée for a Day,” *The Patty Duke Show* (ABC, April 13, 1966); Patty Duke and Kenneth Turan, *Call Me Anna: The Autobiography of Patty Duke* (Toronto; New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 144–60.

⁸⁶ Benjamin Spock, “When Teen-Agers Talk of Marriage,” *Redbook*, August 1967.

acceleration' on youngsters - the pressures, with full parental approval and encouragement, to make children behave like adults."⁸⁷

Social acceleration took many forms but the ones that garnered the most attention had to do with dating and sexuality. A high school principal in 1963 attributed his school's marriage problem to early dating: "Students start going steady when they're thirteen and during high school most of the girls are wearing a boy's ring on a necklace. If they aren't officially engaged by the end of their senior year, they think their life's ruined." Journalist Lester Davis blamed parents for "the encouragement of 'Little League' romance, or dating in the preteen years," which he believed led to sexual experimentation and young marriage.⁸⁸ Precocious behaviors existed on a spectrum: early dating was certainly better than early marriage, but it was a slippery slope from one to the other.

Davis argued that mothers were grooming their daughters for teenage marriage by exposing them to adult femininity too soon: "Mothers are encouraging early marriage by making young girls conscious of the trappings of femininity years before they should be concerned with them."⁸⁹ In Davis's article, Dr. Helen Hall Jennings, a clinical psychologist from New York, explained that "undue emphasis on personal prettiness and modishness too early in life can result in a preoccupation on a child's part with self and appearance." She continued,

Slowly, insidiously, she can be distracted from the normal pursuits of childhood, to which she will give less and less attention, as she concentrates on her personal prettiness . . . Eventually the only real skill she becomes interested in developing is personal attractiveness. Boys soon enter the picture. For her, early marriage is far more likely than for other girls.⁹⁰

Jennings, like others, traced the social crisis of early marriage back to childhood, specifically to childhoods in which innocence was lost too soon. Even some teenagers, like a seventeen-year-old girl interviewed in *Ladies' Home Journal* in 1963 agreed that early dating, and parents' support for the practice, led to young marriages. "Parents aren't doing anything to discourage early dating. If anything, [they] are *encouraging* it. You find them planning dances for children in grade school. It's almost a status thing."⁹¹

Even when mothers did not focus on dating, they could still shepherd their daughters into early marriages through seemingly harmless behavior, according to Lester Davis. He presented the example of Clarissa, a girl who was driven into marriage at age sixteen because her mother introduced her to the adult world too early. She brought her daughter to grown-up parties, theaters and restaurants at age thirteen. Eventually, Clarissa found the world of kids her own age dull. As Davis explained, "authorities agree that one fundamental psychological factor is common to all teenage wives. Exactly as in

⁸⁷ Norma Lee Browning, "Why Too Many Marriages Fail," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 3, 1960.

⁸⁸ Parton, "Why Do They Marry So Young?"; Lester Davis, "Are You Pushing Your Daughter into Too-Early Marriage?," *Good Housekeeping*, October 1961, 219, 216; Anderson, "Teen-Age Marriage Craze," 66.

⁸⁹ Davis, "Are You Pushing Your Daughter into Too-Early Marriage?," 219.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁹¹ Anderson, "Teen-Age Marriage Craze," 66.

Clarissa's case, the girl has become unhappy with her role as a growing child and demanded the headier excitement and broader experiences enjoyed by adults."⁹² For critics of teenage marriage - a trend that threatened to destabilize age boundaries - the solution seemed to be solidifying those lines. Children should stay children, innocent of romance, and adult institutions like marriage should be left for true adults.

Love on the Run: State Laws, Border Crossings and Teenage Elopement

Sixteen-year-old Kenny Brown and fifteen-year-old Barbara Cotter met and fell in love at Oyster Bay High School in East Norwich, Long Island. By the time he was a junior and she was a senior in 1955, they had been dating for a year and were desperate to get married. According to the marriage laws of New York, however, they were too young to wed. Kenny and Barbara diligently studied the marriage laws of each state and discovered that they could legally marry in Utah with only a letter of parental consent. Carrying carefully forged letters of consent, the resolute couple took a train to New York City, a second train to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and a bus to Salt Lake City. Their elopement might have gone off without a hitch had Barbara not been spotted by a truancy officer who hauled both her and Kenny down to the local detention home. Social workers contacted Barbara and Kenny's distraught parents, who, after much anguish, reluctantly gave their approval. Kenny and Barbara were married on April 9th, thousands of miles from home, with detention home workers as their bridal party. The two teenagers found jobs and settled into married life in their new state. Kenny explained to a reporter from the *Washington Post*, "We didn't want to run away, but our parents just never understood. ... We're still sorry it had to be this way."⁹³

The discrepancies in state marriage laws that Kenny and Barbara so carefully studied elevated teenage marriage from a local problem to a national – and occasionally international – one in the postwar years. Historian Nancy Cott explained that the federal government became increasingly involved in marriage law in the thirty years after World War II, creating incentives for couples to marry and protecting the rights of individuals to enter marriage more freely. The Social Security system as well as the new federal income tax code of 1948 offered financial benefits to married couples. In *Griswold v. Connecticut*, a 1965 case that struck down Connecticut's ban on contraceptives for married couples, the Supreme Court ruled that the Constitution protected a "right to marital privacy." In the 1967's *Loving v. Virginia*, which declared anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional, the high court declared the right to marry a "fundamental freedom." As Cott argues, judges treated marriage as a pillar of national liberty, emblematic of American consent and freedom.⁹⁴ While this era was characterized by an increase in marital freedom and federal protection from state limitations, including adolescents tells a different story. During the 1950s and 1960s, fears of teenage matrimony inspired states and lawmakers to limit young people's access to marriage by increasing the minimum age of marriage, tightening parental consent laws and lobbying for more uniform marriage laws across the nation. Historians have recognized the role that rising divorce rates played for marriage reformers, but I argue that the continued popularity of youthful

⁹² Davis, "Are You Pushing Your Daughter into Too-Early Marriage?," 219, 216.

⁹³ Bernstein, "Runaway Marriage," 35.

⁹⁴ Cott, *Public Vows*, 191–99.

marriage was also a critical factor in the flurry of marriage reform in the twenty-five years after World War II.

Since the Antebellum Era, states have been the primary architects and regulators of marriage and divorce laws, and they have jealously guarded this right from the encroachment of the federal government. Local control resulted in widely divergent rules across the country concerning minimum marriage age, parental consent, blood tests and waiting periods. This disparate landscape also provided a hospitable environment for cross-border elopements. When neighboring states had different marriage requirements, a brisk business in marriage tourism often popped up on the more lenient side of the border. Young people like Kenny and Barbara who eloped in Utah learned to exploit differences in state marriage laws, striking fear in the hearts of parents. As Tennessee Governor Frank G. Clement described in 1957, legislative action was necessary to prevent marriages “which appear legal on one side [of the border] and a little short of immoral on the other.”⁹⁵ Beginning in the 1950s, parents, lawmakers, educators and psychologists grappled with the disparity in marriage laws, and tried to come up with a reformed system that would keep their teenagers single.

In the 1950s, when nuptial rates peaked for young people, marriage laws differed greatly from state to state. New Hampshire distinguished itself by having the lowest legal minimum ages in the nation in 1956: thirteen for girls and fourteen for boys. Texas set its limits at fourteen for girls and sixteen for boys with parental consent. Newspapers reported marriages of girls as young as ten and eleven in Mississippi during the same time period. Most states had higher limits, typically fifteen or sixteen for girls and seventeen or eighteen for boys with parental approval, but they also varied widely in other requirements. For example, in 1956, nine states plus the District of Columbia allowed marriage without a blood test; twenty-five states issued marriage licenses immediately without a waiting period. Given the lack of uniformity in state marriage laws, couples of all ages could pick out the most lenient state within a reasonable distance and hit the road for a quick wedding. State boundaries might have been a deterrent to young lovers in years past, but as a reporter for *American Mercury* explained, “this is the day of the automobile. This is the day when it’s easy to get married.”⁹⁶

Armed with their family car and youthful determination, many teenagers traveled long distances to get legal marriages in states with looser requirements. But out-of-state marriages often led to discord and legal trouble. In 1961, seventeen-year-old Jane Ellen Haughey, daughter of a prominent Wall Street broker, eloped with a twenty-one-year-old gas-station attendant named George Lisberg. The pair drove from their homes in Long Island all the way to Virginia to wed. When Jane returned home, her father shuttered her in their mansion in Old Brookville, New York, and refused to let her husband in. George went to court alleging that his wife was being kept “prisoner” and obtained a writ allowing him to visit, without his new father-in-law present. At the time the story appeared in the *New York Times*, the legal battle for custody of Jane raged on.⁹⁷ Cars and loose marriage laws in nearby states could subvert even the wealthiest parents’ plans for their children.

⁹⁵ Jesse Burt, “Sex and Teen-Age Marriages,” *American Mercury*, January 1957.

⁹⁶ “Marriage Before Age 7 Illegal,” *Washington Post*, 1956 Jun 26; “Raise Age For Marriage in Mississippi,” *Chicago Defender*, December 28, 1957; Burt, “Sex and Teen-Age Marriages.”

⁹⁷ “Eloper Wins Right To Visit Wife, 17, At Her L.I. Estate.”

Other young people traveled out of state for their weddings because they could lie more easily about their age, forge required documents, or subvert parental disapproval in states with more relaxed laws. Like Kenny and Barbara who forged letters of approval from their parents' before heading off to Utah, out-of-state elopements gave young people an opportunity to evade marriage laws in a place where no one knew them. Newspapers in the 1950s and 1960s frequently contained tales of elopements, legal battles between father and husband, and cautionary tales of out-of-state marriages. The *Chicago Reporter* told of eighteen-year-old Carl Gehrke and thirteen-year-old Jane Kanzler who drove nearly six-hundred miles to get married in Mississippi in 1957, a state notorious for its lax marriage laws. The teens, who grew up across the street from each other in a suburb of Chicago, traveled to Hernando, Mississippi just a few miles south of the state line. They lied about their ages on their marriage application to avoid the required parental approval. Upon their return, Jane's parents went straight to Superior Court, demanding that the judge issue an annulment. The Superior Judge chastised the couple for "flouting the laws of Illinois," and ordered the young woman back to her parents' home.⁹⁸

The same year, the *Los Angeles Times* reported on ten-year-old Donna Sue Nichols and her nineteen-year-old husband Charles William Turner Jr. When they made up their mind to get married, they merely drove a few towns over where no one recognized the young bride nor noticed that she erroneously listed her age as fifteen on her marriage license. She had purportedly even convinced her husband that she was fifteen throughout their short courtship. Playing into the sensational nature of the story, the paper accompanied the article with a photograph of Charles and his admittedly mature-looking bride, wearing high heels and lipstick. The judge planned to declare Donna Sue "neglected" by her parents and turn her over to juvenile authorities.⁹⁹

Teenage marriage tourism did more than enrage fathers and animate courtroom battles; it sustained the economy of entire towns. "Marriage mills," as these towns were known, tended to pop up in states with lax marriage laws, close to the border of states with stricter laws. Hernando, Mississippi, the same town where Jerry Lee Lewis and Myra Brown said their vows, was a notorious marriage mill in a state renowned for its plentiful and easy issuance of marriage licenses. In 1957, for example, Mississippi issued 66,500 marriage licenses, making it second only to Nevada on a per capita basis. A full sixty-five of those licenses were issued to out-of-state couples.

Residents of Hernando, Mississippi described their home as a one-factory town – that factory being the marriage industry. The otherwise sleepy town of 1,853 residents issued nearly 9,000 marriage licenses in 1957. Located just twenty-five miles south of Memphis, Tennessee, the town welcomed the economic boom provided by eloping couples. Ministers found themselves so wealthy and busy from the marrying business that they had no time or need for a parish. Elder Sandefur "married as high as \$300 worth of couples a day" and made extra cash renting his motel rooms to honeymooners after performing their marriage ceremonies. Perhaps the biggest windfall of the matrimonial business came to the clerk of the Circuit Court, whose primary job was issuing marriage licenses. Because he received a portion of each fee, Richard Davis collected \$27,000 on top of his annual salary of \$3,000, making him better paid than the Governor of

⁹⁸ "Too Young For Love, Says Judge," *Chicago Defender*, August 14, 1957.

⁹⁹ "Legal Snarls Faced by Bride, 10, and Mate, 19," *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 1957.

Mississippi. Residents in a wide variety of businesses got involved in the marriage boom, including Mils E. Barbee, a white shop owner whose general store served the town's black population. Barbee arranged for a black preacher, Wills Smith, to set up shop within his store, and black couples quickly followed. In peak season, Smith performed ten to twelve weddings on a single day. Officials estimated that the town took in \$500,000 a year from its connubial business.¹⁰⁰

Marriage mills were not limited to the United States; in states along the nation's southern border, bold adolescents crossed *international* lines to marry at ages that were illegal in their home state. In 1960, Modern Catalina High School in Tucson, Arizona, confronted an "epidemic" of students driving to Mexico to get married. In a four-month period, twenty girls from the school eloped in Nogales, Mexico, a town 65 miles to the South. Some of the brides were as young as fifteen years old, and few if any, had parental permission. Alarmed, the Parent Teacher Association set up a committee to investigate the trend, and found that most marriages followed a similar pattern. Students generally borrowed the family car under the guise that they were going to stay out late at a school dance or party. Instead, they sped southward to Nogales, where bartenders and cab drivers waited at the border to usher the students through their Mexican wedding ceremonies for a fee, ranging from thirty to fifty dollars. The couple filled out paperwork in Spanish with the help of their guide, went through a short ceremony, and drove back to Arizona before their parents realized they were gone. Once back home, the newlyweds generally hid their marriage from their parents until they figured enough time had passed so that the marriage could not be annulled. News of successful elopement trips encouraged other teens to follow suit. One boy who got married in Nogales reported that other students asked him for advice on their own Mexican weddings at least once a week.

Back in Arizona, adults questioned the legality of these Mexican marriages. Harry Ackerman, Pima Count's Attorney, said that "if a couple married in Mexico in order to evade Arizona's marriage laws, the marriage is void." But parents did not trust the dubious legality of Mexican weddings to stop their children from eloping: they called for tighter border control. No single state had jurisdiction to regulate an international boundary; still, border states including Texas and California thought up ways to prevent youngsters from heading south. California considered a law that barred teenagers from crossing the border without an adult relative. In 1960, Thomas Hennings, Missouri Senator and Chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, said "legislation to close the entire border to unescorted teenagers is a possibility."¹⁰¹ Increased parental and police vigilance curtailed cross-border marriages in Arizona, but adults feared the victory would not last forever. While lawmakers never managed to close the border to unaccompanied youngsters, fear of teenage elopement reverberated in the highest levels of government and affected legislation ranging from local marriage laws to international border policy.

By the late 1950s, pressure from parents, politicians, educators and psychologists to limit teenage marriages inspired states to raise their minimum marriage age, increase waiting periods and add requirements that would make the process of obtaining a license more difficult. Mississippi took steps to combat its image as a marriage mill in 1957 by

¹⁰⁰ Cal Brumley, "A Marriage Mill Is Shutting Down With Myriad Consequences," *Wall Street Journal*, July 1, 1958.

¹⁰¹ Spicer, "Teenage Secret Marriage Epidemic."

passing a law that raised marriage ages to fifteen for girls and seventeen for boys. The law also required circuit clerks to inform the parents of minors by registered mail that their children had applied for a license. It forbade girls under age twenty-one from obtaining a license outside of their home county, and it required medical certificates for all applicants. Hernando residents who lived off of the marriage business were horrified. One Baptist minister who sold his chapel after the new law went into effect predicted that “the new marriage law will upset the entire economy of the county.” Judge Joe Massey, who made his living by marrying visiting couples, claimed, “Now, if I want to eat, I guess I’ll have to catch rabbits.”¹⁰²

In 1959, Texas and Oklahoma worked in unison to tighten their marriage laws. The new regulations kept the previous minimum marriage age with parental consent at fourteen for girls and sixteen for boys, but specified that girls below age eighteen and boys below age twenty-one had to be accompanied by their parents in person to obtain a marriage license, rather than providing a note as they had in the past. In addition, the states added a three-day waiting period and required proof such as a driver’s license or birth certificate to verify age.¹⁰³ In the same year, Wisconsin raised the minimum marriage age for girls from fifteen to sixteen in order to “slow down and prevent waste in divorce and marriage proceedings,” in the words of the legislative council.¹⁰⁴ Iowa followed suit in 1961, raising the age limit of marrying with parental consent from fourteen to sixteen for girls and sixteen to eighteen for boys, and adding a three-day waiting period. In 1963, Arkansas reinstated a law originally passed in 1941 requiring girls to be sixteen and boys to be eighteen years old at the time of marriage in order for the union to be officially recognized. Only those in “official” marriages could claim Social Security benefits later in life. This law set off a spate of remarriages, including seven brides and seven grooms who married in a group ceremony in Star City a few months after the new law took effect.¹⁰⁵

In many cases, revamped marriage laws helped cut down on youthful elopements. But in other cases, new legislation simply altered the geography of elopement, closing down old marriage mill towns as new ones arose to take their place. In the Midwest, Crown Point, Indiana dominated the out-of-state marriage business during the 1930s. But after Indiana passed legislation in 1940 requiring blood tests, the marriage boom moved west to Iowa, where girls of fourteen and boys of sixteen could marry with parental consent, and without a waiting period. By 1961, Iowa county clerks reported that half of all marriages performed were for out-of-state juveniles. Each border town catered to a different population: Chicagoans went to Clinton and Davenport, Wisconsinites headed to



Figure 1 - Group Wedding in Star City, Arkansas. AP Images

¹⁰² Brumley, “A Marriage Mill Is Shutting Down With Myriad Consequences.”

¹⁰³ Al Hester, “Teen-Age Problem In Texas,” *Washington Post*, June 26, 1960.

¹⁰⁴ “Ban Marriage For Girls 15, In Wis.”

¹⁰⁵ “They Made It Legal,” *Washington Post*, July 16, 1963.

Dubuque, while Minnesotans wed in Mason City and Northwood. In response to political pressure, the Iowa legislature rolled out new marriage laws with higher age limits on July 4, 1961, but left a loophole for underage marriages for girls who were pregnant. Officials were happy with the revised law, but worried that the pregnancy clause could cause an even larger “marriage-go-round” than ever.¹⁰⁶ Stricter requirements and higher minimum ages slowed down elopements but even the strictest state marriage laws were surmountable by a determined young couple with a car. The mobility of the American population in the 1960s posed a serious challenge to those who tried to remake marriage through state-level strategies.

The California State Legislature took up the fight against teenage marriage in the mid-1960s. In early 1965, the Judiciary Committee recommended a series of reforms designed to curb hasty unions and educate youngsters about the benefits of waiting to wed. The Committee proposed that the marriage license fee be raised from \$2 to \$5, and that \$5 be added to the divorce filing fee. The money collected from this increase would be used to fund preventative school programs in Family Life Education and remedial marital counseling. This proposal successfully passed the Assembly but languished in the Senate Judiciary Committee for Interim Study.¹⁰⁷ The Committee’s efforts to reform the waiting period for a marriage license had more traction. In 1965, California was one of nineteen states that did not require a waiting period, and the legislature held hearings to investigate whether longer waiting periods would discourage teenage marriage. Experts testified that “anything which slows down, delays or postpones the all too often hasty and unconsidered youthful plunge into matrimony would be a positive step.”¹⁰⁸ Legislators drafted a bill that added a waiting period of thirty days for all minors seeking to marry, but allowed couples to apply for a waiver from a juvenile court judge in special circumstances.

This bill passed both houses of the legislature, but Governor Pat Brown snuffed it with a pocket veto. Brown’s veto message focused on the need for more education, rather than stricter rules. It read:

The theory is that this would give time for premarital counseling and education. However, such counseling and education is not provided for in the bill and an undue hardship is forced on young unmarried girls. More premarital counseling is needed but this bill does not accomplish this and would do more harm than good.¹⁰⁹

This roadblock sent California legislators thinking about national solutions. Law professor and legislative consultant Robert E. Furlong suggested “a state-initiated, federal constitutional amendment which would grant Congress jurisdiction which is does not currently have to establish uniform minimum waiting periods preceding marriage and uniform, minimal residence requirements preceding divorce.” In 1965, the California

¹⁰⁶ Browning, “Marriage Mill for Teens.”

¹⁰⁷ Robert E. Furlong, “Robert E Furlong, “Youthful Marriage and Parenthood: A Threat to Family Stability,” *Hastings Law Journal* 19, no. 1 (1967).

¹⁰⁸ Robert E. Furlong, “Easy Marriage, Easy Divorce” in Farber and Wilson, *Teen-age Marriage and Divorce; a Symposium*, 111.

¹⁰⁹ Furlong, “Robert E Furlong, “Youthful Marriage and Parenthood: A Threat to Family Stability.”

Legislature passed a resolution, AJR 17, urging Congress to initiate a constitutional amendment.”¹¹⁰ This vote was largely symbolic, but it was representative of a broad ideological shift toward finding a national solution to the problem of teenage marriage.

Calls to unify national marriage laws had a long history. In the 1870s and 1880s, Progressive reformers pressured state legislatures to control matrimony more strictly. Frightened by a rising divorce rate, they pushed to eliminate “informal” marriages performed without the participation of the state and limit access to divorce. Their early efforts were stymied by the inconsistency of state marriage laws and the mobility of the population. In response, they advocated for uniform national marriage laws in order to eliminate out-of-state divorces and argued their case before Congress several times. Reformers in Congress even managed to propose a Constitutional Amendment to establish a national marriage and divorce code in the 1885 – 1886 Congressional session.¹¹¹ Similarly, in the mid-twentieth century, lawmakers shifted away from their state-by-state reform efforts, and pushed for a nation-wide uniform marriage code in hopes of stopping premature marriage for good.

For over a century, the leading organization in the effort to coordinate state marriage policies was the Special Committee on Uniform Divorce and Marriage Laws of the National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws (NCCUSL). NCCUSL was founded in 1892 by the American Bar Association. Its goal was to create uniform laws in areas outside of Congressional jurisdiction by convincing states to voluntarily adopt legislation they had drafted. Governors from each state appointed Commissioners, who met in national conferences to draft uniform laws. Once the Conference approved and published a new law, Commissioners lobbied their state legislatures for its passage. Over the years, NCCUSL focused on issues including bank notes, a universal commercial code and food and drug laws.

NCCUSL turned its significant resources to marriage and divorce laws starting in 1950, and their efforts intensified in the late 1960s. The organization’s first foray into marriage law was the Uniform Marriage License Application Act, which they published in 1950. It proposed that all parties applying for a marriage license to submit a blood test and mandated a five-day waiting period. State Commissioners tried to drum up support for the measure, but as of 1957, only five states had adopted it.¹¹² Undeterred, NCCUSL tackled marriage in a bigger way a decade later with the Uniform Marriage and Divorce Act (UMDA), which it drafted in 1969 and approved in 1970. This more ambitious project was shaped in part by concerns over teenage marriage. The bill attempted to create a single standard for all marriage and divorce laws, including marriage age, grounds for divorce, child custody, and property distribution. While this effort is best remembered for its role in popularizing no-fault divorce, the transcript of drafting meetings illustrates that the Committee was both deeply concerned about teenage marriage, and sharply divided on this controversial topic.

In 1970, NCCUSL met at its National Conference to review and finalize the Uniform Marriage and Divorce Act, which it had begun writing in 1969. The draft of the bill outlined the required ages for parties wishing to marry in section 203. It read that a clerk could issue a marriage license after seeing proof that

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 112, 114.

¹¹¹ Cott, *Public Vows*, 110, 261n12.

¹¹² Burt, “Sex and Teen-Age Marriages.”

each party to the marriage will have attained the age of 18 at the time the marriage license becomes effective, or will have attained the age of 16 and has either the consent of both parents or guardian to the marriage, or has obtained judicial approval, or if under the age of 16, has judicial approval.¹¹³

In other words, sixteen and seventeen-year-olds could marry with parental consent while younger adolescents could only marry with the specific approval of a judge. Generally, underage applicants only received judicial approval if they were pregnant, as most judges thought it was best for the child to be born in wedlock to avoid stigma. This clause, however, set off a vigorous debate among the Commissioners.

Commissioner Peter Langrock of Vermont asked whether there was any evidence of marriages succeeding when the parties were under age sixteen. Professor Robert Levy, a family law expert from the University of Minnesota offered a statistical defense of young spouses. He acknowledged that young marriages were more likely to end in divorce, but it was not clear that *youth* itself was the cause of those divorces:

Most social scientists would say that the chances of divorce increase as the age at which marriage occurs goes down, but they are not willing to say that extreme youth means that the marriage will end in divorce, because there are too often [complicating] variables which are too often associated with youth.

These variables included “lack of education, lack of employment opportunities, lack of education among the parents, or a divorce among the parents.”¹¹⁴

Langrock was unconvinced by the sociological evidence and suggested that the “underage” clause be struck from the bill. “I do not think that pregnancy is a valid criterion for allowing the marriage to take place,” he argued. “I don’t think there is any social justification for allowing anybody under the age of 16 to marry and I move to delete it.”¹¹⁵ Other members voiced their agreement. Commissioner Charles Welling from North Carolina vigorously opposed section 203 because he believed that sixteen-year-olds had not yet reached social maturity in contemporary society:

A 16-year-old is not today in a position to assume the responsibilities of marriage. In our State he cannot get a job without a special work permit at age 16. Years ago we had a society where people had at 16 and 18 completed the formal education they were going to get, and they went into the world and formed a family to live together and raise children. Today at 16 children are just beginning

¹¹³ National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws, “Proceedings: National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws in Its 79th Year, Uniform Marriage and Divorce Act,” Conference Transcription, New York: Martin C. Johnson Reporting Service, Inc. (Colony Motor Hotel, Clayton, Missouri, August 1, 1970), 26, <http://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.nccusl/nccpub00531&collection=nccusl&index=&id=1>.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

their formal education, and to saddle them with a marriage is wrong, and I will support the motion.¹¹⁶

In contrast, Commissioner Maurice Merrell from Oklahoma argued that legal recognition of underage unions was better than allowing young people to live together under their own rules. “We have been confronted with the fact that these kids are getting together, that if there is an insuperable barrier to marriage, many of them – in increasing numbers – are nevertheless going to live together.” He continued, “it would be preferable to have them married rather than to have them living together in an unrecognized association.” Thomas Needham, a Commissioner from Rhode Island disagreed. “The purpose of this act,” he argued “is to promote integrity and stability in marriage, and to bring about a conscious awareness in the citizenry of this country of the obligations of marriage.” In his estimation, this bill would allow the commissioners to “say sanctimoniously that we’re going to hold to sixteen” while pushing the responsibility for underage youth “off to the juvenile court.”¹¹⁷

The Chairman stopped debate at this point and put the motion to strike the “underage” portion of Section 203 to a vote. The measure failed to get approval. Section 203 and the exception for judicial approval stayed in the UDMA, to the dismay of many including Commissioner James Burke from Wisconsin. He complained that if he took the bill with this section home to Wisconsin, it “would be amended out of there so fast it would scare you, and then we’d wind up with an un-uniform Act.”¹¹⁸ In a final moment of compromise, the Commission added two sentences that served as a moral guideline. In the published version of UMDA, Section 203 specified that a party under the age of sixteen could marry “only if the court finds that the underaged party is capable of assuming the responsibilities of marriage and the marriage would serve his best interests. Pregnancy alone does not establish that the best interests of the party would be served.”¹¹⁹ The Commission kept its underage clause, while reminding judges to use their powers sparingly.

NCCUSL published the Uniform Marriage and Divorce Act in 1970, but it met with little success in state legislatures. No states adopted the Act in its entirety, and only eight states adopted significant portions that kept its main principles intact. In 1965, five years before the publication of UMDA, NCCUSL’s Executive Director, Allison Dunham, reflected that the organization had struggled in the field of marriage and divorce reform because “there has been too much diversity of local custom among the states.”¹²⁰ Little had changed by 1970. Where they could, states continued to guard their control over marriage law fiercely.¹²¹ The movement to create uniform marriage laws in the late 1960s represents a novel approach to solving the problem of young marriage, but the fears that animated the movement – of teenage divorce, inappropriate sexuality and lack of

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 35.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 30–1.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 36.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., B11–B12.

¹²⁰ Allison Dunham, “A History of the National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 30 (Spring 1965): 245.

¹²¹ Although the UMDA did not result in uniform marriage laws, it played an important role in popularizing no-fault divorce and equitable distribution of marital property on a national level.

maturity – remained remarkably similar to those that inspired reformers twenty years earlier.

What ended the legislative debate over teenage marriage was the behavior of teenagers themselves. Young marriage waned in popularity as people increasingly chose to live together before they married or eschewed marriage altogether. By 1977, the average marriage age was back at its prewar levels. The percentage of fifteen to seventeen-year-olds who were married dropped to four percent, right where it had started before World War II.¹²² The demographic anomalies of the postwar years that had resulted in hundreds of thousands of teenage brides came to an end, essentially silencing the twenty-year debate over marriage age. Fears of teenage marriage gave way to new concerns, about cohabitation, free love, and most importantly, adolescent pregnancy. Whereas the postwar generation married in order to gain access to the trappings of adulthood – maturity, sexual freedom, and independence – subsequent generations laid claim to those privileges without bothering with a marriage license. This later rebellion, the severing of marriage from the rights it once bestowed, gave rise to a powerful new set of anxieties about the meanings of youth, adulthood, and age-appropriate sexuality.

¹²² Calculated from Carter, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Earliest Times to the Present*, 1:Table Aa614–683, 1–74 – 1–100.

Student Bodies: Adolescent Marriage and Parenthood in Postwar American High Schools

In the spring of 1951, Georgine Gardy was just finishing up her senior year at Mount Morris High School in Michigan where she served as senior class president. A few weeks before graduation, the seventeen-year-old married her boyfriend who worked in a factory in nearby Flint. When she returned to Mount Morris High the next week, Superintendent E.L. Clark made a school-wide announcement: Georgine and the five other married and engaged students in the senior class had to withdraw from school immediately because they were a bad influence on the rest of the student body.

