

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — The United States faces a problem that has reached the dimensions of a national disaster, comparable to a flood, epidemic or famine—and one that results, similarly, from a colossal flaw of nature. That flaw is the precipitous, unprecedented drop in the age of puberty; the problem is the spread of teen-age pregnancy.

In 1840, the average young woman in Europe and the United States menstruated for the first time at the age of 17; her modern counterpart reaches the age of menstruation at about 12. Well known to biological anthropologists as the "secular trend," this crash in the age of sexual maturity has proceeded at the rate of four months per decade, and, in most populations, continues.

The age of first possible parenthood has declined comparably, and early literary references to teen-age marriage and parenthood have been shown to be completely unrepresentative, exaggerated or false.

In much of the third world, we can watch the trend beginning. Among the Kung San, an African gathering-hunting people believed to model the original human way of life, the age at first menstruation is 16½ and the age at first birth 19½ (with a very narrow range). Sex play in childhood and adolescence is ubiquitous; 99 percent of girls are married by age 20 (half of them before their first menstruation) and no contraception is in use.

There is thus no explanation for the late age at first birth except late menstruation and adolescent sterility.

Human beings are not designed by evolution either in body or in spirit for the experience of adolescent pregnancy. In the United States, from 1940 to 1960, births in the 15-19 maternal age group about doubled. After 1960,

# Adolescent Pregnancy

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By Melvin J. Konner

out-of-wedlock births in the 14-17-year age range rose steadily until 1973, when legal abortions halted the rise. But teen-age pregnancy has continued to rise to the present rate of one million a year. The fastest rise in the youngest group, 11-13 years.

As maternal age drops from age 20, mortality risk for mother and child rise sharply as does the probability of birth defects. Offspring of adolescent mothers, if they survive, are more likely to have impaired intellectual functioning. Poverty, divorce, inept parenting, child neglect and child abuse are all more frequent in teen-age parents.

The baby, of course, is not the only sufferer. For women of all ages, the incidence of onset of mental illness increases fivefold to fifteenfold during the first month after delivery. What sort of effect may we expect it to have on a junior high school girl? Little stretch of the imagination is required to conclude that denying her an abortion is in itself a form of child abuse, even leaving aside the kitchen-abortion horror tales.

In every other arena of life, including the criminal court, we absolve her of responsibility for her actions; in the maternity clinic we avert our eyes and condemn her.

Consider the plight of these children. Assaulted by culturally sanctioned sexual innuendo and borne along by physical and physiological events that have never before befallen such young children, they are

at the mercy of their own and one another's impulses, having five years less experience and mental growth than their pubescent counterparts of a century ago.

To guide them through these biological storms, we offer religions thick with the dust of a past era, parental counsel that is vague, timid, false, irrelevant or negligible, and teachers who, on the subject of contraception, are silenced by rule of law.

The people who keep children in the dark about contraception have now deprived them of a major source of rescue from the accident caused by this legislated ignorance. An estimated one-third of the 250,000-300,000 abortions funded by Medicaid each year go to teen-agers, and it is easy to see how ignorance kept a ceiling on this figure even before the law withdrew the funds, bowing to a superstitious campaign against women's rights to govern their bodies.

The effect of this capitulation is the moral and practical equivalent of sabotaging a lone remaining dam above an already inundated flood plain. Its result will be a lock-step cycle of children born to children, inadequately parented and inadequately parenting, condemned to poverty, with a generation turnover time approaching one decade.

Let us hope that the proposed substitute—bounty payments to foster parents—is merely ill-advised, because if it is not ill-advised, it is simply cynical.

Foster care is such a well-studied failure that it is difficult to be charitable to its promoters, except where the only alternative is the orphanage.

We may sympathize with the impulse of those whose private views make them oppose abortion on ethical grounds. But their personal reading of the human moral law need not constrain the rest of us from exercising a more complex judgment.

We must now evidently fight for the right to do so. In the meantime, the law may yet provide some protection for pregnant children. The arguments that I give, though they must not be taken as a substitute for a woman's right to choose, produce the conclusion that an abortion must always be available to a teen-ager. Modern teen-agers are the victims of a physiological blight, the capacity for immature pregnancy—a tragic, anomalous, biological novelty. It is our clear duty to help save them from this blight, not condemn them to it.

A little moment ago in European history, the intense convictions of some people led them to enjoin others—on pain of torture and death—from believing that rulers derived their power from the governed, that many religions were possible, that animal species were mutable, and that the planet Earth revolved around the sun.

In another moment, the high-minded stricture against women's rights over their bodies will seem, in retrospect, comparably arbitrary and bullying.

But for the transient, rather desperate, here and now some of us have a moral sense that enables us to feel obligated to several hundred thousand pregnant children.

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