

AMERICAN  
**Educator**

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS  
WINTER 1994-95

What the Public  
Expects of Its  
Public Schools

Culture and  
Our Moral Condition:  
What's Gone Wrong?

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The survey on violence in the schools is the latest in a 10-year series of surveys, all commissioned by MetLife and conducted by the polling firm of Louis Harris & Associates, which have explored a wide range of issues in education.

You may obtain a summary of the findings of *Violence in America's Public Schools: The Family Perspective*, without cost, by writing to MetLife Teachers' Survey 1994, PO Box 807, Madison Square Station, NY, NY 10159-0807.

\*The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher 1994:  
*Violence in America's Public Schools: The Family Perspective*



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ALBERT SHANKER  
President  
American Federation of Teachers

Elizabeth McPike  
editor

Mary Power Boyd  
associate editor

Sandra Brown  
editorial assistant

Andrew Bornstein  
design consultant

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**Advertising Sales Representative**  
**Peter Li, Inc.**  
330 Progress Road  
Dayton, OH 45449  
800-523-4625  
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William M. Doran  
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310 Madison Ave., Suite 1809  
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**Peter Li, Inc.**  
8420 W. Bryn Mawr Ave., Suite 413  
Chicago, IL 60631  
312-380-5080  
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PAGE 14



PAGE 22



PAGE 30

# AMERICAN **Educator**

## FIRST THINGS FIRST:

### WHAT AMERICANS EXPECT FROM THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

4

A Report from *Public Agenda*

*Americans express strong support for higher standards, more challenging academic content, and tough measures to hold students accountable. But they're skeptical of what they consider unproven teaching innovations, and they're worried that too many schools are unsafe and disorderly and too many children are not mastering basic knowledge and skills.*

## CULTURE AND OUR MORAL CONDITION: WHAT'S GONE WRONG?

### ■ A DE-MORALIZED SOCIETY: THE BRITISH/AMERICAN EXPERIENCE 14

By Gertrude Himmelfarb

*It is no longer possible to ignore or gloss over the distress that is all around us. The illegitimacy rate, which had risen only two percentage points in the preceding forty years, has skyrocketed from 5% in 1960 to 30% in 1991. And violent crime has become so endemic that what once were shocking headlines are now commonplace items in the daily news. To find our way out, we will have to re-discover the centrality of values.*

### ■ THE FAILURE OF SEX EDUCATION

22

By Barbara Dafoe Whitehead

*The social and cultural norms and adult oversight that were once employed to enforce a moratorium on adolescent sexual behavior have been greatly relaxed. In their stead, teenagers are provided with "comprehensive sex education," contraceptives, and "communication skills," and sent into the world to fend for themselves. By all accounts, they're not faring well. It's time to re-think.*

### ■ MUSIC AND MORALITY

30

By William Kilpatrick

*Music comes as close to touching the soul as anything can. And just as music can enhance a child's moral imagination, so can it stunt it. With so much at stake, we'd better listen carefully.*

## "CITIZEN, WITH YOUR VOTE, YOU DECIDE THE FUTURE OF THE COUNTRY"

38

*With assistance from an AFT program, the children of Nicaragua are learning about democracy—and celebrating it with artwork like this.*

# FIRST THINGS FIRST

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# WHAT AMERICANS EXPECT FROM THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

*A Report from Public Agenda*

BY JEAN JOHNSON AND JOHN IMMERWAHR

**T**hose involved in school reform, and everyone who cares about maintaining—some would say regaining—strong public support for public education, must have a clear grasp of what the public wants from its schools and how those expectations match what it perceives to be happening. A new report conducted this past summer by Public Agenda, a nonpartisan research and education organization, captures, frames, and focuses the public's concerns in clear, compelling form.

"The message the public is sending is loud and clear," said AFT President Albert Shanker in a recent column discussing the report. "Higher standards and more challenging school work are strongly supported, but the public doubts reformers who have all sorts of plans for 'innovations' without first taking care of school safety, discipline and the basics.

"Reformers will only get the credibility and public support they need to succeed if they accept the public's agenda as part of their own. The overwhelming majority of teachers and others who work in public schools should have no difficulty in doing so since these public concerns are theirs, too. This could be the basis of a powerful alliance between the American public and teachers."