When word of the expulsions got out, the senior class erupted in protest. Nearly the entire senior class and a few recruits from other grades went on strike in protest. They paraded around the school's grounds holding homemade signs. One read "Unfair to Married and Engaged Women!" Another sign drew attention to Clark's disrespect for the students: "Superintendent Refers to Students as Hoodlums." A third sign – "SUPT. TO OLD" – expressed frustration with the growing generation gap between the students and Clark, though the poor spelling suggested the protesters still had a few things to learn from their elders.



Figure 2 - Students Protest Outside Mount Morris High School, 1951. AP Images.

An astonished Superintendent Clark called for an emergency meeting of students, faculty, and parents to quell what he called an “uprising.” A large crowd gathered in the school gymnasium to discuss the expulsions and the student strike, but the meeting quickly devolved into shouting and chaotic disagreement. A parent fetched state police sergeant Vincent Nearing from Flint to moderate the meeting and calm the disorderly crowd. Four hours later, Sergeant Nearing emerged from the gym, mopped his brow, and told reporters that a tentative compromise had been reached.

According to the agreement, the student who was noticeably pregnant would leave school immediately and avoid school grounds for the remainder of her pregnancy. The other married girls could return to school once they brought a doctor’s note affirming that they were not pregnant. They would be allowed to use the school’s facilities before and after regular classes to study privately with teachers. Assuming their schoolwork was satisfactory, they would graduate on time. Finally, the recently engaged student would be allowed to continue in her regular classes so long as she removed the evidence of her transgression: her engagement ring. Georgine deemed the terms of the settlement to be “acceptable,” and a teacher told reporters that the other girls had also agreed to the arrangement. In a sense, nearly all participants got what they wanted: Superintendent Clark rid his school of pregnant students; the married girls got to return to class assuming they were not pregnant; and the student body got to give public voice to their frustration with the superintendent. Everyone, that is, other than the pregnant student who not only had to stop her education prematurely but was banned from even stepping foot on campus.¹

The events in Mount Morris, Michigan were unusual enough to make headlines in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Washington Post*. But young marriage itself was quite common, as was Mount Morris High School’s treatment of its students. In the two decades after World War II, new trends in family formation and schooling brought an unprecedented number of married and pregnant students into the school system. During the postwar era, American teenagers stayed in school longer and in greater numbers than ever before. At the same time, they also married and started families at exceptionally young ages. During these years, Americans generally agreed that precocious teenage sexuality was a private problem that should be dealt with discreetly and on an individual level. The one place where youthful marriages and childbearing emerged from the private sphere and became hotly contested *public* issues was in high schools.

The presence of married and pregnant adolescents in high schools hallways and classrooms blatantly clashed with existing understandings of the purpose of education, the meaning of adulthood and age-appropriate sexuality. Children in category but adults in actions, these students made educators question whether they belonged in school, or whether they posed a moral threat to the rest of the student body. Were they still enough like children to deserve or need an education? Or were they more like adults who should be working and tending to the home? Were they sexual deviants who should be separated from their innocent peers or respectable husbands and wives who embodied monogamous, heterosexual family life?

¹ “Married Girls Win Rights in Student Strike,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 7, 1951; “Strike over Ban on Pregnant Girl Students Ended,” *Washington Post*, August 7, 1951; “Married Pupil Dispute Flares Anew at School: Five Must Prove They Aren’t Pregnant,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 8, 1951.

In the twenty years after World War II, high schools responded to adolescent marriage and parenthood by excluding non-conforming youths from the student population. School boards and principals throughout the nation adopted restrictive policies that expelled, suspended and limited the activities of married and pregnant students. School-age marriage and pregnancy imperiled ideas about adolescent development, the meaning of marriage, and the purpose of education. In this moment of contestation over age-appropriate behavior, educators used restrictive school policies in an attempt to restore traditional timing to the life course and establish schools as places free of the confusion that reigned outside their walls.

Educators framed their actions in terms of child protection. Some asserted that they were saving innocent students from the moral threat posed by their sexually active, married peers. Others claimed that they were protecting married youngsters and their fragile marriages by “allowing” them to spend more time at home. Whatever the logic, educators generally agreed that married and pregnant teenagers did not belong in school.

For the most part, students accepted this consensus, with rare exceptions like the 1951 strike in Mount Morris, Michigan. Many married girls were happy to leave school to seek the domestic bliss they expected from family life. But a small number of students – both boys and girls – protested their exclusion in court. This legal history, which extends from the 1920s through the 1970s, suggests that there was a degree of student resistance to schools’ marriage rules. The majority of cases in the 1960s were brought on behalf of male students who had been removed from sports teams after marrying their pregnant girlfriends. These boys felt they should not be punished for behaving “honorably” in the face of a premarital pregnancy. Until the late 1960s, courts routinely ruled against student plaintiffs, affirming the right of public schools to control their student population however they saw fit. Although these legal challenges to restrictive school rules were largely unsuccessful, this story offers a useful counterpoint to the actions of schools, and suggests the impact that teenage marriage and pregnancy had on adolescents of both genders – a fact that often gets left out of the story.

Age, like gender, race and class, is intricately connected to privilege and power. We tend to think that adulthood is a positive status that comes with more rights and more access to power than childhood. But as the educational struggles of married students demonstrates, adulthood can also be viewed through a negative lens insofar as adults are denied the rights and protections of childhood. Some students claimed adulthood in order to escape schooling. Others were reclassified as adults without their consent and fought to remain in school. As the history of married and pregnant students demonstrates, age was a complex category that was used by different groups to both claim rights and to deny privileges.

Locating Married Students in Postwar Historiography

Historians have studied unwed mothers (who were most often in their twenties), and adolescent sexual delinquents (who were most often unmarried). However, significantly less attention has been paid to the experiences of married adolescents.²

² Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); Rickie Solinger, *Wake up Little*

American understandings of school-age mothers were related to these other types of unsanctioned sexuality, but their experiences were unique and merit their own study.

The lives of sexually unorthodox women were profoundly influenced by the nation's focus on the nuclear family and rigid gender roles after World War II. The entry of the United States into the war thrust women into newly public roles, mobilizing their labor capacity and sexuality in the name of patriotism. Nearly five million women joined the work force between 1940 and 1945; by 1944, thirty-seven percent of adult women worked in the paid labor force.³ Many of these women worked in wartime factories, doing what had been understood to be "men's work," and their efforts temporarily expanded popular notions about women's labor capabilities. At the same time, the government feared that women would use the social unrest of wartime to act out sexually, and stepped up punishment of promiscuous and potentially promiscuous women.⁴

Rather than causing a reshuffling of gender roles, the end of the war resulted in a nationwide embrace of domestic life. Most women left their wartime jobs and leapt into young marriage, motherhood, and suburban family life. The cultural and demographic plunge into domesticity, known as the baby boom, was by no means inevitable, nor was it "traditional." Increased educational and employment opportunities and more effective birth control might have led women to delay family life and pursue careers outside the home. As Elaine Tyler May argues, Americans embraced domestic life and rigid gender roles as a refuge from the insecurities of the Cold War. In a time of racial strife, class conflict, and nuclear threat, the family became "bastion of safety." The 1950s were not the swan song of "traditional" patterns of family life. Rather these years witnessed a radically new "effort to create a home that would fulfill virtually all its members' personal needs through an energized and expressive personal life." In other words, the domestic ethos of the 1950s was more of an "innovation" than a "revival."⁵

Within this culture of domesticity, nonmarital sexuality and unwed motherhood appeared particularly dangerous and threatening. Women who became pregnant outside of engagement or marriage were intensely stigmatized for their sexual transgression. At the time, becoming pregnant out of wedlock was one of the worst things a girl could do. A young mother who gave her child up for adoption explained, "They almost treated you like you had committed murder or something." A woman who also became pregnant in her teens recalled, "When I walked down the street, all the parents made their daughters cross the street. They couldn't walk on the same side of the street as me. A sense of shame and humiliation permeated the entire family." Another woman recalled having to

Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race before Roe V. Wade (New York: Routledge, 1992); Littauer, "Unsanctioned Encounters: Women, Girls and Non-Marital Sexuality in the United States, 1941 - 1963."

³ Ellen Carol DuBois and Lynn Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes: An American History with Documents*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2009), 548.

⁴ One of the government's best weapons was the 1941 May Act, which made prostitution in military and defense-related areas a federal crime. Women convicted under the May Act were often promiscuous, but they were rarely prostitutes. As women moved into public spaces and engaged in new activities, the government became increasingly worried that they would participate in disorderly sexual behavior and increased surveillance of "suspicious" women. For more on government attempts to regulate female sexuality during World War II, see Hegarty, *Victory Girls, Khaki-wackies, and Patriotutes: the Regulation of Female Sexuality During World War II*.

⁵ May, *Homeward Bound American Families in the Cold War Era*.

lie down in the family car when her mother drove her around so that none of the neighbors would see her.⁶

A daughter's pregnancy also threatened the family's success and class status. During the 1950s and 1960s, millions of families entered the middle class thanks to the booming postwar economy and government programs like the G.I. Bill. One girl who became pregnant in her teens explained the stress it put on her family:

When I got pregnant it was like slipping back a generation somehow. It was like slipping back in time. The climbing that they [my parents] had done and their aspirations were suddenly under threat. *They* were going to be those people they looked down on. There was a clear social category for unwed mothers and that was the 'you must not come from a very good home' category.⁷

During an era of class mobility and domesticity, unsanctioned pregnancies were menacing to pregnant women and families alike.

The options available to unwed mothers differed widely by race and class. Middle-class white girls generally "went away," either to hide out with a relative or to maternity home during pregnancy. These homes, many of which were run by religious and charitable organizations, offered minimal classes, occasional camaraderie, and a safe haven away from unfriendly stares. Most maternity homes required the resident to surrender her child for adoption, and sent girls back to their old lives to pretend that nothing had happened. Working-class black girls had different options. The segregated nature of maternity homes and the lack of a black adoption market meant that most black women kept their babies. Within black communities, unwed motherhood and teenage pregnancy was less stigmatized, and most young mothers raised their children with the help of their family and extended kinship networks.⁸

Historians including Rickie Solinger and Regina Kunzel have written a great deal about out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Scholars have written significantly less about adolescent girls who had children *within* marriage, or those who got married young and tried to stay in school. But during the postwar years, over eighty-five percent of teenage mothers were married, suggesting that there is another story still to be told.

Married teenagers were pushed into the private sphere and thus left fewer archival materials than unwed mothers who interacted with maternity homes or adoption agencies. The forced domestication of young brides and mothers served to hide their experiences, both to observers in the postwar era and to historians in the present. They fell between archival cracks, blending into the general population of postwar wives, even though their position was unique. The legal records of litigious high school students, however, offer a glimpse inside the experiences of adolescent marriage. These sources are still limited: they tell us more about the opinions of educators and judges than they do about the experiences of the teenagers themselves. Court cases only recorded the experience of students who possessed the resources to wage a legal battle. This archive is silent on the question of race, but it likely reveals more about the experiences of white teenagers, who

⁶ Ann Fessler, *The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades before Roe V. Wade* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 9, 74.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁸ Solinger, *Wake up Little Susie*; Fessler, *The Girls Who Went Away*.

made up nearly ninety percent of married teenage girls.⁹ Despite these limitations, an examination of national, institutional responses to marriage and pregnancy in schools is useful and important: it reveals the great lengths that adults went to in order to reestablish a clear boundary between youth and adulthood, and the lengths “age deviants” went to remain in school.

“Refining and Elevating”: High School Marriage in the 1920s

Although the cultural context of this study lies primarily in the postwar years, the legal story begins in the late 1920s. Two important cases regarding married students’ educational rights were decided in state supreme courts in 1929. In some ways, these cases were remarkably similar to court cases after World War II: they involved married school-age girls trying to gain access to high school against the wishes of the school administration. But while they dealt with similar issues, the 1929 cases emerged out of a dramatically different cultural context. In this earlier period, fewer than half of school-age adolescents attended high school. Early marriage was relatively anomalous and did not seem like part of a larger trend. Unlike in the postwar era when most adolescents went to high school and large numbers of teenagers got married, school-age marriage was an unusual and unfamiliar issue in the 1920s. This pair of cases reveals a less rigid understanding of youth and a more positive view toward young marriage than the one that emerged in the postwar years.

In 1927, fifteen-year-old Wanda Dodge Myers enrolled in her local public high school in Moss Point, Mississippi, an old lumber town on the Gulf Coast. The school board initially accepted her application, but the superintendent revoked it once he learned that she was married. Moss Point’s public school system had adopted an ordinance barring married people from attending school and according to this rule, Myers was deemed ineligible for school.

Instead of accepting the decision, however, Wanda sued the school board. With the backing of District Attorney William Colmer, she filed suit against the Moss Point Public School Board, claiming the school had unfairly denied her the free public education guaranteed under the Mississippi Constitution. Her legal team pointed to Section 201 of the State Constitution, which directed the legislature to create a “uniform system of free public schools, by taxation or otherwise, for all children between the ages of five and twenty-one years old.”¹⁰ The school board claimed, on the other hand, that they had the right to manage the student body without the interference of courts unless they passed “unreasonable” rules and regulations. A 1927 Mississippi education law, known as Hemingway’s Code, allowed school boards to “suspend or dismiss pupils, when the best interests of the schools make it necessary.” The ban on married students, they claimed, was reasonable and well within their authority. Myers’ legal team

⁹ The debate over teen pregnancy would become highly racialized after the 1970s, but during the immediate postwar years, the problem of teenage marriage was largely viewed by the public as a white issue. *Vital Statistics of the United States, 1960*.

¹⁰ Mississippi Constitution, article 8, section 201 quoted in *McLeod v. State of Mississippi*, 122 So. 737, 154 Miss. 468 (1929).

countered that her marriage did not harm the school in any way and demanded her reinstatement.¹¹

Further, the board had argued that “marriage emancipates a child from all parental control of its conduct, as well as such control by the school authorities” and that “marriage relation brings about views of life which should not be known to unmarried children.” In other words, they claimed that marriage conferred adult status upon students, removing them from the purview of the public education system. The Moss Point School Board also held that married students would harm their unmarried peers by spreading inappropriate sexual knowledge.

These arguments highlight two legal concepts that are critical to understanding cases regarding married and pregnant students throughout the twentieth century. The first is *in loco parentis* that allowed schools to act “in the place of a parent.” This concept invested schools with the same legal rights over their students as parents had over their children. Schools were, by definition, places for children. For example, in *McLeod v. State*, the Moss Point School Board claimed that Wanda should be viewed as an adult, and should thus be removed from school. In many ways, the doctrine of *in loco parentis* gave schools wide-reaching power over the lives of its pupils. Historically, this doctrine was interpreted as giving schools almost unlimited authority in disciplinary matters, including the right to physical punishment. Until the 1960s, most courts were unwilling to interfere in disputes between students and schools, just as they stayed out of domestic disputes between parents and children. However, a school’s authority was contingent upon its students being *children*. Once students were no longer children – because of age or legal designation – the power of schools was severely curtailed.

Throughout the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, the concept of *in loco parentis* granted schools near-total authority over their students, and courts rarely stepped in to settle disputes. Judges followed the “reasonableness test” – the second important legal concept – to determine when to step in. This rule dictated that unless a school rule was “arbitrary and unreasonable,” it should be allowed to stand. In practice, courts used this doctrine to allow schools to everything from strict dress codes to corporal punishment.¹² The “reasonableness test” put the burden of proof on students, and, in the 1950s and 1960s, made it quite difficult to get marriage regulations overturned in court. In the 1920s, however, students had decidedly more success.

The Mississippi Supreme Court ruled on *McLeod v. State of Mississippi* on June 3, 1929. The decision was unanimous in Wanda Dodge Myer’s favor. In the majority opinion, Judge Anderson explained, the “ordinance in question is arbitrary and unreasonable, and therefore void.” The decision focused on the school board’s claim that married students would disrupt and negatively influence the school’s teaching mission. The Mississippi Supreme Court rejected this logic entirely, emphasizing instead the *positive* and *edifying* effects of including married students in high schools.

Marriage is a domestic relation highly favored by the law. When the relation is entered into with correct motives, the effect on the husband and wife is refining

¹¹ Paragraph 15 of section 126, c. 283, Laws of 1924 (section 8767, Hemingway’s Code 1927) quoted in *ibid*.

¹² David Schimmel and Louis Fischer, *The Civil Rights of Students*, Critical Issues in Education (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 16.

and elevating, rather than demoralizing. Pupils associating in school with a child occupying such a relation, it seems, would be benefited instead of harmed.¹³

Instead of declaring Wanda an adult, as the school board had hoped, the judge based his decision on his favorable view of the effects of marriage on spouses as well as those around them. Rather than harming the school by passing on lurid stories of the conjugal bedroom, married students could serve as an example of morality.

The judge's conviction that a student's marriage would act as a positive influence in the school reflects the emergence of a new middle-class ideal of marriage in the 1920s. Termed "companionate marriage" by judge Ben Lindsey in 1927 in a book of the same name, this conception of marriage was characterized by emotional compatibility between husband and wife, sexual pleasure and personal fulfillment. This was made possible by advances in birth control and shrinking family size. Widespread use of condoms, diaphragms and spermicide allowed spouses to enjoy sex for pleasure without the frustration of "natural" contraceptive techniques like coitus interruptus or the fear of unwanted pregnancy. Americans reduced the size of their families from five or six children in the 1820s to two or three in the 1920s. This opened up the possibility of greater intimacy between husband and wife. Marriage experts spoke of matrimony in a newly joyful light as a necessary component of personal satisfaction and happiness.¹⁴ Likewise, in *McLeod v. State*, Judge Anderson argued that the welfare of the school could be enhanced rather than undermined by the example of a happily married student. By his logic, the presence of a married student could only enrich the experiences of other students, and thus it was unreasonable to deny Wanda admission.

Even though marriage was recast in a positive light in the 1920s, married high school students were not always considered moral in the view of schools, society or courts. The second case, *Nutt v. Board of Education of City of Goodland, Sherman County* revolved around the sexual morality of Dorothy Nutt, a young mother from Goodland, Kansas.

Dorothy began her sophomore year at Sherman County Community High School in the fall of 1927. She was an average student with no disciplinary problems. She was largely unremarkable in the school system until she applied to the principal in February of 1928 to withdraw from school on sick leave. Shortly after withdrawing, Dorothy married Oliver Mitchell, and on August 9, they had their first child. The timing suggests that Dorothy, now Dorothy Nutt Mitchell, withdrew from school just after learning that she was pregnant. The young couple separated shortly after the birth of their child, and the following fall, Dorothy reenrolled at Sherman High School. Soon, however, the administration told Mitchell that she was not welcome in the school because of her status as a married woman. She met with the school board to argue her case, but they supported the expulsion.

In the months that followed her expulsion, Dorothy started attending school in the neighboring town of Edson, Kansas. Her mother filed a suit against Goodland's Board of Education for failing to follow its stated policy of being "open to all pupils of the city of

¹³ Schimmel and Fischer, *The Civil Rights of Students*.

¹⁴ For a discussion of companionate marriage, see D'Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, 265–70.

Goodland and the county of Sherman.”¹⁵ The ensuing court case ended up in the Kansas Supreme Court, and became a public referendum on Mitchell’s moral character.

The Kansas Supreme Court agreed that minors were entitled to an education in public schools so long as their “moral standards are not objectionable.”¹⁶ Schools reserved the right to exclude any pupil who posed a moral or physical threat to other students, whether because of health problems or immoral character. The legal question up for debate was whether Mitchell posed a moral threat to other students based on her recent behavior.

Both sides presented evidence of Dorothy’s moral character. Affidavits filed by the Goodland school board pointed to several misdeeds: the short duration of her marriage, her premarital pregnancy, her associations with male students at Edson High School, car rides she had taken with male students from Edson to Goodland, and the fact that she had attended a public dance after the birth of her child. Dorothy’s lawyers filed their own affidavits that countered these claims. The Sherman High School principal testified that Dorothy had a good reputation and had demonstrated good character in school. Other documents proved that she went to the public dance in question accompanied by her mother. The suspect car rides home were in fact rides with her male cousin and his friend, and they stayed on the road for only forty-five minutes, no longer than necessary, the lawyers insisted.

For their final decision, the judges weighed the evidence of Dorothy’s ethical successes and failings and ultimately decided that she was indeed of sound moral character. The court held that, aside from her premarital sexual activity, Dorothy was morally blameless.

Other than the fact that she had a child conceived out of wedlock, no sufficient reason is advanced for preventing her from attending school. Her child was born in wedlock, and the fact that her husband may have abandoned her should not prevent her from gaining an education, which would better fit her to meet the problems of life.¹⁷

Dorothy had made mistakes, but her subsequent actions restored the court’s faith in her character. Furthermore, the very fact that Mitchell desired to continue her education “was of itself an indication of character warranting favorable consideration,” the court concluded. The morality of young marriage never came up; it was one of many bits of evidence used to establish her character, no more or less prominent in the decision than the length of her car ride home from Edson.

These cases reveal a view of youth in the late 1920s that was not antithetical to marriage, and a view of marriage that was not strictly bounded by age. The *McLeod* and *Nutt* cases established legal precedent that public schools could not permanently expel or deny admissions to students solely based on marriage. In the following decades, schools got around this by issuing long suspensions, which turned out to be equally effective. Although the cultural context of postwar America was considerably different, these cases effectively defined the terms of the debate that would persist for the next forty years:

¹⁵ Nutt v. Board of Education of City of Goodland, 278 P. 1065, 128 Kan. 507 (1929).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

whether marriage made a child an adult, and whether sexual knowledge made a student morally unfit to remain in the classroom.

By the 1950s, understandings of youth and marriage had shifted in ways that made married adolescents seem significantly more adult and less compatible with school. This was due to two clusters of cultural changes – the first having to do with how people *thought* about age, and the second having to do with the actual *behavior* of those adolescents. In less than twenty years, high school marriage went from being a “refining and elevating” experience to a “bad influence” on others.

Teenage Pupils and Teenage Spouses

In the twenty years after World War II, trends in age of marriage and schooling brought divergent definitions of youth into collision in the halls of high schools. As discussed in Chapter Two, young teenagers married and had children at higher rates in the two decades after World War II than at any other time in American history. Marriage fever gripped the nation after the war, as Americans of all ages rushed to the altar. Between 1950 and 1970, over forty percent of first-time brides were in their teens. In 1960, half a million teenage brides and 200,000 teenage grooms walked down the aisle.¹⁸

Early childbearing followed close on the heels of these early marriages. Between 1940 and 1960, births to teenage mothers doubled, from 300,000 to 600,000 births. The birthrate for teenagers grew from 51.1 births per 1,000 women in 1945 to a peak of 96.3 in 1957.¹⁹ This explosion of young motherhood went largely unnoticed because the vast majority of teenage mothers were married by the time they gave birth. From 1940 until the early 1960s, over eighty-five percent of teenage births occurred within wedlock. Teenage motherhood in the 1950s and 1960s did not uproot the longstanding link between sex, procreation and marriage, and thus took place with relatively little cultural notice outside of schools.

This increase in teenage marriage and parenthood coincided with the near-universalization of high school attendance. During the twentieth century, high schools became the great normalizing institution of adolescence in the United States. The first three decades of the century witnessed a rapid expansion of public high schools and a dramatic spike in attendance. In 1910, less than fifteen percent of American high-school aged adolescents enrolled in high schools; in 1960, nearly ninety percent of fourteen to seventeen-year-olds were enrolled in secondary school. By the middle of the century, high school had become the defining feature of adolescence for the majority of Americans across race, gender, class and ethnic groups, as well as the minimum amount of education necessary to compete in the postwar economy.²⁰

Schooling was important to teenagers, both materially and symbolically. As the postwar American economy began to shift away from factory production, toward a service economy of white-collar jobs, high school education became increasingly valuable. A new emphasis on extended schooling was part of Cold War competition,

¹⁸ *Vital Statistics of the United States, 1960*, 3: Table 2–6, Table 1–T.

¹⁹ Ventura, Matthews, and Hamilton, *Births to Teenagers in the United States 1940-2000*.

²⁰ Thomas D Snyder and National Center for Education Statistics, *120 Years of American Education: a Statistical Portrait* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics, 1993), 36–7, table 9.

which only intensified after the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957. A high school diploma became indispensable as more people entered the job market with a college degree. Between 1946 and 1970, the population of college students ballooned from two million to nearly eight million.²¹ High school dropouts had little hope of finding a decent job in this newly competitive environment.

In midcentury America, high schools were supposed to train young men for careers in the new white-collar marketplace that would support their growing families at home. But if education for boys was largely career-oriented, what was the purpose of education for girls? Why did some teenage brides want to remain in school?

In part, girls wanted to graduate from high school for career reasons as well. Despite the popular perception that most women retreated into homes in the suburbs after the war, significant numbers of women – including wives and mothers – worked for pay. Few married women pursued lifelong full-time careers, but young mothers and wives became more likely to work after World War II. At the height of the baby boom, nearly three in eight wives worked two years into their marriages. Between 1948 and 1960, the proportion of wives with children between six and eighteen who worked for pay rose from twenty-one percent to thirty-six percent.²² Many took advantage of part-time and part-year jobs, often in the service economy, where high school literacy skills were required. Young brides could expect to work within a few years of marriage and a diploma would help them in that pursuit.

Less tangibly, but no less importantly, a high school diploma was a central part of middle-class respectability and class mobility. In the postwar period, education was more closely linked to economic and social position than ever before. Historian Lizabeth Cohen writes, “as Americans pursued the promises of the ‘affluent society,’ a good education became a ticket, an inferior one a hindrance.” Historian Paula Fass adds that parents in the 1950s understood that increased education was the best path to increasing class status and financial success, and they made sacrifices so their children could spend longer in school.²³ Once high school graduation became an expected part of American life, a high school diploma was evidence of middle-class status. Conversely, dropping out of high school (or being pushed out) was often read as dropping out of the middle-class as well. For both practical and affective reasons, a high school diploma was important to American youth, particularly those in or hoping to join the middle class.

Finally, high school offered more than an education: it was the defining institution of adolescence and the locus of teenage culture. Young people who were excluded from high school were separated from their friends, their peer culture, all the teenage activities that took place in and around school. Further, they were symbolically excluded from normative understandings of youth. Beginning in the 1930s, Americans agreed that high schools were the proper place for teenagers. Those who found themselves outside of school were pathologized as dropouts, failures, or burdens to society. This helps explain

²¹ Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 317.

²² Modell, *Into One's Own*, 221–22.

²³ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 2003), 240; Paula S. Fass, “The Child-Centered Family? New Rules in Postwar America,” in *Reinventing Childhood after World War II*, ed. Michael Grossberg and Paula S. Fass (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 8.

why girls, who did not expect to have a lifelong career, often fought to stay in school even after marriage.

High school structured the daily lives of teenagers, and structured the ways in which Americans *thought* about teenagers. It spread a normative standard of age-appropriate development and behavior for adolescents throughout the country. Students studied in classrooms divided by age, in buildings split into elementary, junior and high schools, and age-related expectations grew more specific and prevalent. When students stepped outside of these boundaries, they faced an uncertain future. Adolescents who were too childlike (due to developmental disabilities for example) or too adult (due to disruptive or sexual behavior) were excised from the student population.²⁴ “Normal” adolescent development in midcentury America did not include marriage and childbearing.

Restrictive Regulations in Postwar High Schools

In 1947, a thirteen-year-old girl named Ann appeared in front of New York City’s Domestic Relations Court after being arrested by a local truancy officer. Most truancy cases had to do with students who skipped school. Ann, however, had not been charged with skipping school. Instead, she was accused of unlawfully *attending* school. Her case had caught the truancy officer’s attention when she left school for several weeks, complaining of acute appendicitis. When the officer looked into Ann’s absences, he discovered to his astonishment that she had given birth to a child two weeks earlier. She had continued to attend school, her condition undiscovered, up until the day before she gave birth. According to New York City’s Board of Education policies, pregnant students were forbidden from attending class and schools were instructed to dismiss girls as soon as their condition came to light. After giving birth, students who wished to continue their education could reapply to a different school with their principal’s permission, but in practice, most were pushed out of the education system. In Ann’s case, her principal explicitly told her not to return after the birth of her child. At the trial, she exclaimed in frustration, “They say I have the status of a married woman and can’t go back to school. I never want to see that baby.”²⁵

Like married girls and school-age mothers throughout the country, Ann was barred from participating in all parts of school life. The most unusual aspect of Ann’s case was the fact that she was unmarried. In 1947, only twelve percent of teenage births were to unwed mothers.²⁶ Ann’s school asserted that even though she was not married, her pregnancy had given her “the status of a married woman.” This, they claimed, disqualified her from attending public school in New York. The school’s conflation of parenthood with marriage is itself revealing. Until the late 1960s, unwed adolescent pregnancy was so rare that schools and courts tended to treat young marriage and young pregnancy as manifestations of the same problem: namely, the assault on age-appropriate

²⁴ Vinovskis, *Education, Society, and Economic Opportunity : a Historical Perspective on Persistent Issues*.

²⁵ Justine Wise Polier, “What’s Your Name, If You Have a Name?,” Unpublished speech, 1947, Justine Wise Polier Papers, MC 413, folder 558, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

²⁶ Ventura, Matthews, and Hamilton, *Births to Teenagers in the United States 1940-2000*.

behavior by American youth. The school viewed Ann as an adult, signaled by their use of the word “woman,” and moved to restrict her contact with children. Ann’s permanent exile from school rested upon her new identity as an adult – an identity she disagreed with but had little power to refute. The only trace of her childhood in the archival record is her extremely young age (thirteen) and her childlike protestation that she never wanted to see “that baby” again.

Justice Justine Wise Polier, a New York City family court judge and advocate for the rights of unwed mothers, retold Ann’s story to illustrate the grave problems with the Board of Education’s treatment of pregnant students in a speech later that year. She entreated, “This child had suffered as no child should be made to suffer... and yet the school had come in only as a prosecutor at the time of ultimate crisis.” Polier’s repetition of the word “child” was no casual turn of phrase. Just as the court had labeled Ann as an adult in order to remove her from school, Polier invoked Ann’s youth in order to draw attention to the punishments and indignities young pregnant girls suffered at the hands of the educational system. The archival record offers no clues to Ann’s fate, but she likely never went to school again.²⁷

Competing and rapidly changing notions of age came to a head in high schools. Rising rates of teenage marriage, young pregnancy and high school attendance made a confrontation between schools and precocious pupils inevitable. Most married boys and girls of school age dropped out of high school of their own accord to get a job or become a housewife. However, the minority of students who tried to continue in school presented educators with a series of questions. Did married minors belong in schools? Could they be required to attend school? Could they legally be *prevented* from attending, just as Ann was in 1947? Were educators right to believe that married and pregnant students present a moral threat to their unmarried peers?

