



CaesarRodney.org

## The Gathering Storm

By John Stapleford, Ph.D.

Recent Federal data reveals that Delaware now ranks 5<sup>th</sup> among all the states in the percent of births to unmarried mothers. Nearly 46% of Delaware births during 2006 were to unwed mothers, including 32% of births among whites, 62% among Hispanic and 72% among blacks. This portends trouble down the road.

Despite the Murphy Brown myth, the research literature is clear. While not inevitable, children raised in single-parent families are at greater risk of cognitive and behavioral problems. Compared to children from married-couple families, children from single-parent families are more likely to drop out of high school, be suspended or expelled from school, become pregnant as teenagers, abuse drugs, commit crimes, become mentally ill, or get in trouble with the law. Eighty percent of all adolescents in psychiatric hospitals come from broken homes and seventy percent of the juveniles in state reform institutions grew up in fatherless homes. Single parenthood is a better predictor of criminal activity than low income.

Over the past 50 years births to unwed mothers in America have soared from 5% to 39% of all births. Not surprisingly, 26% of the nation's children now live in single parent families, including 21% of white children and 54% of black children. This extraordinary rise in out-of-wedlock births and single parent families has occurred not only in the U.S., but across many of the industrialized countries in western Europe. What accounts for this trend?

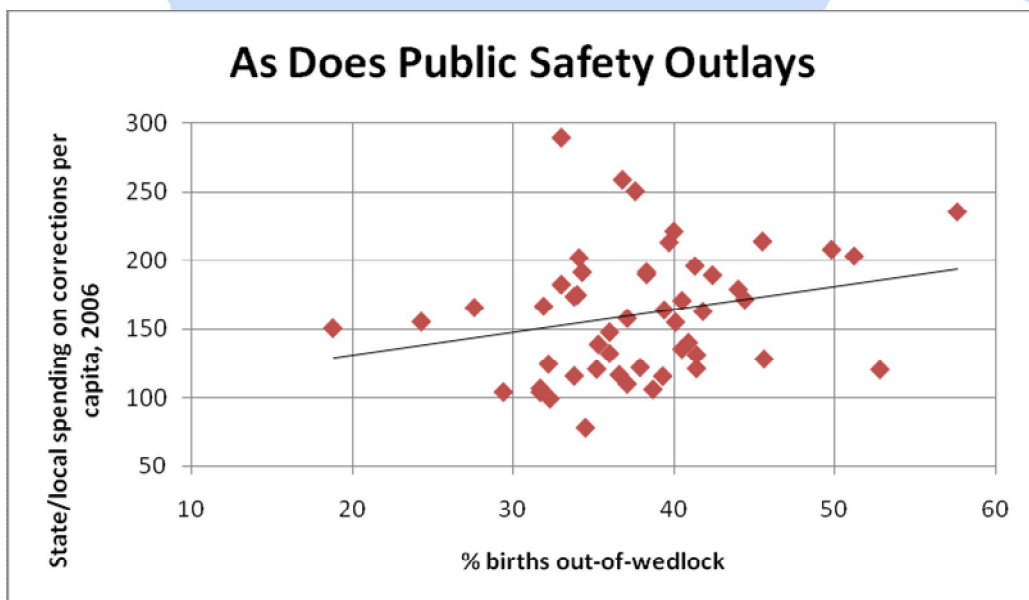
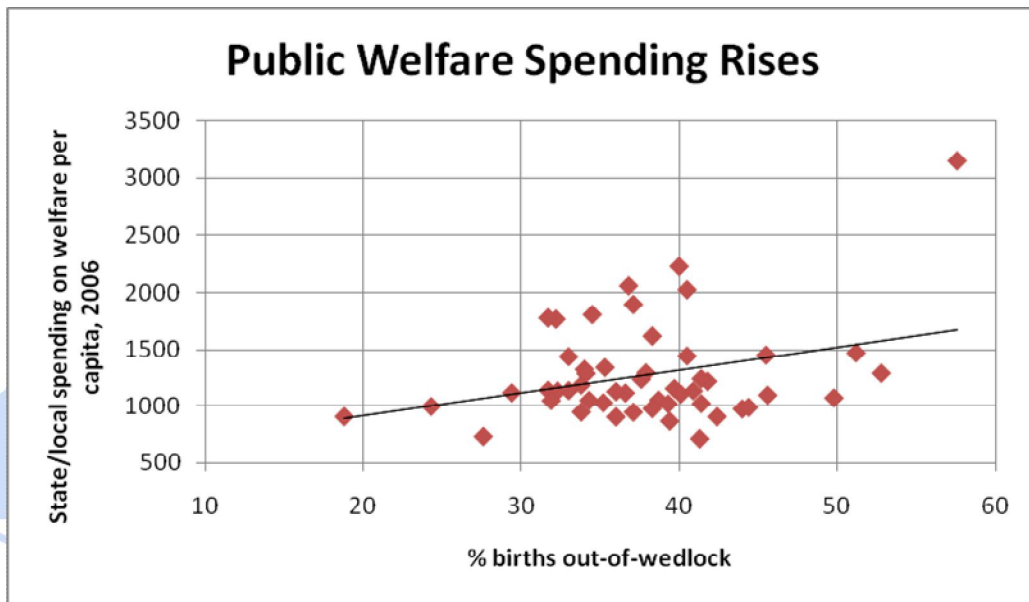
Four things are clear from the research literature. First, contrary to what logic dictates, there is almost no statistically reliable relationship between welfare payments and the out-of-wedlock birth rate. Second, the labor market for women has changed. The occupational choices for more educated women have expanded making marriage less important for economic security. Among less educated young women who believe they face a bleak work future, unwed birth has risen as an attractive, near-term alternative.

