PROMISES I CAN KEEP
WHY POOR WOMEN PUT MOTHERHOOD BEFORE MARRIAGE

With a New Preface

KATHRYN EDIN +
MARIA KEFALAS

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
BERKELEY LOS ANGELES LONDON
through pregnancy and birth, and where things stood for them at the present. We also learned much about how motherhood had affected their lives. Women openly, and often eagerly, shared life lessons they had learned about relationships, marriage, and children. We share their stories in the pages that follow.

**INTRODUCTION**

**ONE**

"BEFORE WE HAD A BABY . . ."

**ANTONIA AND EMILIO**

Antonia Rodriguez and her boyfriend Emilio, a young Puerto Rican couple, live in Philadelphia’s West Kensington section, colloquially dubbed “the Badlands” because of all the drug activity and violence there. Both sides of their block are lined with small, unadorned row homes, some well over a hundred years old. A century and a half ago, this densely populated neighborhood was home to hundreds of small manufacturing concerns. Though few of these businesses exist today, the America Street Enterprise Zone, one of four such zones within Philadelphia, has revived some of the area’s industrial vigor. Antonia and Emilio’s immediate neighborhood is a mix of industrial strips, residential blocks, and narrow thoroughfares choked with small businesses, including an astonishing number of storefronts offering auto repair, auto parts, and auto detailing—trades that provide an economic niche for Philadelphia’s Puerto Rican men.

Twenty-year-old Antonia is slight, with shoulder-length brown hair, large brown eyes, and a warm, friendly manner. She invites us in through the enclosed porch, and as we move through the living room to the kitchen, she proudly points to renovations that she and Emilio have made to the tiny row home since they bought it five years ago, when the me-
The median price of a home in the neighborhood was about $5,000. After we settle around the table in her newly remodeled kitchen, Antonia tells us she is the youngest of three children from her mother's first marriage and the black sheep of her Catholic family. Antonia's older brother and sister both graduated from high school and have stable jobs, one in the military and one in a mortgage company. Her sister also has a child, but she is married to the father. Antonia describes her sister as her "very best role model."

Unlike her siblings, Antonia became a parent very young—at fourteen—and left high school at fifteen. She's been unemployed and on welfare ever since, except for a brief stint behind the counter at McDonald's. Yet Antonia sees herself as bright and ambitious and believes she will go somewhere. She's sorry she didn't graduate from high school with her peers and "march down that aisle, have all those memories." She also regrets that the pregnancy prompted Emilio, whom she describes as very smart, to drop out just one month shy of graduation so that he could work full time and support his new family.

Antonia met Emilio when she was eleven and he was sixteen, about to enter his sophomore year at Edison High. "I always liked him," Antonia recalls. "I thought he was handsome. But he never paid no mind to me because I was young." She soon found out that his aunt, whom he often visited, lived next door to her own family, so Antonia spent much of the summer between the sixth and seventh grade camped out on her front stoop hoping to capture his attention. "I always told [his aunt], 'Tell him to just stop by to say hi. I'm not gonna bite him.'"

Two summers after she developed her crush, Emilio "walked by, he stopped, and we started talking ever since." In Philadelphia's poorest neighborhoods, "talking" is a handy euphemism for anything from casual flirting to sex. Antonia's problems at home and the frequent angry confrontations with her mother, whom she describes as verbally abusive, took her relationship with Emilio to the next level with breathtaking swiftness. When Antonia's mother evicted her at age fourteen, Emilio convinced his mother to let Antonia live with them. Soon after moving in, Antonia started "feeling kind of sick and hungry." Since they were not using any form of birth control, she immediately thought she knew the cause. "I said, 'Oh my God, I think I'm pregnant.'" After a positive home pregnancy test, Antonia and an older cousin did what many other low-income young women in her position do: they quickly made a furtive trip to Planned Parenthood to confirm the results. When the test "came out positive," Antonia was "happy, but then again I was scared because I was only—what?—fourteen years old."

Despite their youth, Antonia insists she and Emilio had already planned to have children before she got pregnant, but had agreed to wait a year or two so both could get further in school. In the half-year before the child was conceived, Antonia says she and Emilio spent hours imagining, "If in the future we have kids . . . I wonder who he'll look like. Yeah that'll be great . . . " Yet neither anticipated that the first pregnancy would occur less than six months into their relationship. The pair nonetheless dealt with the situation in what they deemed the only responsible way: "I didn't think I was gonna have a child at [such] an early age, but I faced it. We faced reality, and we moved on." Emilio faced it by looking for an apartment where they could set up housekeeping on their own. Shortly thereafter, he dropped out of school and began working two jobs to finance the move—a weekend job at Checkers, a local fast-food joint, and a weekday job as a mechanic in his uncle's garage.

Pregnant by fourteen, a high school dropout at fifteen, and already a mother performing all the tasks of a wife—just when other girls her age are merely hoping to get a learner's permit to drive a car—Antonia is no neighborhood success story. But in poor neighborhoods like West Kensington, where Antonia has lived all her life, the haphazard way she and Emilio embarked upon family life is hardly unusual. Across the city of Philadelphia, more than six out of ten births are now outside of marriage, many to couples whose circumstances are no better than Antonia and Emilio's. And though Antonia may have been younger than most single
mothers when she had her first child, nearly half of all first nonmarital births are to teens.3

What forces compel childbearing among the poor at a time in the life course when most of their affluent peers probably worry about whom to invite to the prom? To answer this question, we share parts of the hundreds of in-depth conversations held on front stoops and in the kitchens of these bleak urban neighborhoods. The stories of those we spoke with offer an intimate look into the private moments of courtship, as well as the drama of how relationships unfold during the often tumultuous experience of pregnancy and childbirth. Women's voices tell the stories; the perspectives of the men who father their children are not heard.4 But as you will see, these women have their own theories of why the men in their lives behave as they do.

"I WANNA HAVE A BABY BY YOU."

Like Antonia Rodriguez, young women who come of age in poor communities like West Kensington usually meet the men who father their children in their neighborhoods: on their front stoops, at the corner store, in their school hallways, or through mutual friends.5 Yet once a young pair begins casually flirting, or "kicking it," the relationship often moves at lightning speed along the trajectory that culminates in the delivery of a shared child. Kimberly, a twenty-seven-year-old Puerto Rican mother of two children, ages six and three, provides an excellent example: "There's this bridge in Puerto Rico that he took me to [on our first date]. That's where he asked me to be his girlfriend. That's where we had our first kiss.... It was really nice. I got pregnant quick though. We started [dating] April 1, and by May I was pregnant."

Romance and dreams of shared children seem almost inevitably to go together for Madeline, an eighteen-year-old Puerto Rican mother of a four-month-old, who casually explains, "In the beginning, when you first like a guy a lot, oh, you wanna have his baby." And young women are not the only dreamers. Lisa, white and thirty-two, now a mother of two teenagers, recalls that her children's father announced his desire to father a child by her almost immediately after they met. "From day one... I'd say within a week... of being with him, he wanted to have a baby by me. He talked about how pregnant women are beautiful and it'd be beautiful if we had a baby."

To the outside observer, begging one's girlfriend for a baby just days or weeks after initiating a new romance might seem to be little more than a cynical pickup line, and that is certainly how it is sometimes used. But in the social world of young people like Antonia and Emilio, nearly everyone knows that a young man who proclaims his desire to have a baby by a young woman is offering high tribute to her beauty, for this avowal expresses a desire for a child that will have her eyes and her smile. The statement's significance extends beyond praise for her physical charms, though. A man who says these words with sincerity bestows an even higher form of flattery: she is the kind of woman he is willing to entrust with the upbringing of his progeny, his own flesh and blood. Yet expressing the desire to have a baby together is far from a promise of lifelong commitment. What it does reflect is the desire to create some sort of significant, long-lasting bond through a child. Lena, a white mother of a one-year-old, who is only fifteen when we talk with her, says her boyfriend told her he "wanted to get me pregnant... so that I won't leave him. So that I'll stay with him forever. Then he said [to me], 'When you have kids by somebody, they'll always go back to you.'" And when Lisette, an eighteen-year-old African American mother of two toddlers, discovered she was pregnant, "[The father] said to me, 'You know, I got you pregnant on purpose because I want you in my life for the rest of my life.'" For Lena and Lisette and the men in their lives, marriage is both fragile and rare, and the bond that shared children create may be the most significant and enduring tie available.

The heady significance of the declaration "I want to have a baby by you" is also fueled by the extraordinarily high social value the poor place on children. For a lack of compelling alternatives, poor youth like Antonia and Emilio often begin to eagerly anticipate children and the social
role of parents at a remarkably tender age. While middle-class teens and twenty-somethings anticipate completing college and embarking on careers, their lower-class counterparts can only dream of such glories. Though some do aspire to these goals, the practical steps necessary to reach them are often a mystery. We return to this theme in chapter 6.

African American, sixteen-year-old Brehanna conceived a child when she and her boyfriend Jason were only fourteen. Her sister too had her poor first child young, and Brehanna says she wants to be just like her. This high school dropout from East Camden, now a telemarketer, tells us that from the early days of their courtship, “We was always going out to the mall and going [window] shopping for [baby things]. We always talked about having a baby. We used to always talk about having kids and everything.”

Thoughts of children—when to have them, who with, what they’ll be like—often preoccupy the hopes and dreams of Brehanna, Jason, and their peers throughout adolescence and into the early adult years. Visions of shared children stand in vivid, living color against a monochromatic backdrop of otherwise dismal prospects. An unabashed confidence that they’re up to the job of parenting feeds the focus on children that most poor youth display, and this is at least partly because they’ve already mastered many of its mechanics. This point was brought home when one of us (Edin) was asked to speak about urban poverty to a group of several dozen Camden middle school youth in a summer employment program. While she talked, her daughter Kaitlin, then three, toddled around in the middle of the room. Suddenly, the child tripped and fell. Almost instantly two-thirds of the youth were on their feet, ready to spring into action on her behalf. While she’d been talking, most of her young audience had been listening with one ear while at the same time closely monitoring the child, and they were doing so out of habit—something she could not imagine herself having done at the same age. Inspired by this insight, she asked, “How many of you help take care of younger siblings or cousins?” Almost all raised their hands. Then she asked, “How many of you know how to change a diaper and make up a bottle?” Again, dozens of hands shot up in the air. “I didn’t know how to do either until I was thirty and had a baby!” she admitted to the group.

A childhood embedded in a social network rich with children—younger siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews, and the children of friends—creates the illusion of a near Dr. Spock-like competence in childrearing. Tatiana, a twenty-two-year-old African American mother of two preschoolers and a first grader, brags, “My sister used to make me have my niece all the time. I really had experience. . . . I had a lot of experience.” Sonia, a twenty-three-year-old Puerto Rican with a three-year-old son, says the prospect of becoming a mother at eighteen didn’t scare her because, “I was the responsible one. I was already a mom. . . . I would cook, clean, do everything else. . . . I’ve always been a mom. That’s why it wasn’t nothing new to me.” Destiny, an eighteen-year-old white mother of two toddlers, explains, “When we were living with my mom, I was taking care of my little sister and my little brother anyway. She was working two jobs, so I was taking care of them mostly. I got patience, a lot of patience. It wasn’t like I wasn’t able to take care of no kids anyway!”

“MY DAUGHTER WAS DEFINITELY PLANNED. I WANTED A KID!”

Children come early to couples in West Kensington and other decaying neighborhoods in Philadelphia’s inner core—in fact, most conceive their first child within a year of being together. As talk of shared children is part of the romantic dialogue poor young couples engage in from the earliest days of courtship, this is not surprising. Nonetheless, for these mothers, only one in four children is conceived according to an explicit plan—about one in five for our African American and Puerto Rican mothers, and one in ten for our whites (see appendix A).