The question of whether married minors were required to attend public school animated the 1946 case, *State of Louisiana v. Priest*. On November 4, 1945, fifteen-year-old Louise Davis married Sam Priest in Louisiana. After the wedding, Louise quit school to devote herself to her new role as a housewife. Before long, however, juvenile court officers tracked her down and convicted her of violating state law that required children to attend school until age sixteen. Louise was convicted of truancy and committed to the State Industrial School. Her distraught husband sued for her release, arguing that Louise was emancipated from mandatory schooling laws as a married woman. Lawyers on both sides clashed over the question of whether Louise was a child or an adult.

Ultimately, the Louisiana Supreme Court ruled in the young couple’s favor, declaring that Louise be immediately released from reform school into her husband’s care. The court ruled that Louise’s marriage made her a legal adult, despite her chronological age. The decision read, “The marriage relationship, regardless of the age of the persons involved, creates conditions and imposes obligations upon the parties that are obviously inconsistent with compulsory school attendance laws or with either the husband or wife remaining under the legal control of parents or other persons.” *In loco parentis* could not apply to married persons because they were no longer under the “legal control” of their parents. Because the school could no longer act “in the place of the parent,” Louise could

²⁷ Polier, “What’s Your Name, If You Have a Name?”.

not be forced to attend school against her will. Marriage released Louise from the requirement of attending high school, and legally redefined her as an adult.²⁸

Courts and schools erased the fluidity between childhood and adulthood, and the liminal position of girls like Louise and Ann who exhibited qualities of both youth and maturity. In this case, Louise used the rigidity of the legal system to her advantage. The court confirmed her adult status in spite of her young age and relieved her of the *burden* of attending school. *Louisiana v. Priest* established that married minors could not be forced to go to school, but what about students seeking the *right* to attend school? Were they so much like adults that they did not belong in school? Or did they retain enough of their “childhood” to deserve an education?

For most of 1950s and the late 1960s, schools answered this question with a resounding clarity: married and pregnant students were not children, they were not entitled to an education and they did not belong in schools. As we saw in the pair of cases from 1929, schools could not legally expel or deny admission to students based on marriage, but there were other ways of excising unwanted individuals from the student population. In the postwar era, high schools throughout the United States excluded married and pregnant students through what were sometimes referred to as “marriage policies.” These restrictive policies, which often addressed pregnancy as well, showed up in high schools as early as the 1920s, but they proliferated in the late 1950s.²⁹

An example of a typical marriage policy could be found in the small town of Harrodsburg, Kentucky. Harrodsburg parents hounded the local board of education to do something about the “epidemic” of marriages in high schools. The Board agreed that student marriages were causing disruption, discussion and excitement during the term, none of which was good for the welfare and interests of students. In 1957, the Harrodsburg Independent School District adopted the following policy:

Any student, either boy or girl, who marries, automatically must withdraw immediately from school and cannot re-enter school for one full year, and then only as a special student with permission of the principal. A special student cannot attend homeroom or study halls or enter into any class activities, social events or athletics. If, upon re-entering school after the year has elapsed, the student becomes pregnant, she will automatically withdraw until after the birth of the child.³⁰

This regulation was typical of marriage policies in several ways. Like many schools, Harrodsburg removed married students from the general student population for an extended period of time, and established special hurdles for those who wished to reenroll. Upon returning to school, married students’ contact with peers and spatial freedom was severely limited. Many schools punished girls further if they became pregnant. The exclusion of boys was less typical but not unheard of.

Restrictive rules did not necessarily dissuade teenagers from marrying or becoming pregnant; they simply removed the problem from public view. Washington, D.C. schools instituted a ban on married pregnant students in the early 1950s but the

²⁸ *State of Louisiana v. Priest*, 27 So. (2d) 173, 210 La. 389 (1946).

²⁹ Burchinal, “Research on Young Marriage.”

³⁰ *Harrodsburg v. Bentley*, 383 S.W.2d 677; 1964 Ky. LEXIS 51; 11 A.L.R.3d 990 (1964).

teenage pregnancy trend continued unabated. During the 1955-1956 school year, the Board of Education reported that ninety-five girls had dropped out due to pregnancy, and an average of 100 girls per year had dropped out in the previous five years. These numbers were almost certainly understated because many pregnant girls hid their pregnancies or left school before they could be detected. The school system did not keep statistics on pupils older than sixteen because they were no longer legally required to attend school. Even these understated figures were alarming to administrators. Still, they did not consider allowing these youngsters back into schools. The administrators felt that pregnancy was a private, adult problem, beyond the purview of the public education system.³¹

Schools frequently instituted policies that established a hierarchy of wrongdoing and punishment. For example, a 1958 study conducted by sociologist Lee Burchinal in Iowa showed that high schools were most lenient towards boys, and most restrictive toward girls who became pregnant outside of marriage. Thirty-eight percent of the schools sampled required immediate withdrawal for unmarried girls who became pregnant; twenty-nine required withdrawal for girls who married first and then became pregnant.³² A similar study in Minnesota in 1962 found that half of the high schools sampled required pregnant girls to withdraw from school, while less than a quarter required the withdrawal of married girls who were not pregnant.³³ The unmarried pregnant girl was the most severely punished; the putative father got off with little more than a wrist slap in most schools.

It is difficult to know how many schools instituted official policies and how many pushed students out through informal means, but sociological studies revealed a wide range of practices. In California in 1965, only eight percent of high schools encouraged married girls to remain in school.³⁴ In Iowa in 1958, twenty-eight percent of public schools and sixty-two percent of Catholic schools had official policies limiting married student attendance.³⁵ A national study in 1968 found that two-thirds of schools insisted that girls leave as soon as their pregnancies were detected, while one-third allowed girls to remain until alternative arrangements could be made.³⁶

While school policies likely had little direct effect on slowing the tide of youthful marriages, which persisted through the 1970s, they were very effective at curtailing the education of married and pregnant students. Only nineteen percent of school-age mothers in the United States graduated from high school in 1958.³⁷ In the same year, seventy-nine percent of married girls and forty-three percent of married boys in Iowa withdrew from school.³⁸ If students were forced to leave school, even for a short period

³¹ "95 School Girls Pregnant," *Washington Post*, June 30, 1956.

³² Lee G. Burchinal, "School Policies and School Age Marriages," *The Family Life Coordinator* 8, no. 3 (March 1960): 43-48.

³³ Wayne J. Anderson and Sander M. Latts, "High School Marriages and School Policies in Minnesota," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 27, no. 2 (May 1965): 266-270.

³⁴ Judson T. Landis, "High School Student Marriages, School Policy, and Family Life Education in California," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 27, no. 2 (May 1965): 271-276.

³⁵ Burchinal, "School Policies and School Age Marriages."

³⁶ Marion Howard, *Multiservice Programs for Pregnant School Girls* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Health, Education, and Welfare, Children's Bureau, 1968).

³⁷ Luker, *Dubious Conceptions*, 1996, 121.

³⁸ Boys were rarely suspended for getting married because educators believed they needed education in order to get good jobs and support their families in the future.

of time, they were extremely unlikely to return. Overall, only 8.5 percent of all married girls and 8.8 percent of married boys reenrolled after suspension; schools that suspended students effectively ended their education.”³⁹

Reasons Behind the Restrictions

Why did so many schools discourage married and pregnant students from continuing their education? What was the purpose behind restrictive regulations? In part, educators wanted to rid the classroom of all associations with sex in order to protect the minds and morals of their students. Additionally, these rules functioned as a way of enforcing rigid postwar gender roles among young people who had already flouted age conventions by pushing them out of the public sphere into private family life. Finally, schools used restrictive policies to try to reestablish clear divisions between childhood and adulthood, and to sort out the age confusion that was brought on by the unusually mature behavior of many young people.

Restrictive rules were part of the separation between schools and sexuality in general, and a discomfort with precocious adolescent female sexuality in particular. One policy in a Minnesota school allowed pregnant girls to work privately with tutors at home, but they were banned from the graduation ceremony if they were visibly pregnant. Even pregnant married teachers were banned from school grounds until the mid-1970s, Kristin Luker explains, “lest their swelling bellies cross that invisible boundary separating the real world (where sex and pregnancy existed) from the schools (where they did not).”⁴⁰ Even sexual education in the 1950s and early 1960s had little information about actual sexual behavior. Sex education became Family Life Education, which focused on the happiness of middle-class marriage, normative gender roles, and harmonious domestic life, but rarely taught about sex.⁴¹ In the same spirit, schools dealt with the sexual threat of married and pregnant teenagers by simply removing them from schools altogether.

Educators saw married students as a potential source of contamination that could pollute the sexual innocence of the regular student body with “adult” knowledge. A survey conducted during the 1953-54 school year in California schools asked school principals why they felt it necessary to exclude married and pregnant students. The most popular response was concern that these pupils would “discuss marital sexual experiences with other unmarried students.”⁴² One Minnesota policy explicitly forbade married students from talking about “married life,” a euphemism for sex. Sex was so closely associated with marriage though that schools often referred to it as “the marriage act.” One woman who got pregnant in high school recalled that she believed that a woman had to be married in order to have a baby: “Oh no, no, no, you can’t be pregnant unless you’re married.’ That’s what my parents told me: ‘You have to be married to have a baby.’”⁴³

³⁹ Burchinal, “School Policies and School Age Marriages.”

⁴⁰ Luker, *Dubious Conceptions*, 1996, 2.

⁴¹ Jeffrey P Moran, *Teaching Sex: The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

⁴² Judson T. Landis and Kenneth C. Kidd, “Attitudes and Policies Concerning Marriages Among High School Students,” *Marriage and Family Living* 18, no. 2 (May 1956): 128–136.

⁴³ Fessler, *The Girls Who Went Away*, 39.

Schools had articulated fears of contamination by married students in the 1920s. But whereas courts defended the educational rights of Wanda Dodge Myers and Dorothy Nutt in 1929, judges in the 1950s were unsympathetic to the plight of married students. In twelve cases dealing with the schooling of married and pregnant students between 1957 and 1970, eight upheld restrictive school regulations, often citing the danger of “contamination” in their decisions.

The fear of contagion turned out to be more imagined than actual. Sociologist June Henton conducted a survey in 1964 to determine whether the presence of married students had an effect on their unmarried peers. Her research showed that “the presence of married students has almost no effect on the attitudes of unmarried students, and certainly does not make them more sexually liberal.” The only difference she found was that students at schools that allowed married pupils were slightly less likely to approve of kissing on the first few dates. She concluded that “restrictive attendance policies serve no useful purpose,” and that the presence of married youngsters might actually have a tempering effect on the sexual behavior of other students.⁴⁴

A significant number of schools allowed continued attendance, but forbade married students from participating in extracurricular activities, including sports, student government and social clubs. These activities were an important part of most young people’s high school experience and a major aspect of teenage culture. But to adults, extracurricular activities seemed particularly menacing because they allowed for unchaperoned mixing between students of different ages and experience levels. For example, a school in Louisiana considered married students to be “special students.” Special students had extreme limits on their school participation, including a ban on any extracurricular activities. They were even restricted from hanging around school after class: “Each day, upon completion of academic classes, Special Students will be expected to leave the school campus without loitering.”⁴⁵

Administrators feared that casual interactions with married students would tarnish the supposed innocence of unmarried youth. Law professor Lawrence Friedman explained, “The locker room talk of married students could hardly be worse than that of the unmarried, but what the school boards really feared was legitimating teenage sex. The ideal was chastity and strict morality, obedience and respect for authority.”⁴⁶ Schools used bans on extracurricular activities in the interests of protecting some students, but they did so at the expense of others.

In 1960, two Michigan high school boys sued the Mesick Consolidated District Board of Education in 1960 after they were kicked off the football team. The athletes, Ronald Cochrane and David Shively, were among fourteen students who had gotten married in the span of a few weeks, and among only three students who returned to continue their education. The Board of Education claimed that the ban on extracurricular activities was necessary “to discourage others to follow” down the path of “child marriage.” The president of the school board explained that “our students are minors and

⁴⁴ June Marcum Henton, “The Effects of Married High-School Students on Their Unmarried Classmates,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 26, no. 1 (February 1964): 87–88.

⁴⁵ *Estay v. LaFourche Parish School Board*, 230 So. 2d 443, La. App. LEXIS 4956 (1969).

⁴⁶ Robert L Hampel, National Association of Independent Schools National Association of Secondary School Principals (U.S.), and Commission on Educational Issues, *The Last Little Citadel: American High Schools Since 1940* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 94–5.

under their parents' guidance, and when they enter into a position of marriage they are more or less their own boss, which could cause problems." The Supreme Court of Michigan sided with the school board, specifically affirming the idea that extracurricular activities presented a danger of contagion. The court explained in *Cochrane v. Mesick Consolidated District Board of Education* that the possibility of married students negatively influencing younger students was heightened in extracurricular activities because of increased age mixing.⁴⁷ These rules enforced a policy of containment by limiting the physical and social encounters of non-normative students with their well-behaved peers.

The Iowa Supreme Court heard a similar case in 1967. Ronald Green, a seventeen-year old high school student and basketball player from Waterloo, Iowa, got married during the summer before his senior year. When he returned to school, he was kicked off the team. Ronald sued the school, arguing that the rule was "arbitrary, unreasonable, irrational, unauthorized, irreparably injurious." In this case, as in many others, the court affirmed the right of the school board to limit extracurricular activities to unmarried students only. The court ruled that "participation in extracurricular activities . . . is a privilege which may be claimed only in accordance with the standards set up for participation." The "reasonableness doctrine" set a high bar for student plaintiffs and courts generally ruled in favor of the schools.⁴⁸

One single case, *Harrodsburg v. Bentley*, was decided in favor of a married student under the "reasonableness" doctrine. In 1964, the Kentucky Court of Appeals heard the case of a high school junior who was suspended for a year after she got married. The judge ruled that the school's marriage policy was overly broad: it punished students who married because of an unintended pregnancy as harshly as those who entered into matrimony freely. This particular plaintiff was "a moral and respectable person" and there was no suggestion of "sensationalism or scandal" (i.e. pregnancy) preceding the marriage. "The fatal vice of the regulation" the judge wrote, "lies in its sweeping, advance determination that every married student, regardless of the circumstances, must lose at least a year's schooling." It was deemed unreasonable and arbitrary, and the married student returned to class. The decision did not challenge the notion that schools had broad powers over their students' lives. Rather, it argued that this *particular* rule was unreasonable, while still affirming the doctrine of *in loco parentis*.⁴⁹

In addition to trying to keep sex out of the classroom, educators used marriage regulations to enforce middle-class norms of family life on young couples. Gender expectations were plainly articulated in popular culture, as well as Family Life Education courses: men were supposed to work outside the home and make enough money to allow their wives to raise their children in the private home. Despite the fact that these family arrangements were only realistic for the middle class, they were presented as natural and universal. Adults believed that they could strengthen young marriages by forcing school-age wives out of schools and into their "proper" roles as housewives. In other words,

⁴⁷ *Cochrane v. Mesick Consolidated School District Board of Education*, 360 Mich. 390, 103 N.W.2d 569, 1960 Mich. LEXIS 392 (1960).

⁴⁸ *Board of Directors of Independent School District of Waterloo v. Green*, 259 Iowa 1260; 147 N.W.2d 854, Iowa Sup. Lexis 692 (1967).

⁴⁹ *Board of Education of Harrodsburg, Kentucky v. Joy Burgin Bentley*, 383 S.W.2d 677; 1964 Ky. LEXIS 51; 11 A.L.R.3d 990 (1964).

teens who had flouted rules of age-appropriate behavior could still be forced into gender-appropriate behavior. In a 1962 Ohio court case, a sixteen-year-old basketball star challenged Taft High School's rule banning married students from playing sports. The boy had married his pregnant girlfriend, and was promptly kicked off of the state-champion team. The school board argued that the rule was necessary to quell the recent upsurge in student marriages. More interestingly, they argued that the rule was actually "conducive to the preservation of marriage." The judge agreed, writing that "the Board ought to be permitted to restrict the extra-curricular activities of such a student so as to prevent the marriage from being subjected to burdens additional to that of the youthfulness of the husband or wife." In other words, husband and wife should be home nurturing their marriage, not playing games with their friend. The court accepted that the restrictive rule protected the very marriages it regulated, reducing the young couples' responsibilities at school, and increasing the amount of time they could devote to their relationship.⁵⁰

In a similar case in Utah in 1963, lawyers for Davis County High School argued that their ban on married athletes protected student marriages that already existed. High school senior James Harold Starkey got married over Christmas break in 1962 and returned to school to find himself banned from the Boys' Association, the wrestling team, the usher squad and the baseball team. He sued the school board, claiming that he was being denied equal protection under the Utah Constitution. The school's lawyer explained that the rule was in place to protect boys like James. It was desirable, they explained, for young married spouses to "devote more time and attention to the serious responsibilities involved rather than spending the extra time needed for extracurricular school activities."⁵¹ The Supreme Court of Utah agreed. In a sense, these rules can be viewed as a form of domestic containment, to use Elaine Tyler May's useful concept of femininity during the Cold War. Just as adult women were contained within the home, married teenagers were removed from the public space of schools and relegated to the private marital home.⁵²

Finally, schools used marriage rules to restore order to the chronological chaos wreaked by teenage marriage and pregnancy. Viewed differently, these rules punished not just sexual behavior but also violations of age. An administrator in New York explained that students could not have the best of both childhood and adulthood. "Marriage is an adult function. If teen-agers marry, they should take adult responsibilities – leave school and give full time to their marriage." Some school rules were more explicit than others that the central issue at stake was age. The marriage rule at Alvin High School in Houston, Texas made plain its goal of sorting out the muddled waters of age. It began, "a pupil who marries can no longer be considered a *youth*. By the very act of getting married, he or she becomes an *adult* and assumes the responsibility of *adulthood* [emphasis added]." The rule went on to say married students shall not "participate in school activities other than regular classes." Finally, if the student wants

⁵⁰ State, ex rel. Baker et, Plaintiff v. Stevenson et, Defendants, 189 N.E.2d 181; 1962 Ohio Misc. LEXIS 211; 27 Ohio Op. 2d 233; 94 Ohio L. Abs. 545 (1962).

⁵¹ Starkey v. Board of Education, 14 Utah 2d 227; 381 P.2d 718; 1963 Utah LEXIS 187 (1963).

⁵² May, *Homeward Bound American Families in the Cold War Era*.

to “start her family,” she must withdraw from school permanently.⁵³ A resolution adopted in Mesick, Michigan read, “When a student enters into marriage he assumes *adulthood* and consequently enters into another society, removed from the less mature students and also removed from parental guidance [emphasis added].”⁵⁴ Students who married may have been seen as sexually suspect or in need of domestic guidance, but the root of their exclusion from schools was the fact that they were reclassified as adults.

On occasion, sympathetic adults argued in favor of married adolescents’ educational rights. In the 1960 Michigan court case *Cochrane v. Mesick Consolidated District Board of Education*, Justice Harry Kelly wrote a dissenting opinion in favor of the students’ case. While he did not explicitly come out in favor of teenage marriage, he reasoned that schools had no right to punish perfectly legal marriages. Nearly every state allowed sixteen-year-old girls and eighteen-year-old boys to marry with parental permission. If most school-age marriages were legal, he asked, what business did schools have restricting the educational opportunities of married youngsters? If a community wanted to discourage high school marriages, Kelly wrote, “the way to do it is through legislation, as by raising the age limit for marriage, not through school board interference with the prerogatives of the legislature, the parents and the church,” all of whom had sanctioned these unions. Otherwise, these rules served only “to humiliate and ridicule” students, condemning their legal marriages as somehow wrong. Kelly argued that restrictive rules “interfere not only with their education but also with their marriages” by undermining the morale of the spouses. Justice Kelly argued, like many educators, that schools should be in the business of protecting young marriages. But he believed that the best way to do that was to offer married students the same rights and respect as their unmarried peers. Although the majority of the Michigan Supreme Court disagreed with Justice Kelly, his logic would ultimately prevail in the decades to come.⁵⁵

...

In the two decades after World War II, marriage, pregnancy and schooling came together in unprecedented ways that strained the traditional connections between school and childhood, and between marriage and adulthood. Adolescent boys and girls who married and had children posed a challenge to a culture in which age categories were becoming more defined. By appropriating the legal and cultural symbols of adulthood – marriage and parenthood – these “age outlaws” flouted long-held notions about the timing and order of life events. Schools responded with restrictions that attempted to restore strict boundaries between childhood and adulthood, at the very least in the classroom, and aimed to contain nonconforming adolescents in the private space of the home.

A critical treatment of age reveals how the ascription of adulthood can be voluntary or involuntary, as well as liberating or constraining. Sociologist Ann Ferguson examined this phenomenon in her 2001 study of race in elementary schools. She argues

⁵³ *Alvin Independent School District v. Kathy Ann Cooper*, 404 S.W.2d 76, 1996 Tex. App. LEXIS 3045 (1966).

⁵⁴ *Cochrane v. Mesick Consolidated School District Board of Education*, 360 Mich. 390, 103 N.W.2d 569, 1960 Mich. LEXIS 392 (1960).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

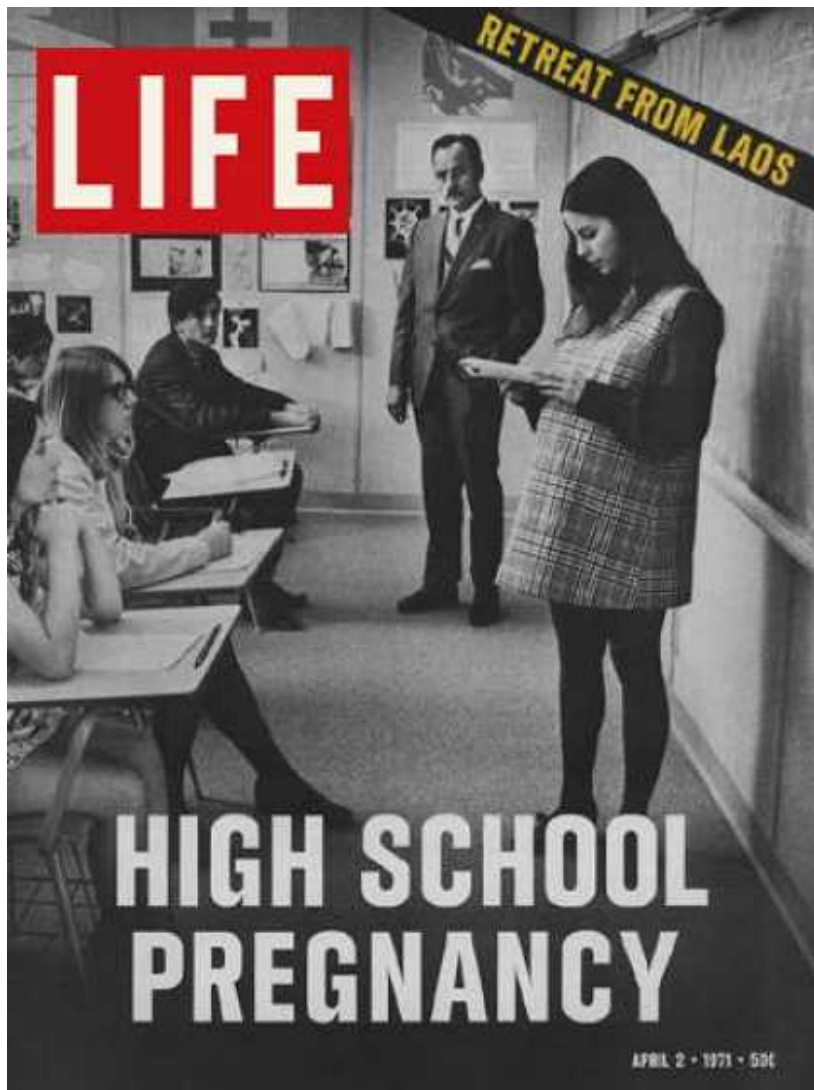
that black children were “adultified” within the classroom. The actions of black children, she explains, were “made to take on a sinister, intentional fully conscious tone that is stripped of any element of childish naiveté,” while the misbehavior of white students was viewed as childish “horsing around.” This designation of adulthood to young black boys led to their marginalization and contributed to their disproportional punishment in school disciplinary systems.⁵⁶ While Ferguson’s study deals with a different time period, age functioned in a similar way in postwar high schools. Schools and courts deemed married and pregnant girls to be adults, and then used their adulthood as justification to remove them from school. Although adult status sometimes conferred privileges upon adolescents, in this case, it denied them a basic right of childhood: education.

In the late 1960s, the tide began to turn against exclusionary school rules. Increasingly, students who sued their schools prevailed in court, and state governments began to prohibit educational discrimination on the basis of marriage and parenthood. This cultural pivot toward greater educational access culminated in the passage of Title IX in 1972, which prohibited federally funded schools from discriminating on the basis of marital and parental status. The following chapter traces these historical shifts as well as a broad transition in understandings of children’s rights that had profound effects on the educational opportunities of married and pregnant young people.

⁵⁶ Ann Arnett Ferguson, *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 83.

A School of One's Own: Teenage Pregnancy in the Classroom, Courtroom, and Congress

The April 2, 1971 cover of LIFE magazine featured a candid photograph of a high school English classroom. In the foreground, a teenage girl wearing a plaid jumper stands in front of the blackboard, reading a book to the rest of the class. The image shows a watchful teacher observing her from the corner of the classroom as well as a row of students listening from their row of desks. The scene would have been wholly unremarkable if not for one fact. The girl in the jumper is unmistakably and extremely pregnant. Her swollen belly forces the hem of her dress to stick out at an odd angle, making her miniskirt even shorter. The title of the cover story sat at the bottom of the cover in all capital letters: HIGH SCHOOL PREGNANCY.



The article profiled Citrus High School in Azusa, California, a town nestled against the San Gabriel Mountains just north of Los Angeles. Citrus High's innovative program enrolled twenty pregnant girls out of a total student body of two hundred. These students spent their mornings in special classes on subjects like childcare and homemaking and their afternoons in the school's regular academic courses. They were encouraged to work and socialize with the other students. Most girls remained in school until two weeks before their due date and came back to class six weeks after they gave birth with their infants in tow. Mothers were allowed to bring their babies right into the classroom. One photograph pictured a young mother in the back of a social studies class feeding a bottle to a baby bundled up in a basinet next to her desk. The article explained, "Although the sound of crying babies is a normal disruption at Citrus, the more vocal ones are usually hustled out of class."

James Georgeou, Citrus' principal, dreamed up the experimental program after seeing the hardships pregnant students endured. "We should treat the problem not as a social disease but as a fact of life," he explained. "You can't condemn a pregnant girl for life. Particularly when you don't know why it happened." Rather than banishing pregnant students, Georgeou created an environment that welcomed them into the high school community. One young mother described her experience: "I'm not an outcast anymore. I feel like a human being again."

The girls in Citrus' program tended to do well academically and emotionally. They were encouraged to work at their own pace, and many graduated early. The previous year, two had received college scholarships. Judy Fay, the girl featured on the cover, nearly ran away when she discovered she was pregnant at age sixteen. Instead, she transferred out of Azusa High School into Citrus High and her outlook improved immediately. As the article explained, "Judy made friends, and discovered that being able to talk out her problems in the school's relaxed atmosphere made them seem less acute." A picture showed her smiling as she talked with a group of boys and girls outside of class. "No one gets too depressed here," she said. Judy gave birth to her son, Dylan, in February. She planned to return to school soon, graduate in June, and continue on to college, a goal she had not even considered before she became pregnant.¹

Although pregnant girls were warmly accepted at Citrus High, the reception from many readers was much less than welcoming. Michael McSweeney, vice president of his high school senior class in Redondo Beach, California commended Principal Georgeou



¹ Richard Woodbury, "Help for High School Mothers," *LIFE*, April 2, 1971 Photographs by Ralph Crane, Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.

on his program. But, he continued, “I feel the LIFE story was done in the epitome of poor taste. The entire tone of that article was such that one would think the greatest way of getting through high school is by having babies.” J.A. Siegel of Manitou Springs, Colorado was also upset by the article. “Your April 2 cover sets some sort of new dimension of achievement in crass, lurid, inelegant journalistic bad taste. To proffer a picture of this pathetic schoolchild with her grotesque maternity figure over the bold-type title “High School Pregnancy” simply makes a bad, sad scene.”²

Despite some readers’ strong aversion to the article, it reflected a real and growing trend. Pregnant school-age girls were gaining unprecedented access to education. From the end of World War II through the mid-1960s, the vast majority of schools expelled, suspended or otherwise removed pregnant and married students from the classroom, claiming that they posed a moral threat to their peers. But in the late 1960s and early 1970s, courts across the country began to invalidate these school rules as unfair and unconstitutional, and special programs for pregnant girls emerged in school districts around the nation. By 1975, the right of minors to attend school regardless of their marital or parental status was enshrined in federal law. Although few schools around the country embraced their pregnant students as fully as Citrus High, the trend towards greater acceptance was quite clear by 1971. The LIFE article explained, “While teen-age pregnancy is just as unwanted and undesirable as ever, more and more parents and schools are trying to help the girls put their lives together again instead of ostracizing them. In nearly every major city, programs now exist to meet the special educational, medical and psychological needs of teen-age mothers.”³

What brought about this rapid transition in educational policy and the treatment of sexually precocious youth? How did pregnant and parenting school-age girls gain access to education? Why did high schools suddenly open their doors to pregnant and parenting students after thirty years of exclusion?

I argue that the incorporation of pregnant girls into American high schools resulted from a new understanding of childhood and children’s rights that emerged in the late 1960s. This new concept rejected the idea that children were vulnerable, innocent and in need of adult protection. Instead, it saw young people as capable, entitled to autonomy, and endowed with expanded rights of citizenship. Scholars have chronicled the dramatic expansion of children’s rights in the 1960s and 70s, but they have focused largely on rights of free speech, political participation, the drinking age, and the voting age.⁴ As my research suggests, however, teenage mothers were some of the greatest (though least heralded) beneficiaries of this social movement. Pregnant girls and their advocates drew upon these newly articulated rights to secure their place back in the classroom, reversing a twenty-five-year policy of exclusion. This transition not only brought pregnant girls back into *schools*, but it also brought them back into the concept of *childhood* itself, granting them access to the rights, protections, and social benefits that came with it.

² “Letters to the Editor,” *LIFE*, April 23, 1971, 20A.

