

**Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put
Motherhood Before Marriage
Kathryn Edin & Maria Kefalas
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Summary

Promises I Can Keep is a study on why single mothers from poor urban neighborhoods are increasingly having children out of wedlock at an average age of 21 without a near-term intension of marrying the father. Authors Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas researched their study in Philadelphia's eight most blighted neighborhoods, where oppression and danger are high and substantial job opportunities are rare. Edin and Kefalas shatter the middle-class myth that poor young urban women are having children due to a lack of education on birth control or because they intend to work the welfare system. Instead, having children is their best and perhaps only means of obtaining the purpose, validation and companionship that is otherwise difficult to find in a high-crime, poverty stricken neighborhood.

Facts and Findings

The eight poor neighborhoods of Philadelphia used in this study are places where poor whites, African-Americans and Latinos (here, predominately Puerto Ricans) live under approximately the same social and economic circumstances. Therefore, the authors find that class and not race is the driving factor in the women's lives. In this study, half of the women and men having children out of wedlock lack a high school diploma, and often times it is the birth of the child that causes either or both parents to drop out of school to work or take care of the baby full time. (2). Four out of ten of these fathers are in prison or jail by the time

the child is born, and a quarter of these fathers have no job. (2). In the year before the birth of the child, almost a third of the mothers did not work at all and nearly half of the fathers earned less than \$10,000. (2).

On a national level, the average age for first time unwed mothers in poor urban neighborhoods is 21 years with many occurring during the teenage years. (2). It is common to see a fourteen through seventeen year old girl finding herself pregnant and dropping out of school to take care of her baby. These young women are well-enough educated on birth control and often know by memory where the local Planned Parenthood is located. Yet various factors, including social isolation, pressure from the boyfriend, and a dismal life prospect can cause the young women to move quickly from casual dating to an intimate relationship to ultimately being pregnant within a few months. Some of these women want to get pregnant to escape a troubled home life that often includes angry confrontations, physical abuse and verbal abuse. Others use birth control haphazardly, and consider their pregnancy “in between” being accidental and planned.

Many young men knowingly cause their girlfriends to quickly become pregnant. It is common for the men to say in the beginning of a relationship “I want to have a baby with you,” and often times they sincerely mean it. This is considered a high tribute to her beauty and a form of flattery to let her know that he is entrusting her with the upbringing of his progeny. (29). In addition, men often view birth control as a “lack of fidelity and trust.” However, too often the men do not keep their promises; instead they continue to party, cheat with other women, and ultimately take little to no responsibility in helping to raise their child.

A vast majority of the young women in this study felt that they got pregnant only one to two years prior to their ideal age. This includes teenagers between 15 and 17. Poor women often do not agree with the middle-class standards of waiting until ones 30’s to have a baby. Most of the women portrayed in the book also do not agree with abortions or adoption unless the mother’s situation is absolutely dire. An educated middle-class woman has much to gain financially if she holds out until her 30’s to have her first child, sometimes doubling her overall income. However these financial prospects are rarely seen for women in poverty stricken areas. Essentially, these women “have little to lose” if they do not properly time their births like their middle-class counterparts.

Very few women interviewed viewed their children as a hindrance to their own life’s potential. Rather, their baby is their life. Being a good mother can raise a young woman’s self-esteem and social status when all other areas of her life show dismal prospects. Some young women discuss how having a baby is what straightened their lives out. Prior to the pregnancy, these women felt aimless, depressed, and were often roaming

the neighborhoods abusing drugs and alcohol, and perhaps being promiscuous. If they had postponed having a baby, some feel they would be dead, in jail, or still continuing with the wrong crowd.

Although the women in this survey believed in having children young, ironically, they also believe in postponing marriage until at least one's 30's. These women do not disregard marriage, but rather, they take it so seriously, they would rather wait than rush into a marriage that will most likely end in divorce. For them, "good decent, trustworthy men are in short supply." From an economic perspective, these women are also postponing marriage until they are financially secure with a stable career. Economic stability for them is seen as a necessary "power and insurance" against a marriage gone bad. Many of these mothers do not trust their baby's fathers "to remain faithful, to stay working, to pay their share of the bills, to not beat them or abuse their children, to stay out of trouble with the law, and to stay free of addiction to alcohol and drugs." Ideally, poor women do want to get married first and have children second, but considering their prospects in a male partner, they do not see how this is possible.