Some youth decide to begin trying to get pregnant so they can escape a troubled home life. Roxanne, a white mother of an adult child, a teenager, and a one-year-old, now in her early forties, recalls the first time she and her boyfriend had sex. “We went down to the shore. I re-
The desire to conceive can become so compelling that some young couples begin trying as soon as they feel it is minimally feasible to care for a child. Gianni, a seventeen-year-old African American mother of a one-year-old, says, "I was happy [when I found out] because I wanted a baby. [My baby's father lived with my mom and me] and we had a good relationship. We both wanted a baby. Everything was cool, and I could go to school and everything because I had help [from my mom]. It was me and him [planning it]. He was eighteen and I was fourteen." Deena, featured in chapter 4, now twenty, a white mother who conceived her child at seventeen in similar circumstances, explains, "I wanted to have a baby. It wasn’t like because everybody else had a baby. I really wanted to have a family. I wanted somebody to take care of. I wanted a baby."

While older and wiser parents and kin may—and do—encourage the young to wait, to “live their lives” first, many young women come to see parenthood as the point at which they can really start living. When Pepper Ann’s mother learned she was planning to get pregnant at fifteen, she tried to put an end to her daughter’s scheme. Now forty-seven, this African American mother of two grown children and a twelve-year-old remembers vividly how her mother wanted her to get a diploma first and “live her life.” “But to me,” she explains, “that [baby] was life!”

Poor young women decide they’re going to try to conceive for other reasons as well. Some want to express gratitude to a boyfriend who has shown them kindness. Others want to seal a new and hopeful romance. Some feel obligated because their boyfriends have other children they’re barred from seeing because they’ve lost touch, the children have moved away, or the children’s mother refuses them contact. A few use pregnancy to steal a man from another woman or to trap a man they’re losing. The desire to bear children early—to “get it out of the way” before beginning a career—also compels some to make pregnancy plans. While most poor young girls don’t plan to become mothers at fourteen, they almost all agree that no reasonable woman would postpone childbearing into her thirties. Tatiana, introduced earlier, exclaims, “We definitely was like, ‘I’m ready. You ready?’ We went for it. It happened. I didn’t want to have
one at thirty! I wanted to get it out of the way!” And once the first child is born, many have another child or two quite quickly to get the early childhood years “over with,” for there is nearly universal agreement that all children ought to have a sibling or two to play with.

But attempts to get pregnant aren’t always motivated by the mother’s desire. Listen to the stories of four young mothers with newborns. Celeste, a white twenty-one-year-old, says she and her boyfriend James, who fences stolen goods for a living, had been together for just three months when she conceived. “He just kept saying, ‘I wanna have a baby, I wanna have a baby,’ just out of the blue. I kept saying, ‘Not yet, not yet.’ And it wound up happening.” Alexis, also white, conceived her child at sixteen with her boyfriend, age thirty-three. She relates, “He wanted to, but I told him I wasn’t ready. So it was like he got his way.” Champagne, an African American mother, says, “He was sixteen when I first met him. I had to be about eleven, twelve—something like that. He said that he wanted kids, and I said I wasn’t ready for no kids. I wasn’t even having sex! He waited for about two years until I got old enough to do what [he] wanted to do, but I still wasn’t ready for kids. . . . He just had to wait. When I turned fifteen, we [conceived] the baby . . . but it wasn’t something that I wanted to do [that soon].” And fifteen-year-old Zeyora, a white mother, recalls asking her boyfriend Tom, age nineteen, “What do you want for your birthday?” And he was like, “For you to be pregnant.”

From the young woman’s point of view, any boyfriend who begs for a baby ought to be man enough to promise support too. An exasperated Cherry, an African American who is sixteen and just about to give birth to her first child, says her boyfriend Joe didn’t initially seem to realize that being ready to have a baby means being ready to support it as well. “[Joe wanted to be a father. When I asked him why], he said ‘I [am just] ready to have a baby.’ He sees everybody with their baby and he’s thinking he’s the right age and stuff [even though he] still wasn’t out of school. . . . I was like, ‘Well, I’m too young. . . .’ He said, ‘I’m ready to . . . start a family.’ . . . He’s like, ‘I wanted a baby by you.’ I’m still saying that’s not a good enough reason. But then he [finally] clears it up and says that he’s ready to support us.”

Eighteen-year-old Lisette, introduced earlier, also worried about the ability of her boyfriend Shawn, age seventeen, to support a family, but was eventually worn down by his insistent pleas for a child. She explains, “That’s all he kept talking about is having a baby. . . . I actually [got pregnant, even though I was only in ninth grade] on purpose . . . because he wanted a baby so bad.” Seventeen-year-old Natasha, an African American mother of a one-year-old child whose boyfriend Martin was still a junior in high school when he got her pregnant, had also tried and failed to negotiate for more time. “He was like, ‘Oh, well, I want you to have my baby.’ I’m like, ‘Well, you know, it’s okay for you to want me to have your baby but we can’t have no baby right now because we both in school and we gotta graduate and we gotta do this and that.’ He was like, ‘All right,’ you know, ‘We gonna be together for that long anyway, so we can wait.’” In the end, however, she gave in to her boyfriend’s demands. “That was May,” she remembers. “By August I’m pregnant.”

“IN A WAY I DID, IN A WAY I DIDN’T.”

Though pregnancy by design is by no means rare, in neighborhoods like West Kensington it is more the exception than the rule. Nevertheless, most conceptions are hardly pure accidents. Typically, young women describe their pregnancies as “not exactly planned” yet “not exactly avoided” either—as only a few were using any form of contraception at all when their “unplanned” child was conceived. Nearly half (47 percent) of the mothers characterized their most recent birth as neither planned nor unplanned but somewhere in between (see appendix A). The whites were the most likely to characterize their births in this way (56 percent) and Puerto Ricans the least likely (34 percent), with African Americans falling in between (46 percent). Most of the rest—roughly four in ten—described the birth as “accidental,” and Puerto Ricans were
especially likely to do so. When probed, however, roughly half of the women with accidental pregnancies said they were not doing anything to prevent a pregnancy at the time. Yet most knew full well the facts of life and realized that unprotected sex would almost inevitably lead to conception. So why do nothing to avoid pregnancy?

One reasonable guess is a lack of access to contraception. But Planned Parenthood, area hospitals, and Philadelphia's network of free clinics all offer family planning services, and these institutions are so well known in these neighborhoods that few have to look in the phone book to find the address. Furthermore, most say they used birth control—usually the pill, a condom, or both—at the beginning of the relationship with the baby's father. But once there is an understanding that they've become an exclusive pair, he often abandons condoms because continued use would signal a lack of fidelity and trust. And the same young woman who initially took a birth control pill each day, wore the patch each week, or visited the clinic for the "depo" (Depo-Provera) shot every three months suddenly decides that these practices are not worth the trouble.

Sometimes women stop using birth control even when they are not sure a relationship has really reached "the next level." They complain that the pill, patch, or shot makes them sick, lose their hair, or feel depressed or irritable, and they have not yet found a more palatable method. Still others simply say they tired of the required routine. Lori, a thirty-one-year-old Puerto Rican mother of two preschooolers, remembers, "Their father used condoms. That was our way of birth control. And he did that for a whole year, so he was tired [of using them]. He was like 'Come on, the baby's already a year! Let's try without. I'm tired of using these things! You probably won't even come out pregnant that fast.' So as soon as we tried without, I came out pregnant like that! Really quick." Abby, a white twenty-five-year-old with a three-year-old daughter, tells us she "didn't plan on... getting pregnant," but then admits, "Well, [I] more or less did. I just stopped taking my birth control pills, [thinking] 'If I get pregnant, I get pregnant.' I got pregnant." Irene, an African American mother in her early forties, with five children ranging in age from thirteen to twenty-five, didn't plan for any of her pregnancies in advance, but admits that her lackadaisical use of the pill practically guaranteed her five "accidents." She shrugs, smiling, and says, "You forget to take one pill and then you miss three... Hey, next thing you know, you are having another one!"

One way or another, most of these women drifted into the Russian roulette of unprotected sex. The lack of a clear plan does not mean there is no desire to get pregnant, yet those who admit—even to themselves—that they're trying to have a baby invite public contempt and self-reproach, for they know that the choice to bear children while young and unmarried is, in many ways, absurd. At the same time, though, they wonder if their circumstances will ever be "right." The potent mix of social shame, self-doubt, and compelling desire leads to accidents waiting to happen.

Some, like Abby, begin to take chances on purpose and leave the outcome to fate. But others are so deeply engaged in a high-risk lifestyle that they simply aren't thinking about where their actions might lead. Depression and despondency spawned by difficult life situations sometimes stop them from caring whether they become pregnant or not. Monica, a twenty-nine-year-old white mother of two, ages five and nine, explains, "It wasn't like I cared if I did or didn't. It wasn't like a matter of, 'Oh my God, if I get pregnant, I'm dead.' It was just—if I did, I did."

Twenty-one-year-old Sam, a white mother of a four-year-old son, was living with her drug-addicted father and had just seen her best friend murdered in a drug-related incident when she became pregnant. Both she and her boyfriend were also using drugs at the time. On top of that, the Kensington neighborhood she lived in had become so crime-ridden that most owners of the row homes there had switched from aluminum to plastic screen doors so that drug addicts wouldn't steal the metal and sell it for scrap. She says that with all the "negativity" pressing in upon her, neither she nor her partner cared whether they got pregnant. "I think he just didn't care if I got pregnant or not. I was pretty much [thinking] the same thing... If I was pregnant, I wanted to be pregnant, but if I wasn't it..."
Conception without planning is most common among the young, yet even the very young—like Antonia Rodriguez—usually say they got pregnant only a year or two before they’d hoped. Sherry, a Puerto Rican mother who is twenty-four and has three children under the age of six, says her first baby—conceived at sixteen—came only about a year too soon. “As soon as I found out [about the pregnancy] I got happy, because I wanted a kid. . . . I was trying to get pregnant, but not so fast as I did. I at least wanted [to wait] a year. We talked about it, and he was willing. We both agreed with [the idea of having] a kid.” Tasheika, a twenty-year-old African American mother of a kindergartener and two younger children, has a similar story. “I was fourteen. I wanted to get pregnant because his father treated me right. . . . And I was like, ‘Well, be want a baby, I want a baby—we’re gonna have a baby!’ He was planned. . . . Well, we planned it, but he didn’t come when we planned, [he came a little sooner].”

The vigilance and care that most birth control methods require are hard to maintain when women like Tasheika see so few costs to having a baby. These young women often reject the idea that children—or at least the first child—will damage their future prospects much. Most believe that becoming a mother only gets in the way if a girl lets it. Nikki, an eighteen-year-old African American mother who gave birth just weeks after graduating from high school, explains, “I was supposed to go to college, but [having a baby] don’t mean you don’t want to go to college. You can do this! Some girls just get lazy and their potential will get real low, or whatever. That’s why most of them, they just stay home and don’t do nothing.” Ebony, an eighteen-year-old African American mother, conceived her first child in her freshman year of college. She defends her choice to bring the pregnancy to term by telling us, “I wanted it. I wanted to keep it. I felt as though I was out of school—out of high school—and I thought I could manage. I had started having sex when I moved in with [the baby’s father, but we didn’t use protection]. He was saying, ‘You can have a baby and still go to school.’ I thought, ‘Okay, I’m gonna have my baby. . . . I’m still gonna be able to go to college. . . . It’s gonna be fine.’”