³ Woodbury, “Help for High School Mothers.”

⁴ Gael Graham, *Young Activists*; Jenny Diamond Chang, “Uncovering the Twenty-Sixth Amendment” Ph.D. Diss, Sonja Grover, *Young People’s Human Rights and the Politics of Voting Age*; Wendell Cultice, *Youth’s Battle for the Ballot*; Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, chapter 15.

Pregnant girls' integration into the American education system took place in stages that spanned classrooms, courtrooms, and Congress. Starting in the early 1960s, a handful of school districts created comprehensive programs specifically designed to meet the needs of pregnant youth. These programs offered education, health care and counseling services under one roof, away from the judgment of peers and unsympathetic teachers. Though programs varied greatly from one another, they all viewed pregnant teenagers as flawed but redeemable children and promoted the idea that communities had a responsibility to educate all of their children. In the early 1970s, comprehensive programs became less prominent as more schools brought pregnant girls into mainstream classes, but they were a critical first step in establishing educational rights for pregnant teenagers.

In late-1960s through the early 1970s, advocacy shifted from the classroom to the courtroom. A series of cases brought by pregnant students ended up significantly expanding their rights to education. Heavily influenced by the children's rights and students' rights movements, these decisions also redefined pregnant girls as *citizens* endowed with constitutional rights, including the right to an education.

Finally, in the early and mid-1970s, legislatures around the country and eventually the U.S. Congress passed laws protecting the educational rights of pregnant and parenting youth. These sex discrimination laws, most notably Title IX, came out of the women's liberation movement, and focused on broad gender-based rights in education. Although protecting pregnant adolescents was never their primary goal, these legislative victories created important legal architecture for protecting the rights of pregnant students. By the middle of the 1970s, pregnant teenagers were constructed in law and in culture as autonomous individuals endowed with rights, whether as students, citizens or women.

From Caretaking to Liberation Rights

Americans have understood the notion of children's rights in a variety of ways over time. In his 1993 book, *Children: Rights and Childhood*, political philosopher David Archard describes two predominant perspectives. The first, which he calls a "caretaking" understanding of children's rights, assumes that children are dependent, vulnerable, and in need of adult protection. Caretaking rights are exercised by adults *on behalf* of children; they do not require children to do anything. Examples include the right to basic health care, access to education, protection from violence, and freedom from cruelty. Historian Michael Grossberg explains that the caretaking perspective "converts children's basic human needs into rights and is thus rooted in assumptions of children's inherent dependence and need for adult care and protection."⁵

Caretaking rights reached their pinnacle in the child-saving movement of the Progressive Era around the turn of the century. During these years, reformers established numerous laws and institutions designed to protect children's innocence including compulsory schooling laws, child labor protections, and juvenile courts. This

⁵ David Archard, *Children: Rights and Childhood*, Ideas (London ; New York: Routledge, 1993); Michael Grossberg, "Liberation and Caretaking: Fighting over Children's Rights in Postwar America," in *Reinventing Childhood after World War II*, ed. Paula S. Fass (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 20.

interpretation of children's rights remained important throughout the first half of the twentieth century.⁶

A second paradigm rose to prominence after World War II. "Liberation" rights, which dominated American thought for the next several decades, offered a significantly different view of children. This paradigm assumes that children are mature, capable and entitled to many of the same rights as adults. In contrast to caretaking rights, liberation rights are exercised *by* children; they aim to maximize autonomy and freedom rather than protection. Some examples include the right to privacy, to vote, to travel, and to free speech.

This understanding of children's rights expanded dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s. Inspired by the freedom struggles of African Americans, women and other minorities, children's rights activists clamored for young people to be included in this historic expansion of citizenship rights. This movement culminated in the 1971 passage of the Twenty-Sixth Amendment, which lowered the voting age to eighteen.⁷

The rise and fall of these concepts of children's rights directly affected the fortunes of pregnant teenagers. In the 1950s and early 1960s, schools subscribed to a caretaking view of children's rights. They believed that children needed to be protected and taken care of by adults, but they did not consider married and pregnant students to be children despite their young age. Rather, they were seen as a *threat* to children. According to school boards, exclusionary rules were necessary to protect "regular" children from the dangerous "adult" influence of their married and pregnant peers. They did not see any irony in the fact that the expelled students and the protected students were the same age. When caretaking rights prevailed, married and pregnant teenagers simply did not fit within the popular understanding of children's rights.

The shift from caretaking to liberation rights in the late 1960s offered pregnant teenagers a new framework in which to lobby for their educational rights. Once Americans embraced liberation rights, which conceived of children as endowed with similar rights as adults, it became more difficult to deny them equal access to education. Supreme Court Justice Henry Blackman summed up this perspective in a decision on abortion rights for minors. "Constitutional rights do not mature and come into being magically only when one attains the state-defined age of majority. Minors, as well as adults, are protected by the Constitution and possess constitutional rights."⁸ In a somewhat paradoxical fashion, once the concept of childhood expanded to include more adult-like rights, adult-like children (namely pregnant teenagers) were incorporated back into childhood.

"An Attitude of Public Responsibility:" Comprehensive Programs and the Public Education of Pregnant Pupils

⁶ Archard, *Children: Rights and Childhood*, 71. David Archard, *Children : Rights and Childhood*, Ideas (London ; New York: Routledge, 1993), 71.

⁷ Archard, *Children: Rights and Childhood*. In the late 1970s, there was a withdrawal from liberation rights and a return to caretaking rights as parents increasingly focused on their children's vulnerability in the modern world.

⁸ From *Planned Parenthood v. Danforth*, 428 U.S. 52 (1976), Grossberg, "Liberation and Caretaking."

The first major steps toward the inclusion of pregnant teenagers took place in select school districts in the early 1960s in the form of so-called comprehensive programs. Before 1963, the best education most pregnant adolescents could hope for was occasional home visits from a tutor. By 1971, over 250 school districts established educational programs specifically designed to meet the educational, medical and psychological needs of pregnant adolescents. These comprehensive programs brought together public schools, medical centers and social workers, and were typically run by sympathetic educators. By the mid-1960s, as journalist Nancy Moss wrote, “an attitude of public responsibility for helping pregnant adolescents continue their education was beginning to take shape in public and private schools.”⁹

Johnson’s Great Society, The War on Poverty and Education

Early efforts to educate pregnant school-age girls emerged during an era when the nation was particularly focused on reducing social inequality. The early 1960s were a time of great affluence, but the 1962 publication of Michael Harrington’s influential *The Other America* focused the nation’s attention on the significant numbers of people left in the economic underclass. President Lyndon B. Johnson, a great believer in the federal government’s ability to solve the nation’s problems, declared an “unconditional war on poverty” and enlisted the state’s resources in battle. He launched a massive legislative agenda known as the Great Society in 1964. It was largely designed to help the poor, or in his words, those “who have been forgotten and passed over and passed by.” Over the next several years, he pushed through laws that created Medicare, Head Start, food stamps, transit subsidies, job training, and a higher minimum wage.¹⁰

The cornerstone of Johnson’s vision to end poverty was education. In the 1960s, Americans placed great faith in the ability of schools to solve economic and social inequality and to create a more peaceful, just society. Unlike the academic reformers of the 1950s who saw schools as a way to beat the Russians in the Cold War, educators in the 1960s imagined that schools could create a better world within the nation’s borders. In the midst of a chaotic and violent decade, schools were re-envisioned as engines of social change that could make society a more just and integrated place.¹¹

This belief in the transformative power of education fueled intense interest in schools. President Johnson, who had worked as a teacher in an impoverished Texas school in his youth, firmly believed in the power of education to combat inequality: “Education is the only valid passport from poverty,” he declared in 1965.¹² As Fred Hechinger, a *New York Times* columnist, wrote, “From the President down to the local town and city officials, everybody has proclaimed that the schools and colleges must provide the solutions to most of the nation’s problems.”¹³

⁹ Nancy Moss, “Schools Helping Unwed Mothers with Education,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 3, 1966.

¹⁰ Bruce J Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism: a Brief Biography with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2007).

¹¹ This trend gained significant traction after the 1955 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case, which focused on using educational equality as a way of creating greater social equality. William G. Wraga, *Democracy’s High School: the Comprehensive High School and Educational Reform in the United States* (Lanham, MD.: University Press of America, 1994), 129.

¹² Schulman, *Lyndon B. Johnson and American Liberalism*, 5.

¹³ “Era of Challenge Facing Schools,” *New York Times*, 1965 Jan 13.

A great deal of President Johnson's Great Society program focused on meeting the educational needs of disadvantaged children. Over sixty percent of the massive anti-poverty legislative package, the Economic Opportunity Act, was aimed at schools. Its key piece of legislation was the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), the first federal program that specifically allocated funds for the education of disadvantaged children.¹⁴ The ESEA was a massive federal aid program designed to allow every child to receive, in Johnson's words, "as much schooling as he could take." The program gave schools the mandate and the resources to serve poor students' unmet needs in the hopes of creating a more equal future. It was within this context that public schools began to embrace special programs for disadvantaged students. A small number of these programs addressed the needs of pregnant school-age girls.

The Webster School

The first and most influential comprehensive school program was the Webster School for Girls in Washington, D.C. This pioneering program opened in 1963 and served pregnant students until 1974. And though other communities launched similar programs in the intervening years, Webster remains a useful case study because it was a model for school districts across the country.¹⁵

Educators in Washington, D.C. realized they had a "pregnancy problem" in the mid-1950s. Adolescent pregnancies increased dramatically in the District of Columbia after World War II, and educators were among the first professionals to pick up on this trend. During the 1955-1956 school year, the Board of Education reported that an average of one hundred girls had dropped out of school due to pregnancy each of the past five years; a "shockingly large" number, according to District Superintendent Hobart M. Corning.¹⁶

Although these pregnancies alarmed educators, they agreed that married and pregnant girls did not belong in the classroom. D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) required pregnant students to withdraw from school as soon as their condition was discovered. Through the mid-1960s, pregnant girls had the option of enrolling in a sympathetic private school or staying at a maternity home, but most simply ended their education altogether.

Starting in the early 1960s, DCPS began to take a more sympathetic and more experimental approach to the issue of pregnancy in schools. Superintendent Carl Hansen appointed a committee of experts to study the problem in 1961 and asked them to suggest a way to keep pregnant students from dropping out of school. The Pregnant Girls Committee took a broad approach to the problem. Instead of simply trying to reduce the number of pregnancy-related dropouts, they envisaged a school that would meet pregnant girls' educational, social, medical, nutritional and emotional needs. Their proposal called for a program primarily based in the school system but run jointly by the Board of

¹⁴ Wraga, *Democracy's High School: the Comprehensive High School and Educational Reform in the United States*, 138-9; "Era of Challenge Facing Schools," 75.

¹⁵ Other important early programs were in Chicago, New Haven and Atlanta. See Lorraine V. Klerman and James F. Jekel, *School-age Mothers: Problems, Programs, & Policy* (Hamden, Conn.: Linnet Books, 1973).

¹⁶ "95 School Girls Pregnant."

Education and the Public Welfare and Public Health Departments. This school-centered, inter-agency program would create an uninterrupted educational experience for pregnant girls so they would be more likely to return to school after delivery. It would also provide much-needed prenatal medical care, individual case meetings with social workers, psychological consults, and a safe environment away from the stares and taunts of other students.¹⁷

The innovative plan made a rather controversial assertion: that public schools were responsible for the education and welfare of *every* person under age sixteen, even those who were pregnant. This proposition met with some opposition on the Board of Education when it was debated in 1962. Dissenting board members argued that pregnant girls were not the responsibility of the public school system, and that they might damage the education and morale of other students. Board member Carl C. Smuck felt that the program was “beyond the purview of our educational program. This proposal is not an educational program” and “will only dilute our efforts in other more appropriate areas.”¹⁸ Other members refused to approve the plan if there was a chance that other students might come in contact with, or even see, pregnant girls.

In contrast, supportive board members stressed the educational aspects of the program and the need to give children a second chance. Board member Gloria K. Roberts agreed that the program was primarily academic and suggested that they could always pass off the program to another agency after a few years if they found that academics were not being stressed. Another member, Dr. Mordechai Johnson added, “This serious error on the part of girls should not be allowed to destroy their lives if it could be helped.”¹⁹ The *Washington Post* also came out in support of the program: “The problem, far from being ‘tangential,’ is inescapable [and] only the schools can conceivably assume responsibility for educating the unhappy girls involved.” “These children,” the article continued, “are surely much more sinned against than sinning.” This vote of support portrayed pregnant girls not as a social problem, but as *children* deserving of pity and in need of help.²⁰

The Board of Education approved the proposal on December 19, 1962 in a 7-to-2 vote. The following day, it submitted a grant application for a three-year demonstration program to the Children’s Bureau. In May of 1963, the Children’s Bureau approved the proposal, providing \$60,000 for the first year, \$90,200 for the second year and \$94,300 for the third.²¹ This marked the first time that the federal government directly supported educational programs for pregnant school-age girls.

The Webster School for Girls opened its doors in September of 1963 in a former school building on 10th and H Street in downtown D.C. From 1918 through 1949, the building had housed the Americanization School for the District, designed to help new immigrants shed their native cultural practices and assimilate into American culture.²² In its newest guise, the Webster School again embarked on a reeducation campaign of sorts,

¹⁷ Marion Howard, *The Webster School; a District of Columbia Program for Pregnant Girls* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Health, Education, and Welfare, Children’s Bureau, 1968).

¹⁸ “School Board Votes to Set Up Classes for Pregnant Girls,” *Washington Post*, December 20, 1962.

¹⁹ “Pregnant Students: Memo,” December 19, 1962, folder “Pregnant Students: Programs, 1960s,” Charles Sumner School Archive, Washington, D.C.

²⁰ “Morals and Education,” *The Washington Post*, November 19, 1962.

²¹ Howard, *The Webster School*, 2.

²² “Untitled Memo,” n.d., folder “Webster, Daniel,” Charles Sumner School Archive, Washington, D.C.

hoping to transform its array of teenage pariahs into healthy, engaged high school students.

Webster enrolled 487 students in its first three years, about one-fifth of those referred from their home schools.²³ Students attended Webster for the final four months of their pregnancy, stayed home with their baby for six weeks after delivery, and returned to Webster for two additional weeks. After their stay at Webster was complete, they transferred back into a regular school, though not the school they had originally attended in order to give the girls a “new start.”

The largest component of the program was academic instruction. Webster offered a full day of classes, from 9:00 am to 3:30 pm, in which teachers offered a wide range of academic courses plus a required course in Personal and Family Life.²⁴ The school also offered free, coordinated medical care to its students at the nearby Gales Maternity Clinic. Expectant teenagers often hid their pregnancies and delayed doctor’s visits for as long as possible, which increased the likelihood of complications and poor health outcomes. To combat this trend, Webster employed an obstetrician, a public health nurse and a Health Department nutritionist who dropped by the school several days a week.

In addition to medical services, comprehensive programs rounded out their staff with social workers and psychologists. Webster employed two caseworkers on site and the Department of Public Welfare provided a social worker once a week to supervise their work.²⁵ Later programs would follow a similar design, offering schooling, health care, psychological and social work services.

By a wide range of measures, the school was a success. Its students made greater academic progress, showed more emotional stability, and demonstrated a stronger commitment to education than similar students who did not enroll in the program.²⁶ Webster students were half as likely to have another child, and nearly twice as likely to remain in school two years after they left the program.²⁷ They delivered healthier babies and spoke highly of their experiences. Nearly every Webster student reported that she felt more comfortable in the program than at her regular school.²⁸ One student explained that Webster “has given teenage girls who might otherwise be afraid and broken-spirited a new confidence and faith in the future.” Another wrote that the program had helped girls realize “that the fact they are going to have children does not lessen their chances to succeed in future endeavors.”²⁹

The Webster School’s success convinced local and federal authorities to expand their support of similar programs. By 1968, thirty-five programs were in operation across the country. In 1971, the Secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Elliot Richardson, created the Federal Inter-Agency Task Force on Comprehensive

²³ Howard, *The Webster School*, 5–8, 25.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁵ Maurine Hoffman, “Regular School for Irregular Girls Will Be Three-Year Experiment Here: Unwed Mothers Stay in School Puppy Love Blamed Illegitimacies Rise,” *The Washington Post*, November 1, 1963, A1.

²⁶ Howard, *The Webster School*, 25.

²⁷ Howard, *The Webster School*; Howard, *Multiservice Programs for Pregnant School Girls*, 33.

²⁸ “Draft Proposal for the Continuation of the Webster Junior-Senior High School Program for Unwed Mothers,” n.d., folder “Pregnant Students Programs, Webster ES Prog, 1960-1970s,” Charles Sumner School Archive, Washington, D.C.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Appendix H.

Programs for School Age Parents in order to coordinate efforts to develop and improve initiatives on a national scale.³⁰ By 1973, 250 schools served more than 50,000 girls a year. Program leaders organized their own national organization called the National Alliance Concerned with School-Age Parents to support the development of programs.

Despite their successes, comprehensive programs also had significant limitations. First, their focus on individual care meant that they were expensive and small. Even as Webster expanded, it still failed to meet the need of D.C.'s growing population of pregnant school-age girls. In the first three years alone, 1,629 girls were turned away from the program because of space constraints.³¹ The educational prospects for those girls remained grim. In effect, this situation created two-tiers of pregnant girls in the 1960s: most girls were forced out of the school system and likely never came back, while a small minority received personalized, comprehensive care that helped them continue their education well after the birth of their child.

Second, these programs were predicated on a segregated model of education. Though the programs intended to create safe, sheltered spaces for pregnant girls, they inadvertently reinforced the idea that these girls were different, deviant, and potentially contagious. Most schools were located in isolated locations so that their students would never cross paths with regular students. Some families hesitated to send their daughters to schools in distant or unfamiliar neighborhoods. In 1971 for example, a Chicago girl refused to attend the city's comprehensive program because her family felt the ten-mile bus trip was too dangerous. Instead, they started a protracted legal battle with the school district in the hopes of getting their daughter readmitted to her original school.³²

Legal scholar Tamara Ling argues that the separation of pregnant girls from the general student population was a delicate compromise. It "satisfied the traditional perspective, which remained hostile to the presence of pregnant students in mainstream schools, and a newer social perspective, which viewed pregnancy as a trauma and pregnant teenagers as a unique population requiring a sheltered school environment."³³ Further, it allowed regular schools to put pregnant students out of their mind, neither taking responsibility for them nor conceiving of them as part of the student community.

Finally, comprehensive programs, which overwhelmingly served girls of color, were often stigmatized. Sociologist Constance Nathanson argues that middle-class white women tended to avoid services that drew public attention to their sexual behavior, leaving them for poor women of color.³⁴ Of Webster's 487 students in its first three years, for example, 480 were African-American, and most came from lower-middle-class families.³⁵ Psychologist Gail L. Zellman, who researched pregnancy schools for the federal Office of Civil Rights, discovered that "in several cases, the special program had been a minority school before it had been reassigned to the pregnancy program; the 'minority' label stuck, and few nonminority students would enroll." Some schools even

³⁰ Klerman and Jekel, *School-age Mothers*, xi.

³¹ Howard, *Multiservice Programs for Pregnant School Girls*, 6.

³² Carolyn Toll, "Do Pregnant Students Belong in Public School Classrooms?," *Chicago Tribune*, December 26, 1971, B11.

³³ Tamara S. Ling, *Lifting Voices: Toward Equal Education for Pregnant and Parenting Students in New York City*, 29 *Fordham Urb. L.J.* 2387, 2002.

³⁴ Constance Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage: The Social Control of Sexuality in Women's Adolescence* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 162.

³⁵ Howard, *Multiservice Programs for Pregnant School Girls*.

had different informal policies for student pregnancy by race. Minority girls were encouraged to transfer to the pregnancy program, while white girls were expected to drop out or get physician approval to stay out of school until after delivery.³⁶ Educators advocated for more integrated solutions in the mid-1970s in the hopes of erasing some of this racial and economic stratification.

Toward Mainstreaming

In the 1960s, solutions that allowed pregnant girls to remain in their regular classes were dismissed as politically untenable and highly controversial. Most principals believed that the presence of pregnant girls in class would be read as tacit approval of teen pregnancy by the community; worse, it might encourage other students to follow suit. This fear of contagion kept sexually unorthodox girls out of schools and out of sight.

By the early 1970s, however, “contagion theory” began to fall out of favor as educators, social scientists and children’s advocates focused instead on the harm that isolation could do to pregnant youngsters. As a school official in Fullerton, California argued in 1970, “separating them implies that you think they’ve done something wrong, and you’re afraid they’ll contaminate the other students.” Further, there was some indication that spending time in class with pregnant students even made other students *less* likely to become pregnant in the future.³⁷

Influential groups began to support “mainstreaming” for pregnant girls publically in the 1970s. One of these groups was the Task Force on Rights and Justice of the White House Conference on Youth in 1971. This panel of youth activists from around the country met in Estes Park, Colorado to come up with new approaches to the problems facing youth. They vigorously disapproved of any policy that removed pregnant girls from their classrooms:

The importance of receiving public education through twelfth grade has not only social and psychological but also economic values. To deprive a teenager of high school education is to inflict upon her irreparable injury, to deprive her of her property without due process of law and to deny her the equal protection of the law. The pregnant unwed adolescent girl is not only at risk psychically and emotionally, but also educationally if she is deprived of her basic, legal right to attend school. The Task Force on Rights and Justice of the White House Conference on Youth reaffirms the legal right of the pregnant adolescent to attend school if she wishes.³⁸

A statement affirming the legal rights of pregnant girls and the economic importance of education at a national conference would have been unheard of just a few years earlier.

³⁶ Gail Zellman, Rand Corporation., and United States. Dept. of Health Education and Welfare. Office for Civil Rights., *A Title IX Perspective on the Schools’ Response to Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood* (Santa Monica, Ca.: Rand, 1981), 30.

³⁷ Robert Hamlett Bremner, *Children and Youth in America: a Documentary History*, vol. III (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 840.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, III:831.

The National Council for Illegitimacy (NCI) voiced their support for mainstreaming as well. This group, which attempted to change societal attitudes toward unwed mothers, adopted a “Policy Statement on Continued Schooling for Pregnant Girls and Young Mothers” in 1968. The resolution advocated for “the right to continued public education for all pregnant girls and young mothers.” It stated, “Educational opportunities are a part of the value system of a free society,” and “a prerequisite for the opportunity to lead a full and productive life.” NCI advocated for the “right to continued public education for all pregnant girls and young mothers.”³⁹ The organization even suggested that schools take responsibility for pregnant adolescents beyond the limits of school attendance in order to maximize young women’s opportunities.

Others, including Dr. Frederick Green, the chief of the Children’s Bureau stressed the financial risk of curtailed education. Teenage parents, he explained, were often “forced into the job market before their educational and vocational preparation has been completed. This lack of preparedness means they end up in low paying jobs with no potential.” According to Dr. Green, school districts that allowed pregnant girls to stay in school saw the graduation rates of teenage mothers double.⁴⁰ Doctor and professor of public health James F. Jekel feared that the sheltered atmosphere of comprehensive programs might leave teenage mothers unprepared to fend for themselves in the wider world.

If the school-aged mother leaves the protected hothouse of the special program to go back to the jungle of the world, we may have just given her a breathing spell before going back into the wintry night of society’s discontent, unless we help her deal creatively with the society to which she must return. She needs to learn to demand her rights, to find the help and services she needs and to integrate the life and economics of a small but important family.

He believed that pregnant students should be integrated into regular schools in order to learn independence.⁴¹

A growing number of educators agreed that taking a pregnant girl out of her familiar environment caused unnecessary disruption at a time when she was dealing with change in most other aspects of her life. School policies also began to change to reflect the belief in mainstreaming in the 1970s. New York City public schools were among the first to allow pregnant girls to remain in their regular classes after the city superintendent ordered schools to follow this new policy in 1969.⁴²

³⁹ Wanda S. Pillow, *Unfit Subjects: Educational Policy and the Teen Mother* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2004), 59.

⁴⁰ Bremner, *Children and Youth in America: a Documentary History*, III:839–41.

⁴¹ James F. Jekel, “The Past Decade of Special Programs for School-Age Parents: Cause for Satisfaction or Just the Beginning?,” *National Alliance Concerned with School-Age Parents Newsletter* Vol 3., No.1 (Spring 1975) in U.S. Congress, Senate, School-age Mother and Child Health Act, 1975: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, United States Senate, 94th Congress, 1st Sess., on S. 2538 ... November 4, 1975., Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, Subcommittee on Health (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Office, 1976).

⁴² Georgia L. McMurray, “Summary of Activities Sept 1968 to Oct 1969, Committee for the Education of Preg School Age Girls – Summary of Activities,” 1969, Public Education Association MG 142, Box 46, Series 9, Folder 121, New York City Municipal Archives, New York.

The Atlanta Public School district ran an influential experiment in mainstreaming in 1971. On May 10, the School Board released a new policy on student pregnancy: “Pregnant students are to receive the same opportunities and considerations of the Atlanta Public Schools as do other students.” It continued, “No school official or employee should without sufficient cause exclude, expel, transfer, or excuse from school privileges any pregnant student entitled to admission as a student of the Atlanta Public Schools.” Students could transfer to an alternative program if they wished, but “every effort should be made to keep pregnant students in an educational program and to return them to it as soon as possible after delivery.” Put simply, pregnant students were allowed and *encouraged* to stay in their regular classes as long as they wanted. The board asked school staff to report any violations of this policy to the superintendent.⁴³

The Children’s Bureau funded an evaluation of the new program and released the results in 1974. According to the report, the new policy “must be considered a success.” The school reported a decline in student pregnancies and an increase in pregnant students’ attendance. While attendance “suffers slightly during the maternity period, they are returning to school after delivery in an encouraging upward trend.” A survey of school counselors, nurses, and social workers in the school system also yielded positive results. Ninety percent of the respondents reported that traditional students were showing acceptance toward their pregnant classmates, and eighty-three percent responded that the majority of pregnant students were choosing to return to school after delivery. In addition, students who remained in their regular classes had improved health and educational outcomes, proving that an in-place solution was possible as well.⁴⁴

Washington D.C. schools joined the mainstreaming trend in 1971 when the district officially changed its pregnancy policy. The District Board of Education declared that students were free to remain in their regular classes until the seventh month of pregnancy, at which point they should withdraw for medical reasons. The Superintendent explained that “the major thrust of our public school system is to provide at the local school level for as many students as possible” rather than separating students into specialized programs. While school compliance with the new rule was not perfect, the policy change marked a significant increase in educational access for pregnant schoolgirls. In 1973, for example, the valedictorian at D.C.’s Anacostia High School was pregnant, and nearby McKinley High School reported twenty pregnant girls in the student body at one time.⁴⁵ In 1971, the *Washington Post* profiled a pregnant student who had moved all the way from Nebraska to Fairfax, Virginia in order to live closer to her boyfriend, and take advantage of the new district rule allowing pregnant girls to stay in regular classes.⁴⁶ Girls who could not get into Webster now had a way of continuing

⁴³ U.S. Congress, Senate, *School-age Mother and Child Health Act, 1975: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, United States Senate, 94th Congress, 1st Sess., on S. 2538 ... November 4, 1975.*, Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, Subcommittee on Health (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Office, 1976), 290.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁴⁵ “Excerpts from March 1, 1973 Minutes – Pp. 16-18,” n.d., folder “Webster Girls’ School,” Charles Sumner School Archive, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁶ Kenneth Bredemeier, “Classmate Parents: Married Fairfax Students Coping as Parents,” *Washington Post*, April 13, 1973, C1.

their education, albeit without the personalized instruction, medical attention and emotional security provided by the program.⁴⁷

Mainstreaming opened up schooling to countless girls who would have dropped out before, but it also hastened the end of comprehensive programs. Once schools were allowed to “keep” their pregnant pupils, enrollment at Webster fell dramatically, prompting administrators to question its continued relevance. In March of 1974, the D.C. Board of Education, now led by Superintendent Barbara Sizemore, debated whether or not to close the Webster School in the fall of 1974. Some members vigorously objected, claiming that girls needed the safety and protection of special schools. One claimed, “The pregnant girls chose the Webster School because they felt uncomfortable being among the other children. . . . What kind of provisions are going to be made for those girls?”⁴⁸ But other members countered that Webster was no longer necessary now that pregnant girls had other options. A board member named Mr. Scott explained, “We have learned enough about what to do with them from the Webster School. I think the major thing is maintaining those specialized services.” After much debate, the board unanimously voted to close the Webster School the following school year, and to provide training to teachers in the regular system to care for pregnant students and refer them to appropriate medical facilities.⁴⁹

The closing of Webster would turn out to be more complicated than it seemed at first. When Webster shut its doors in the fall of 1974, regular schools had received no training and no notice that the special program had ended. Principals around the region referred 90 girls to the shuttered program in the fall alone.⁵⁰ Frustrations with the closure boiled over on October 8, 1974 when former Webster students and community group members picketed Superintendent Sizemore’s offices, demanding that the school be reopened. They chanted, “mainstream Sizemore, not school-aged parents.” The protesters told reporters that most teenage mothers had stopped attending school altogether since the closing of Webster and that nurses in regular schools were wholly unprepared to deal with the needs of pregnant girls. In a show of defiance, the school board called a special meeting on October 15, 1974 and voted to reopen Webster against the wishes of Superintendent Sizemore.

The archival record is unclear on whether students actually attended Webster after it was officially reopened in October 1974 or whether they were lost in the bureaucratic chaos that followed. What is clear is that the school never ran at full capacity after the 1973-74 school year, and that D.C. Public Schools had definitively moved toward mainstreaming.

By the mid-1970s, ideas about teenage pregnancy and education had clearly shifted. In the 1960s, for example, newspaper stories about teen mothers consistently showed the girls in shadow, from behind or with their faces otherwise obscured. By the early 1970s, newspapers started publishing photographs with full pictures of young

⁴⁷ Bredemeier, “Classmate Parents: Married Fairfax Students Coping as Parents.”

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Barbara Sizemore, “Memo: “Brookland/Pierce Program for Trainable Mentally Retarded Students and the School-Aged Parent Program at the Webster School,” October 16, 1974, folder “Webster Girls’ School, Charles Sumner School Archive, Washington, D.C.

mothers, suggesting that there was less shame associated with unwed motherhood.⁵¹ As the protests outside of the D.C. school board suggest, teenage mothers had developed a political consciousness and a sense of entitlement to their education. These newly empowered teenagers continued to push for educational rights, but they would move their fight from classrooms to courtrooms.