The excerpt that follows reports fully on four of the ten findings highlighted in the Public Agenda report. All ten findings are briefly summarized on pages 9 and 10. Ordering information for the full 56-page report, with supporting tables, is provided at the bottom of page 10. Requests to reproduce or excerpt from the report should be submitted to the Public Agenda Foundation.

## **FINDING:**

### **First Things First: Safety, Order, and the Basics**

For the large majority of Americans, too many public schools are not providing the minimum prerequisites for education—a safe, orderly environment and effective teaching of "the basics."

It seems axiomatic to people that schools should be safe, orderly, and conducive to teaching and learning. But Americans in all parts of the country and across every demographic category say their local public schools are not providing this basic underpinning for sound education.

For a large majority of Americans, too many public schools are not meeting their most elemental goal: ensuring that the nation's children master some basic, but essential skills—the ability to read and write English and to do simple arithmetic by hand, along with a "common knowledge" understanding of science, history, and geography.

This study captures decisively what opinion research on education has suggested during the last decade: Americans are concerned that too many public schools are so disorderly and undisciplined that learning cannot take place. And the public's concern about discipline and order has been joined in the last few years by a disturbing new fear—that the schools are violent and unsafe.

For most Americans, three images sum up their sense that the public schools are failing: metal detectors in high schools, students outside schools smoking during school hours, and supermarket checkout clerks who can't make



ILLUSTRATED BY DAN SHERRO

## The Public's Primary Agenda

- Restore safety, order, and discipline as the indispensable foundation for learning and the prerequisites for all other reforms;
- Emphasize the basic academic subjects and make their content "tougher and more challenging";
- Be clear and specific about what students should learn and adopt rigorous measures to enforce high standards;
- Be skeptical of educational fads and unproven teaching innovations;
- Teach values like honesty, equality, and tolerance, but do not promote sharply negative critiques of American society.



change. People's fears and frustrations, and their strongest desires for progress, center on three areas: safety, order, and the basics.

### Safety

Almost three-quarters of Americans (72%) say "drugs and violence" are serious problems in schools in their area. Among African-American parents with children in public school, eight in ten (80%) say drugs and violence are serious problems in their local schools, compared to roughly six in ten (58%) white parents. Other recent public opinion surveys have uncovered similar fears about safety in the schools. In a 1994 Gallup survey, Americans most frequently named fighting, gangs, and violence—along with discipline problems—as the "biggest problem" facing the public schools.

Some leaders have argued that people's fears about drugs and violence are driven by media coverage and do not accurately reflect what is happening in most public schools. In this study, respondents were specifically asked about their own *local* public schools—not schools in general (people generally have more positive views about schools in their own community). Moreover, questions about safety and drugs were intermingled with questions about other school issues such as testing and teaching practices.

Thus, while people's fears about safety may be magnified by the media, they are very real—and they go beyond generalized concerns about teenage crime or indiscriminate cynicism about public institutions. The perception that children are exposed to violence and drugs in the public schools is pervasive among African-American parents and that perception has seeped far beyond the nation's large urban centers.

### Living with Fear

A Public Agenda focus group in Danbury, Connecticut—conducted for a William Casper Graustein Memorial Fund project—suggests the degree to which fears about safety and drugs, regardless of whether they are real or exaggerated, can create an uncivilized, almost brutish, school environment even in middle-class neighborhoods. Questioned by the moderator, parents in Danbury repeatedly gave the local high school high marks for its teachers, principal, programs, equipment, and so forth. Most said their children were receiving a good education in a well-run and responsive public school system. But after some minutes of conversation, one father mentioned that his daughter routinely avoids using the restroom for fear of being accosted by a tough set of teenagers. The positive tone of the conversation quick-



ly changed to one of anger and frustration, as more respondents shared stories about the fear and intimidation their children experienced. The parents had accepted the situation. They "lived with it," but it also served as a symbol to them that the era of safety and security they knew in their youth had been irretrievably lost.