At first it is puzzling how any young woman could maintain this belief while living in a neighborhood that seems to offer nothing but evidence to the contrary. But our mothers have a different point of view. While they often struggle to name one happily married couple, they can easily rattle off the names of dozens of women who, in their view, are “good” single mothers. And many of these local heroes have, in their view, succeeded against great odds. So though their neighborhoods and schools offer plenty of examples of young mothers who had to leave school and face extraordinarily hard times, they still provide an ample supply of counterexamples—young unmarried women who have succeeded in doing well by their children, ensuring that they’re clean, clothed, housed, fed, and loved. Armed with these role models, they insist that it doesn’t take a college education, a good job, a big house, matching furniture—or a marriage license—to be a good mother.

Thus, most are ambivalent about—though not opposed to—the idea of having a child when the conception occurs. When we ask Violet, a white sixteen-year-old mother of a five-month-old, if she’d planned to get pregnant, she answers, “No, not really. In a way I did, in a way I didn’t. I was confused. I wanted to be a mom and I did not want to be. It was back and forth. I don’t know, I just wanted a baby, I guess.” Seventeen-year-old Aleena, a white mother of a two-year-old boy, tells us, “As I got older, like around fourteen, [I went on the pill] so I couldn’t get pregnant, [but] I was confused. I wanted to have a baby, but just not at that time, you know. [But] I always loved kids. . . . I would [go through a time where I would] try [to get pregnant]. But then . . . I would figure, ‘Well, how am I gonna raise this baby?’ . . . I didn’t know whether this week I wanted to try or next week I didn’t. [But] I was always thinking about it. Always.”

Once a young pair has been together for a while and feels the relationship has advanced to the next level of commitment, the conception of a child often seems like the natural next step. Even if children seem to just “happen,” most believe they were meant to be. Jasmine, a Puerto Rican mother who is twenty-four and has three children under the age of six, says—"BEFORE WE HAD A BABY . . ." 41
Rican mother of two adult children and a four-year-old she conceived in her mid-thirties, tells us, “I never used anything [when] I got pregnant. God is in control. And [my kids] was meant to be. . . . I feel like, if it happens, it happens.” Forty-three-year-old Susan, a Puerto Rican mother of one adult child and a preschooler, says her most recent pregnancy was “a surprise” too. Yet, she counters, “It wasn’t like I could just plan things. Things happen, and so you just go ahead. Some things happen you just can’t plan!”

As a new romance deepens, young women who are “not exactly planning” to have children may nonetheless begin to look for signs of their partner’s willingness to “do the right thing” if they were to “wind up pregnant.” A boyfriend’s mere willingness to engage in unprotected sex is sometimes the only green light a young woman requires, though her judgment is sometimes in error. Marilyn, a twenty-four-year-old white mother of a preschooler and a kindergartner she is raising alone, made this mistake. Just before they conceived, he’d proposed marriage. She told him, “‘Yeah, sure, but let’s wait and see. I want a diamond ring, and let’s get a house.’ He worked on [that] part and I just got pregnant. I was [open to getting pregnant]. I figured, ‘This is the man I’m going to marry.’ We were having sex for a long time, sometimes protected, sometimes [not]. I trusted him. I figured, ‘He’s not stupid. . . . When we’re having unprotected sex he must know that something can happen!’”

“She’s in control. And [my kids] was meant to be . . . . I feel like, if it happens, it happens.”

Children, whether planned or not, are nearly always viewed as a gift, not a liability—a source of both joy and fulfillment whenever they happen upon the scene. They bring a new sense of hope and a chance to start fresh. Thus, most women want the baby very much once the pregnancy occurs.¹ This is partially a reflection of neighborhood norms about how a young woman ought to respond to a pregnancy, as the few mothers who admit a less favorable reaction often express shame about it. While everyone knows that accidents happen—and these youth say that not everything, especially children, can or should be planned—the way in which a young woman reacts in the face of a pregnancy is viewed as a mark of her worth as a person. And as motherhood is the most important social role she believes she will play, a failure to respond positively to the challenge is a blot on her sense of self. Rasheeda, a nineteen-year-old African American mother of a one-year-old, tells us that when she learned she’d conceived a child unintentionally, and in the midst of very difficult personal circumstances, “I was happy. I’m proud of that.” But Denise, an eighteen-year-old white mother of two-year-old twins, guiltily admits, “I felt bad about myself in a way because, like, I didn’t really want them. I was like doing so good in school and [I felt] I [had to] throw everything away.”

Michelle, a thirty-one-year-old African American mother of three, a seven-year-old and four-year-old twins, tells us, “I don’t believe in having abortions . . . . If I didn’t want it to happen, I would have protected myself better. It’s here. I have to
didn’t finish school! But then I thought, ‘I got the father with me, [it will be okay].’” Lenise, a thirty-six-year-old African American mother of two, ages eleven and seventeen, says her second pregnancy “wasn’t planned, but I was just too happy. I was happy every day. I didn’t know I could be so happy!”

Even though most pregnancies are not planned, happiness is the mother’s typical response to the news that she’s conceived, at least once she recovers from the initial shock. Madeline, a Puerto Rican eighteen-year-old with a four-month-old whose father deserted her and the child, told us, “To be honest, I was happy [when I found out]. Like at first, I was scared, I was all scared, I cried at the same time, but I was crying happy tears too. All I could think of was that I’m too young to have a baby, I
deal with it. So that's what I did, I dealt with it. Because if I didn't want to get pregnant, then I should have done something to prevent it." Brenda, a twenty-six-year-old white mother of a seven-year-old, has just learned she is pregnant again by Derrick, the same man who fathered her first child. She demonstrates what she feels is her high moral standard by telling him, "We're gonna get through this and do it the right way because I'm against abortion." Amber, a twenty-three-year-old white mother of a four-year-old and a newborn, was abandoned by her boyfriend after she found she was pregnant with her second child. She too, however, believes she has made the self-sacrificial choice to "struggle" rather than go through with an abortion or "give the child away." "Four months into the relationship I wound up pregnant. I was like, 'Oh no, I don't believe in abortion.' I was talking about giving the baby away, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't do it. I was like, 'I'll struggle, I don't care, I'll do it by myself.'"

As sociologist Kristin Luker shows, many middle-class women view abortion as a personal choice arising from a woman's right to control her body and her life. Yet most mothers who live in the Philadelphia area's bleak core typically share a radically different view. Though most concede there are circumstances desperate enough to warrant an abortion, most still view the termination of a pregnancy as a tragedy—perhaps unavoidable but still deeply regrettable. Virtually no woman we spoke with believed it was acceptable to have an abortion merely to advance an educational trajectory. Something else, they say, must be present to warrant that decision—the desertion of the child's father, an utter lack of support from the young woman's own mother, rape or incest, an uncontrollable drug or alcohol addiction, homelessness, or impossible financial straits.

The irony here is that a substantial number of the mothers we spoke to willingly admit that they themselves have had abortions in the past—about a quarter of the total. In absolute terms, the poor have more abortions than the middle class, but that is because they also have more pregnancies. Affluent youth are far more likely to terminate any given pregnancy than those raised in poor, minority, or single-parent house-

holds. Even among the most disadvantaged, it is those youth who are performing poorly in school who are least likely to respond to a pregnancy by seeking an abortion. The class contrast is even starker when we look at only those with "unplanned" births. Affluent teens faced with an unplanned pregnancy choose abortion about two-thirds of the time, while their poor counterparts do so only about half of the time. Still, a large number of youth from poor backgrounds do have abortions.

The lack of correspondence between belief and behavior presumably arises because poor youth raised in impoverished contexts are simply quite likely to find themselves in desperate straits. Most believe that abortion is "the easy way out." To them, "doing the right thing" or "taking care of your responsibilities" means bringing the pregnancy to term. And adoption is, to almost all, simply out of the question—it is generally viewed as "giving away" your own "flesh and blood."

In choosing to bring a pregnancy to term, a young woman can capitalize on an important and rare opportunity to demonstrate her capabilities to her kin and community. Her willingness and ability to react to an unplanned pregnancy by rising to the challenge of the most serious and consequential of all adult roles is clear evidence that she is no longer a "trifling" teenager. Nikki, introduced earlier, graduated from high school just weeks before the birth of her child. She says that anyone who is mature enough to "handle stuff" ought to be able to handle a child. "[The doctor] threw all these papers in my face real quick. [She was] like, 'You have two options: you can terminate the pregnancy, or you can keep the baby.' So I looked at her and I was like, 'I'm keeping it.' Even though I didn't plan for it or whatever, I can handle stuff. . . . Just by the way I am, I can handle stuff."

Twenty-eight-year-old Allison, a white, recovering drug addict with a nine-month-old child, explains that though her pregnancy wasn't exactly planned she could find no reason not to take the pregnancy to term. "I'd say my first thought was to take the easy way out, and then, once I had thought it, I realized that was [not] what I wanted. The way I kept looking at it was that if I do this now and I never have a chance to be a mom again, I would never be able to live with myself, because I'd always..."
wanted to have children. . . . Like I'm twenty-eight, I have a good job where I could support her, and I felt like . . . there was really no good excuse not to have her."

Brehanna, the sixteen-year-old African American mother of a child she conceived when she was fourteen, explains, "I had stopped taking birth control. . . . I didn't really care [whether I got pregnant or not]. . . . [But when I found out,] the first thing I thought about was school. [Then] I was like, 'Oh my God, what am I gonna . . . tell my friends? Oh my God, what are people going think?' Then it hit me that it shouldn't matter what [other people] thought because it was *me*, I was pregnant. . . . It was *my* problem, I had to deal with it, and it shouldn't have been anybody else's business. . . . Even though it was a mistake, I didn't want to take it out on the baby and be like, 'Oh, I'm gonna get an abortion, he's a mistake.' That's just not *me*, you know, that's just not the way I go about things." 21

"TO ME, THIS BABY WAS MY LIFE."

Romance these days leads quite rapidly to sex among poor and middle-class teenagers alike. 22 But for a disadvantaged woman, a sexual relationship often leads to conception, and the fact of the pregnancy defines the arc of her young adulthood. Unlike their wealthier sisters, who have the chance to go to college and embark on careers—attractive possibilities that provide strong motivation to put off having children—poor young women grab eagerly at the surest source of accomplishment within their reach: becoming a mother.

Poor kids dream of future glory just like their well-heeled peers in the suburbs. But while the offspring of the middle class envision the professional kudos and chic lifestyles that await them, the dreams poor men and women share with each other often center on children. The men seem at least as eager to dream as the women. Yet this does not mean that the pregnancies that so often follow result from clear planning. Few say their children are the result of *either* an overt plan or a contraceptive fail-

ure. Rather, the large majority are *neither* fully planned nor actively avoided. Most often, the young women are well versed in the use of birth control prior to conception. In fact, many practiced contraception in the early days of their relationships with their children's fathers. However, when the relationship moves to a higher level of trust and commitment, they typically abandon these practices or begin to engage in them inconsistently.

Whether the pregnancy is planned, accidental, or somewhere in between, most are eager to have the child once the conception occurs. This is because they value children so highly, anticipate them so eagerly, and believe so strongly they can do a good job of mothering even when young and in difficult circumstances. A poor girl who gets pregnant just a year or so sooner than planned reacts far differently than a middle-class girl who gets pregnant a decade or two before she'd intended to. Most of those who grow up in the urban slums of metropolitan Philadelphia also believe strongly that those not actively avoiding pregnancy by using birth control have no business "getting rid of" an unwanted child or "giving it away" after birth. Even mothers who conceive despite careful contraception do not often escape moral condemnation for having abortions or putting their children up for adoption, as they ought to have known where sex can lead.