“A Basic Personal Right”: Pregnant Students and the Struggle for Education in the Courtroom

Scholars who have written about the liberation struggles of the 1960s and 1970s have tended to focus on the Civil Rights Movement, Women’s Liberation, and the Gay Rights Movement. But one of the most important and overlooked social movements of this era of protest was waged in the name of children’s and student rights. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, young people succeeded in changing national laws and even amending the federal Constitution in the pursuit of greater rights of self-determination and self-expression. These activists ushered in a new legal concept of children as competent and capable rather than dependent and in need of protection. Pregnant teenagers drew upon and aligned themselves with the children’s rights movement in their ongoing struggle for educational rights. In the second major stage of their fight, advocates and pregnant teens went to court wielding a new legal definition of childhood that resulted in significant victories by the mid-1970s. These young plaintiffs helped shape this new legal understanding of youth and took advantage of it as they sought entry into the schoolhouse gates.

The Rights of the Dependent Child

Lawmakers first turned their attention to children in the late nineteenth century. Around the turn-of-the-century, middle-class families embraced a new understanding of children as precious, vulnerable, and innocent, in need of adult protection. In what Viviana Zelizer calls the “sacralization of childhood,” children were transformed from productive members of the family economy into emotionally priceless but economically useless beings.⁵² Inspired by their new sense of children’s vulnerability and dependence, adults felt compelled to protect children. Members of the child saving movement created a spate of new institutions and laws designed to keep children safe, including playgrounds, public schools, and age of consent laws.⁵³

Throughout the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, schools used this notion of children’s vulnerability to exercise broad powers over their students. The concept of *in loco parentis* granted schools near-total authority over their students, and courts rarely stepped in. Judges followed the “reasonableness test” to determine when to step in: unless a school rule was “arbitrary and unreasonable,” they allowed it to stand. In practice, this gave schools expansive powers to control the student population, from

⁵¹ See, for example Anne LaRiveiere, “Unwed Mother- and Babies - Go to School,” *Los Angeles Time*, January 12, 1973, G1.

⁵² Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child : the Changing Social Value of Children*.

⁵³ Grossberg, “Liberation and Caretaking.”

specifying strict dress codes to meting out corporal punishment.⁵⁴ As discussed in Chapter Three, most married or pregnant students who challenged their suspensions in court were unsuccessful throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

A rare successful case in 1966 suggested that courts were beginning to view pregnant students in a more sympathetic light. *Alvin v. Cooper*, mentioned earlier, focused on Kathy Ann Cooper, a sixteen-year-old Texas high school sophomore who was prevented from attending Alvin High School because she had a child.⁵⁵ The First District Court of Civil Appeals ruled that the school must offer her admission in accordance with a Texas statute that guaranteed education to “any person over six and not over twenty-one years old... if such a person or his parents or legal guardian reside within the district,” and ruled in her favor. Anyone within these age limits was “entitled to admission as a matter of law.” Justice Bell defined Cooper not as a wife, not as a mother, but as a sixteen-year-old youth, deserving of education. This decision was notable because it was one of the first to abandon the “reasonableness test.” In its place, the court asserted the primacy of chronological age over life circumstances, allowing a married mother to remain a youth in the eyes of the law.⁵⁶ In hindsight, this case turned out to be something of a swan song for the caretaking perspective on children’s rights; after this ruling, judges increasingly embraced a liberation perspective of children’s rights.

The Children’s Rights Movement

The concept of liberation rights for children gained widespread influence during the 1960s and 1970s. Children’s advocates and young people argued that children were capable of self-determination, deserved autonomy, and should be able to make decisions about their lives. As opposed to caretaking rights, this philosophy articulated rights *of* children to be exercised by children themselves; not rights *for* children to be exercised by adults on their behalf.

The Children’s Liberation Movement, which grew out of 1960s activism, was the major proponent of expanded rights for children. Its members viewed the liberation of children as part of a greater freedom struggle of oppressed groups that included African Americans and women. Most children’s activists pushed for greater autonomy and self-determination for minors. More extreme believers, like psychologist Richard Farson and educator John Holt, argued that children should be granted exactly the same legal rights as adults and that any separation between children’s and adults’ worlds was oppressive. But most advocates for children’s rights wanted to redraw – not erase – the boundary between youth and adulthood.⁵⁷

One of the most important legacies of the Children’s Liberation Movement was a new sense of student rights. Over the course of the mid-1960s and early 1970s, students transformed schools into stages of political and cultural conflict. Students in Chicago staged walkouts in 1963 and 1964 to protest over-enrollment, inequitable conditions and gerrymandering of attendance maps. Around the same time, Latino students in the

⁵⁴ Schimmel and Fischer, *The Civil Rights of Students*, 16.

⁵⁵ “Teen Mother Battles School,” 5.

⁵⁶ *Alvin Independent School District v. Kathy Ann Cooper*, 404 S.W.2d 76, 1996 Tex. App. LEXIS 3045 (1966).

⁵⁷ Archard, *Children: Rights and Childhood*, 71.

Southwest also staged boycotts on behalf of Brown Power. They demanded improvement of their school's poor physical condition, high dropout rates, poor teachers, and counselors who guided Latino students into vocational programs rather than college-track courses. One walkout in Eastside Los Angeles in 1968 spread to fifteen schools, and prompted 20,000 students to leave class for several days.⁵⁸

The children's rights and students' rights movement came together in the landmark Supreme Court decision, *Tinker v. Des Moines*. The case concerned a thirteen-year-old girl, Mary Tinker, who had been suspended from school along with several friends for wearing a black armband to protest the Vietnam War. With the help of the ACLU, Tinker brought her case against the Des Moines school board to the Supreme Court in 1969. The high court ruled in Tinker's favor, declaring that students possessed constitutionally protected rights that could not be violated by schools. Justice Abe Fortas famously wrote in the majority opinion, "It can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate." He explained that students in school "are 'persons' under our Constitution. They are possessed of fundamental rights which the State must respect."⁵⁹ In a related 1967 decision, Fortas declared, "neither the Fourteenth Amendment nor the Bill of Rights is for adults alone" – a deeply liberationist interpretation of the Constitution.⁶⁰ *Tinker* reinforced this view and applied it to schools. The landmark case dealt a profound blow to the doctrine of *in loco parentis* and re-conceived of students as citizens rather than children under the authority of a parental figure.⁶¹

Legal scholar Franklin Zimring argues that the legal redefinition of adolescence in the late 1960s was a long-overdue realignment of legal theory with social reality. The lives of adolescents changed drastically during the first six decades of the twentieth century with hardly any adjustment in legal constructions of youth. "While the legal theory of youthful dependency stood still, the essential elements of modern adolescence fell into place: prolonged economic dependence, age segregation, and tremendous physical mobility."⁶² Cases like *Tinker* were playing legal catch-up, and by the 1970s, juvenile law more closely reflected the realities of everyday life for adolescents.

These affirmations of children's and students' rights led to a rapid turnaround in the legal fortunes of pregnant teens. Legal teams shifted their cases from state to federal court, and judges abandoned the "reasonableness test" that had given schools such expansive powers. They focused instead on whether rights of students were being protected. Between 1966 and 1975, courts heard twelve cases having to do with pregnant girls' educational rights: ten were decided in favor of the student.

Of these twelve cases, *Perry v. Grenada* was one of the most important was. Decided a few months after *Tinker v. Des Moines*, it expanded the rights of students through the equal protection clause. Although historians have largely overlooked *Perry*, it was the first case to establish that pregnant students were protected against school discrimination by the Fourteenth Amendment in federal court, setting an important

⁵⁸ Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 325.

⁵⁹ *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 393 U.S. 503 (1969).

⁶⁰ *In re Gault et al.*, 387 U.S. 1 (1967); Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 329–30.

⁶¹ *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 393 U.S. 503 (1969).

⁶² Franklin E. Zimring, *The Changing Legal World of Adolescence* (New York, London: Free Press ; Collier Macmillan, 1982), 31, 45.

precedent that would not be widely recognized until the mid-1970s.

Grenada, Mississippi, had a fraught history when it came to education. The town was the site of a bitter and bloody battle over school integration in 1966. That summer, members of the Southern Christian Leadership Council and local leaders registered nearly 450 black students to attend the town's two white schools. When children showed up for the first day of school, they were attacked by a white mob wielding chains, pipes and ax handles as police stood by and watched. Several students were hospitalized; others made it into school safely only to be beaten as they left the schoolhouse that afternoon. Martin Luther King traveled to Grenada in the hopes that national attention might quell the violence against the town's children. But continued violence and a massive boycott by black students brought the school system to a near-halt. By winter, tensions had calmed, but only 111 black students remained in integrated schools the following year.⁶³ Among them were Clydie Marie Perry and Emma Jean Wilson.

Perry was seventeen and Wilson was fourteen when they became pregnant in 1967. Neither was married. Despite the fact that both girls were good students and well respected by their peers and teachers, they were promptly expelled from their integrated schools on the grounds of moral unfitness. The NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund took up the girls' case. They sued the school board for violating the Equal Protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, and alleged that the newly integrated schools were using morality codes as a way to get rid of black students.⁶⁴

In 1969, Perry and Wilson won their case in U.S. District Court. Judge Orma Smith dismissed the claims of racial discrimination, but found that expelling a student for becoming pregnant out of wedlock violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. He wrote that "no one can deny the importance of education to our youth," especially to unwed mothers. "The fact that a girl has one child out of wedlock does not forever brand her as a scarlet woman undeserving of any chance for rehabilitation or the opportunity for future education."⁶⁵

Months later, noted black journalist Carl T. Rowan wrote that *Perry v. Grenada* "may well be no less important than the . . . school desegregation policies of the Nixon administration or the new voting rights proposal of the Justice Department." This case, he argued, has "reopened the door of hope for tens of thousands of young women who previously were doomed to become only the scorned, the accursed, the bitter." Black adolescent mothers could build promising futures, he argued, but only with access to education. Rowan saw potential for a larger racial and class victory in *Perry v. Grenada* but it would take another two years before a similar case, *Ordway v. Hargraves*, captured the nation's attention.⁶⁶

Fay Ordway was a senior at North Middlesex Regional High School in East Pepperell, Massachusetts in 1971. The eighteen-year-old had big ambitions for her senior year: she was the editor of the yearbook, class secretary, and had been accepted to attend

⁶³ Edward Burks, "Dr. King Arrives in Grenada, Miss," *New York Times*, September 20, 1966, 34; Bruce Hartford, "Grenada, Mississippi: Chronology of a Movement, Daily Event Log," Southern Christian Leadership Conference Report, 1966, <http://www.crmvet.org/info/grenada.htm>, accessed Sep 1, 2012., Civil Rights Movement Veterans.

⁶⁴ "2 Unwed Mothers Get Chance to Finish School," *Chicago Daily Defender*, July 12, 1969, 13; *Perry v. Grenada*, 300 F. Supp. 748 (1969).

⁶⁵ *Perry v. Grenada*, 300 F. Supp. 748 (1969).

⁶⁶ Carl Rowan, "Quiet Mississippi Decision Important for U.S. Poor," *Toledo Blade*, July 16, 1969, 26.

Fitchburg State College in the fall. She had not planned, however, on getting pregnant.

She and her boyfriend briefly considered marriage, but she feared that a hasty, premature marriage would only add to their woes. When Ordway's principal found out about her pregnancy in January, he immediately expelled her. The school's rules banned unmarried pregnant girls from school (though married pregnant girls were allowed to stay). After appealing to the school board, Ordway was allowed to meet with teachers after school, but she quickly realized this system was a poor substitute for real classes. "I couldn't see that my being married or not had anything to do with my education. Everyone should be entitled to an education - everyone needs an education. So I decided to fight for mine."⁶⁷ She took her school board to court.

With legal representation from the Task Force for Excluded Children, Ordway took her case to U.S. District Court, arguing that she had a constitutional right to education. As Kristin Luker has pointed out, the school chose to defend the expulsion on practical, rather than moral grounds. They argued that it was necessary to protect Ordway's health. This, on its own, suggests how much had changed since the early 1960s, when pregnant girls were universally understood to pose a moral threat to other students. Ordway's legal team countered this claim by arguing that her *mental* anguish at being expelled posed a greater threat to the health of the pregnancy than any physical threat in school.

The judge ruled definitively in Ordway's favor: "It would seem beyond argument that the right to receive a public school education is a basic personal right or liberty."⁶⁸ The school had failed to demonstrate a compelling reason to deny Ordway her basic right to an education, so she must be readmitted. Ordway returned to school, finished senior year and received her diploma with the rest of her class, two weeks before her due date.

Though Fay Ordway's case was similar to that of Clydie Marie Perry and Emma Jean Wilson, the girls' lives were quite different. Perry and Wilson were African-American, they grew up in a segregated, disadvantaged Southern town, and they never captured the attention of the national media. Ordway, on the other hand, was white, middle-class, and photogenic – "an attractive five foot brunette" according to one newspaper. She spoke openly to journalists who wrote about her in sympathetic, flattering tones. One reporter exclaimed, "Fay looks and acts like anything but a rebel" and "she has never been one to challenge authority or make trouble."⁶⁹ Ordway became something of a non-threatening, respectable poster child for teenage pregnancy. She challenged not only the laws about school-age pregnancy, but also public assumptions about unwed motherhood. While historians have retold her story, Perry and Wilson's path breaking lawsuit has been largely overlooked. It deserves more recognition and study than it has received. Together with *Ordway v. Hargraves*, it firmly established that adolescents – married, unmarried, pregnant or not – possessed educational rights that were protected by the Constitution. Both cases relied on a new legal concept of youth ushered in by the children's rights movement that stressed competence, maturity and the

⁶⁷ Edwin Kiester Jr., "What's Happening in the Rest of the Country," *Chicago Tribune*, September 10, 1972.

⁶⁸ *Ordway v. Hargraves*, 323 F.Supp. 1155 (1971) The ruling made no mention of *Perry v. Grenada* even though the circumstances were very similar.

⁶⁹ "The Return of Fay Ordway," *Lowell Sun*, March 15, 1971 Accessed at newspaperarchive.com, Sept 13, 2012. Kiester Jr., "What's Happening in the Rest of the Country."

right to self-determination.

The rise of liberation rights for children helped usher in significant victories for pregnant teenagers with academic ambitions. By the late 1960s and through the early 1970s, pregnant girls made impressive gains in securing educational rights in court. In response, many school districts changed their policies to reflect these rulings and an unprecedented number of pregnant girls got to stay in their home schools. Without a national structure in place to enforce educational rights, however, pregnant girls still faced discrimination, suspension and expulsion.

Children's Rights as Women's Rights: Title IX and Educational Discrimination

The final stage in the expansion of pregnant girls' educational rights took place in the form of gender discrimination laws. Women's rights activists reclassified the issue of teenage pregnancy as one of sex discrimination rather than adolescent sexuality. Unlike school programs that viewed pregnant girls as children in need of help, or judges who saw them as constitutionally protected citizens, legislatures helped pregnant school-age girls because they were *women*. Antidiscrimination laws, passed in legislatures on the local and national level, grew out of the women's liberation movement. These laws supported a liberationist view of adolescent girls: namely that they were entitled to the same rights, legal protections, and equitable educational environment as adult women.

The most important piece of legislation, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, set up the legal architecture necessary to protect the educational rights of pregnant and married girls from a wide range of discriminatory practices. However, as legal scholars have pointed out, its provisions were often unenforced and its full potential left unrealized. Despite this, Title IX created important protections for pregnant and married school-age girls and laid the groundwork for a new relationship between young mothers and the state that would intensify over the course of the following decade.

Historians have rightly celebrated Title IX for ushering in an era of unprecedented gender equality in athletics. The law was a boon for female athletes and profoundly increased women's access to sports at all levels of education. However, the law's singular role in women's athletics has led historians to overlook its significance in other realms of gender discrimination.⁷⁰ Title IX's full historical importance extends beyond athletics to the legal protection it provided students regardless of their marital and parental status. The legislators and advocates who created Title IX did not set out to address the issue of school-age pregnancy. Their original focus was discrimination against older women – in college, graduate school, or the workforce. But they eventually realized that adolescent girls suffered similar educational biases and crafted their legislation in a way that addressed their concerns as well.

As the women's rights movement gained traction in the late 1960s and early 1970s, activists began to focus on the obstacles that blocked women's progress in education. Educational institutions in the 1950s and 1960s offered a chilly reception and a frequently hostile environment to female students and employees. For example,

⁷⁰ For example, see Welch Suggs, *A Place on the Team: The Triumph and Tragedy of Title IX* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); Susan Ware, *Title IX: a Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2007); Nancy Hogshead-Makar, *Equal Play: Title IX and Social Change* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2007).

application forms for graduate school often asked female applicants to identify their marital status or prove that they had their husband's permission to attend school. They never made similar demands of male applicants. As late as 1970, Virginia state law prohibited women from being admitted to the College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Virginia, the highest rated university in the state. It took a court order for the institution to admit its first female student.⁷¹

Educational discrimination often pivoted around the issue of marital status. Pregnant students and professors found that their medical care, insurance benefits and maternity leave differed widely depending on whether they were married or not. Some programs admitted unwed fathers but not unwed mothers. Other universities refused to hire married female employees altogether. House Representative Patsy Mink (D-Hawaii) who would become a key supporter of Title IX, was pushed out of her desired career path – medicine – because medical schools did not accept female students. Even Lucy Baines Johnson, daughter of President Johnson, was denied readmission to Georgetown University's school of nursing after her marriage in 1966. School policies did not allow married women to be students and even the first daughter was not exempt.⁷²

Bernice Sandler, who would go on to bring educational discrimination against women to the attention of Congress, experienced sex discrimination firsthand in graduate school. After finishing her doctorate in Counseling at the University of Maryland in 1969, Sandler applied for academic jobs in her home department as well as two other schools. She was rejected from all three, she believed, on the basis of sex discrimination. Sandler recounted that one colleague told her she “came on too strong for a woman.” Another department informed her that they did not hire women because they took too much time off to be with their children.⁷³

Frustrated by the blatant sexism of the job market, Sandler researched laws that might prohibit sex discrimination in higher education. In January of 1970, she compiled eighty pages of documents detailing extensive sex discrimination in higher education. She then filed a class-action lawsuit against all universities in the United States with specific charges against University of Maryland for violating the Executive Order 11246, which prohibited federal contractors from discriminating on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, or sex. In case her class action lawsuit did not capture the attention of lawmakers, she also sent copies of her documents to the press and members of Congress.

Sandler's actions peaked the interest of Rep. Edith Green (D-Ore.), who chaired the subcommittee on higher education and had long been interested in women's education. In June and July 1970, she drafted the first legislation prohibiting sex discrimination in education and held congressional hearings. Witnesses at the hearings

⁷¹ U.S. Department of Education, *Title IX: 25 Years of Progress*, June 1997, <http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/TitleIX/index.html>.

⁷² “Maternity Policies and the Educational Institution,” 1975, Project on the Status and Education of Women Collection, MC 557, Box 83, folder 3, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.; Margaret Dunkle and Bernice Sandler, “Sex Discrimination Against Students: Implications of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, PSEW Collection,” November 19, 1974, Project on the Status and Education of Women Collection, MC 557, Box 83, Folder 5, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.; U.S. Department of Education, *Title IX: 25 Years of Progress*.

⁷³ Ware, *Title IX*, 36–7.

enumerated the challenges facing women in higher education, as well as pregnant women or mothers in the workplace. Unsurprisingly, they focused almost entirely on adult women. In 600 pages of testimony, pregnant high school students were only mentioned twice.⁷⁴

Senators Birch Bayh (D-Ind.) and George McGovern (D-S.Dak.) ushered the bill through the Senate. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 passed Congress with little fanfare, and Nixon signed it into law on June 23. The language of the original law was simple and broad. Title IX stated,

No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.

Although the law was heralded among women's rights advocates, what it would mean in practice was anyone's guess at that point. Few people had given much thought to what became its most contentious application, gender equity in college athletics, let alone its impact on teenage pregnancy. Congress gave the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) within the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) three years to issue specific regulations on how schools must comply with the law. It was during this time that Title IX took on its more familiar form and addressed school-age pregnancy.

Between 1972 and 1975, OCR worked closely with experts on women and education as they crafted Title IX's detailed regulations. One of the central groups in this process was the Project on the Status and Education of Women (PSEW). Founded in 1971 by the Association of American Colleges, PSEW was the first national organization focused on gender equality in education for students, faculty, and administrators. Bernice Sandler, who spurred congressional interest in educational discrimination in the first place, was the director of PSEW. Along with associate director Margaret Dunkle, she played an important advisory role to HEW. Their extensive memos and newsletters traced the evolving shape of Title IX and the development of interest in school-age pregnancy.

OCR and PSEW's first forays into discrimination in high schools focused on teachers. During the 1950s and 1960s, many schools forced pregnant teachers to take maternity leave at a set point in their pregnancy. In a 1972 pamphlet, PSEW argued that this practice would certainly be prohibited under Title IX.⁷⁵ A year before the law went into effect, however, the Supreme Court declared mandatory maternity leave to be unconstitutional under the Fourteenth Amendment. In *Cleveland v. LaFleur*, the court ruled that "freedom of personal choice in matters of marriage and family life is one of the liberties protected by the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment." Mandatory maternity leave penalized a teacher for deciding to have a child, thus violating her "protected freedoms."⁷⁶

⁷⁴ U.S. Congress, House and Special Subcommittee on Education, *Discrimination Against Women. Hearings before the Special Subcommittee on Education of the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives, 91st Congress, 2nd Sesss, on Section 805 of H.R. 16098, June 17, 19, 26, 29, 30, 1970*, Committee on Education and Labor (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Office, 1970).

⁷⁵ "Maternity Policies and the Educational Institution."

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*; *Cleveland Board of Education v. LaFleur*, 414 U.S. 632 (1974).

Once these groups were engaged in the issue of pregnant high school teachers, it was only a small step to thinking about Title IX's implications for high school students as well. Between 1972 and 1975, OCR and PSEW documented discriminatory practices toward high school students that would need to be addressed by Title IX's detailed regulations. These included rules limiting married students' participation in classes or extracurricular activities. Also suspect were rules that required pregnant students to leave school permanently, enroll in special classes, be tutored at home, leave and return after a specific number of months, or inform schools of their due dates.⁷⁷ PSEW also documented widespread prejudice against unwed mothers, while unwed fathers remained unidentified and unpunished. Even schools that punished "unwed parents" would likely run afoul of Title IX. Sandler and Dunkle explained in a 1974 paper, "Since it is impossible to identify unwed fathers with any certainty and consistency, even a policy which ostensibly applied to all 'unwed parents' is probably impermissible under Title IX."⁷⁸

In its research, PSEW found schools that couched gender discrimination in rules about virginity. In 1973, the senior class at Urbana High School in Ohio nominated Sharon Boldman for homecoming queen. Before the vote took place, the school principal removed Sharon's name from the ballot because she was the unwed mother of a 6-month-old girl. The principal claimed that she was not disqualified because she had a child out of wedlock: the real issue was that she was no longer a virgin. Ignoring the obvious problem that it was impossible to verify the other candidates' virginity, he argued that only a virgin queen could represent the values of the community. The students at Urbana High ignored the principal's missive and mounted a campaign to elect Sharon as a write-in candidate. Meanwhile, her parents hired a lawyer and planned to sue the school for \$50,000. Their lawyer told reporters, "We're not living in the nineteenth century anymore. These are not the days of Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Scarlet Letter." Ultimately, the write-in campaign failed, and the lawsuit never made it to court.⁷⁹ But these type of school rules would be prohibited when Title IX went into effect.

HEW published Title IX's Regulations after three years of research and revision in 1975. The rules clearly stated that schools receiving federal funds could not discriminate against married, pregnant or parenting students. Section 34 C.F.R 106.40, titled "Marital or Parental Status" detailed the three basic guidelines for schools. First, pregnant students must be permitted to attend school and remain in regular classes if they wished. Second, school districts may set up special programs for pregnant students so long as enrollment was completely voluntary. Finally, the education offered in separate pregnancy schools must be comparable to the mainstream school program. These requirements applied to all schools that received federal funding.

The section used deliberately inclusive language. It banned schools from applying "any rule concerning a student's *actual or potential* parental, family, or marital status which treats students differently on the basis of sex [*italics added*]." Further, it prohibited discriminatory treatment due to "pregnancy, childbirth, false pregnancy,

⁷⁷ Dunkle and Sandler, "Sex Discrimination Against Students: Implications of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, PSEW Collection."

⁷⁸ Ibid., footnote 59.

⁷⁹ Ibid., footnote 60; "Virgins Only," *Parade*, November 11, 1973; "Homecoming Queen: No Experience Allowed," *The Quill*, February 19, 1974.

termination of pregnancy or recovery therefrom.”⁸⁰ In an expansive spirit, the law was written to cover the largest group of students possible, including those who had an abortion, a miscarriage, or a live birth, or those who might experience these events in the future.

Title IX enshrined in federal law anti-discrimination measures that were gaining support on the state level as well. In the years after the passage of Title IX in 1972 but before the regulations were issued in 1975, several states passed their own statutes on sex discrimination that offered wide-ranging rights to pregnant students. New Jersey’s legislature passed an anti-sex discrimination law in 1973 and guidelines for its enforcement in 1974. One of its most contentious sections, the requirement of in-school education for pregnant girls, managed to attract little notice. The Dean of Rutgers University wrote to Bernice Sander that “barring a revolt by New Jersey educators,” the guidelines would become law after sixty days. “Needless to say,” she added, “we (feminists) are laying low.”⁸¹ In 1975, Oregon passed a measure prohibiting elementary and secondary schools from discriminating on the basis of sex, race, marital status, religion or national origin. In the same year, South Dakota outlawed discrimination against any student on the basis of “pregnancy, childbirth, miscarriage, abortion, or recovery therefrom.”⁸² By 1975, when Title IX went into full effect, pregnant schoolgirls had legal protection on a scale unimaginable a decade earlier.

Still, these laws left much to be desired. Although Title IX set up important legal protections for married and pregnant school-age girls, it was written in a way that made it difficult if not impossible to enforce. Firstly, the federal government did not set aside any funding to implement programs for teenage mothers. Secondly, and quite importantly, Congress and HEW failed to establish clear procedures through which the regulations would be enforced. Compliance was voluntary, unmonitored, and left up to individual schools. Thirdly, the law did not require statistical reporting. To the present day, no federal or state agency collects or publishes data on the numbers of pregnant students who drop out, stay in school, or attend alternative education programs. Without data on these behaviors, it was (and remains) nearly impossible to catch violators or know whether schools were complying with the new requirements.

Legal scholar Kendra Fershee characterized the bill as “short and sweet but not necessarily effective.” Although the bill was well intended, she argued, “the protections in the Regulations are not adequate to educate, identify, and punish school administrators who treat pregnant students unlawfully.”⁸³ Indeed, as recently as 2004, there was no case

⁸⁰ Resource Center on Sex Roles in Education of the National Foundation for Improvement of Education, “Summary of Title IX: What the Proposed Regulations Require” (Research Action Notes, August 1974), Project on the Status and Education of Women Collection, MC 557, Box 83, folder 5, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.; U.S. Department of Education, *Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex in Education Programs or Activities Receiving Federal Financial Assistance*, n.d., <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/rights/reg/ocr/edlite-34cfr106.html#S40>.

⁸¹ Jean Ambrose, “Letter to Bernice Sandler,” n.d., Project on the Status and Education of Women Collection, MC 557, folder 103.4 LR. State Laws 1970-1975, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

⁸² “State Laws Concerning Students and Education Programs: South Dakota, 1975, Commission on Human Rights Proposed Rules, 1975,” 1975, MC 557, folder 103.14, Project on the Status and Education of Women Collection, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

⁸³ Kendra Fershee, “Hollow Promises for Pregnant Students: How the Regulations Governing Title IX Fail to Prevent Pregnancy Discrimination in School,” *Indiana Law Review* 43 (2010 2009): 89, 80, 63.

law on record addressing this aspect of Title IX. A few plaintiffs challenged schools for discrimination in extracurricular activities, but no one has sued regarding discrimination during the school day. The most likely explanation is that adolescents are unaware of their rights, though without accurate reporting on school policies and procedures, it is difficult to know.⁸⁴ While the legal importance of Title IX and similar state laws is undeniable, their full potential is yet to be fulfilled.

Although the advocates behind Title IX did not set out with the intention of helping pregnant teenagers, they stumbled upon an effective argument for educating pregnant girls: by reinterpreting educational exclusion as a matter of *sex discrimination*. Title IX conceived of pregnancy discrimination as an issue that these girls faced because of their gender, rather than their age or sexual proclivities. Historians have overlooked this important aspect of the law. Much of its potential remains untapped to the present day, but it deserves more scholarly and legal attention. These laws supported a liberationist view of adolescent girls: namely that they were entitled to the same rights, legal protections, and equitable educational environment as adult women. Title IX created important protections for pregnant and married school-age girls and laid the groundwork for a new relationship between young mothers and the state that would intensify over the course of the following decade.

...

The incorporation of pregnant girls into American high schools was made possible by a significant shift in understandings of youth that was ushered in by the children's rights movements and led to significant victories for pregnant teenagers with academic ambitions. These battles, which took place in classrooms, courtrooms, and legislatures, took advantage of the new language of liberation rights to win educational rights for pregnant teens. The shift from caretaking to liberation rights in the late 1960s offered pregnant teenagers a new framework in which to lobby for their educational rights – as citizens with legitimate claims to constitutional rights and to education.

Over the course of the 1960s and early 1970s, educational opportunities for pregnant teenagers expanded at an impressive rate. Comprehensive programs were critical in convincing school districts that they had a responsibility to educate all adolescents, even those who were married, pregnant or parenting. Legal cases like *Ordway v. Hargraves* and *Perry v. Grenada* established that school-age children possessed a basic right to education that was protected by the Fourteenth Amendment. Title IX enshrined this right to equal education in federal law, providing girls with powerful, though problematic, legal tools to advocate for their rights.

The liberalization of educational policy made a real difference in educational attainment in teen mothers. By the late 1970s, most school districts had adopted policies that allowed pregnant students to stay in their regular classes. Between the 1950s and the

⁸⁴ When Wanda Pillow tried to gather information from the Office of Civil Rights on the number of complaints about teen mothers' access to schooling for her 2004 book *Unfit Subjects*, OCR told her that there was "no available code for 'teen pregnancy.'" The only way to search was by "maternal discrimination" which includes adult women as well as school-age girls. Complaints would have to be examined individually to determine which were about school and which were about the workplace, but complaints are not in the public domain unless they have been investigated or settled. OCR reported 25 complaints under "maternity discrimination" from 1993-2002. Pillow, *Unfit Subjects*, 75n22.