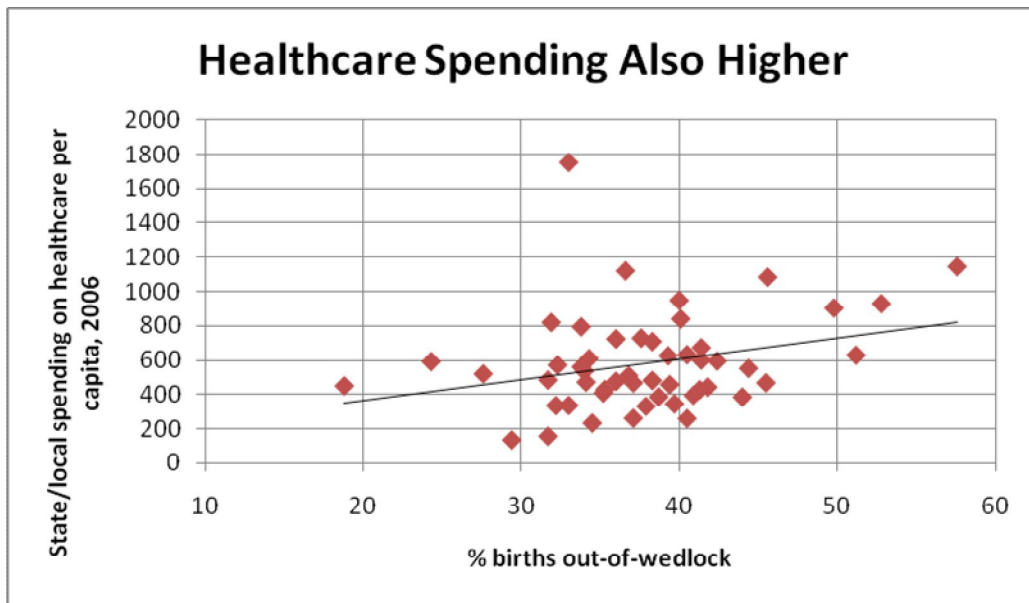
Third, the decline in the pool of "marriageable" males age 25 to 44, especially in the black community, due to the precipitous decline in the real wages of less skilled young men, their high unemployment rates, incarceration rates and death rates, has been an important factor in the rise of the out-of-wedlock birth rate. Finally, delayed marriage and what David Blackenhorn has labeled "decultured paternity" have contributed to a decline in marriage following the birth of a child among couples who have cohabited. The social stigma associated with unwed birth has diminished.

What are the implications of this trend for Delaware? An obvious one is higher state and local government costs. Using 2006 data from the census of governments, a higher rate of out-of-wedlock birth has a statistically significant and positive impact on per capita state and local government spending on public welfare, public safety (corrections) and healthcare (see the charts below). While no significant relationship was found between state and local government spending per capita on K-12 public education and the unwed birth rate, examination of data within Delaware shows higher spending per pupil in school districts with a higher proportion of single parent families.

As public education, corrections and health and human services are the largest cost components of Delaware state and local government, the prospect for bringing them under control appear grim. Among other, less apparent spinoffs, is the impact of more dysfunctional young people upon our labor force and our economic competitiveness.

What, if anything, can be done to bring a halt to the rapid rise in out-of-wedlock births in the First State and stabilize the married-couple family? That is beyond my scope, but at the least Delaware's leaders need to convene experts in the appropriate fields to begin brainstorming. The consequences of not doing so are obvious.





*John E. Stapleford, Ph.D. is a member of the Caesar Rodney Institute's Board of Directors.*

*The Caesar Rodney Institute is a 501(c)(3) research and educational organization and is committed to being a catalyst for improved performance, accountability, and efficiency in Delaware government.*