While abortion is sometimes accepted as necessary—when a young woman's situation is deemed truly desperate—most do not view their own circumstances as dire enough to qualify. Mothers who choose abortion when they have the means to avoid it are viewed as immature at best and immoral at worst, unable or unwilling to face up to the consequences of their own actions. But beyond the confines of this moral landscape is the fundamental fact that, for these disadvantaged youth, a pregnancy offers young women who say their lives are "going nowhere fast" a chance to grasp at a better future. Choosing to end a pregnancy is thus like abandoning hope. Whereas outsiders generally view childbearing in such circumstances as irresponsible and self-destructive, within the social milieu of these down-and-out neighborhoods the norms work in reverse, and
the choice to have a child despite the obstacles that lie ahead is a compelling demonstration of a young woman's maturity and high moral stature. Pregnancy offers her a unique chance to demonstrate these virtues to her family and friends and the community at large.

Middle-class beliefs about the right way to start a family are conditioned by a social context that provides huge economic rewards for those who are willing to wait to have children until a decade or more after attaining sexual maturity. For a white college-bound adolescent raised on Philadelphia's affluent Main Line, each year of postponed childbearing will likely lead to higher lifetime earnings. In fact, if she can hold out until her mid-thirties, she'll likely earn twice as much as if she'd had a child right out of college. Just imagine how her economic prospects would plummet if she brought a pregnancy to term at fifteen! From this privileged vantage point, a disadvantaged young woman's willingness to bear a child well before she is of legal age is beyond comprehension.

Even in the most impoverished of communities, most youth understand that bearing children while young, poor, and unmarried is not the ideal way of doing things. Yet they also recognize that, given their already limited economic prospects, they have little to lose if they fail to time their births as precisely as the middle class does. And though most single mothers readily acknowledge that having a child before establishing a stable two-parent household or landing a well-paid job may not be the best way of doing things, their sense of when the right time might be often seems quite vague. In the meantime, they typically perceive little disadvantage to bearing a child while unmarried or still in their teens or early twenties. Thus, in the heat of romance and sex, many simply fail to take the steps that could prevent them from becoming pregnant.

The young people who live in these neighborhoods—whether they play by society's rules or not—share the same dismal prospects for lifetime earnings. So, for Antonia Rodriguez and Emilio and others like them, having a child while still in their teens is hardly the end of the world. Granted, Antonia didn't get to graduate from high school—to "march down that aisle, have all those memories"—but she plans to go back for her GED soon. And Emilio needs no high school diploma for his job as a mechanic in his uncle's auto repair shop, nor does he need one to achieve his dream of owning and operating his own garage.

Of course, children aren't free—Emilio had to take on two jobs to pay for a place for his young family to live, and buying diapers, formula, clothing, and the other things the baby needs takes a large share of the couple's meager resources. But Antonia and Emilio have few regrets. They planned on having children in a "year or two" anyway. Like their neighborhood peers, each firmly believes that life without children is meaningless and concludes that it really doesn't matter all that much whether they accrue these costs early on or later in the life course.

The centrality of children in this lower-class worldview of what is important and meaningful in life stands in striking contrast to their low priority in the view of more affluent teens and twenty-something youth, who may want children at some point in the future, but only after educational, career, and other life goals have been achieved. Putting motherhood first makes sense in a social context where the achievements that middle-class youth see as their birthright are little more than pipe dreams: Children offer a tangible source of meaning, while other avenues for gaining social esteem and personal satisfaction appear vague and tenuous.
CONCLUSION: MAKING SENSE OF SINGLE MOTHERHOOD

In September 2003 we reconnect with Mahkiya Washington, introduced in chapter 2, who still lives in the same Strawberry Mansion neighborhood but now in an apartment of her own. We meet her at her grandmother’s place, a tiny row house on one of the narrow, cramped side streets tucked between the avenues lined with grander dwellings. It has been three years since we’ve talked, and Mahkiya’s daughter Ebony, now a kindergartener at a small neighborhood charter school, bounces around the room proudly showing off her new school uniform.

Mahkiya, her hair neatly coiffed in a bob, has a new air of confidence about her. She’s come a long way since we last saw her, completing a two-year degree in the culinary arts while holding down a full-time job. Her plan now is to transfer to a local four-year college and get a BA in business. Then she hopes to pursue an MBA and open a catering company. But during the last three years, her demanding schedule has kept her away from home from 6:00 A.M. to 9:00 P.M. Though her grandmother has taken good care of Ebony, Mahkiya resents missing out on so much. Right now, she is taking time off from school to make up for the lost time with her daughter, but she’s promised herself she’ll go back next year. Meanwhile, she’s secured a lucrative management job in large food service company.

Ebony’s father Mike left Mahkiya during the pregnancy. But the cou-
ple reunited just before Ebony’s first birthday—shortly after he’d finally managed to secure a full-time, relatively well-paid janitorial job. Initially, they moved in with her sister and were saving to get an apartment of their own. But almost as soon as they met that goal, Mike lost the job. After that setback, he couldn’t seem to stick to subsequent jobs for one reason or another—didn’t like the work, didn’t like the hours—it was always something. And the friends who had brought him down during the pregnancy were back. So as Mahkiya kept up her breakneck fourteen-hour schedule of work and school, and her ambition soared, his seemed to deflate and then collapse altogether. She kicked him out once and for all about three years ago. “I couldn’t do both,” Mahkiya explains. “He just was not supportive of me [when I was both working and] going back to school.”

Rather than help out with Ebony, she complains, “He still wanted to party and spend time with his friends.”

When we ask Mahkiya where Mike is now, she holds her hands out in front of her, pantomiming wrists in a pair of handcuffs. Mike, once the honor student, has had repeated run-ins with the law. Mike and his mother take Ebony every weekend, but Mahkiya has moved on. She is undeterred in her ambition to marry someday—her parents were married, and she sees marriage as part of the successful lifestyle she aspires to. She has just begun dating Andre, a man who might well fit the bill. Andre and Mahkiya grew up together, so they already knew each other well. The two attributes that most clearly distinguish Andre from Mike are his maturity and work ethic. Andre is very involved with his son, a boy about Ebony’s age. At twenty-three, he’s already started his own drywall installation business.

Right now, though, Mahkiya’s main focus is on working toward her goals—the new job, the college degree, and the catering business she hopes to start. So she’s not ready to think about marriage yet. The hard times with Mike have made her cautious. She insists she does not want to create a “revolving door” of men in her daughter’s life. Mahkiya likes the fact that Andre already knew Ebony before the two of them started dating. She now realizes, though, that love and romance are not enough to sustain a couple over the long haul. “I didn’t know the rules of being together. You need someone who will support you.” She adds, “I’m on a journey right now with my family and school, but it’s still not finished.” For Mahkiya, marriage is at the end of that journey.

We catch up with Deena Vallas, from chapter 4, on a warm fall day in 2003, nearly four years after we last saw her. Kevin Jr., a kindergartner now, clowns around to the squeals of his younger sister Magdalena, now three, who is a beauty like her mother. And there is another child too, six-month-old Cameron, a mellow baby content to watch his half-siblings play. A few minutes into the conversation, we are startled to learn that Patrick is now out of the picture. Deena seems a bit stunned herself. The faithful Patrick seemed like such a big improvement over Kevin, the womanizer who’d cheated on her while she was pregnant with his son. Deena believed that Patrick’s eagerness to take on the father role with Kevin Jr. proved he was ready to be a family man.

But things began to fall apart with Patrick almost as soon as she had Magdalena. Playing the role of social father was one thing, it seems, but having a child of his own to support was another. Before Magdalena came along, Deena regarded every dollar Patrick put toward Kevin Jr.’s support as a gift, as he had no legal or moral duty to provide for the child. But Magdalena represented an obligation, and the pressure Patrick felt was apparently too much. By the time their baby was just a few months old, he had returned to the habits he’d left behind when they learned Deena was carrying his child, “smoking crack, cocaine, pills, anything he could get his hands on.”

Deena tried to intervene by moving the family to her mother’s home in the New Jersey suburbs—as far away from the negative neighborhood “element” as she thought she could get. There, she landed the first good job she had ever had—as a manager of a hair salon—and Patrick found steady work too. But her effort to curb Patrick’s rapidly escalating drug
habit failed. "I figured if I took him to Jersey, he would stop doing drugs. Well, he never stopped."

As Patrick's cocaine use became steady, things got ugly between the two, especially after Patrick left his job to pursue his addiction. This act, added to the growing tension between Deena and her mother, prompted Deena to move back to her grandmother's PennsPort home, while Patrick returned to his mother's house. She describes the months in New Jersey as "a long struggle with him with drugs. I mean, if I can't help him, who can? If you love me so much, why, like why would you do this to your family?"

Back in PennsPort, Deena landed on her feet. She found work as a waitress at a busy Greek diner in downtown Philadelphia, and used a hefty tax return to make a down payment on a three-bedroom condominium next door to her grandmother. "I [was] really excited. I bought my own place. I did all these things for myself. I bought all these things for it. Everything going good. I was working at a restaurant, like a diner. I loved it." And during this period, when she and Patrick were neither together nor officially broken up, Deena rekindled a relationship with Sean, a childhood sweetheart.

When she learned she was pregnant a third time, she knew Sean, not Patrick, had to be the father. She was afraid, though, that Sean was not ready to be "serious," so she let Patrick move in to help pay the bills while she took time off to have the baby. She also allowed him to believe the child was his. On Father's Day, when baby Cameron was two months old, it all came apart. Returning home, Deena discovered that her CD player, CDs, television and VCR, the beds, the couch—virtually everything she'd purchased for the home—had disappeared, sold for the meager proceeds such second-hand items command. "I made a home!" she exclaims, remembering her reaction to the desolate scene. "He made it feel like it was this horrible crack house. And it was a beautiful house. My house was clean, it was nice, the kids had their own rooms, and the beds were always made, and I had my clothes washed, and it was perfect. It was a beautiful home, and he turned it into this horrible place." In her rage, she told Patrick that Cameron, whom he had named and legally claimed, was not his. He moved out almost immediately, and, as she had no income at the time, she could not keep up with the mortgage.

Deena is now living with her grandmother again and works six days a week at the diner while grandma watches the kids. She is with Cameron's father, Sean, now, who has responded positively to her ultimatum to "either be with me or don't be with me." "With kids you can't keep coming in and out of their lives either, because not only are you just with me, you're with me and my kids. You take the whole package." Deena is delighted by how things have turned out, though she admits that the discovery of her third pregnancy made her feel that her life "was over." "I love my boyfriend now, and I'm happy with him, and he makes me happy. I haven't been this happy in a very, very long time." She describes her love for Sean as "an extreme love, the craziest love I've ever had in my whole life." "I don't even think I loved Patrick," she now reflects. "I settled for Patrick because I couldn't have what I wanted. And I was pregnant with Magdalena, so what could I do?" She still feels some guilt that she couldn't work things out with Patrick. "We tried, we tried our best. He let it go to the extreme. Rock bottom—he was there. I don't want to live that way. I don't want to be scared now. I didn't want to [spend my life just] wondering what it would be like to be with a normal guy, one who didn't do drugs."

On the surface, Sean seems like an excellent bet for a long-term relationship. He is apprenticing with a local plumbers' union, has no other kids, and is willing to play daddy to all three children. He has no prison record, and though he gets high occasionally, he is not a drug addict. These attributes qualify him as a PennsPort version of a Rhodes scholar. Deena says marriage is "definitely" where her relationship with Sean is headed. But the couple has much to accomplish first, for she still insists on having the "white picket fence" before she'll marry.

We meet up with Dominique Watkins, from chapter 5, at a music school in North Central Philadelphia, where her children, now ages sixteen,
eleven, and nine, take classes after school. She now owns a home there, which she inherited when her father passed away two years ago. Dominique still works as a teacher’s aide, but her goal is to become a head teacher. To that end, she is pursuing an associate’s degree. She has class after work two nights a week, leaving the other evenings free for her busy family life. Dominique is taking “Introduction to Psychology” this term, a course with weekly quizzes. When she returns home after class, her middle child, Jaclyn, queries, “What’d you get on the quiz today?” If it’s not an A grade, the daughter chides, “That’s not good enough! You have to study, Mom!”