1980s, graduation rates for school-age mothers nearly tripled, from less than twenty percent to fifty-five percent.⁸⁵

These educational changes not only created new opportunities for sexually precocious teenagers; they also made these girls more *visible* than ever before. As pregnant adolescents became a common sight in high school hallways, Americans became increasingly concerned and interested in the problem of teen pregnancy. As we will see in the next chapter, this increased visibility, combined with new patterns in adolescent sexual activity, drove the federal government to tackle the issue of teenage pregnancy with unprecedented zeal in the late 1970s and 1980s.

⁸⁵ In 1958, only nineteen percent of school-age mothers graduated from high school. By 1975, thirty percent graduated, and in 1986, fifty-five percent graduated. Dawn M. Upchurch and James McCarthy, "Adolescent Childbearing and High School Completion in the 1980s: Have Things Changed?," *Family Planning Perspectives* 21, no. 5 (September 1, 1989): 199–202.

Pregnant in Public: Teenage Pregnancy and the State after 1975

When Myra Lindsay became pregnant in high school, she assumed this news meant the end of her education. Pregnant girls were not allowed in school, and once her child was born, she figured it would be nearly impossible to find childcare that would allow her to continue with her classes. But before she dropped out of school, Myra's friend told her about the Delaware Adolescent Program Inc. (DAPI), a comprehensive program designed to help girls continue their education during and after pregnancy. Myra signed up, and started to believe that perhaps she could have her baby and continue her education.

During the months she spent at DAPI, Myra shared her experiences with her friends and family. But on November 4, 1975, she told her story to a much loftier audience. Myra was among the witnesses who testified in front of the Subcommittee on Health of the Committee of Labor and Public Welfare (94th Congress). Senator Edward Kennedy extended a warm greeting to the young mother: "We want to welcome you here. You have been paying attention to our hearing this morning. I've watched you listening very attentively. I think you probably understand what we are trying to do here."

Myra told the Senate subcommittee about her experience at DAPI. "They helped me in a lot of ways in school, as far as my education, keeping me in school so I would not have to stay off." DAPI also continued to help out after the birth of her child. Myra told the Senator how she enrolled her child in DAPI's on-site day care center, which allowed her to keep going to class. "What about health care?" Senator Kennedy asked. She explained that doctors visited the program once a week to tend to students and their young children. All the services she needed were all in one place. "Does that make it easier?" Kennedy asked. "Yes. It's better than running around all over the place," Myra replied.

Richard Cochran, Myra's boyfriend and the father of her child, also testified in front of the congressional subcommittee that day. He explained that he got involved in the program because one of Myra's counselors wanted to talk to him and he "just became attached" afterwards. The staff taught him practical skills like how to hold his daughter, change and feed her, and look for illness. But more importantly, they helped him make the transition into fatherhood. "The counselors are so openhearted, so well minded that they see the problems and they blend right together and help, and without this I think that the situation would be like a ball of fire. It would go up in smoke." He told the Senators that he can now "set an example for the young fathers" and spread the word about how they can take responsibility for their children as well. Senator Kennedy thanked the teenage parents for their "very good testimony."¹

This respectful exchange between a teenage mother, the unmarried father of her child, and a United States Senator would have been unthinkable just a few years earlier.

¹ U.S. Congress, Senate, *School-Age Mother and Child Health Act, 1975*, 480-481.

But in the mid-1970s, the federal government became intensely interested in the issue of adolescent childbearing and began interacting with teenage parents in new ways.

Adolescent sexuality, whether in the form of steady dating, teenage marriage or adolescent pregnancy, had been a topic of interest to the American people since at least World War II. But from the 1940s through the early 1970s, Americans generally agreed that these problems were best dealt with in private. Sexually precocious adolescents were removed from public spaces, most notably schools, and relegated to the private sphere. Adolescent girls who became pregnant during these years found support from their parents, extended families, husbands, and communities. The state was rarely involved.

But in the 1970s, the relationship between the government and pregnant teenagers fundamentally changed. Adolescent sexuality was reframed as a public issue that was best dealt with through government intervention. By the end of the 1970s, it was commonly accepted that federal and state agencies should play a role in supporting teenage mothers, helping them stay in school, and preventing future pregnancies. What caused this significant shift, what were its consequences and how did it effect the lives of teenage girls? How did an issue that had long been dealt with privately (and shamefully) become a major topic for lawmakers on both sides of the political divide?

The transformation of teenage pregnancy into a public problem was driven by the growing visibility of school-age pregnancy, a steep drop-off in marriage rates, and new patterns in adolescent sexual behavior that made early childbearing seem like a significant and growing threat. As more adolescents engaged in sexual activity, fewer pregnant girls married, and more young mothers decided to raise their children, the issue took on new urgency and new costs. Social workers, educators and, for the first time, politicians increasingly believed that the state should take action. The form and purpose of this intervention was hotly debated throughout the 1970s, but the idea that the state should take *some* sort of action in response to teenage pregnancy become accepted wisdom by the end of the decade.

The reclassification of adolescent childbearing as a public social problem led to a spate of government policies starting in 1975. Lawmakers proposed a wide range of responses, ranging from subsidized contraception, health services, abstinence counseling, and monetary assistance. As new parties and political coalitions came to power, the exact form of the government's response shifted. But while opposing political parties had different views on *how* to fix the issue of teenage pregnancy, they all agreed by the late 1970s *that* the government should take a part in tackling this social problem. In this chapter, I will examine the most important federal responses to teenage pregnancy including the proposed 1975 Mother and Child Health Act, the 1978 Adolescent Health Act, the 1981 Adolescent Family Life Act, and a range of welfare reforms aimed at young mothers.

The transformation of teenage pregnancy into a “national problem” had wide-ranging results. By the middle of the 1980s, pregnant girls had gained greater protections and more forms of support from the state than every before. At the same time, however, this transformation led the government to become more involved in the sexual lives of adolescent girls and more interested in shaping their sexual choices. Although adolescent pregnancy affected young women from all walks of life, the state intervened most in the lives of minority girls. Finally, this increased attention to teenage pregnancy led lawmakers to grapple with the age status of adolescent mothers. Were they burgeoning

adults who should be encouraged to set up independent lives? Or were they children who should be shepherded back into their parental families so they could finish growing up? In the 1970s, influential policymakers tended to view teenage mothers as potential adults. By the 1980s, they were replaced by lawmakers who saw teenage mothers as children. As we will see, this transition had direct policy ramifications. Between the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, teenage pregnancy was transformed from a deeply private to an overtly public issue, and though this transition had varying impact on different groups of girls, it profoundly and permanently altered the relationship between the state and young Americans.

New Patterns in Adolescent Sexuality

Although the 1960s are often remembered as the decade of sexual revolution, the most dramatic changes in adolescent sexual behavior took place in the 1970s. Over the course of the decade, teenagers walked away from marriage and adoption, embraced contraception and abortion, and increasingly raised children out of wedlock. These changes were most pronounced among white, middle-class girls and brought teenage sexuality out of private into public view. The newly public nature of teenage sexuality convinced legislators to tackle adolescent pregnancy on the national level. Young mothers were no longer concealed within newly formed marriages, maternity homes, or poor neighborhoods; they roamed the halls of high schools, and testified in the halls of Congress. The nation's leaders could no longer ignore what appeared to be a serious and growing problem.

The most basic explanation of the public's growing interest in young people's sexual behavior was that there were simply more teenagers than ever before. As the first wave of the baby boom generation reached adolescence between 1960 and 1970, there was a substantial increase in the number of teenagers compared to adults. In ten years, the adolescent female population grew by forty percent, from seven million to ten million.² This demographic anomaly magnified even small changes in young people's behavior into influential cultural shifts. Americans spent much of the 1960s and 1970s baffled by and worried about youth culture, from hippie counterculture and the Woodstock generation to college protest movements and civil rights activists. By the time teenagers started embracing new sexual mores, the nation was primed to think of young people as a social problem.

The most significant change in adolescent sexual behavior in the 1970s, however, had to do with marriage. From World War II until the early 1960s, when teenage birthrates were the highest, the most popular solution was a hasty marriage, particularly among white women. In 1960 for example, eighty-five percent of teenage births took place within marriage.³ Matrimony shielded adolescent fertility from view: young wives were removed from school, separated from their peers, and whisked into the private world of family life where they could give birth without causing a scandal. It privatized the problem of teen sexuality. As long as teenage childbearing took place within marriage, Americans assumed that the mother would be "taken care of" by her husband and family. Although the issue of adolescent sexuality, marriage, and childbearing in the

² Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage*, 26.

³ Ventura, Matthews, and Hamilton, *Births to Teenagers in the United States 1940-2000*.

1950s and 1960s may have been as complex as it was in later years, federal, local and state governments simply did not see themselves as being responsible for preventing pregnancies or supporting young mothers.⁴

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, adolescent marital behavior had clearly started to change. Teenage girls joined adult women in a widespread retreat from marriage. Women of all ages were marrying later and in smaller numbers as the frenetic pace of the baby boom wore off and cohabitation became more common. The “marriage bust” was most dramatic among teenagers. In the seven years between 1960 and 1967, the marriage rate for adolescent women dropped by 20 percent (compared to a three percent drop among all women). This trend would continue through the end of the century with teenagers at the leading edge of this demographic wave.⁵

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the nationwide marriage bust was that it also affected women who became pregnant out of wedlock. Premarital pregnancies had been quite common throughout American history, but most of these “accidents” were legitimated by marriage by the time the baby arrived. On occasion, the father refused to marry the mother or could not be found, and some women chose motherhood on their own; but societal taboos against unwed motherhood were so strong that few pregnant women refused the chance to marry if they had the choice.

The historic connection between premarital pregnancy and marriage broke down in the 1970s. In the 1950s and 1960s, approximately half of all women who became pregnant out of wedlock got married before the arrival of their baby.⁶ Between 1975 and 1979, only a third of premarital pregnancies were legitimated by marriage. Most women who became pregnant out of wedlock delivered their babies without marrying.⁷

The decline was similar among high-school age girls, to the point that teenage pregnancy became more or less synonymous with unwed motherhood in the public imagination. Between 1960 and 1977, the rate of illegitimate births to teenage girls increased by sixty-four percent, and the number of illegitimate births skyrocketed from just over 43,000 to nearly 117,000. These changes were all the more noticeable because women of all other ages were having fewer and fewer illegitimate births.⁸ By the 1970s, nearly half of all teenage births were to an unmarried mother, and half of all unmarried

⁴ Maris Vinovskis, *An “Epidemic” of Adolescent Pregnancy?: Some Historical and Policy Considerations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 48.

⁵ Frank F. Furstenberg, Jane Menken, and Richard Lincoln, *Teenage Sexuality, Pregnancy, and Childbearing* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 31; Modell, *Into One’s Own*, 271, fig. 20, p. 67.

⁶ The percentage of premarital pregnancies that resulted in marriages varied widely by race: white pregnant women married before childbirth about two-thirds of time versus a quarter of black pregnant women. This difference was largely due to greater acceptance of unwed motherhood within the black community. Martin O’Connell and Carolyn C. Rogers, “Out-of-Wedlock Births, Premarital Pregnancies and Their Effect on Family Formation and Dissolution,” *Family Planning Perspectives* 16, no. 4 (July 1, 1984): 159.

⁷ Half of unwed pregnant teens were married by the time they gave birth between 1955-1959. Twenty years later, that number had dropped to only 27.7%. *Ibid.*, 159.

⁸ U.S. Congress, House, *Adolescent Pregnancy: Hearing before the Subcommittee on Select Education of the Committee on Education and Labor, House of Representatives, 95th Congress, 2nd Sess., on H. R. 12146 ... July 24, 1978.*, Committee on Education and Labor, Subcommittee on Select Education (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Office, 1978), 30. Between 1960 and 1977, the rate of illegitimate births to women aged 20 – 24 dropped by 15%. For women aged 25-29, the rate dropped by 39%. Vinovskis, *An “Epidemic” of Adolescent Pregnancy?*, 28–9.

births were to a teenage mother.⁹ Unwed birthrates differed sharply by race: in 1977, four in ten births to white teens were out of wedlock as were nine in ten births to nonwhite teens.¹⁰ Adult observers, particularly white observers, were troubled by this rising tide of young, unmarried mothers. Unlike earlier decades when teenage pregnancies were quickly couched within teenage marriages, teenage mothers of the 1970s and 1980s seemed content to remain single.

What caused this monumental shift in adolescent marital behavior? Firstly, the powerful stigma of unwed pregnancy began to loosen its grip on women. In the early postwar period, a girl could commit no greater sin than getting pregnant out of marriage. One teenage girl who became pregnant explained, “This was in that period of time when there wasn’t much worse that a girl could do. They almost treated you like you had committed murder or something.”¹¹

But in the 1970s, mainstream American culture became slightly more accepting of premarital sex and unwed motherhood. As late as 1969, nearly 70 percent of Americans believed that premarital sex was wrong. By 1973, this number had dropped by twenty percentage points.¹² A spate of famous actresses bore children out of wedlock in the 1970s, which helped dispel some of the censure directed at unwed mothers. In 1970, movie star Mia Farrow gave birth to twin sons while her boyfriend, Andre Previn, was still going through a divorce from his wife. Vanessa Redgrave and Italian actor Franco Nero had a son in 1969, but they did not marry until 2006. In 1972, Barbara Hershey and David Carradine spoke to an AP reporter about the child they were expecting together. The couple had lived together for three years but chose not to marry. “I don’t believe in marriage,” Hershey explained. “If a relationship isn’t right, you should be able to end it at any time.” When asked how their child might view his unmarried parents’ decision, she said, “Being our child, he will understand.”¹³ These women helped pave the way for ordinary women who chose to raise children without a marriage certificate.

As pregnant teenagers were welcomed back into high schools in the late 1970s, their presence helped diffuse some of the stigma against early pregnancy. Some went so far as to suggest that pregnancy had become something of a fad in high schools. A 1979 *Washington Post* article, “Baby Chic: No Stigma to Pregnancy, Montgomery Teens Say,” claimed that in the Maryland high school district, “teen-age pregnancy has become not only acceptable but fashionable.” Whereas a pregnant high school student would have been shamed in the past, “today, instead, she is a celebrity among her peers.” This article certainly overstated its case, but it suggests that the stigma surrounding teenage pregnancy was beginning to crumble.¹⁴

As more and more adolescents began to experiment sexually, the profound social pressure that had forced legions of young people into marriage in the 1950s and 1960s

⁹ Kristin Luker, “Dubious Conceptions: The Controversy Over Teen Pregnancy,” *The American Prospect*, December 4, 2000, <http://prospect.org/article/dubious-conceptions-controversy-over-teen-pregnancy>.

¹⁰ Ventura, Matthews, and Hamilton, *Births to Teenagers in the United States 1940-2000*; Vinovskis, *An “Epidemic” of Adolescent Pregnancy?*, 28–9.

¹¹ Fessler, *The Girls Who Went Away*, 9.

¹² Luker, *Dubious Conceptions*, 1996, 87.

¹³ Bob Thomas, “One Reason Why More Unwed Mothers Keep Their Children,” *Lewiston Evening Journal*, April 18, 1972, 10.

¹⁴ Stephanie Mansfield, “Baby Chic: No Stigma to Pregnancy, Montgomery Teens Say,” *Washington Post*, November 5, 1979.

also lessened. The 1970s witnessed a significant increase in adolescent sexual activity. In 1971, thirty percent of fifteen- to nineteen-year-old girls had experienced premarital intercourse. By 1976, the proportion had increased to forty-one percent.¹⁵ The increase in girls' sexual activity likely lessened the pressure on boys to marry girls they had "gotten in trouble." It was harder to justify forcing a boy into a shotgun marriage for doing what it seemed like everyone else was doing. Unlike in the 1950s when doubts about a girl's virginity could destroy her reputation, women's honor was no longer on the line in the same way. The advent of contraception that women could control (like diaphragms and the pill) and legal abortion may have made men feel less responsible for an unplanned pregnancy. As youth culture became more sexualized, and women played a more direct role in controlling their fertility, older justifications for forcing teenagers into marriage held less weight.

This shift away from matrimony can also be viewed as a rational decision on the part of young people. Most shotgun weddings of the 1950s and 1960s had turned out quite poorly, as many teens observed. When eighteen-year-old Fay Ordway became pregnant out of wedlock in 1971, she briefly considered marrying her high school boyfriend, but hesitated after reflecting on her parents' marriage. The pair had married young and they were now going through a bitter divorce. As Ordway explained, she "didn't want to start the same kind of tragedy" by rushing into her own hasty marriage.¹⁶ For marriages in which the bride was between fifteen and seventeen years old, one in four ended in divorce within five years. This compared to a ninety percent success rate for brides over age twenty.¹⁷ Some teenagers likely learned about the precariousness of early marriage through magazine articles, newspaper stories, and educational materials that repeated these dire statistics. Others likely learned the lesson by observing their slightly older peers. Increasingly, young people hesitated before jumping into a shotgun marriage. Further, as more women entered the workforce and established careers, girls could also envision fulfilling lives for themselves outside of the home. Wendy Baldwin, a social demographer at the Center for Population Research of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, suggested that "fewer women may now feel obligated to marry as soon as possible for lack of an alternative, socially acceptable role."¹⁸

Marriage also made little sense if the father had poor economic prospects or few resources to offer the mother. Rates of early marriage dropped among African Americans and other disadvantaged minorities before they dropped among whites, largely because of the economic problems facing men. As the manufacturing sector gave way to a service economy and jobs moved from cities to suburbs in the 1960s, African American men suffered disproportionate unemployment. Sociologist Frank Furstenberg, who conducted an influential long-term study of teenage mothers in Baltimore, explained,

¹⁵ Melvin Zelnik, John F Kantner, and Kathleen Ford, *Sex and Pregnancy in Adolescence* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1981), 64–5.

¹⁶ Kiester Jr., "What's Happening in the Rest of the Country."

¹⁷ This was for 1950 – 1970. O'Connell and Rogers, "Out-of-Wedlock Births, Premarital Pregnancies and Their Effect on Family Formation and Dissolution," 161.

¹⁸ Wendy Baldwin, "Adolescent Pregnancy and Childbearing – Growing Concerns for Americans." *Population Bulletin*, Population Reference Bureau, Vol 31, No. 2, May 1977. In U.S. Congress, House, *Adolescent Pregnancy Hearing*, 1978, 202.

Women were beginning to learn from the experiences of their kin and community that marriage was not a good bet, particularly when their sexual partner was uneducated and underemployed as was often the case among African Americans. . . . They were gradually moving toward a view – later adopted by teenage whites and older women in general – that single parenthood was at least as viable a solution as was a hasty marriage or its alternatives.¹⁹

If a husband had little to offer in terms of stability or resources and young marriages tended to end in divorce, raising a child out of wedlock seemed like a logical decision for young women who wanted to keep their babies.

In the late 1960s, sociologist Prudence Rains worked with unwed mothers at a school for pregnant girls in the Midwest that primarily served poor African-American women. Her clients were skeptical of marriage in general, and believed that it would limit their freedom while adding new responsibilities and possibly more children. As a girl named May explained, “I didn’t want to get married. I wouldn’t mind when I’m older. But I want to finish school. . . . I ain’t ready for no husband.”²⁰ In many ways, May was wise to avoid marriage, which she rationally assumed would add to her problems.

By the mid-1970s, prominent social scientists increasingly discouraged pregnant teenagers from marrying because they believed that married teenage mothers often had more difficult lives than their single counterparts. In her testimony to Congress in 1978, Wendy Baldwin explained that “the dramatic rise in illegitimate births to teenagers has not occurred because of more out-of-wedlock conceptions, but because fewer out-of-wedlock conceptions now lead to marriage.” But instead of advocating for more teenage marriages, she advised caution. “Adolescents who marry may not be better off and, in some ways, worse off than their peers who don’t marry. . . . It is not clear that marriage is really a solution especially for the very young teenager” because it so often resulted in divorce or more children.²¹

Sociologist Lorraine Klerman and Dr. James Jekel, who wrote extensively about teenage pregnancy, also cautioned against marriage in the case of an illegitimate pregnancy. “The rapid making and dissolution of a marriage, with all its legal and financial complications may be more of a psychic trauma to the mother and her child than an attempt to raise a child within her parent’s home or independently.”²² Other sociologists went farther, arguing that young mothers were better off living with their own parents rather than establishing an independent household. Harriet Pressler, a sociologist at the University of Maryland explained, “The girl’s parents can often be more supportive than the father in enabling them to return to school,” whereas married girls were unlikely to return to school. “She may, therefore, trade off marriage for going back to school.”²³ For a host of reasons, teenagers in the 1970s were more likely than

¹⁹ Furstenberg, Menken, and Lincoln, *Teenage Sexuality, Pregnancy, and Childbearing*, 11. Furstenberg, *Destinies of Disadvantage*, 11.

²⁰ Prue Rains, *Becoming an Unwed Mother; a Sociological Account*. (Chicago: Aldine-Atherton, 1971), 38.

²¹ Baldwin, “Adolescent Pregnancy and Childbearing” in U.S. Congress, House, *Adolescent Pregnancy Hearing, 1978*, 200.

²² Klerman and Jekel, *School-age Mothers*, 130.

²³ Vinovskis, *An “Epidemic” of Adolescent Pregnancy?*, 170.

ever to have a child out of wedlock, a profound shift in the demographic profile of young mothers.

Interestingly, Catholics were among the most vociferous opponents of shotgun weddings. Although Catholics regarded premarital sex as a sin, scripture presented marriage as a sacred and permanent relationship and thus insincere marriage was a greater sin. An article from *U.S. Catholic* explained, sex “is a spiritual coupling that affects you to the deepest part of your being, whether or not you want it to or feel that it does. But it does not follow that sex makes a marriage.” Christian marriage, the author argued, must be entered into thoughtfully, willingly, and reverently. “Marriage is holy, an act of worship to God, and a service that God involves himself in and shows himself through. If we believe this, we dare not force anyone to enter marriage against his or her will.” A forced marriage may soothe the conscience of friends and family, the author argued, “but what we give the two young people and their child may be a living hell. And though we feel that the sin of premarital sex has been covered, in fact we have merely added something more sinful: the profaning of Christian marriage.” Further, as divorce became an increasingly common occurrence in American family life, the Church was struggling to protect the sanctity of its marriages. The author explained, “Divorce is a reality in Christian homes these days; we ought to do all we can to discourage the conditions that lead to it as well as the decisions that finalize it.” This meant putting an end to forced marriages. A reader from Fort Myers, Florida summed up this view in a succinct letter: “Sex is not sacramental; marriage is.”

Over the course of the 1970s, young women not only walked away from marriage, but also from the other major strategy of concealing an unplanned pregnancy: adoption. During the 1950s and 1960s, adoption had been an extremely popular solution for white girls who became pregnant outside of marriage. In a country seized by the baby boom, the demand for white babies was huge. A network of maternity homes shielded white girls from view during their pregnancies and handled the details of the adoption at the end of their stay. Conversely, the exclusion of black women from maternity homes and the absence of a black adoption market meant that this never became a feasible option for black women. Still, domestic adoptions rose steadily after World War II, peaking at 175,000 in 1970. Between 1945 and 1973, one and a half million babies were relinquished for non-family or unrelated adoptions.²⁴

However, adoptions declined rapidly after 1970, falling by twenty-five percent in five years.²⁵ Elizabeth Cole of the Child Welfare League saw this trend play out in her office. In 1970, she recalled, around eighty percent of women who came in asking about adoption services chose to place their child with her agency. A mere five years later, she estimated that eighty or ninety percent of the women who came to her agency chose to *keep* their child.²⁶ The sharp drop-off in adoptions was caused in part by better contraceptive options, by the availability of abortion, and the growing acceptance of unwed motherhood. As the stigma against single motherhood lessened, more mothers chose to endure the challenges of single parenthood rather than relinquish their babies.

²⁴ Fessler, *The Girls Who Went Away*, 8.

²⁵ Kathy S. Stolley, “Statistics on Adoption in the United States,” *The Future of Children* 3, no. 1 (April 1, 1993): 28.

²⁶ Baldwin, “Adolescent Pregnancy and Childbearing” in U.S. Congress, House, *Adolescent Pregnancy Hearing*, 1978, 203.

Adoption's rapid decline in popularity almost exclusively affected white women, who had relinquished babies for adoption at an average of ten times the rate of black women.²⁷ Adoption had erased the public evidence of unwed pregnancy for countless white women. As they walked away from this option, white unwed motherhood became significantly more visible, more public, and more troubling to the American public – all of which nudged the state to become more involved in the issue of teenage pregnancy.

At the same time that older strategies for dealing with premarital pregnancies were falling out of favor, new strategies were emerging. In the 1970s, teenage girls gained expanded (though highly mediated) access to reliable contraception. The birth control pill came to market in 1960, but in its first decade, women had to pretend to be married, engaged, or find a doctor who did not ask questions in order to get a prescription. The Supreme Court established the right of all married couples to use contraceptives in the 1964 case *Griswold v. Connecticut* and extended this right to unmarried adults in the 1972 case, *Eisenstadt v. Baird*. But the rights of unmarried adolescents remained unclear. Age of majority laws varied from state to state, particularly as local governments sought to bring their legislation in line with the Twenty-Sixth Amendment after 1971. This amendment, which lowered the voting age from 21 to 18, led legislators to grant a range of other rights to young people as well. But many states, counties and clinics would not prescribe contraceptives to minors without parental consent, or even below a certain age. Although the “contraceptive revolution” had some impact on unmarried teenage girls, it was limited at best.²⁸

The development that arguably had the more profound impact on the history of adolescent sexuality was the legalization of abortion. Several states legalized the procedure in 1970s, and the Supreme Court decision, *Roe v. Wade*, expanded this right to the entire country in 1973. Though *Roe* gave women of all ages unprecedented control over their reproductive lives, it had a disproportionate impact on adolescent girls. Teenagers took great advantage of this new right, and it had an immediate and lasting effect on their reproductive lives. Throughout the 1970s, teenagers had *one-third* of all abortions.²⁹ After 1973, abortions were responsible for teenage births falling for the first time in a decade, despite the fact that the number of teenage *pregnancies* and rates of adolescent sexual behavior were still on the rise.³⁰ The popularity of abortion among adolescent girls reflects the fact that they were often the least prepared to raise a baby and frequently became pregnant by accident. It allowed girls to delay childbearing until they felt ready, had a stable partner, or had finished their education. Indeed, the advent of legal abortion was linked to sudden drops in adolescent illegitimacy rates, which had been steadily increasing since 1965. When New York, Washington, Alaska and Hawaii became the first four states to legalize abortion with virtually no restrictions in 1970, the

²⁷ Fessler, *The Girls Who Went Away*, 108.

²⁸ Luker, *Dubious Conceptions*, 1996, 64–6.

²⁹ Statement by Cynthia Green, Zero Population Growth, Inc. to the Senate Labor and Public Welfare Subcomm on Health, Nov 17, 1975. U.S. Congress, Senate, *School-Age Mother and Child Health Act, 1975*, 649.

³⁰ Improved access to contraception played a part too, but abortion was the greatest determinant. Annette Lawson and Deborah L Rhode, eds., *The Politics of Pregnancy* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1993), 3; Alan Guttmacher Institute, *U.S. Teenage Pregnancies, Births and Abortions: National and State Trends and Trends by Race and Ethnicity*, January 2010, 7, <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/USTPtrends.pdf>.

rate of teenage illegitimacy fell by ten percent in the following year while it continued to rise slightly in states where abortion was illegal.³¹

But there were also unintended consequences of legalized abortion for young women. After 1973, several organizations began collecting and publishing statistics in a new way. They did not just report the number births to teenage girls, but also the number of *pregnancies*. These new figures (which included pregnancies that ended due to miscarriages, abortion and stillbirth) made the problem of teenage fertility seem larger and more menacing. As Constance Nathanson argues, “these data have been a major source of raw material for the creation of ‘adolescent pregnancy’ as a public problem.”³² For example, in 1975, girls between the ages of fifteen and nineteen gave birth to nearly 600,000 babies. However, those babies represented just over half of the nearly 1.1 million pregnancies among that same group. Depending on whether one looked at teenage pregnancy or teenage childbearing, the scope of the problem looked dramatically different.

While the legalization of abortion was a transformative event in the history of adolescent sexuality, it opened up new options for some girls more than others. Studies showed that the decision end a pregnancy was strongly correlated to race, class and level of education. Girls from more successful backgrounds, especially those who expected to be successful in the future, were much more likely to seek an abortion than those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This meant that pregnant teenagers from white, affluent, two-parent homes were significantly less likely to bear a child than those from minority, single-parent, financially strapped homes. Even within disadvantaged groups of young women, individuals who were doing well in school and had plans for higher education were more likely to get an abortion.³³ In practice, legal abortion created an important and much-used option for young women, but it also led white middle-class women to delay and decrease their childbearing while early motherhood became concentrated among poor and black women.

Abortion was not the only development in adolescent sexuality that differed by race and class. Indeed, the public reaction to new adolescent sexual behavior was deeply rooted in cultural expectations about race and sexuality. In the postwar era, black and white young women had fairly different patterns of sexual behavior and family formation. On the whole, black women experienced higher rates of adolescent sexual activity, pregnancy and out-of-wedlock births. Rather than viewing these differences as connected to black women’s limited circumstances and opportunities, politicians and social workers saw them as evidence of hypersexuality and immorality that needed to be reformed. Efforts to control black sexuality took a wide range of forms including school segregation, welfare restrictions, and forced sterilization.

White women, on the other hand, had long been portrayed as sexually innocent and pure. When they strayed out of acceptable sexual boundaries, by becoming pregnant out of wedlock for example, they were seen not as hypersexual but as temporarily

³¹ June Sklar and Beth Berkov, “Teenage Family Formation in Postwar America,” in Furstenberg, Menken, and Lincoln, *Teenage Sexuality, Pregnancy, and Childbearing*, 35.

³² Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage*, 30.

