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THE FALLACY THAT WELFARE REFORM WILL INCREASE ABORTIONS

In recent days two organizations opposed to abortion, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the National Right to Life Committee, have made the claim that welfare reforms being considered by the House will increase abortions. According to these organizations, limiting the availability of additional welfare benefits for single women if they have another child will encourage women to have abortions.

The problem with this line of reasoning is that it is completely false. The data show clearly that, in the real world, the proportion of conceptions that end in abortion is unrelated to the level of welfare available in a state—lower benefits do not mean more abortions. Welfare does have an effect on abortions, but not the one suggested by some anti-abortion organizations.

The rise of illegitimacy and the collapse of the family generated by welfare is a major factor in generating high rates of *both illegitimacy and abortion*. Thus, the paradox is that the position of these organizations on welfare reform actually would *increase* the number of abortions in the United States. It also would lead them to the remarkable conclusion—contradicted by the evidence—that Congress should increase welfare benefits to reduce the rate of abortion.

Encouraging increased illegitimacy does not lead to fewer abortions. In fact, those states that have higher rates of illegitimacy also have higher rates of abortion. State-by-state statistical analysis conducted by The Heritage Foundation shows an extremely high and consistent correlation between illegitimacy and abortion rates. The correlation is between .67 and .72 (where 1.0 is a perfect correlation and -1.0 is a perfect negative correlation). Further examination of the interstate data shows that an increase of 100 in the number of illegitimate births per 10,000 women results in an increase of 200 in the number of abortions per 10,000 women.

A more generous welfare system clearly undermines the moral norms within a community. It encourages promiscuous sexual activity and discourages self-restraint and marriage, thereby increasing both illegitimacy and abortion. As Father Robert Sirico pointed out recently in *The Washington Times*, “The pro-welfare, anti-abortion crowd forgets that the Great Society and the sexual revolution coincided in time and place. Indeed, one logically follows another. The government sent the message that sexual promiscuity was morally neutral and that if pregnancy results, it would offer assistance, no questions asked. Since 1964, illegitimate births have zoomed 400 percent. It should not surprise us, since the welfare state encourages this by financing it.”

Liberals in the 1970s argued that easy access to abortion was a way to reduce illegitimacy and welfare dependence. This has not been the case. Long-term trends in abortion and illegitimacy have risen together. Just as abortion has not been a morally acceptable or effective means of reducing illegitimacy, welfare subsidies that promote illegitimacy are neither morally acceptable nor an effective means of reducing abortion.

Thus, contrary to the claims made by certain anti-abortion critics of welfare reform, the welfare system is not pro-life. Were it so, as the critics of welfare believe, the logic would be to increase substantially the level of welfare benefits to unmarried mothers. But such a policy would destroy families, wreck communities, and lead to a surge of juvenile crime and other social pathologies in the future. By promoting family disintegration, welfare has proved pivotal in promoting the current high rates of illegitimacy and abortion. Maintaining the current welfare system unquestionably will cause an increase in abortions in future years.

State-by-state analysis also shows that states with higher and more generous welfare benefits have higher abortion rates. These data indicate that a policy of providing more welfare aid will be unlikely to reduce abortions, even in the very short term.

Welfare-promoted increases in illegitimacy over the intermediate term unquestionably lead to a higher number of abortions because girls who are born out of wedlock are not only far more likely themselves to have children out of wedlock; they are much more likely to engage in early teenage sexual activity and thus to become candidates for abortion. Girls raised in single-parent homes are up to twice as likely to engage in early non-marital sexual intercourse.¹ Holding other social variables constant, girls from single-parent homes are one-third less likely to use contraceptives while engaging in non-marital sexual activity.²

The welfare policy urged by such pro-life groups as National Right to Life thus turns out to be anti-family and anti-marriage, and would lead to more abortions in both the short term and long term.

Reading between the lines, it is clear that many on the NRL staff are quite comfortable with a social trend in which marriage and two-parent families increasingly are replaced by single parenthood. NRL staff seek to use welfare to facilitate an increase in illegitimacy and express dismay that anyone would seek to restore "stigma" against illegitimacy.

National Right to Life has stated that it is exclusively concerned with the immediate number of abortions in the U.S. and that it has deliberately ignored all other social concerns in formulating its policy. Following this logic, NRL should vigorously promote federal policies to encourage or require non-married welfare mothers to use Norplant birth control since such a policy would dramatically reduce both abortions and illegitimacy. While NRL has no formal position on this issue, its staff indicate that NRL would be reluctant to endorse it because promoting birth control among welfare mothers who have already had children out of wedlock could have negative social consequences. Apparently, to NRL staff, exploding illegitimacy does not have negative social consequences, but encouraging the increased use of birth control by welfare mothers would.

Robert Rector
Senior Policy Analyst

Methodology

The correlation between illegitimacy and abortion was determined by using abortion statistics from the *Abortion Factbook*, 1992 edition, published by The Alan Guttmacher Institute, and illegitimacy statistics from *Labor Vital Statistics: Natality*, Vol. 1, from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Using state-level statistics for the number of illegitimate births per 1,000 women aged 15-44 and number of abortions per 1,000 women aged 15-44, we determined an overall correlation for each year that ranged from .67 to .72. Our analysis also indicated that for an increase of one in illegitimate births per 1,000 women there was roughly an increase of two in the rate of abortions per 1,000 women.

These figures indicate a relationship between illegitimacy and abortion. Any observations based on these data necessarily are preliminary, however, and subject to further analysis of factors influencing abortion rates. An analysis of abortion and poverty levels by state indicates that there is no statistically significant correlation between the two variables (-.125 correlation). Abortion data broken down by income class are unavailable.

David H. Winston
Senior Fellow in Statistical Policy Analysis

Christine L. Olson
Research Analyst

1 Renata T. Forste and Tim B. Heaton, "Initiation of Sexual Activity Among Female Adolescents," *Youth and Society*, March 1988, pp. 250-268.

2 Dennis Hogar, Marie Astone, and Evelyn Kitagawa, "Social and Environmental Factors Influencing Contraceptive Use Among Black Adolescents," *Family Planning Perspectives*, July/August 1985.