Dominique’s children remain on the honor roll. Renee earns straight As, loves to sing, and seems quite musically talented. Dominique says she is an independent girl who doesn’t “follow the crowd,” though the middle daughter is vivacious and “likes the crowd,” which worries her a little. Yet eleven-year-old Jaclyn excels at school too, and her teachers have identified a particular gift for writing. Elijah is in fourth grade and is also at the head of his class. When we ask her how she’s kept them so focused on schoolwork, she replies, “Talking to them, being around them a lot, . . . encouraging them whatever they want to do, . . . show up for everything, staying involved with them.”

While we chat with Dominique, Elijah is deeply engrossed in the task of composing music on a computer. As we watch Dominique help him, we can see he is clearly the light of his mother’s life. “My son . . . he’s my protector. . . . He says, ‘Mom, you seem sad.’ He worries about me a little bit.” It’s been over three years since we saw Dominique last, and we’re surprised to learn that she’s back together with Ron, the children’s father. They’d broken up over his failure to work steadily, with increasingly explosive encounters when both parents were at home. That is part of why Elijah, a witness to some of these traumatic events, is so protective of her.

Dominique explains that about a year after her breakup with Ron, the father of all three of her children, he showed up at her door penniless with no place to stay. “I’m like, ‘Okay, I’ll let him stay.’ Because I couldn’t see somebody staying out on the street or whatever. I think that was his way of gradually working his way back in.” For the next year, the couple was “living together, but not together, you know.” During that period, “he was [working] steady, things like that; and he spent time with the kids more, he [was] contributing and stuff like that. So, I decided, I’d said, ‘Okay, I’d give him another chance.’” She chuckles as she says, “But he knows that he messed up!”

When we ask Dominique why she thinks Ron finally changed, she replies, “I think he felt that he was really losing me, and that I wasn’t paying him any mind, so he knew he had to get himself together before he truly, truly lost me. So that’s what I really think. He finally grew up [at] thirty-eight. . . . I think he realized ‘She really doesn’t need me, it doesn’t matter one way or the other.’ And I really think he got himself together because of that. I really do.” The financial independence that her job provided seemed to provide the key to Ron’s reform.

We then ask Dominique what she is thinking now about “the M word.” She replies, “We’ve talked about it; he’s recently actually asked me . . . and actually, I’ve thought about it, and [I’m] like, ‘All this time? I don’t know. . . . No matter how much I love you, I don’t know.’” For Dominique, the turnaround in Ron’s behavior is too new, and perhaps the mistrust spawned by the past too deep, to think about marriage yet. “Maybe one day I would get married, but I don’t think about it right now. I wanna do what I need to do for me. . . . Get my associate’s [degree]!” she exclaims.

Four years ago, at age seventeen, Jen Burke, from chapter 3, says her life hit rock bottom. The man who had just asked her to marry him, with whom she already shared one child and had just conceived another, had gotten another girl pregnant, and she had decided to leave him and then lost the baby. She swore to us then that she was done with Rick for good, but she now admits that she found herself “back with him” just weeks later. As we explain, however, Rick isn’t exactly available for a relationship these days.
Right now, Jen—once the aimless high school dropout with the depressed air—is not exactly on the top of the world, but she is close. Monday through Thursday she enters data at a warehouse distribution center, earning an astonishing $10.25 an hour. She has held the job for three years now, and has shown high aptitude for the task and a strong work ethic. No one is more surprised by this happy turn of events than Jen, and she delights in ticking off on four proud fingers the job’s many perks—the two weeks of paid vacation, the four personal days, the sixty hours of sick time, and the all-important medical benefits.

Since her son has started school, she’s been faithfully attending a high school completion program offering evening and weekend classes, and a single test—in her least favorite subject—is all that stands between her and a diploma. She confides, “My plan is to start college in January. [This month] I take my math test... so I can get my diploma.” Ambition is now Jen’s middle name, but the passion to succeed—to make a better life for herself and her son—only began after Rick’s dramatic exit from the scene about three and half years ago on the night of his twenty-second birthday. “You know that bar [down the street]? It happened in that bar. I was at my dad’s. I was supposed to meet [Rick and his friends] there [to celebrate], but I was sick.... They were in the bar, and this guy was like bad-mouthing [Rick’s friend] Mikey, talking stuff to him or whatever. So Rick had to go get involved in it and start with this guy.... Then he goes outside and fights the guy, [and] the guy dies of head trauma.... They were all on drugs, they were all drinking, and things just got out of control, and that’s what happened. He got fourteen to thirty years.”

While Rick was in jail awaiting trial, Jen embarked on a radically different future. “That’s when I really started [to get better], because I didn’t have to worry about what he was doing, didn’t have to worry about him cheating on me, all this stuff. [It was] then I realized that I had to do what I had to do to take care of my son.... When he was there, I think that my whole life revolved around him, you know, so I always messed up somehow because I was so busy worrying about what he was doing. Like I would leave the programs I was in just [to go home and see what he was doing. My mind was never concentrating.]”

Now things are far different for Jen, and her transformation is evident to many. “A lot of people in my family look up to me now, because all my sisters are dropped out from school—you know—nobody went back to school. I went back to school, you know?... So that makes me happy... because five years ago nobody looked up to me.” Yet the journey has been far from easy. “Being a young mom, being fifteen [when I had him], it’s hard, hard, hard, you know.” When we ask how hard it is, she says, “I have no life.... I work from 6:30 in the morning until 5:00 at night. I leave here at 5:30 in the morning, I don’t get home until about 6:00 at night. So my stepmom, she takes him to school, she picks him up afterwards. Then when I get home I have my own homework to do, I have to do Colin’s homework with him, and I’m tired, you know.” Yet despite the hardship involved, and perhaps even because of it, Jen is fiercely proud of what she’s been able to accomplish—especially since she’s done it largely on her own. “I don’t depend on nobody. I might live with my dad and them, but I don’t depend on them, you know. Everything Colin has, I bought. Everything he needs, I bought, you know?” “There [used to] be days when I be so stressed out, like, ‘I can’t do this!’ And I would just cry and cry and cry.... Then I look at Colin, and he’ll be sleeping, and I’ll just look at him and think I don’t have no [reason to feel sorry for myself]. The cards I have I’ve dealt myself, so I have to deal with it now. I’m older. I can’t change anything. He’s my responsibility... so I have to deal with that.... I know I could have waited [to have a child], but in a way I think Colin’s the best thing that could have happened to me. Because when I had my son, I changed.... I think Colin changed my life, he saved my life, really. I had a really big problem, like I had my stomach pumped for popping pills, I almost died from popping pills, so I think if it wasn’t for Colin I probably wouldn’t be here because he—Colin—is the only person out there that I... stopped everything for. I stopped on pills, you know? My whole life revolves around Colin!”

Becoming a mother has transformed Jen’s point of view on just about
everything. For example, she says, “I thought hanging on the corner, drinking, getting high—I thought that was a good life, and I thought I could live that way for eternity, like sitting out with my friends. But it's not as fun once you have your own kid… I think it changes [you]. I think, ‘Would I want Colin to do that? Would I want my son to be like that?’ It was fun to me, but it’s not fun anymore. Half the people I hung with are either—some have died from drug overdoses, some are in jail, and some people are just out there living the same life that they always lived, and they don’t look really good, they look really bad.” But Jen does wonder about how Colin will fare growing up without a father. “By the time Rick comes home, Colin will be [at least] eighteen. He’s not coming home any time soon. That’s the only thing that bothers me now, is that he don’t have his dad. When I got pregnant, I didn’t plan to raise him by myself. I had no choice. . . . I would never want Colin to do the things I did in life. When I was younger, I stopped going to school. . . . I was doing drugs, I was drinking. . . . I would never want him to do stuff I did. I want to keep his mind occupied on things. . . . so he doesn’t have to get in the street. I always say, ‘Colin . . . do you want to be a leader or a follower?’ I was like, ‘People look up to leaders, and followers are just people [hanging] with people thinking they’re cool when it’s really not, you know.’ I said, ‘If you be a leader, people look up to you.’ Colin wants to be a policeman or a fireman. I was like, ‘Well, you have to go to school for that and stuff,’ and I was like, ‘You can be anything you wanna be as long as you do the right things to get there.’”

In the previous chapters we have used the experiences of the single mothers living in neighborhoods like Kensington and West Kensington, North Central and Strawberry Mansion, PennsPort and the Camden neighborhoods across the Delaware River to redraw the portrait of non-marital childbearing and the forces behind it. In doing so, we give a voice to people who are seldom heard in Beltway debates. We gathered our data in the kitchens and front rooms, the sidewalks and front stoops of those declining neighborhoods where the growth in single motherhood has been most pronounced. What we learned—and the stories we tell—challenge what most Americans believe about unwed motherhood and its causes. This on-the-ground approach creates a portrait of poor single mothers that goes beyond the statistics that are so often used to describe them.

Mahkiya, Deena, Dominique, and Jen all face unfavorable odds in their search for a lasting relationship with a man. In the poor black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods of Philadelphia and Camden, the sex ratios are badly out of balance. Both Mahkiya’s new love interest and Dominique’s long-term partner—who, despite his past problems, has a trade that pays well, stays away from drugs, and has no children by other women—are both lucky finds. Even in the white neighborhoods of Kensington and PennsPort, there is not an overabundance of sober, stably employed men, so Deena feels fortunate as well. Jen has not been so lucky.

WHAT CAUSED THE RETREAT FROM MARRIAGE?

Over the past three decades, scholars have offered a number of intuitively appealing theories to explain the huge changes in family formation that are so vividly illustrated in the lives of Mahkiya, Deena, Dominique, Jen, and the other 158 women we spoke with. The leading explanations are the increasing economic independence of women, the growing generosity of welfare, and the declining pool of marriageable men in America’s inner cities. These ideas have generated a large volume of research. Yet two or more decades of empirical work have told us as much about what doesn’t explain these changes as what does.

In the early 1980s Nobel Prize-winning economist Gary Becker advanced a compelling explanation for the retreat from marriage in his Treatise on the Family. Using market logic, Becker argued that the gains to marriage for both husband and wife depended on the degree of spe-
cialization within the relationship. Maximum efficiency resulted when one spouse was mostly dedicated to homemaking and childrearing while the other specialized in market work. Becker argued that women's entry into the labor market and the rise in their incomes relative to men's made marriage less attractive—and less profitable—to both parties. A variant of the same general idea holds that as women began to work more and earn more, they married less because they could afford to stay single. According to this version of the argument, often called the "women's economic independence theory," women who fail to find satisfactory male partners no longer have to marry for economic survival.

A second idea—what we call the welfare-state hypothesis—gained prominence in the mid 1980s, when conservative commentator Charles Murray published his best-selling book Losing Ground. Murray noted that during the 1970s, both nonmarital childbearing and the value of a welfare check grew dramatically. He argued that the rise in nonmarital births was a direct result, and a rational response, to this increased state support for poor single mothers. Once the poor realized they could even live together and share resources without having to forgo welfare benefits, he claimed, the marriage rate plummeted, and nonmarital childbearing soared.

Shortly after Murray made his controversial claims, a leading liberal social scientist from the University of Chicago, William Julius Wilson, offered an alternative hypothesis. In his groundbreaking book, The Truly Disadvantaged, Wilson argued that it was the declining number of marriageable men in inner-city neighborhoods—that created an impossible dilemma for young women who wanted to start families. As deindustrialization drained manufacturing jobs from inner-city neighborhoods, there were fewer and fewer "marriageable"—that is, stably employed—men to go around. The result, said Wilson, was a decline in marriage and a sharp upturn in nonmarital childbearing. This theory has been dubbed the "male marriageable pool hypothesis."