³³ Luker, *Dubious Conceptions*, 1996, 154.

neurotic. If a young white woman gave her child up for adoption to a deserving white couple and returned to her life, she was seen as “cured” and redeemed.³⁴

In many ways, the reproductive revolution of the 1970s led to greater condemnation of black reproduction. Lorraine Klerman argued in 1974 that expanded access to abortion and contraception led many people to envision parenthood as a *choice* while ignoring the fact that some women had limited access to these technologies. Klerman explained, “Inadequate financial resources, inaccessibility, and social mores have kept many black families from using the middle-class solution of abortion, adoption or marriage.” Young women who deviated from middle-class expectations were seen as deviant, problematic and unworthy of sympathy. The fact that African-American women made up a disproportionate percentage of this group led to prejudice against young black mothers, and a broad racialization of the issue of school-age pregnancy. “Given the racial prejudices still prevalent in this country,” Klerman explained, “a variant style of life whose principal adherents are black is likely to be labeled deviant, and, consequently, a problem for society.”³⁵

Klerman was correct that black female sexuality was pathologized throughout the 1970s as it diverged from white middle-class expectations; however, it was the sexual behavior of white young women that captivated policymakers and convinced them to take action. The new sexual patterns described above – more adolescent pregnancy, fewer marriages, and more illegitimate births – occurred among girls of all races. But they were most pronounced, most dramatic, and certainly most noticed among the white population. As sex researchers Melvin Zelnik and John Kantner observed, “Virtually all of the growth in coitus between 1976 and 1979 is accounted for by the growth in sexual activity among never-married whites.” From 1960 to 1980, the number of unwed births to white girls doubled while remaining relatively stable for black girls.³⁶ As several scholars have noted, it was this perceived crisis in white girls’ sexuality that captured the nation’s attention. Indeed, part of the reason that Americans became so concerned with new sexual patterns among white girls was that their behavior was converging with black patterns, which had long been disdained.³⁷

It is important to note that during the early years of federal intervention in teenage pregnancy, most policymakers believed that teenage pregnancy was a problem that profoundly affected the white middle class. As Wanda Pillow writes, they believed that the unwed pregnant teenager was “one of us.”³⁸ During the early 1970s, unwanted pregnancy was recast from an issue of poverty to one of youth. In the 1960, Americans understood unwed motherhood to be a subset of the problems that came with poverty. National family planning policies grew out of President Johnson’s War on Poverty, and population control was seen as an essential part of poverty eradication. In the mid-1970s,

³⁴ See Solinger, *Wake up Little Susie*. The influential 1965 Moynihan Report encapsulated this focus on family formation and sexuality. It argued that black families, particularly when they were headed by women, were “a tangled web of pathology” and the root of problems in the black community.

³⁵ Klerman and Jekel, *School-age Mothers*, 3.

³⁶ Melvin Zelnik and John F. Kantner, “Sexual Activity, Contraceptive Use and Pregnancy Among Metropolitan-Area Teenagers: 1971-1979,” *Family Planning Perspectives* 12, no. 5 (September 1, 1980): 230–237; Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage*, 29, fig. 2.2.

³⁷ Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage*; Pillow, *Unfit Subjects*; Emily S Mann, “The Politics of Teenage Sexualities Social Regulation, Citizenship and the U.S. State” (Ph.D. Diss, University of Maryland, 2010).

³⁸ Pillow, *Unfit Subjects*, 30.

however, poor women were displaced by teenagers as the new victims of unintended pregnancy in the minds of most Americans. In the late 1960s, reporters, politicians and social scientists repeatedly referred to the “five million poor women” who suffered the consequences of unwanted pregnancy – an estimate that came from demographer Arthur Campbell.³⁹ By 1976, the target of intervention had shifted to “11 million teenagers” – the number of sexually active adolescents identified in an influential pamphlet published by the Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI). Kristin Luker summed up this transition: “If in the early 1960s the image of the typical woman needing family planning was that of a woman on welfare surrounded by a gaggle of unkempt children, by the mid-1970s it had become the image of a bewildered adolescent who, incongruously, was both visibly pregnant and carrying an armload of schoolbooks.”⁴⁰

And, as advocates hammered home, it was not just poor or minority girls who were at risk; it was the white, middle-class “girl next door” too. It was *this* risk - to “our girls” - that people referred to time and time again in order to convince lawmakers of the importance of this issue. This invocation of the universality of teenage pregnancy became something of a trope in magazine articles in the mid- to late-1970s: “These girls belong to every ethnic, racial and economic group,” warned *Ladies Home Journal*. “Teenage pregnancy can happen in any family or level of society,” offered *Parents’ Magazine*. “Adolescent pregnancies are no longer limited to low income and minority groups,” echoed *Science News*.⁴¹

Advocates worked hard to convince lawmakers that unwed mothers were no different than their own daughters. In testimony to Congress in 1978, the President of the Guttmacher Institute insisted that teen mothers came from all walks of life. “Unintended pregnancy... is happening to *our* young women, not only among the poor and minority groups, but in all socioeconomic groups. If I had a daughter, I would say to ‘*our*’ daughters [emphasis added].”⁴² These statements did more than reflect a new statistical reality; they suggested that teenage pregnancy was worthy of public concern and state action because it affected the white middle class.⁴³ As sociologist Emily Mann argues, the women ultimately affected by federal policy were largely young, low-income girls of color, but the motivation behind national involvement in the issue of teenage pregnancy was firmly rooted in helping white daughters of privilege.

Sinning Against the Budget

³⁹ Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage*, 46.

⁴⁰ Luker, *Dubious Conceptions*, 1996, 62.

⁴¹ Eunice Kennedy Shriver, “Surprising View of Teen-Age Pregnancy,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, November 1978, 100; Margaret Markham and Howard Jacobson, “Unwed Teenage Parents,” *Parents Magazine & Better Homemaking*, June 1976, 36; “America’s Teen Pregnancy Epidemic,” *Science News*, May 6, 1978, 299, 302.

⁴² Pillow, *Unfit Subjects*, 17.

⁴³ As sociologist Emily Mann argues, this universalist, color-blind language gave policymakers permission to regulate adolescent sexuality; but once they had that permission, they used it disproportionately to regulate the sexuality of lower-class girls of color. “These universalistic discourses,” she writes “obscured the ways in which actors in the federal policymaking process differentiated among teenagers in particularistic terms across specific intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality, and age, constituting some groups of teenagers as ‘at risk’ due to their social status as girl, youth of color, gay and lesbian teenagers, [or] poor youth.” Mann, “The Politics of Teenage Sexualities Social Regulation, Citizenship and the U.S. State,” 82.

New sexual and reproductive patterns not only made teenage childbearing more *visible*; they also made it seem more *expensive*. A final and important reason the government was moved to tackle the issue of teenage pregnancy was its seemingly large and growing cost to society. In decades past, marriage and adoption had served to conceal and privatize adolescent and illegitimate pregnancies. The costs of raising these children had fallen on husbands, adoptive families, or the teenage mother's family and community. As marriage and adoption fell out of favor and more unmarried teenagers chose to raise their babies on their own, a significant portion of these costs shifted to the state, specifically state welfare agencies.

This coincided with the expansion of federal and state programs like Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) – more commonly known as welfare – since the 1960s. Welfare was initially created as a part of the New Deal program to allow widows to stay at home with their children. Over the next thirty years, welfare rolls swelled as unmarried mothers overtook widows as the primary recipients of government support. Resistance to welfare grew in the late 1960s and 1970s as the families it supported became younger, browner, and usually headed by single women. The economic stagnation of the 1970s added to popular resistance to what had become an expansive program.

Americans began to connect teenage pregnancy to ballooning welfare costs. Starting in the early 1970s, reporters regularly cited the financial cost of teenage pregnancy as well as the related issues of illegitimate births and school-age motherhood. In 1973, the magazine *Clearing House* reported on the growing cost of unwed pregnancy. The article explained that only a small percentage of women who delivered children out of wedlock were on welfare. “However, the number of out-of-wedlock pregnancies is so large that the relatively small percentage adds up to a large sum of money.” It reported that for the year ending June 1967, the government spent \$540 million on families with no father in the home.⁴⁴ In 1977, Grace Naismith reported in *Reader's Digest* that “society spends an estimated \$2250 each year to support a mother and one child on welfare – plus additional amounts for medical care, social-service workers, and aid to any other dependent children the mother may have.”⁴⁵

Some articles connected the financial cost of teen pregnancy and dropping out of school because those without high school diplomas earned less money and were more likely to need government assistance during their lives. Lynn Smith of the *Los Angeles Times* reported, “In California alone, even a ten percent increase in the number of teen mothers finishing high school would save \$53 million in welfare costs.” She continued, “Nearly 60% of California's total welfare budget provides payments to women who first gave birth as teen-agers.”⁴⁶

The connection between teenage pregnancy and taxpayer dollars was solidified in 1975, when the Urban Institute published the results of a study commissioned by Congress. The influential report concluded that the United States government spent \$4.65

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Heller and John Kiraly Jr., “Educational Program for Pregnant School Age Girls,” *Clearing House*, April 1973, 476–82.

⁴⁵ Grace Naismith, “Too Many Pregnancies, Too Early,” *Reader's Digest*, November 1977, 150.

⁴⁶ Lynn Smith, “Teen-Age Pregnancy on Rise: Melania's 16th Birthday Present: a Baby,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 1985, 2.

billion, or *half* of total AFDC expenditures on households in which the mother had her first child as a teenager.⁴⁷ Americans increasingly pushed the government to get teenage childbearing under control in order to reign in what seemed to some as profligate spending.

As reporter Colman McCarthy explained in an article for the *Los Angeles Times*, taxpayers were not only angered by teenagers' sexual transgressions, but their financial ones as well.

The offense isn't the old-fashioned one of loose sexual morals but the modern and more horrible one of sinning against the budget. If society, it is said, ends up paying for those babies through the immense costs of welfare and food stamps, then it has a right to compel obedience to the 11th commandment, Thou Shalt Not Strain the Federal Budget.⁴⁸

As Americans became convinced that teenage pregnancy was not only an abstract moral problem but also a personal financial burden, the issue took on new urgency and roused politicians to respond with legislative solutions.

Over the course of the late 1960s and early 1970s, adolescent girls adopted an impressively broad set of new sexual patterns. Taken together, the significant changes in marriage, sexual activity, contraception, adoption, and abortion made teenage pregnancy more visible than ever. A problem that had been concealed through marriage and adoption now burst into view; a problem that seemed to be limited to the disadvantaged was nipping at the heels of the white middle-class; and a problem that had once burdened individual families was now putting a strain on public coffers. By the late 1970s, this would result in widespread political interest in the problem of adolescent childbearing, national legislation on teenage pregnancy, and a new relationship between the state and sexually active young women.

The State Steps In

The emergence of unwed teenage pregnancy as a public problem affected the lives of young mothers in a wide array of ways, but arguably the most important was that it led to a restructuring of their relationship with the federal government. Between 1975 and 1981, Congress debated and passed a series of measures aimed at curbing adolescent pregnancy and supporting teenage mothers. While lawmakers disagreed over how best to approach the issue of adolescent pregnancy, they all agreed on two things: that it was a problem of epidemic proportions, and that the national government should take responsibility for solving it.

By the late 1970s, the government offered teenage mothers varying degrees of financial support, comprehensive services, access to contraception, and healthcare. The state took over roles that had previously been filled by an assortment of husbands, boyfriends, parents, extended families and friends. But this largesse came with a price.

⁴⁷ Kristin A. Moore, "Teenage Childbirth and Welfare Dependency," *Family Planning Perspectives* 10, no. 4 (July 1, 1978): 233–235.

⁴⁸ Colman McCarthy, "Children Having Children: Aid Is Under Way," *Los Angeles Times*, October 17, 1979.

In exchange, the government also exerted new levels of control over young women's lives, actively trying to shape their sexual behavior and reproductive decisions. Legislation also reflected evolving understandings of adolescent mothers. By the early 1980s, new laws reconceived of pregnant adolescents and teenage mothers as *children*. This infantilization of adolescent mothers, which obscured the complexity of their age position, ultimately left them with a stigma of dependence that would dominate the debate over teenage sexuality in the following decades.

The National School-Age Mother and Child Health Act of 1975

The government took its first tentative steps toward supporting adolescent mothers in 1975. In this year, Senator Edward Kennedy held the first hearings on school-age motherhood in front of the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare. Kennedy proposed S.2534 or the National School-Age Mother and Child Health Act to the 94th Congress. He presided over hearings on the morning of November 4, 1975 in which a range of experts spelled out the scope of the problem and presented some of the most successful state and local programs designed to help teen mothers. It was also in these hearings that Myra Lindsay and Richard Cochrane shared their stories of adolescent parenthood as we heard at the beginning of this chapter. While these hearings did not result in legislation, they brought teenage childbearing into the public eye and onto the national stage for the first time, firmly establishing it as an issue of federal concern.

In his opening remarks at the hearing, Kennedy explained that the problem of adolescent childbearing was so large and broadly spread that it demanded a federal response:

The problem of school-age parents is becoming critical. ... Well over 600,000 babies will be born to teenage women in 1975 and the number of births to girls under the age of 15 has doubled in the past 12 years. These problems cut across social, economic, and ethnic classes, and exists in urban, suburban, and rural areas alike. It is clearly time we recognize this situation on the national level.⁴⁹

Given the size and scope of the problem, only the federal government could adequately address it. As we will see, this sense of universalism – that an unplanned pregnancy could happen in *any* family, not just bad families – was essential to the government's involvement in teenage pregnancy.

Teenage pregnancy, in Kennedy's view, was also a matter of national concern because it was linked to a vast array of negative consequences. The Findings and Declaration of Purpose of S.2534 explained that adolescent pregnancies "are a leading cause of school dropout, familial disruption and increasing dependency upon welfare and other community resources" as well the cause of health problems for mother and child.⁵⁰ Particularly worrisome were the connections between teenage pregnancy and poverty. One study published in 1972 reported that sixty percent of white and eighty percent of nonwhite children born out of wedlock between 1964 and 1966 were born to women

⁴⁹ U.S. Congress, Senate, *School-Age Mother and Child Health Act, 1975*, 1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

below or near the poverty line. And though this study did not parse its data by age, women ages fifteen to nineteen made up approximately sixty-five percent of all out-of-wedlock births in the first half of the 1970s, and likely represented a large chunk of these impoverished mothers.⁵¹ A 1974 study of married women indicated that younger ages of motherhood were “clearly and strongly” related to higher levels of economic deprivation. It reportedly found one in three married women who gave birth before their sixteenth birthday were living in poverty in 1967.”⁵² Doctor Phillip Sarrel found in the early 1970s that sixty percent of unmarried teenage mothers enrolled in AFDC at some time in the first five years of their baby’s life.⁵³ Although contemporary researchers showed a correlation between early childbearing and poverty rather than a causal relationship, most politicians believed that early motherhood was the first step toward a future of deprivation.

Government assistance in the form of AFDC was often a lifeline for young women dealing with the new burdens of motherhood. Particularly for girls who dropped out of school to raise their child, well paying, flexible jobs were hard to find. Politicians worried, however, that teenage pregnancy might also breed long-term reliance on welfare. Dr. Charles Lowe, Special Assistant for Child Health Affairs at the U.S Public Health Service testified, “The evidence is very strong that the young girl who becomes burdened with an infant is more likely to become dependent on social resources. . . . The younger she is when she carries her first infant to term, the more likely it is that she will never be able to become economically independent.”⁵⁴ Although liberal politicians wanted to support young mothers in the short term, they wanted to avoid creating lifelong dependence on welfare.

For Kennedy, this meant preventing future teenage pregnancies and helping young mothers get on their feet. He feared that teenage pregnancy, if left unchecked, would create a new American underclass and burden the federal government. “For about sixty percent of these girls, the birth of a child begins a cycle of dependency upon public welfare,” he explained.⁵⁵ Preventing teen pregnancies might not only prevent poverty in the near future; he reasoned that if the government acted now, it could prevent poverty and the welfare costs associated with it in the long term as well.

⁵¹ Phillips Cutright, “Illegitimacy in the United States: 1920-1968,” in Commission on Population Growth and the American Future, *Demographic and Social Aspects of Population Growth*, C. F. Westoff and R. Parke, Jr. eds., Vol 1 of Commission Research Reports, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington D.C. (GPO), 1972, p.375. Cited in James Trussell, “Economic Consequences of Early Childbearing” in Furstenberg, Menken, and Lincoln, *Teenage Sexuality, Pregnancy, and Childbearing*, 260. Unmarried teenage childbearing calculated from Amara Bachu, *Trends in Marital Status of U.S. Women at First Birth: 1930 to 1994*, U.S. Census Bureau, Tables 1, 3, accessed at <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0020/twps0020.html>

⁵² Lloyd Bacon, “Early Motherhood, Accelerated Role Transition, and Social Pathologies,” *Social Forces* 52, no. 3 (March 1, 1974): 337.

⁵³ James Jekel, “Poverty and the Adolescent Parent,” Paper presented at the 24th Annual Convention of the American Scientific Affiliation, August 18-21, 1969. in U.S. Congress, Senate, *School-Age Mother and Child Health Act, 1975*, 401.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1. Recent studies have indicated the reverse: that poverty makes young women susceptible to early motherhood, rather than early motherhood leading to poverty. See for example Melissa Schettini Kearney and Phillip B. Levine, “Why Is the Teen Birthrate in the United States So High and Why Does It Matter?,” National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper 17965, March 2012, accessed at http://www.nber.org/papers/w17965.pdf?new_window=1

Lorraine Klerman, whose book *School Age Mothers: Problems, Programs and Policy*, was submitted in its entirety as evidence in the 1975 hearings, offered a nuanced view of the linkage between dependence and the stigma against teenage pregnancy. She began by explaining how society treats pregnant girls differently depending on whether they keep their children.

The pregnant school-age girl is at variance with many of the expectations of the American middle class if she chooses to carry the baby to completion and then keep the baby. The girls who have abortions or who surrender their infants are not penalized permanently. The “problem” centers around the school-age mother who keeps her child. In most cases she has not yet graduated from high school; she is frequently not married when the baby is born; and she was even less likely to have been married when the infant was conceived.⁵⁶

Girls who chose to raise their babies often needed the help of family or government support, which only compounded the stigma they feel.

If the young mother is unmarried and brings her baby home to live in her parents’ residence, the mother and child become economically dependent upon her parents or upon some form of welfare. American society conceivably could consider this life style an acceptable alternative... just as it accepts attending college and depending economically on parents as an acceptable, even laudatory, alternative to entering employment and becoming financially independent. But for many reasons, society has labeled the pregnant school-age girl and mother as deviant.⁵⁷

Economic dependence was not just a financial issue; it was also the root of much of the shame associated with teenage pregnancy. If federal legislation could relieve some of the economic hardship of early motherhood and give girls the tools to support themselves and their young families, Klerman suggested, perhaps it could make a powerful impact on their lives and their position in society.

The 1975 proposed legislation sought to prevent the worst consequences of teenage pregnancy by offering services to girls in need. The most successful and high profile programs for adolescent mothers in 1975 were those that provided comprehensive services like the ones examined in the previous chapter. Although segregated educational programs were beginning to give way to mainstream education by the early 1970s, they still provided lawmakers with the best example of direct services to young mothers. Kennedy believed that most communities had the resources to provide support for young mothers; the necessary services were just “inadequate, disorganized, and fragmented.”⁵⁸

In order to meet these challenges, the School-Age Mother and Child Health Act proposed setting up comprehensive service programs across the nation. These would be modeled on the Delaware Adolescent Program Inc. (DAPI), the only existing statewide comprehensive program for pregnant girls. Each state would create a plan to integrate existing services, designate a state agency to run the program, and form a state advisory

⁵⁶ Klerman and Jekel, *School-age Mothers*, 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ U.S. Congress, Senate, *School-Age Mother and Child Health Act, 1975*, 5.

council to oversee the effort. This strategy had some strengths, primarily the fact that comprehensive programs had proven short-term benefits for young mothers. However, there were many factors working against the bill as well. The long-term benefits of comprehensive programs were unknown, and they were particularly expensive. The Ford administration via its representative from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare did not support the bill, and it was introduced late in the session, without strong support in either chamber. Though it never progressed past the hearing, it set the tone for later congressional debates about adolescent motherhood.

Importantly, questions about the age status of teenage mothers began to emerge in the 1975 hearing. The bill itself identified its target population as girls of “school-age” – a somewhat inexact definition that could vary based on state laws on mandatory school attendance. Though none of the witnesses explicitly addressed the age limits of problematic motherhood, age was a consistent undercurrent throughout the hearings. In Kennedy’s opening remarks, he drew attention to age in order to ramp up sympathy for young parents. “Some of these young people are still children themselves, scarcely able to cope with child-bearing and child-rearing, which we would all agree is a significant challenge even to the mature adult.”⁵⁹ In other words, if bearing and raising children was difficult for “adults,” how could we expect “children” to handle this responsibility on their own? Still, his language also suggested that “some of these young people” were not still children, begging the question of where to draw the line between childhood and adulthood in matters of sexuality.

Ted Kennedy’s sister, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, was clearer on the age status of young mothers. Shriver was also a leader in the effort to create services for pregnant teenagers. As the Executive Vice President of the Joseph P. Kennedy Foundation, she created a comprehensive program for pregnant youth, and wrote about teenage pregnancy extensively in the popular press in order to bring more attention to the problem. In her testimony, she explained, “All of us must realize that pregnancy by itself does not assure maturity. These are not mature, sophisticated women, but young, confused girls needing a continuous source of support and assistance.” In her estimation, teenage mothers were clearly children. The government, she implied, could and should provide “support and assistance” much like a parent so that these girls could “continue their education and develop more fully as responsible human beings.”⁶⁰

In the end, the National School-Age Mother and Child Health Act did not pass or even make it to the floor of either house. But it marked a critical turning point in the story of teenage pregnancy and an essential step in the growing public commitment to manage teenage pregnancy on a national scale. Kristin Luker argues that S. 2534 reflected the still-controversial but growing notion that pregnant teenagers were a special group with unique needs. In the past, the government had offered services to young mothers, but always as a subset of other groups: poor families, women, students, or unwed mothers. But after 1975, politicians embraced the notion that pregnant and parenting teens needed legislation directly tailored to their needs. This view even permeated presidential politics. In 1976, candidate Jimmy Carter promised to lower the teenage pregnancy rate and provide an “alternative to abortion” during his presidential

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶⁰ Statement of Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Executive Vice President of Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation *ibid.*, 361–2.

campaign.⁶¹ As Carter and later presidents would discover over the next few years, teenage pregnancy quickly became an inescapable issue in national politics.

1978 Adolescent Health, Services and Pregnancy Prevention Act

While the 1975 debates brought the issue of teenage pregnancy to the national stage, the 1978 Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention Act was the first comprehensive legislation addressing teenage pregnancy to become law. Jimmy Carter's election in 1976 opened the door for those who supported a federal program for adolescent mothers. Advocates lobbied during the first months of his presidency and the Administration indicated its interest by including \$35 million in the first budget to help sexually active adolescents and pregnant teenagers.⁶²

On July 24, 1978, Ted Kennedy held a second set of hearings in front of the Senate Committee on Education and Labor in support of the Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention Act. The legislation authorized the government to make grants to agencies and programs that would "coordinate and establish linkages" between existing services for pregnant and parenting teens. Unlike the 1975 bill, it would also provide funding for prevention of future pregnancies. These grants would be administered through the newly created Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs (OAPP).

As the bill made its way through Congress, Senate democrats and the Carter administration clashed over the appropriate balance between services (i.e. medical care, counseling, educational support) and primary prevention (i.e. birth control and sex education that could stop pregnancies before they occurred). Kennedy and his allies in Congress believed that comprehensive services were the best, most effective way to help teenage mothers fulfill their full potential. To this end, the stated purpose of the bill was "to establish a program for developing networks of community-based services to prevent unwanted early and repeat pregnancies and to help adolescents become productive, independent contributors to family life and community life."⁶³ Representative John Brademas, who sponsored the bill in the House, explained that he wanted to give pregnant youth the chance to "remain in school and to become responsible, caring parents."⁶⁴

The Department of Health, Education and Welfare, on the other hand, voiced a strong preference for primary prevention. Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) Secretary Joseph Califano advised that "a significant proportion" of total funds should be allocated to family planning and sex education.⁶⁵ Prevention, Califano explained, "is our first and most basic line of defense against unwanted adolescent pregnancies."⁶⁶ Frederick Jaffe from the Alan Guttmacher Institute agreed, warning that the government was starving "the one demonstrably successful program (i.e. family planning) in favor of an ambiguous venture into uncharted territory," namely comprehensive services.⁶⁷

⁶¹ Luker, *Dubious Conceptions*, 1996, 72.

⁶² Vinovskis, *An "Epidemic" of Adolescent Pregnancy?*, 54.

⁶³ U.S. Congress, House, *Adolescent Pregnancy Hearing, 1978*, 2.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁵ Vinovskis, *An "Epidemic" of Adolescent Pregnancy?*, 57.

⁶⁶ U.S. Congress, House, *Adolescent Pregnancy Hearing, 1978*, 34.

⁶⁷ Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage*, 58.

Despite these critiques, the majority of funds were directed toward services rather than prevention though a portion of funding was set aside for prevention and evaluation. While the idea of providing birth control and sex education to teenagers may have been a sound strategy, it was too controversial for most legislators to support without suffering political consequences. Congress did provide some support for primary prevention through other means. In late 1978, they amended Title X of the Family Planning Services Act to mandate that federally funded family planning clinics offer “services to adolescents,” and required that teenagers be allowed family planning clinics without parental consent.⁶⁸ Congress did not allocate additional funding to support these changes. But, as Nathanson argues, “By adding the word ‘adolescents’ to fed legislation on family planning, Congress transformed the sexual behavior of young and unwed women from shameful acts, privately known but publicly concealed, into public, officially recognized ‘facts.’”⁶⁹

In spite of these disagreements over funding priorities, the Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention Act passed both houses easily and was signed into law in late 1978. In many ways, this was a radical achievement. The bill’s authors focused on meeting the needs of teenage parents as they were, rather than chastising girls for their sexual behavior or hiding them from view. Nathanson explains that the law presented teenage pregnancy as a morally neutral issue that needed treatment and services like any other “unfortunate but preventable accident.”⁷⁰ It aimed to bring adolescent mothers and their children back into their communities, their schools, and their families. This would have been unheard of a decade earlier.

But in other ways, it accomplished relatively little. This was primarily due to massive budget cuts – cuts so severe that they practically eliminated the bill’s ability to affect young women. Congress allocated \$50 million to the OAPP to carry out the new law in its first year, 1979. First, the Carter budget allocated the office only \$7.5 million of the \$50 million they had expected. By the time the administration’s budget passed Congress, the program’s share had been whittled down to just \$1 million. These cuts forced the OAPP to abandon evaluation and primary prevention altogether, and the office had to make do with a bare bones staff. In 1979, they approved sixty-two projects but were only able to fund four. In 1980, the story was similar. OAPP received only \$5.8 million out of an anticipated \$17.5 million and were able to fund twenty-seven grants out of nearly four hundred applicants.⁷¹

While funding issues limited the scope of the 1978 law, it was still a landmark moment in the relationship between the government and pregnant and parenting teens. In addition to being the first federal law specifically tailored to meet the needs of sexually active adolescents, it indicated that the federal government saw teen pregnancy as its responsibility, as an issue that it should and would tackle.

But Congress had also redefined the “problem” in a manner that had important ramifications in the future. The bill that Kennedy proposed in 1975 defined its target population as “school-age mothers.” This focus on “school age” grew out of early activism that had focused almost exclusively on married and pregnant girls’ educational

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Vinovskis, *An “Epidemic” of Adolescent Pregnancy?*, 70–3.

rights. Through the mid-1970s, the state saw its responsibility to young mothers as an extension of its responsibility to educate all citizens below a certain age. Unsurprisingly, most victories up to that point were related to education, from the development of school-based comprehensive programs to the passage of Title IX. But the 1978 law defined its target population simply as “adolescents.” The federal government was not helping young mothers because they fell under mandatory schooling laws. It was helping young mothers because they were *young*, because they were innocent, and they were arguably *children*.

This new focus on chronological age rather than school status began to filter into the way people talked about adolescent pregnancy. One illustrative example came from Cabinet member Joseph Califano. He described the effects of early pregnancy on adolescents.

The pressure to experiment with adult behavior before they are ready emotionally, morally, or economically; to shoulder adult responsibility; the wrenching disruption of life and education caused by the unwanted pregnancy and its consequences. This is not liberation; it is a form of bondage – bondage for the child-mother and bondage for the mother’s child.”⁷²

In his estimation, teenage pregnancy forced girls into a sort of age-related slavery by throwing them into adult life long before they were ready. His use of the word “child-mother” and “mother’s child” conflated the adolescent mother and her infant in a rhetorical flourish.

Of course, not everyone agreed that teenage parents were irrevocably damaged by their early entry into adult behavior. The language of the bill itself implied that adolescent parents could attain healthy adulthood with the appropriate support. Its oft-repeated goal, “to help adolescents become productive, independent contributors to family life and community life,” suggested that it viewed teenage mothers as *potential* adults who just needed a little help along their path to maturity. The ultimate goal was to turn adolescent parents into adults who would contribute as individuals to their community.

Still, over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, Americans increasingly understood problematic sexuality as a function of chronological age rather than a function of life stage or education. This shift to an age-based understanding of problematic fertility cast a wider net. Whereas the concept of “school-age motherhood” could easily exclude mothers who were eighteen and nineteen years old, who had graduated from high school, the concept of “adolescent motherhood” included – and pathologized – all mothers under the age of twenty, regardless of their education, marital status, or maturity level.

Unsurprisingly given its meager funding, the Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention Act did not result in any significant decline in teen pregnancy rates. Birthrates to women age fifteen to nineteen remained remarkably steady between 1976 and 1986, averaging 52 per 1,000 women and only varying by a point in either direction over the decade.⁷³ Still, birthrates did not rise as much as one would have expected given

⁷² Mann, “The Politics of Teenage Sexualities Social Regulation, Citizenship and the U.S. State,” 96.

⁷³ Ventura, Matthews, and Hamilton, *Births to Teenagers in the United States 1940-2000*, 10.

the growing numbers of adolescents who were sexually active, but this was less apparent to lawmakers at the time.⁷⁴

Legislators had expected to see a dramatic impact on adolescent pregnancy rates based on their experience with providing birth control to older women. Between 1965 and 1972, public policy aimed at providing family planning services to poor (mostly adult) women resulted in one-third fewer unwanted pregnancies. By the mid-1970s, government programs like Title X, which offered subsidized contraception and sterilization, produced impressive results by giving unprecedented reproductive control to mostly poor and minority.⁷⁵ Despite the fact that programs directed at poor women and teenage girls were vastly different, many lawmakers saw the unchanging teen pregnancy rate as evidence of failed policy. This, combined with the rise of a new political movement opened the door for a new, much more conservative approach to adolescent motherhood.