So why are these women having children at all if the neighborhood conditions and adult relationships are so dire? With dismal education and career prospects, poor women see children as the best of what life has to offer, not as a barrier to their upward mobility and a better life. Often times, teens will get pregnant only after they have experienced academic difficulty and dropped out of school. In addition, there is a perceived low economic cost and high social value poor women put on children and motherhood. Children serve to fill a void that these women will not be able to find in a fulfilling career or education like their middle-class counterparts. These mothers also view their children as a vicarious second chance to a better life than the ones they created for themselves. (179).

Policy Implications

Women at the bottom of the American class ladder are not having children for the welfare money or to keep a man. Rather, when a neighborhood's schools are terrible, crime and drug activities are markedly high, and residents only qualify for the least stable and poorest paying jobs, having child and being considered a good mother are often the only means of attaining a sense of valued accomplishment and emotional fulfillment. As one mother says, "being a mom is something I knew I could do." (177).

Research cited by Edin and Kefalas suggests that when poor, uneducated women have children young, their long term earning potential is actually similar to the same disadvantaged poor women who wait until

their mid or late twenties to have children.¹ Children have a higher value to the poor than to the middle-class because these children usually do not cause their impoverished mothers to forego substantial educational or career opportunities. “[F]amily background, cognitive ability, school performance, mental health status, and so on – have already diminished their life chances so much that an early birth does little to reduce them much further.” (205). In other words, while unwed motherhood may correlate strongly with the women’s poverty, it does not cause it. For most of them, their poverty and other disadvantages lead to unwed motherhood, rather than vice versa.

Men and women who work and earn a viable income marry at a higher rate. During the economic boom in the late 1990’s, unskilled laborers had an unprecedented ability to increase their wages and move upwards. During this time, having children out of wedlock declined for the first time in modern history. This is potential evidence that when poor people “see new reasons to hope for meaning in a variety of life paths,” they may postpone having children early because of it. (219).

The authors recommend the following policy proposals to help these young women and men find a more fruitful avenue in life through their education and careers, while postponing having children until well into their twenties:

- (1) Significant afterschool programs that engage teenagers for a significant period of time have shown the potential to greatly reduce teen pregnancy. The taxpayer dollars used to fund these programs, over the long run, may end up costing less than when the taxpayer dollars are used to fund non-marital birth costs. (217).
- (2) Focusing on more than job training among unskilled men by finding ways to intervene at an early age, before they habituate a life of crime, domestic violence, alcohol and drug addiction, and repeated incarceration. Also, men tend to “age out” of crime and other delinquent behaviors by their late twenties. Finding ways to persuade men to postpone having children until this time would be beneficial for the family. (216-217).

Analysis

The authors of *Promises I Can Keep* bring critical attention to the realities of poor young women searching for meaning, connection and fulfillment in a city that has given them little hope and even fewer resources to create a life of economic and emotional stability. Middle-class readers are forced to realize the problems poor urban women face, and why having children for these women is a life-saving refuge and not a

means of milking the welfare system or a mistake due to ignorance over birth control.

Although the book pointedly addresses the problems as to why poor urban women choose to have children young while desiring to postpone marriage until years later, it lacks any significant solutions on how to uplift these women (and men) through better job resources and educational opportunities. In fairness to the authors, such broad ranging policy discussion was not meant to be the focus of this book.

There is a need to reconsider how taxpayer dollars are being spent on programs for the urban poor. The authors hint that current policies, although well intentioned and much needed, offer only temporary solutions without understanding and fixing the intricate web of problems that begin in early childhood. Spending more money now could mean saving more money later as we create viable resources that help enable poor urban women and men to carve out a more economically substantial and emotionally rewarding life.

ⁱ Ellwood, David T., Ty Wilde, and Lilly Batchelder. 2003. *The Impact of Childbearing on Wages of Women of Differing Skills*; Hotz, V. Joseph, Susan W. McElroy, and Seth G. Sanders. 1997. *The Impacts of Teenage Childbearing on the Mothers and the Consequences of those Impacts for Government*; Hoffman, Saul. 1998. *Teenage Childbearing Is Not So Bad After All, ... or Is It?*; Geronimus, Arlene T. 1997. *Teenage Childbearing and Personal Responsibility: An Alternative View*; Kunz, James. 2002. *Teen Pregnancy and Negative Life Outcomes: What Is the Relationship?*; Kalil, Ariel, and James Kunz. 2002. *Teenage Childbearing, Marital Status, and Depressive Symptoms in Later Life*.