These theories have motivated scientific study for more than a decade, yet the empirical support for each has been amazingly slim. Let's begin with the women's economic independence thesis. Contrary to Becker's theory, most studies find that women who earn higher wages—both in general and relative to men—do not marry less. In fact, among disadvantaged populations, women with higher earnings are more, not less, likely to marry. The welfare-state explanation also largely fails the empirical test. The expansion of the welfare state could not have been responsible for the growth in nonmarital childbearing during the 1980s and 1990s for the simple reason that in the mid 1970s all states but California stopped adjusting their cash welfare benefits for inflation. By the early 1990s a welfare check's real value had fallen nearly 30 percent. Meanwhile, marriage rates continued to decline while the rate of unmarried childbearing showed persistent growth.

Wilson's male marriageable pool hypothesis does the best job of the three explanations, as declines in inner-city men's employment, as well as their higher incarceration and death rates, do seem to explain a statistically significant—albeit modest—part of the decline. The problem is that the changes in family life have been so gigantic that they have dwarfed the effects of even these seemingly powerful economic forces. But another, more fundamental flaw in Wilson's argument is his assumption that employment, even at a menial job, pays enough to make a man marriageable. In the 1950s all but the most marginally employed men found women who were willing to marry them. Now, however, even men who are stably employed at relatively good jobs at the time of their child's birth—men like Mike, Patrick, Ron, and Rick—aren't automatically deemed marriageable by the women in their lives. Nor are Mahkiya or Deena even close to feeling ready to set a date with Andre and Sean, their stably employed new partners.

MARRIAGE REDEFINED

The stories our mothers tell suggest that the reasons for the major shift in family formation are not fully captured by any of the three explana-
tions advanced so far. They suggest that the poor are responding to a re­
definition of marriage that has been evolving over the last century but has
changed most dramatically since the 1950s. Though economic forces—
especially the low number of so-called marriageable men at the bottom
of the income distribution—have certainly played a role, the criteria poor
women have for marriage have changed far more than the economic cir­
cumstances of the men in their lives. Thus, many of the men these
women would have been willing to marry then, in the 1950s and 1960s,
would not meet the standards they hold for marriage now, even if un­
skilled men’s employment hadn’t declined at all.

Any explanation of the decline in marriage and the growth of non­
marital childbearing among the poor must take into account not just eco­
nomics but the profound cultural changes America has undergone over
the last thirty years. Americans’ views about virtually all aspects of fam­
ily life have shifted dramatically to the left since 1960—shifts which now
mean that having sex, establishing a common household, and having
children have all become decoupled from marriage. In the 1960s two­
thirds of Americans thought premarital sex was morally wrong. By the
1980s only one-third opposed it. In the 1970s only one-third of Amer­
ican women agreed that living together outside of marriage was a good
idea, but that figure had grown to just under 60 percent by the late 1990s.
Opposition to nonmarital childbearing also declined dramatically, and
only one in five Americans now believe that couples who don’t get along
should stay together for the sake of the children, though fully half be­
lieved so in the early 1960s. What is crucial to note is that now there are
few differences between the poor and the affluent in attitudes and values toward
marriage.

For the poor and affluent alike, marriage is now much less about sex,
coresidence, and raising children than it used to be. In a cultural context
where everyone had to marry to achieve a minimal level of social ac­
ceptance—as well as to have sex, live openly together, and bear chil­
dren—women’s and men’s expectations for marriage had to be limited to
the actual pool of those partners available to them. The sexual revolu­
tion, the widespread availability of birth control, the dramatic increase in
the social acceptability of cohabitation, and the growing rejection of the
idea that a couple should get or stay married just because there is a child
on the way, have all weakened the once nearly absolute cultural impera­
tive to marry.

At the same time, the feminist movement has succeeded in making
marriage far less necessary for social personhood among American
women: in the late 1950s eight in ten Americans believed a woman who
remained unmarried was “sick, neurotic, or immoral,” while only a quar­
ter still held that view in 1978. When people may have sex, live to­
gether, and even have children outside of marriage, and when unmarried
women are no longer treated like social pariahs, marriage loses much of
its day-to-day significance. But at the same time, the culture can afford
to make marriage more special, more rarified, and more significant in its
meaning. Therefore, we argue, along with noted family scholar Andrew
Cherlin, that while the practical significance of marriage has diminished,
its symbolic significance has grown.

Conservative social commentators often charge that the poor hold to
a deviant set of subcultural values that denigrate marriage, but these
claims miss the point entirely. The truth is that the poor have embraced
a set of surprisingly mainstream norms about marriage and the circum­
cumstances in which it should occur.

WHAT ABOUT ECONOMIC FACTORS?

Though we believe that a culture-wide redefinition of marriage is the
primary reason for changes in marriage rates over time, we assert that the
role the economy has played, and continues to play, is still profound. In­
equalities in income and wealth, which have increased dramatically over
the last thirty years, have bifurcated the life chances of the affluent and
the poor. Although the growth in inequality slowed during the 1990s,
we still live in an America that is deeply unequal. We argue that the
growing divide in the material circumstances of the poor and the afflu­
ent has led these groups to make radically different family adaptations to the new cultural norm about marriage. Consider first how most members of the middle class have adjusted to the new standard. They are waiting much longer to marry—often entering into lower-commitment, “trial marriages” first in order to be “sure”—and they frequently divorce when their relationships fall short of the high expectations they hold. Meanwhile, the poor have been delaying marriage and divorcing more too, but they have also been marrying less overall. We believe that the primary reason for the rather striking class difference in marriage rates that has emerged since the 1950s and 1960s is quite simple: though the poor and the middle class now have a similarly high standard for marriage, the poor are far less likely to reach their “white picket fence dream.”

“I WANT THAT WHITE PICKET FENCE DREAM.”

For women in Deena’s generation, the bar for marriage is high. Whereas most couples—middle class, working class, and poor—used to view marriage as a starting point in their quest to achieve a series of life goals, today the poor insist on meeting these goals before marriage. Those at the bottom of the class ladder today believe that a wedding ought to be the icing on the cake of a working-class respectability already achieved. For the middle class too, marriage no longer comes right after college graduation, but only after both partners have embarked upon careers.

Yet though few poor women can imagine marrying without some level of economic security, it is equally true that few can imagine “making it” without marriage. Mothers like Mahkiya Washington show their adherence to middle-class marital norms when they insist that the “perfect picture” of the lifestyle they aspire to includes a man and a woman with wedding rings. In the worldview of the poor, marriage and class respectability still usually go hand in hand. Thus, for a poor single mother to say she’s abandoned the goal of marriage is the equivalent of admitting she’s given up on her dreams for a better future. Both marriage and upward mobility are as central to the American dream as apple pie.

Poor single mothers like Deena understand that in their neighborhoods a marriage can either confer respectability or deny it, and “poor but happily married” does not make the cut. Deena Vallas knows that no “respectable woman” agrees to marry when living paycheck to paycheck—even if there is a baby on the way and she’s living with the father. Marital relationships ought to be free from the severe economic stress that wrecks so many lesser unions. For the poor, divorce is the ultimate loss of face; the couple must bear the reproach of neighbors and kin for daring to think they were ready for marriage in the first place.

“I’M GONNA MAKE SURE I HAVE MY OWN EVERYTHING BEFORE I GET MARRIED.”

But who is supposed to pay for the white picket fence lifestyle? Unlike women a generation or two ago, mothers like Dominique Watkins do not anticipate reaching their economic goals by relying on a man; rather, they want to reach them on their own. For them, marriage is about more than collecting the right material props. Rather, it is about ensuring a certain level of quality in their relationship. Perhaps even more important, it is about guaranteeing her survival in the face of a marital disaster.

The threats to relationships that most worry mothers like Mahkiya, Deena, Dominique, and Jen are infidelity, domestic violence, substance abuse, and criminal activity. In their view, and that of most Americans across the class divide, these behaviors should not be tolerated, especially in marriage. At the same time, the poor also want their marriages to be the same “partnership of equals” that middle-class women now usually demand. Surveys show that since the sexual revolution there has been a sea change in the attitudes toward gender roles among most American women and men. Unskilled men have been a notable exception: The difference in attitudes between women and men on the bottom rungs of the economic ladder is abysmally large. Among poor couples, therefore, domestic battles for control over decisions about the household and the children are especially bitter. Poor women who insist on being “set” fi-
nancially before marriage are, in part, equipping themselves with the weapons that will ensure that they will have more say within the marriage. Dominique Watkins's relationship with her children's father, Ron, is a vivid demonstration of this principle: A woman with income and assets of her own—one who does not need her man—can insist that he conform to her expectations. If he refuses, she can follow through on her threat to leave him without being "left with nothing."

"MY BABY IS MY HEART."

If the poor shared both the middle class's marriage standards and their childbearing behaviors, few Americans would question their behavior. What troubles most middle-class citizens is why women like Mahkiya, Deena, Dominique, and Jen don't wait until they are married to have children. Though marriage ideals are widely shared, the differences between America's classes are as profound as their similarities, and the rise in nonmarital childbearing can only be understood by looking at both.

The most important difference is that the poor ascribe a higher value to children than members of the middle class do. One 1986 survey asked more than ten thousand Americans whether it was better for a person to have a child rather than to go through life childless. Those lower on the class ladder were nearly twice as likely to agree to this statement as those in the middle (57 percent of high school dropouts versus 30 percent of college graduates). In a 2001 survey, poorly educated women were also much more likely than the more highly educated to agree that motherhood is one of life's most fulfilling roles.

The poor view childlessness as one of the greatest tragedies in life. Surveys show that the differences between the social classes are striking: female high school dropouts are more than five times as likely and male high school dropouts more than four times as likely as their college-educated counterparts to say they think childless people lead empty lives. This statistic even takes into account other distinguishing differences such as their race and age, and their parental and marital status. For most women living in impoverished, inner-city communities, remaining childless is inconceivable.

We believe the high social value the poor give to children has two sources: fewer forgone opportunities and stronger absolute preferences. First, a growing body of evidence shows that the opportunities the poor forgo when they have children early are fewer and less significant than for middle-class women. So the incentives and disincentives for childbearing are very different for women at different class levels. We are not saying that early childbearing costs nothing—in fact, it demands a large share of these mothers' meager resources. But the out-of-pocket costs of kids—the diapers and formula, the clothing and shoes, the stroller and the crib, the childcare, the larger apartment or home—are incurred regardless of the age or marital status of the parent. However, the lost future earnings—what economists call an opportunity cost—that women at different class levels face when they have children early are quite different.

The public often assumes that early childbearing is the main reason why so many girls from poor inner-city areas fail to complete high school, go on to college, gain valuable work skills, or earn decent wages, but there is virtually no evidence to support this idea. Ironically, however, any childbearing at all, and especially early childbearing, has huge opportunity costs for middle-class women. Disadvantaged girls who bear children have about the same long-term earnings trajectories as similarly disadvantaged youth who wait until their mid or late twenties to have a child. Nor do they seem to suffer significantly in other domains. Current research suggests that the initial disadvantage is what drives both the early childbearing and the other negative outcomes that one observes over time. In other words, early childbearing is highly selective of girls whose other characteristics—family 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.