The New Right and the Adolescent Family Life Act

In the 1980s, a new kind of conservative came to power. The New Right profoundly altered the American political landscape when it burst onto the national scene after two decades as a fringe movement. Unlike the Old Right, which had focused largely on defeating communism in all of its domestic and foreign guises, the New Right shifted its focus to social issues that seemed to threaten “American family values.” The movement’s base was largely made up of white evangelical Christians who believed that America was witnessing a moral decline. They saw the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s – including feminism, the youth counterculture, legal abortion, sexual liberalism, and the gay rights movement – as dangerous threats to families, children and “traditional” values that were central to the character and success of the country. Members of the New Right also had a broader political agenda that sought to dismantle New Deal liberalism, the welfare state, and big government. But the cornerstone of this political movement was its conservative social agenda, advanced by its powerful pro-family wing.⁷⁶

This movement coincided with a retreat from a liberationist view of children’s rights and a resurgence of a caretaking view of children’s rights in the 1980s. Over the course of the decade, legislatures and courts raised the drinking age, limited minors’ rights to free speech, curtailed their medical privacy, and expanded media censorship. As historian Michael Grossberg explains, these changes were “propelled by a waning faith in the more autonomous conceptions of childhood that had prevailed in the liberationist era as well as new concerns among old and young alike about the vulnerability of children to a mounting number of risks.”⁷⁷ Historian Paula Fass concurs, explaining that Americans reigned in children’s rights largely in reaction against the 1960s youth revolt.⁷⁸ After a period during which minors gained many rights previously limited to adults, Americans

⁷⁴ Luker, *Dubious Conceptions*, 1996, 75.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 61–2.

⁷⁶ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001); Carole Joffe, “Sexual Politics and the Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Worker in the United States,” in *The Politics of Pregnancy*, ed. Annette Lawson and Deborah L Rhode (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁷⁷ Grossberg, “Liberation and Caretaking,” 30.

⁷⁸ Fass, “The Child-Centered Family? New Rules in Postwar America,” 12.

once again began to view children as significantly less mature and more vulnerable than older individuals.

The New Right was among the most fervent proponents of the “re-juvenilization” of childhood. This view fit squarely within their pro-family ideology and valorization of parental authority. As opposed to liberals who celebrated the autonomy of the individual, conservatives hailed the autonomy and cultural importance of the nuclear family. New Right politicians believed that families should be able to operate autonomously, free from excessive incursion from the state. Indeed, the movement’s first victory in national politics came in 1971, when they successfully pressured Nixon to veto a national childcare bill. Groups of churchgoing women mobilized to defeat the bill, arguing that it was a dangerous invasion of family privacy.

The New Right gained momentum through the 1970s, and was energized after *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. By the 1980 election, disciplined grassroots organizing brought new constituents and new social issues to the forefront of American politics. They came together as the Moral Majority to elect Ronald Reagan to the presidency in a landslide. His victory would have important and lasting consequences for women in general and adolescent mothers specifically.⁷⁹

Prior to Reagan’s election, Carole Joffe argues, it was common for conservative legislators who opposed abortion to be in favor of birth control “so as to make abortion unnecessary.” After 1980, however, this compromise broke down as Reagan appointed some of his most conservative supporters to government positions that were concerned with sexuality and family planning. Joffe writes, “Ever since the election of Reagan, antiabortion activity in the federal government, and in many state governments, has become virtually inseparable from opposition to birth control and sex education.”⁸⁰

And indeed, within a few months of the elections, the newly conservative Congress attempted to gut funding for Title X, the federal program that subsidized birth control and family planning services for low-income women. Although they were unsuccessful, this attack on a previously uncontroversial, popular and effective family planning program suggests the new atmosphere on Capitol Hill.

When it came to the issue of teenage pregnancy, conservative lawmakers were as interested in the subject as their more liberal predecessors. They agreed that the federal government should play a role in addressing adolescent childbearing. But importantly, they defined the “problem” in a fundamentally different manner. For comparison, the Democrats behind the 1978 bill, including Ted Kennedy and John Brademas, believed that the primary problems were (1) the prevalence of teenage pregnancy and (2) the poor life outcomes for teenage mothers. Thus, they supported expanding family planning services for adolescents, and created policy designed to mitigate the negative effects of adolescent pregnancy and to keep young mothers in school.

Conservative lawmakers, on the other hand, believed that the problem that needed to be solved was not teenage pregnancy or childbearing, but *adolescent sexual activity*. Inspired by religious convictions, they argued that premarital sex, and therefore most teenage sex, was morally wrong. And if the problem was promiscuity, the answer was chastity. Teenagers did not need access to birth control or comprehensive programs; they

⁷⁹ Joffe, “Sexual Politics and the Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Worker in the United States”; McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*.

⁸⁰ Joffe, “Sexual Politics and the Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Worker in the United States,” 286.

needed moral guidance. Lawmakers like newly elected Republican Senator Jeremiah Denton of Alabama argued that existing federal support for teenage mothers condoned premarital sex. “We may be projecting an inadvertent message of federal approval for certain values and activities which generally conflict as said before with that of parents and pastors.”⁸¹ During his first year in office, Denton would lead the push to pass a new bill addressing teenage pregnancy that espoused conservative values.

In 1981, Senators Denton and Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) sponsored new legislation that repealed and replaced the 1978 bill. Their proposal, called the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA), took a drastically different approach than its predecessor. The bill was designed chiefly to change young people’s behavior in order to reduce the number of teenage pregnancies. The original version aimed “to promote self-discipline and chastity, and other positive, family-centered approaches to the problems of adolescent promiscuity and adolescent behavior.”⁸² This legislation, called the “chastity bill” by the media, introduced the idea of preventing teenage sexual activity altogether as a conservative goal of public policy.

But Denton’s strong language and focus on chastity alienated even some of his conservative allies. Realizing that he needed to use less isolating tactics in order to get his bill through Congress, Denton reached across the aisle. He approached Ted Kennedy for support, aware that his prominent role in teen pregnancy legislation in the past would make him an important political ally. Kennedy, who knew that his 1978 bill would never survive in the newly conservative Congress, latched on to Denton’s proposal and tried to influence it as much as he could. This led to a fragile alliance between conservative pro-life Republicans who wanted to encourage chastity, restrict abortion, and limit birth control services, and liberal Democrats who wanted to maintain funding for comprehensive programs and eliminate any language regarding chastity and promiscuity from the legislation.⁸³

Through a series of negotiations, Kennedy gutted the AFLA’s most conservative aspects and managed to secure funding to continue comprehensive services for pregnant teens. In the bill’s final form, two-thirds of its funds had to go towards helping pregnant teens and young mothers, and no more than one-quarter could go toward discouraging premarital sex even though this was the bill’s original purpose.⁸⁴ Despite these compromises, AFLA shifted focus from teenage pregnancy to teenage sexual activity. The final version was designed to “discourage adolescent sexual relations and the consequences of such relations,” and to “promote self-discipline and other prudent approaches to the problem of *adolescent premarital sexual relations, including adolescent pregnancy* [emphasis added].”⁸⁵ Teenage pregnancy was presented as a subset of the true problem: adolescent sexual relations. What had been viewed as an accepted fact in 1978, was now seen as a moral failing.

Perhaps most critically, the Adolescent Family Life Act redefined the teenage mother as *a child*. As discussed above, liberal legislators in 1978 believed adolescent

⁸¹ Vinovskis, *An “Epidemic” of Adolescent Pregnancy?*, 81.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 85–6.

⁸⁵ Adolescent Family Life Act: Statutes at Large, 95, Public Law 97-35 (1981), 95 Stat., pp. 579-580, cited in Luker, *Dubious Conceptions*, 1996, 78.

mothers were often immature, but their ultimate goal was to help teenagers become “productive, independent contributors to family and community life.” In other words, they aimed to help usher them into adulthood. They viewed “the family” as the young mother, her child, and perhaps the father of the child.

Lawmakers from the New Right, on the other hand, redefined the family unit to include the teenage mother, her child, and *her parents*. By including grandparents in their familial equation, they transformed the adolescent mother into a child herself. She was resituated into the position of “daughter” rather than “mother.” In their view, teenage pregnancy was a sign of declining moral values, decaying families, and nontraditional gender roles. In order to remedy this grave situation, they looked to bolster parents and traditional families. Conservatives like Denton and Hatch believed that parental involvement would provide adolescents with strong moral guidance, teach them the value of chastity, and slow down their race toward adulthood. This new concept of the family was written into the Adolescent Family Life Act. It offered services designed “to find effective means, *within the context of the family*, of reaching adolescents before they become sexually active in order to maximize the guidance and support available to parents and other family members [emphasis added].”⁸⁶ The “family” mentioned here was not the new family formed by the adolescent mother and her child; it was the original family formed by parents and their teenage daughter.

Marjory Mecklenburg, the pro-life advocate who took over as Director of the Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs in 1981, was a strong proponent of parental involvement. In a 1983 report, she made her case for including parents in policy dealing with teenage pregnancy. She lamented the absence of parents in policy up until this point, agreeing with social worker Theodora Ooms that “policy discussions and research about teenage sex and fertility have almost totally neglected the adolescent’s family.” Mecklenburg explained that a major focus of OAPP programs was the “incorporation of the family as a partner in prevention efforts.”⁸⁷ This led to some semantic hurdles. AFLA’s list of prevention services included “the development of material to support the role of *parents* as the provider of sex education.” In this case, “parents” refers to the parents of adolescent children. Perhaps to avoid confusion, when the bill mentioned teenage mothers a few lines later, it refers to them not as parents but as “eligible persons.”⁸⁸ In language and legislation, the parents of teenage mothers were given a prominent place in the effort to stop early pregnancy.

Conservative Republican’s desire to re-inscribe teenage mothers into their parents’ family can be seen as a reaction against the recent expansion of young people’s autonomy. In the 1970s and 1980s, a series of legal cases greatly expanded teenagers’ autonomy over their own sexual, reproductive and medical decisions. By 1976, new state laws and reduction in the age of majority had given unmarried women aged eighteen and older the right to consent to their own medical care in 45 states. In 48 states, they could consent to abortion and medical care relating to pregnancy. Minors had more limited rights when it came to sex-related health care, but these were expanding too. In the 1976 case *Planned Parenthood of Central Missouri v. Danforth*, the Supreme Court ruled that a state could

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Marjory E. Mecklenburg and Patricia G. Thompson, “The Adolescent Family Life Program as a Prevention Measure,” *Public Health Reports* 98, no. 1 (January 1, 1983): 27.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 26.

not pass a blanket provision requiring parental consent for an unmarried minor to obtain an abortion during the first trimester. The majority ruled that minors possessed a “constitutionally protected right to decide whether to bear or beget a child by using contraceptives.”⁸⁹

The following year in *Carey v. Population Services International*, the Court struck down a New York law that prohibited the sale of nonprescription contraceptives to anyone under age sixteen. The decision affirmed that the “right to privacy in connection with decisions affecting procreation extends to minors as well as adults.”⁹⁰ New York State had argued that the law was important because it communicated disapproval of adolescent sexual activity. But as Justice John Paul Stevens wrote in a concurring opinion, denying teenagers access to contraceptives “is as though a state decided to dramatize its disapproval of motorcycles by forbidding the use of safety helmets.”⁹¹ These new rights diminished parents’ control over their children’s sexual lives and bestowed upon minors many of the rights of adulthood. Importantly, they also disturbed conservatives who saw them as erosions of “traditional” family structures and eroded parental authority. At the same time that minors gained new rights and sexual freedoms, the pro-family wing of the New Right was working to bring them back under their parents’ control. They did this in part by portraying teenage mothers as children, and by advancing policies that treated them as part of their parental families.

Over the course of the 1980s, the idea that teenage mothers were children, or even child victims, entered the mainstream. Within a few years, it had gone from being a conservative reaction to children’s liberation, to a commonly held, popular belief. As Americans became more interested in adolescent motherhood, images of childlike teenage mothers proliferated in magazines, newspapers and public awareness campaigns.

Perhaps the most iconic was the cover of the December 9, 1985 issue of *Time* magazine. It showed a white, blond girl standing sideways in a frilly pink top. She exudes youthfulness in nearly every way, aside from her large, protruding belly. She looks at the camera with a slightly weary look on her face, and



Figure 3 - Time Magazine Cover, 1985.
Photo Credit, Duane Michals

Pregnancy, Teenagers and the Law, 1976,”

⁹¹ Eve W. Paul and Harriet F. Pilpel, “Teenagers and Pregnancy: The Law in 1979,” *Family Planning Perspectives* 11, no. 5 (September 1, 1979): 299.

the large title next to her reads, “Children Having Children.”

The cover image and the article that accompanied it highlighted the contradiction of teenage mothers’ young age and their adult responsibilities.⁹² Of course, the notion of “children having children” was a biological impossibility: teenage girls had to be sexually mature in order to become pregnant. But the media played on the seeming perversity of child-mothers.

The phrase “children having children” was central to the American discourse on teenage pregnancy and helped make it an issue of national concern. However, this construction also denied young mothers their maturity and their individual differences. As professor of social work Diana Pearce argues, it “exclude[d] perspectives that view pregnant and parenting teens as adults and can preclude the kinds of solutions that affirm and empower young women to control their own lives and overcome barriers they face.”⁹³ The “children having children” concept assumes that having a child early in life is an immature act with profoundly negative consequences.

This paradigm influenced policy, public opinion and portrayals of pregnant adolescents. One of the most frequently cited quotes about teenage pregnancy came from demographer Arthur Campbell. Most historians have looked to this quote to illustrate how people believed that teenage pregnancy led directly to poverty, but it also demonstrates how experts linked teenage pregnancy and childhood – or more specifically, teenage pregnancy and an inability to attain normative adulthood. He stated,

The girl who has an illegitimate child at the age of 16 suddenly has 90 percent of her life’s script written for her. She will probably drop out of school; even if someone else in her family helps to take care of the baby, she will probably not be able to find a steady job that pays enough to provide for herself and her child; she may feel impelled to marry someone she might not otherwise have chosen. Her life choices are few, and most of them are bad. Had she been able to delay the first child, her prospects might have been quite different assuming that she would have had the opportunities to continue her education, improve her vocational skills, find a job, marry someone she wanted to marry, and have a child when she and her husband were ready for it.⁹⁴

Campbell mentions all of the requisite, sequential steps of adulthood (first school completion, then gainful employment, then marriage and then parenthood) so as to highlight how disordered teenage mothers’ lives are. The implication was that teenage mothers were not only children at the time they gave birth, but that they were likely doomed to perpetual childhood and may never attain full adulthood.

One of the most interesting fallacies of the “children having children” concept is that a large percentage of teenage mothers were legal adults. According to a 1981 report by AGI, fifty-five percent of teenage births were to women who had already reached the age of majority. Further, thirty-five percent of pregnancies among 18 and 19-year-old

⁹² “Children Having Children,” *Time*, December 9, 1985.

⁹³ Diana M. Pearce, “‘Children Having Children’: Teenage Pregnancy and Public Policy From the Woman’s Perspective,” in *The Politics of Pregnancy*, ed. Deborah L Rhode and Annette Lawson (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1993), 46.

⁹⁴ Arthur A. Campbell, “The Role of Family Planning in the Reduction of Poverty,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 30, no. 2 (May 1, 1968): 238.

women were intended and 42 percent occurred within marriage.⁹⁵ In the eyes of the law, these women were adults; but in the context of public discourse, they were “teenager mothers.” For example, a nineteen-year-old mother fell into the same category as a fourteen-year-old mother although their situations were likely quite different. As long as they were under age twenty, young mothers of remarkably different circumstances were subsumed in or by a single discussion of problematic sexuality. The focus on “children having children” not only infantilized adolescent mothers; it made the experiences of some young women incomprehensible or invisible in the context of the public debate.

This infantilization of teenage mothers was part of a broader resurgence of caretaking rights for children. As Michael Grossberg argues, supporters of caretaking rights in the 1980s were “almost uniformly hostile to any recognition of children’s autonomy and self-determination even for older adolescents.”⁹⁶ New Right lawmakers were among the most ardent proponents of this view, and over the course of the 1980s, they enshrined it in federal law.

The clearest example was in welfare policy, a popular target of conservative politicians. Whereas liberals saw welfare as an essential safety net, conservatives saw it an example of the excessive reach of big government. They also believed that it bred habits of dependency on handouts rather than self-reliance.

The connection between AFDC and teenage motherhood was a topic of much debate and contention. Clearly, not all teenage mothers received welfare, and not all women on welfare were teenage mothers, but there was a good degree of overlap between the groups. The 1975 Urban Institute report, which showed that the government spent half of its total AFDC expenditures on households in which the mother had borne her first child as a teenager, fueled conservative reforms.⁹⁷ Politicians passed new laws in order to influence the behavior of young mothers and reduce dependency over time. These policies likely influenced many young mothers, but their greatest effect may have been that they formalized the perspective that teenage mothers were children.⁹⁸

The first welfare policy that overtly ascribed childhood to teenage mothers passed in 1984. Known as “grandparent deeming,” this statute required that the state count all of the resources in a household when determining whether the child of a minor parent was eligible for AFDC. Before this, a minor mother’s eligibility was determined by looking at her and her child’s income regardless of whether or not she lived with her parents. The 1984 policy, in contrast, treated teenage mothers who lived with their parents as children themselves. It assumed that grandparents could and would contribute to the financial costs of raising their grandchild, while treating the mother as a dependent member of a larger household. In many cases, a single parent and her child who would have qualified for AFDC support on their own were denied when the whole household was included. Grandparent deeming not only decreased the number of teenage mothers receiving

⁹⁵ Mann, “The Politics of Teenage Sexualities Social Regulation, Citizenship and the U.S. State,” 96–97.

⁹⁶ Grossberg, “Liberation and Caretaking,” 31.

⁹⁷ Moore, “Teenage Childbirth and Welfare Dependency,” 234.

⁹⁸ In the 1970s and particularly the 1980s, conservatives began to talk about the problem of “welfare queens.” This disparaging character was constructed as a poor, black, unmarried teenage mother who was scamming federal welfare programs and defrauding honest taxpayers. Ronald Reagan described the welfare queen in his first presidential run in 1976 as a woman from Chicago’s impoverished South Side who drives a Cadillac. Conservatives insisted that young women were having babies just to collect larger welfare checks.

government support; it also forced them to make difficult decisions. As Diana Pearce explains, “Some poor teen parents are thus forced to choose between what welfare provides (income and services, including health care through Medicaid) and what living with their families offers (emotional support, help with child care and the like.”⁹⁹

Four years later, another set of changes situated teenage mothers squarely in childhood. Policymakers believed that young mothers were more likely to remain on welfare longer if they established independent households versus remaining at home with their parents. Some went so far as to suggest that AFDC encouraged teenagers to get pregnant so they could set up their own households and escape from their parents’ control.¹⁰⁰ Translating this perspective into policy, the Family Support Act of 1988 sought to limit the number of single teenage parents who set up their own households. It allowed states to require that minor parents live with their parent or parents in order to receive benefits. Although many adolescent mothers did continue to live at home, this regulation discouraged those young parents who wanted to set up independent homes from doing so.¹⁰¹

The Family Support Act of 1988 also instituted new rules regarding education. Teenage parents who did not have a high school diploma were required to return to school full time in order to receive AFDC regardless of the age of their child. In the case of eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds, the state could place them in a work training program of its own choosing if they did not make “good progress” in school.¹⁰² Schooling was the best decision for many young mothers and could provide important skills for the future; but this regulation stripped young women of the ability to decide what was best for her and her child. After decades of struggling to gain access to high school, sexually unorthodox adolescents were being forced into schools as long as they were in financial need. And given the social, legal and conceptual associations of schooling with childhood, this regulation essentially defined teenage mothers as children despite compelling evidence to the contrary.

In some ways, these policies illustrated the newly intricate relationship between adolescent mothers and the state. But in other ways, they harkened back to an earlier era when illegitimate pregnancies were dealt with in the private sphere as the responsibility of individual families without the intervention or support of the government. These reforms fit into a larger conservative effort to scale back government programs, cut welfare benefits, and reduce to role of government in everyday life. But in a somewhat ironic fashion, these regulations sought to reduce young mothers’ dependency on state welfare agencies by encouraging them to become dependent on their parents.

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⁹⁹ Pearce, “‘Children Having Children’: Teenage Pregnancy and Public Policy From the Woman’s Perspective,” 50.

¹⁰⁰ Kristin Moore and Steven Caldwell discuss this perspective though they do not subscribe to this belief. Kristin Moore and Steven Caldwell, “The Effect of Government Policies on Out-of-Wedlock Sex and Pregnancy,” in Furstenberg, Menken, and Lincoln, *Teenage Sexuality, Pregnancy, and Childbearing*.

¹⁰¹ Pearce, “‘Children Having Children’: Teenage Pregnancy and Public Policy From the Woman’s Perspective,” 50–1.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 51.

Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, teenage pregnancy was transformed from a private issue primarily handled by families, husbands, and communities, to a public issue overseen by the state. New patterns of sexual and marital behavior, particularly among white girls, made adolescent sexuality a more visible and more costly problem, ultimately convincing lawmakers to take action. The policies they created aimed to shape young women's decisions about their reproductive and sexual lives, and enshrined in law shifting views of the maturity or youth of teenage mothers. Pregnant adolescents and teenage mothers walked a fine line between childhood and adulthood, simultaneously embodying and defying aspects of both. As legislators moved toward an age-based understanding of unsanctioned sexuality, the rights of adulthood and the protections of childhood were doled out on an increasingly unequal basis. White middle-class adolescents gained access to many of the privileges of adulthood and sexual autonomy in the 1970s and 1980s. These included access to contraceptives, safe abortions, medical privacy, and the ability to consent to their own health care. Poor black adolescents, particularly those on welfare, had more constraints placed on their reproductive choices as federal programs became more interested in shaping the sexual behavior of young people.

By the end of the 1980s, the federal government's intervention in teenage pregnancy helped many teenage girls negotiate the complexities of life as a young mother. But the state's condemnation of adolescent sexuality and its infantilization of teenage mothers re-inscribed existing inequalities, stigmatizing the choices of those already dealing with the dual burdens of economic deprivation and racial discrimination.

It is also important to note that in spite of conservative efforts to portray pregnant teenagers as children, some groups rejected this view. In particular, the black community viewed motherhood, including teenage motherhood, as a respected path to adulthood. *All Our Kin*, the seminal 1974 study of an impoverished black urban neighborhood by anthropologist Carol Stack, explained how kin networks made early parenthood less burdensome. In order to cope with economic deprivation and racism, the community formed extensive webs of kin and friends that supported and helped each other. Parenting responsibilities were shared by a large network of friends and family rather than falling solely upon the shoulders of the biological mother. In cases where the mother was very young, "mothering" duties were often taken over by a grandparent, aunt, great aunt or older sister, often within the same home as the biological mother. Children were a source of pride, not shame, and there was little to no stigma associated with teenage pregnancy or unwed motherhood.¹⁰³

For many young women growing up under the burdens of poverty and racism, mainstream definitions of adulthood were unattainable. Moreover, the white middle-class concept of adulthood – marriage, a single-family home, high educational achievement and a good job – was often *undesirable* within poor communities of color. Kinship networks offered more stability than nuclear families. Multi-generational homes offered more resources than single-family homes. With few good employment options in the inner cities, a better education did not guarantee a better job. While delayed motherhood had significant benefits for middle-class white women, it offered little to poor women of color. Teenage childbearing was arguably a better choice. For some,

¹⁰³ Carol B Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

teenage motherhood was a costly detour on the way to mainstream adulthood; for others, it was a direct and respected path to an alternative model of adulthood.

Conclusion

At the 2008 Republican National Convention, Presidential hopeful John McCain introduced his running mate Sarah Palin to the nation. After her speech, her family and running mate joined her on stage, and stood together, waving to the massive crowd. At first glance, her phalanx of children seemed to convey a message of traditional values and the strength of the American family. But this tableau was marred by the recently released news that Palin's seventeen-year-old, unmarried daughter, Bristol, was five months pregnant. Her young boyfriend (who had recently become her fiancé) stood with the family, holding hands with Bristol as they smiled at the audience. This image of teenagers preparing for marriage and parenthood was beamed into homes around the nation. In a press release earlier that week, Palin explained that she was proud of Bristol's decision to keep the baby, acknowledged the difficulty of raising a young child, and pledged the entire family's support to the young couple. Despite the cheerful tone, Palin acknowledged Bristol's pregnancy "would make her grow up faster than we had ever planned."¹ This was only the latest in a series of high profile teenage pregnancies in recent years, and Bristol was the latest in a series of young girls who seemed to be growing up faster than anyone had planned.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Americans remained fixated on teenage sexuality, a spectacle that played out on an increasingly public stage. Popular entertainment, like the Academy Award-winning movie, *Juno* and the television show *The Secret Life of the American Teenager* regaled audiences with tales of teenage pregnancy. The MTV reality shows, *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* turned adolescent parenthood into a soap-opera-style drama, and the show's young "moms" showed up on the cover of popular magazines as well as tabloids. In 2007, Nickelodeon television actress Jamie Lynn Spears set off a media frenzy when she revealed her pregnancy at age sixteen, and in 2012, Disney star Miley Cyrus made waves when she announced her engagement at the relatively advanced age of nineteen. Forty years after teenage pregnancy emerged as a public, national problem, the nation was still fascinated by its precocious teens.

This dissertation seeks to put unsanctioned adolescent sexuality in a broader historical context. Between the 1940s and the 1980s, American understandings of teenage sexuality underwent a radical transformation. Immediately after World War II, precocious adolescent sexuality was seen as a private issue that ushered adolescents into premature adulthood. By the 1980s, it had become a public issue that was believed to block young people's path to adulthood, trapping them in a pathologized version of childhood. These twin transitions – from the private sphere to the public sphere, and from adulthood to childhood – shaped the experiences of young people who transgressed the boundary between childhood and adulthood, whether through courtship, marriage, or pregnancy.

In many ways, this story is one of shifting age definitions and age boundaries. Teenagers began challenging the border between childhood and adulthood in large numbers in the late 1940s, at a critical point when age became a central organizing

¹ Carl Hulse and Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "With Focus on Storm, Scaled-Back Convention Opens," *The New York Times*, September 2, 2008.

principle of American society. Postwar teens claimed that they were mature, responsible, and deserved the same rights to sexual expression, monogamy, and partnership as adults. This ethos was clearly illustrated through steady dating, a teenage invention that borrowed liberally from marriage, but which teens adapted to meet the particular needs of high school society. Adults discouraged young people from going steady, fearing that it would lure them into premature commitment, precocious sexuality, and even marriage, cutting off their childhood before they were ready.

Many Americans did end up married while still in their teens in the years after World War II. Teenagers often married to legitimize a premarital pregnancy, but they also wed in order to claim adulthood, prove their maturity or validate their feelings of love. As adolescents stormed the gates of marriage, adults struggled to preserve the symbolic links between matrimony and adulthood. Lawmakers changed local laws in order to quell the tide of young marriages and put an end to cross-border elopements with little success.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, precocious adolescents were reclassified as adults both in society and law. Nowhere did this have greater ramifications than in schools. Married, pregnant and parenting students were removed from schools, separated from their peers, and ushered into the private sphere. Some were happy to leave school for domestic life, but others wanted the education and the peer contact that came with high school. Students who challenged restrictive rules during these years came up short in court, but their luck would change in the near future.

In the 1970s, the rigid boundary between childhood and adulthood softened as minors gained rights and privileges that had been previously reserved for adults. Teenagers took advantage of these newly expansive rights to fight their way back into schools and into public view. The increasingly public presence of sexually active youth, however, helped convince lawmakers that teenage childbearing was an epidemic. A series of federal policies aimed at solving the problem of teenage pregnancy followed soon after, providing resources for young mothers as well as a new degree of state intervention into the sexual and reproductive lives of American youth.

Until recently, historians often regarded age as a simple or stable category. But as the work of historians of childhood has demonstrated, meanings of age, the boundaries between age categories, and the experiences of age groups have changed drastically over time. No group demonstrates this more clearly than adolescents, who occupy a liminal space between childhood and adulthood. Particularly in the second third of the twentieth century, when teenagers still seemed like novel and strange creatures to some adults, the question of teens' maturity levels was highly contested. Over time, Americans grew familiar with the concept of "teen-age" as a stage of life, but understandings of adolescence and notions of what made an adult continued to shift. For example, a sixteen-year-old bride would have been considered an adult in the 1950s whereas an eighteen-year-old mother may have been seen as a child thirty years later.

Moreover, as this study of postwar youth illustrates, adolescents often came up with their own definitions of youth and adulthood in order to suit their needs and meet their aspirations. In the 1950s, when American culture celebrated maturity, responsibility and family, young people fought to be included in adulthood; in the 1970s, when the nation hailed youthfulness and significantly expanded the rights of childhood, teenagers slowed down their transition into adulthood.

My research demonstrates how multiple definitions of age exist at any one point in history. These often-conflicting definitions may differ by generation, race, class or region. Quite often, the law espouses one notion of adulthood while popular culture ascribes to another. In the 1950s, adults' and teenagers' divergent understandings of adolescence clashed in the debates over steady dating, teenage marriage and early childbearing. Later in the 1980s, when impoverished communities of color were cut off from mainstream concepts of adulthood, they embraced a new notion of adulthood that welcomed and celebrated teenage motherhood. The great discrepancies between the paths to adulthood espoused by federal public policy and by disadvantaged communities fueled attacks on black sexuality and family structures.

Over the course of the twentieth century, sexuality has been the most constant and powerful aspect of how Americans defined the boundary between ages. Including everything from courtship patterns to marriage, and sexual experimentation to motherhood, sexual behavior was often the clearest distinction between the rights of children and adults. Youthful transgressions of sexual boundaries drew attention to the importance of these lines while simultaneously destabilizing them and revealing their frailty. Future studies of sexuality, particularly those that focus on adolescents, would be well served to pay close attention to shifting age categories and the profound effect these have on young women's lives. This dissertation argues that the designation of age – who is a child and who is an adult – is a powerful social and political act with profound consequences for young people in all corners of American society.

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