Second, the survey evidence on class differences in family attitudes noted above also suggests that the poor may have stronger preferences
or, in economists' terms, a greater "taste," for children. Not that middle-class parents don't love their children or fail to invest in them. Indeed, family demographer Sara McLanahan argues that never before in American history have middle-class parents invested more heavily in their progeny. However, survey data show that far fewer middle-class women believe their lives would be empty if they did not have children. The stronger preference for children among the poor, especially at an early age, is not, we believe, evidence for deviant subcultural values. The stereotyped image that many have of poor single mothers—one which assumes four, five, or even six children—is rare: the total lifetime fertility of women with a high school diploma or less is now just over two children. While this is still higher than for college-educated women, few Americans would call the desire for two or three children pathological or deviant. Furthermore, the rate of teenage childbearing has dropped sharply in recent years—so much so that today, the typical first nonmarital birth occurs to a woman at age twenty-one—the age at which middle-class childbearing began only two generations ago.

Finally, we believe that the stronger preference for children among the poor can be seen in the propensity of the women we interviewed to put children, rather than marriage, education, or career, at the center of their meaning-making activity. Presumably, people of all social classes share a deep psychological need to make meaning. Over the last half-century, new opportunities to gain esteem and validation have opened for American women. But these new alternatives—the rewarding careers and professional identities—aren't equally available. While middle-class women are now reaching new heights of self-actualization, poor women are relegated to unstable, poorly paid, often mind-stultifying jobs with little room for advancement. Thus, for the poor, childbearing often rises to the top of the list of potential meaning-making activities from mere lack of competition.

But more than the lack of viable alternatives drives the desire to make meaning through children, often at such a young age. The daily stresses of an impoverished adolescence lived out in the environs of East Camden or West Kensington breed a deep sense of need for something positive to "look to." The strong sense of anomie, the loneliness, rootlessness, the lack of direction, the sense that one's life has little meaning or has spun out of control—the very feelings Jen Burke and Deena Vallas describe in the period preceding pregnancy—create a profound drive to make life more meaningful.

"I'M NOT GOING TO MAKE ANY PROMISES I CAN'T KEEP."

To fully understand the set of social dynamics behind the retreat from marriage among the poor, and the rise in the rate of nonmarital childbearing, we need to understand clearly how their moral hierarchy has adapted to the new marriage standard. Most poor women we spoke with say that it is better to have children outside of marriage than to marry foolishly and risk divorce, for divorce desecrates the institution of marriage. Recall from chapter 4 what Marilyn, the twenty-four-year-old white mother of two, says: "I don't wanna have a big trail of divorce, you know. I'd rather say, 'Yes, I had my kids out of wedlock' than say, 'I married this idiot.' It's like a pride thing." The poor avoid marriage not because they think too little of it, but because they revere it. They object to divorce because they believe it strips marriage of its meaning, rendering it little more than "a piece of paper." And their prerequisites for marriage reflect the high standards they've adopted. As Deena vows emphatically, "I'm not going to make any promises I can't keep."

We did not talk with middle-class women, so cannot know for certain how their moral hierarchy has evolved, but we can find clues in their behavior. Middle-class women rarely give birth outside of a marital union. Though nearly four in ten births to high school dropouts are now nonmarital, this is true for only three of every hundred births to college-educated women. Middle-class Manhattanite Rachel, the star of the popular sitcom Friends, who had a baby outside of marriage, is still little more than a myth even in today's seemingly permissive society. Rather
than follow in her footsteps, unmarried middle-class women are logging onto Match.com in droves, many in hopes of making a marital match. Perhaps the culture still dictates that for women of their social standing, the husband ought to come before the baby. Perhaps raising a child alone requires too many sacrifices for the affluent, middle-class career woman who has so much to lose economically.

Meanwhile, the poor view middle-class women who, in their view, privilege career above children, as reprehensible. Early on in our fieldwork in Camden, Edin struck up a friendship with Angela, an unmarried twenty-two-year-old African American cosmetology student with a two-year-old son. About a year after Edin and Angela first met, she conceived a second child—by the same man, who had gotten another woman pregnant and then abandoned Angela for the new paramour while Angela was still carrying their first child. Once again abandoned and on welfare, she was clearly embarrassed to relate her news. Midway into the conversation, she joked, "Someday I'm going to plan my pregnancies like... white [middle-class] women do. You know, like Murphy Brown! You have your fancy car, ... your fancy house, your career all set, and then maybe you'll have a baby!" Edin got the point—that in Angela's view, middle-class women who delay having children just so they can get ahead in life, as the 1980s sitcom character Murphy Brown did, are selfish and unnatural.

For Edin, who'd waited to become a mother until she was thirty and had a PhD and a university teaching job, the message was clear. This is not to say that the poor believe having children outside of marriage is the right way, or even the best way, to go about things—more than eight in ten tell survey researchers they believe that people who want children should get married first. They are also even more likely than those in the middle class to say they believe that a child raised by two parents is better off than a child reared by one. Their responses show that poor mothers also believe that children born and raised within marital unions generally do better than those who are not.

However, these abstractions are largely irrelevant to their lives. Poor women must calculate the potential risks and rewards of the actual partnerships available to them and, given their uncertain future prospects, take a “wait and see” attitude toward the relationships with the men who father their children. From their point of view, this approach makes enormous sense, as the men in the neighborhood partner pool—the only men they can reasonably attract, given their own disadvantaged place in the marriage market—are of fairly uniformly low quality. How does a poor woman like Deena sort the losers from the winners except by relying on the test of time? How else can she know which one her new boyfriend Sean will prove to be?

In the meantime, there is no doubt that a pregnancy tests the man's mettle. If the pair can come through this trial intact and work toward a future together, they are likely to marry eventually. If not, poor women take it as a sign that the relationship was never meant to be. While middle-class couples jealously guard their romantic relationships against the stresses of childrearing—not waiting several years after marriage to have children, poor women seem to welcome the challenge that pregnancy presents. For them, a romantic relationship should not be protected but tested. Better to gauge a man's worth early on than waste years investing in a lost cause.

Among the middle class, the couple relationship is at the heart of family life, with the children as desirable complements. Middle-class couples place great value on enjoying each other first before having children, perhaps because they anticipate what statistics clearly show, that marital satisfaction declines precipitously after a couple has children. Among poor women, the mother-child relationship is central, with the father as a useful complement.

Middle-class women delay marriage until they've completed schooling and established their careers by entering into trial marriages (e.g., cohabitation), and they delay children further still, waiting to have them until well after the wedding date. Women in the middle class now typically order life events as follows: get established economically, get married, get even more established economically, and then have children. However, this strategy risks running out the biological clock.
Poor women instead treat the search for the ideal marital partner as a lifelong quest and the bearing and raising of children as tasks they will accomplish along the way. They see little point in waiting to have children, since they do not believe that having children early will have much effect on their economic prospects later on. They also do not think that their age or their resources have much to do with good mothering. Anyone can be a good mother, they say, if they are willing to “be there” for their children. For the poor, then, the most sensible (though not the ideal) way to order life events is: have the children, get established economically, and then get married. At the outset, poor women hope to accomplish these goals with a single partner and work cooperatively toward these goals. But despite an often promising start, few of the men they partner with prove able or willing to stay the course.

In sum, we show that poor women consider marriage a luxury—one they desire and hope someday to attain, but can live without if they must. Children, on the other hand, are a necessity. Thus, even if a woman finds herself in a match she fears might not be ideal, she is often willing to bring a child into that relationship. On the one hand, she hopes the match will improve with the birth of a child. On the other, she figures she might not have a better chance to have a child or complete the task of building a family.

WHAT MAKES FOR GOOD MOTHERING?

Though the poor hold a middle-class standard for marriage, they do not, by and large, adopt middle-class childrearing norms. This constitutes the second crucial difference between the classes. Middle-class women hold to a set of childrearing norms that measure their success as mothers by their children's achievements. The middle-class child is a hothouse plant whose soil is concertedly cultivated and fertilized by a wide variety of meaningful activities. Ask a middle-class woman if she's a good mother, and she'll likely reply, “Ask me in twenty years,” for then she will know her daughter's score on the SAT, the list of college acceptances she has garnered, and where her career trajectory has led. A poor child lives in a field—not a hothouse—where he is expected to grow naturally. His mother’s job is to ensure that his environment provides the essential elements that allow for natural growth—the roof over his head, the food in his stomach, the clean and pressed clothing, the rudimentary knowledge of “numbers” and “letters”—but the rest is up to the child. Ask a poor woman whether she's a good mother, and she'll likely point to how clean and well-fed her children are, or how she stands by them through whatever problems come their way.

Despite these rather modest notions of what makes for good mothering, children come to mean, quite literally, everything to women like Mahkiya Washington, Deena Vallas, Dominique Watkins, and Jen Burke, for they are the only truly safe emotional harbor. Poor women realize that marriage is fragile, and so they make their primary emotional investments in their relationships with their children, which are not subject to the threats that so often destroy relationships between men and women. Sonia, a twenty-three-year-old Puerto Rican mother of a four-year-old son, puts it this way: “[My son is] my heart. [When I have hard times] I always tell myself I wanted him. Even if I get that rock on my finger, that white picket fence, and that deed that says the house is mine, [I'll still have my son] just in case anything goes sour. I'll say to my husband, ‘You leave! This boy is mine.’”

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RACE

Nationally representative surveys show large racial and ethnic differences in a number of family-related behaviors. For example, though large numbers of unmarried African Americans, Hispanics, and whites cohabit around the time of their child's birth, surveys show that African Americans are less likely than the other groups to do so. African American women are also less likely to marry than Hispanics, who are, in turn, less likely to marry than whites, even when income and other demographic characteristics are taken into account. And African American divorce rates are also higher than those for whites or Hispanics.
Despite these important differences in family-related behavior, our data show few differences across racial and ethnic groups in the attitudes and worldviews that are the subject of this book. By and large, the themes in these chapters ring as true in white PennsPort as in Puerto Rican West Kensington, or in the African American neighborhood of Strawberry Mansion. This similarity in views regarding marriage and children suggests that what drives the large behavioral differences is not that these racial and ethnic groups differ in their adherence to mainstream norms, but that they see real differences in their chances of finding a mate for a marriage that meets the high standard for marriage they share.

There are some exceptions to this rule (see appendix A). First, as we show in chapter 1, some differences exist across the groups in the extent to which children are conceived according to an explicit plan. Yet the most important story the data reveal is that, across all three racial and ethnic groups, the majority of children were the result of neither explicit planning nor contraceptive failure. Most conceptions were described in terms that place them between these two ends of the continuum—between planned and accidental.

Second, as we show in chapter 3, the problems that women in the various racial and ethnic groups encounter in their relationships with their children's fathers also vary. White women's relationships suffer most from the ravages of domestic violence and alcohol abuse. Puerto Rican women seem to experience even higher rates of domestic violence, and drug addiction is also a common cause of failed relationships. For African Americans, criminal behavior, incarceration, and drug abuse are the most common relational problems. Infidelity, however, is a common corrosive factor for women in all groups.

Third, in chapter 4, we show that African Americans are more likely to aspire to marriage than whites or Puerto Ricans, while whites are the most likely to reject the notion of marriage outright. Given the large differences by race in the U.S. population with regard to marital behavior, this finding is somewhat surprising. However, as we noted in chapter 4, those opposed to marriage had usually been married in the past, and our African American mothers were far less likely than our whites (though not our Puerto Ricans) to have been married.49

Fourth, we also show in chapter 4 that for African Americans, the ideal age for marriage comes later in life than for the other groups and is higher than the age at which they believe childbearing should ideally occur.50 This difference may simply reflect real differences in the average timing of marriage across groups, as African Americans often marry much later.51 It is also possible that African Americans have a higher standard for marriage than whites, an idea suggested by several studies showing that men's earnings and employment are more important for predicting marriage among African American women than among whites and Hispanics.52

In sum, though the 162 women we spoke with varied along an numerous dimensions, their individual stories reflect many of the themes we have elaborated here. Though the eight impoverished neighborhoods in which they live are in some ways distinct social worlds, the differences in the worldviews of the single mothers that live in them are usually quite subtle, while their commonalities are striking.

LESSONS FOR MARRIAGE POLICY

American children suffer from more family disruption than children anywhere else in the industrialized world. Though some European countries have similarly high rates of nonmarital childbearing, unmarried European parents usually cohabit and tend to stay together for decades, whereas their U.S. counterparts typically break up within a couple of years. U.S. divorce rates among couples with children, while lower than for couples without, are also much higher than those of other Western industrialized countries. The fragility of both marriage and cohabitation means that by age fifteen, only half of American children live with both biological parents, whereas roughly two-thirds of Swedish, Austrian, German, and French children do so, as do nearly nine in ten children in Spain and Italy.53 These sharp differences in the rate of family disruption
are undeniably part of the reason that the United States has the highest child poverty rate of any Western industrialized country. 54

At the dawn of the new century, American lawmakers and taxpayers alike have noted the high correlation between poverty, poor child outcomes, and the rise of single motherhood, and some have concluded that marriage is the missing ingredient in America’s policy recipe. The new conventional wisdom is that the lack of marriage, rather than the lack of skills or living-wage jobs, is at the root of the disadvantages faced by so many American children.

“Can government be the solution for everything that ails the American family?” asked Bush’s White House marriage czar Wade Horn. “Of course not. But I do think that we have moved beyond the question of whether government ought to be involved in some way on the issue of marriage to the question of how.” How indeed? It’s not education or job training or a low-interest mortgage, but something called “relationship-skills training.” The idea is to provide unwed parents with the relational skills that can bring their dreams of a lifelong marriage to fruition. 55

At the heart of the relationship-skills training they plan to provide are the “speaker-listener” techniques that have helped couples in premarital counseling resolve their day-to-day conflicts in more constructive, less emotionally charged ways. Couples who learn these techniques before marriage, generally in the context of premarital counseling, do tend to have more satisfying and long-lasting relationships. 56 It is easy to see how such techniques would be helpful with such conflicts as how to squeeze a tube of toothpaste, whether the toilet seat should remain up, how often the in-laws can visit, or when to have sex. It’s harder to see how these tools will be of as much use when the quarrels result from chronic infidelity, physical abuse, alcoholism and drug addiction, criminal activity, and incarceration. Indeed, it is hard to envision any type of social program that would, or even should, motivate couples to wed in the light of such serious problems. 57

Yet despite the emphasis on promoting marriage, no one will be coerced to wed. Nor does the government intend to promote marriage at all costs. The last thing most conservatives want is to increase the divorce rate. Rather, the goal is to give unwed couples who are hoping to marry the skills that will lead to healthy, lifelong, marital relationships. They recognize that these are the kinds of marriages in which children do best, and the marriage initiatives are supposed to improve the well-being of children. The focus on a healthy marriage, not marriage at any cost, recognizes that half of all children living in single-parent households are in that situation because their parents divorced, not because they failed to marry. And research shows that children who live with single parents because of divorce fare no better on average than those whose parents never marry at all. 58 The point is that living apart from either biological parent at any point during childhood is what seems to hurt children. And it is important to note that remarriage, the typical middle-class response to divorce, solves nothing for the typical child, as those with a stepfather typically achieve less and suffer more than those living with a single mother. 59

Despite the sharp critiques of the institution of marriage from the left, the overwhelming majority of both male and female Americans still want to get married, expect their marriages to last a lifetime, and plan to raise their children within marital unions. 60 Yet there have been significant declines in the proportion of poor Americans who will marry over their lifetimes, and half of all recent marriages end in divorce. 61 Even among married couples with children, the divorce rate is quite high: up to 30 percent of children born to marital unions can now expect to see their parents part before they reach adulthood. 62

American society as a whole seems to be struggling with the institution of marriage, what it means, and how to make it work better, particularly for women, who are the “leavers” in marital breakups two-thirds of the time. 63 To single out the poor and their marriage attitudes and behaviors ignores the fact that rich and poor alike now hold to a similar
marriage standard. What the poor demand from marriage is no more than what everybody wants.

Marriage will probably never regain its status as a nearly universal cultural characteristic. People do, and will continue to, raise children in a wide variety of ways, and social policymakers concerned with the next generation must seek to enhance their well-being in whatever family form they find them. There is no question that the diversity of the American family is here to stay, so the policy response must be equally diverse.

Yet the acute vulnerability of relationships between poor parents demands a targeted policy response, because although having children early may not affect a young mother’s life chances much, it may diminish the life chances of her children. These costs are not evident to mothers, though, as their folk wisdom supports the notion that even very young mothers can be good mothers.

Some of our readers may conclude that the poor should lower their standards for marriage, but remember that they are often reluctant to marry because of the dangerously low quality of the relationships they are in. Given the alternatives they have to choose from, their reluctance to marry might be quite reasonable. If this is so, then the only course for those who want to promote marriage is to try improving the quality of the male partners in the pool. Teaching poor women to have better taste in men is hardly a solution, since their choices are made in a partner market where the better-quality men go to better-off women, especially given the unbalanced sex ratios in many poor communities.

Following Wilson, liberals have generally advocated a renewed focus on job training or employment among unskilled men. Given the alarming declines in employment among unskilled men, particularly young African American men, such an approach is in order. But we believe it is not enough to focus solely on male employment. Nor do we advocate the punitive approaches to single motherhood that conservatives often promote; researchers have found that no matter how stingy welfare becomes, that tactic has failed to get many more poor couples to wed. We believe that though Wilson’s explanation for the decline of marriage in the inner city was not completely correct in its particulars, his general approach is exactly right—the problem is one of marriageability.

No modern marriage can, or even should, survive the ravages of domestic abuse, chronic infidelity, alcoholism or drug addiction, repeated incarceration, or a living made from crime. Given the prevalence of these problems in the low-income population, promoting marriage will do more harm than good unless policymakers figure out a way to make low-skilled men safer prospects for long-term relationships with women and children. If we wait until the “magic moment” of a child’s birth to intervene in the lives of these men, it will likely prove too late for most, for their problems are already too numerous and too entrenched. The best course is undoubtedly to intervene at a much earlier age, before these troubles have had a chance to take root. In addition, it is well-established that by the time men reach their late twenties, they tend to “age out” of crime and other delinquent behaviors. If we could find ways to convince poor men to postpone fatherhood until their late twenties, their behavior will likely prove far less toxic to family life.

Of course, convincing men to wait means getting their female partners to wait as well, and, as noted above, waiting would probably improve their children’s lives too. Well-crafted social programs aimed specifically at reducing pregnancy among at-risk teens show promise. Several have been experimentally evaluated, and the results show that a well-organized program that engages poor teens in meaningful after-school activities over a significant period of time can decrease the teen pregnancy rate substantially. These programs range in cost from $1,000 to $4,000 per teen per year, but since experts estimate that the typical non-marital birth costs taxpayers roughly $3,750 annually over eighteen years, these programs might eventually save, not cost, money. Research also shows that programs which engage these at-risk youth in service learning are especially effective, though the experts aren’t sure why. Dominique Watkins would probably quickly explain that having the opportunity to give of oneself, and the chance to feel useful to others, is, in
many ways, what having children young is all about. Social programs that
feed this need are on the right track.

Finally, we must recognize that young people growing up in poor
communities have few positive models of marriage. Poor young women
and men need some sense of what constitutes a healthy couple relation­
ship to understand what it can reasonably withstand and what it cannot,
and to learn what helps couples who want to stay together and even
someday marry. So some form of relationship-skills training is needed,
though it must impart far more than mere speaker-listener techniques.

Shoring up these fragile families will also require concrete methods
of increasing access to the economic security that helps to make rela­
tionships strong. Poor women say they'll marry when they and their
partners reach a certain standard of living, providing men also meet their
behavioral standards. This living standard is not lavish; it is a scaled­
down version of the classic American dream. A modest home, a car, and
some savings show that a couple is not merely living paycheck to pay­
check but has some surplus, and has used that surplus to work coopera­
tively toward a common economic goal. These financial accomplish­
ments represent a deeper form of security than mere money income can
buy. Policy that ignores these strongly held moral views and aspirations
is wrongheaded and will not move the marriage rate much, if at all. One
way or another, the wider culture has arrived at these high standards for
marriage, and they are unlikely to change now. American society cannot
now hold out one set of values for the middle class and expect the poor
to abide by another lower standard. Conservatives are acting on the
premise that not being married is what makes so many women and chil­
dren poor. But poor women insist that their poverty is part of what makes
marriage so difficult to sustain. Their keen observations of middle-class
behavior tell them that given all the expectations Americans now place
on it, modern-day marriage is hard enough without the added burden of
financial worries. How, they ask, can an economically strained marriage
hope to survive?

The government is already experimenting with asset-creation strate­
gies on a modest scale, matching the savings of the poor with public dol­
las and limiting expenditures to down-payments on homes or invest­
ments in education. However, policymakers must keep in mind that to
acquire assets, one must have surplus income—something neither wel­
fare nor low-wage employment typically provides. The evidence is
clear that men who work more and earn more also marry more, and that,
at the bottom of the income distribution, women's employment and
earnings also tend to positively predict marriage. Providing more access
to stable, living-wage employment for both men and women should
therefore be a key policy objective.

Putting the economy back into the policy equation is probably even
more crucial for early childbearing than for marriage. As long as they
have so few other ways to establish a sense of self-worth and meaning,
early childbearing among young women in precarious economic condi­
tions is likely to continue. If they believe they have a reason to wait, more
may take steps to prevent early pregnancy. During the late 1990s, when
America saw several years of unprecedented economic growth and very
low unemployment, many of those on the bottom were swept up into the
economic mainstream. Most people who wanted a job could suddenly get
one, the tight job market moved wages for unskilled workers sharply up­
ward, and for the first time in modern memory, the rate of nonmarital
childbearing stopped increasing—it even declined somewhat. What
this suggests is that disadvantaged people don't entirely ignore new op­
portunities in the labor market. When they see new reasons to hope for
meaning in a variety of life paths, some may choose to forgo early child­
bearing because of it.

However, it is irresponsible to make marriage promotion or teen
pregnancy prevention the only social policy games in town while more
than half of those mothers who have recently left welfare remain poor
and, at any given time, nearly six out of ten have no job. In 2002 one in
seven reported no visible means of support at all. Meanwhile, one-fifth
of all American children, and more than half of those living only with
their mothers, remain poor. As the unemployment rate rises for the
population as a whole, it lifts doubly for the most disadvantaged segments of the American population. With the federal safety net for these poor women and children in shreds and state budgets in crisis, we must identify the new needs of poor families and find new ways to meet them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We've written this book to appeal to a wide range of interested readers, in and outside of the academy. Lisa Adams, our agent, and Naomi Schneider, our editor, helped us learn how to transform academic prose into a more lively narrative that we hope will appeal to policymakers and the educated public as well as to scholars and students.

During the five years we were doing the fieldwork and collecting the interview data for this book, we had the good fortune to work with a very talented group of graduate student interviewers and ethnographers, including Susan Clampet-Lundquist (interviewer, West Kensington, Strawberry Mansion), Rebecca Kissane (ethnographer and interviewer, Kensington), Tasheika Hinson-Coleman (interviewer and ethnographer, Strawberry Mansion and North Central), Jeff Gingrich (ethnographer, North Central), and Shelley Shannon (interviewer and project manager, Camden).

Shelley Shannon introduced us to the City of Camden and even rented us the ground-floor flat in her Camden home. Sam Apple taught us much about the history of Camden after the civil rights era. Mary Ann Merion helped us draw up a preliminary list of community leaders and introduced us around town. Camden’s Westminster Presbyterian Church provided a spiritual home. In Philadelphia we were introduced to the broad array of neighborhoods we studied by colleagues and grad-