People's fears about school violence and drug use lead them, not surprisingly, to support proposals to permanently remove from school grounds students caught with weapons or drugs. Seventy-six percent of those questioned backed this idea, which won even higher endorsement from parents with children attending public schools—83% among African-American parents and 84% among white parents. As one Philadelphia parent put it: "You can't just let things go the way they're going now. If a student comes into school, and he's carrying a weapon, the student's got to go. There's too much in this country of the rights of the few, you know, and not the rights of the many."

## Order

But safety is not the public's sole concern. Most Americans are not convinced that schools adequately enforce the standards of behavior and cooperation that allow teachers to teach and children to learn. The public has consistently named lack of discipline as a major problem facing their local public schools for the past decade. This concern is echoed in the current study. Asked to name the most important factors needed for students to learn, people cite good teachers and an orderly, disciplined environment as the top two prerequisites. But more than half of the respondents (54%) say teachers are doing only a "fair" or "poor" job dealing with discipline (compared to only 36% who question teachers' judgment on academic matters). More than half (52%) say it is a serious problem that their local public schools don't teach good work habits, such as being on time and doing homework, and almost half (49%) say it is the worst-behaved students who are getting the most attention.

Comments from the focus groups underscore people's concerns about basic order and discipline in the schools:

"At 12 in the afternoon, students are coming out to buy things from the store across the street as if school was letting out, and my question is, 'Don't teachers see these students out the window, outside the building?' Nothing happens. I mean, they come and go as they please. I don't want them to run it like a prison, but I think it's a little too lax."

—Philadelphia father

"If you send a fifth-grader to the principal because he's in trouble—there's a lot of students who say 'Big deal! He (the principal) is not going to do anything.'"

—Des Moines mother

"Our Rotary Club honored some special students in the local high school. We had 30 boys and girls at this big dinner. Probably 50% of the boys in attendance had these baseball caps on. It was a formal sit-down dinner. All of us were dressed nicely. The superintendent of schools



said, 'Gee, I didn't even notice that.' The students feel they can do anything they want. If they don't get properly disciplined or guided, how can they be educated?"

—Hartford senior citizen

"I think there have been some cases where the children are disciplined wrong, and lawsuits happen, so the teachers are afraid to do anything—to bring order or keep order. I think a lot of these children are just normal active children, but instead of disciplining them in a structured environment so that they [are] in a position [to] learn, they say, 'Well, let's turn it over to a doctor and put them on Ritalin or whatever.'"

—Minneapolis father

Americans do not dismiss the daunting challenges faced by schools attempting to educate children from neighborhoods plagued by poverty and crime and from families unable to provide the structure and support children need to achieve in school. People readily admit that ensuring a safe, orderly environment conducive to learning is a much more difficult task than it once was. A third of Americans (33%) say that teachers are doing a worse job than when they themselves were in school, but 55% say parents are doing a worse job. Even parents concede that parents are doing a worse job, with white, African-American, and traditional Christian parents agreeing in roughly equal numbers. Asked whether a student is more likely to succeed if he comes from a stable and supportive family but attends a poor school, or if he comes from a troubled family but attends a good school, six in ten Americans (61%) say the child with the stable family has the better chance.

Americans don't blame the schools for the problems they face, but neither do they think schools are employing the strategies most likely to work—the strategies most likely to achieve the best results for both troubled children and for those from stronger, more supportive homes.

## The Prerequisite for Learning

Eighty-eight percent of Americans say that emphasizing habits such as being on time, and being dependable and disciplined would make a great deal of difference in how much students learn. Roughly three in four (73%) say taking persistent troublemakers out of class would be a very effective means of boosting academic performance in the schools. The same number (73%) strongly support the idea of keeping students on the school grounds throughout the day, a proposal which people may see offering two benefits: keeping students safe and keeping them more focused on academics.

Findings from this study suggest that the public preoccupation with order and discipline represents much more than the perennial discomfort of the middle-aged for "kids these days." People see order as a prerequisite to learning. They are convinced that a more orderly and disciplined public school environment would improve academic performance. As one Des Moines mother put it: "I think we have to get back the respect. They have to stop



# Privileging Violence

## *Too Much Focus on the Needs and 'Rights' of Disruptive Students*

BY ALBERT SHANKER

There is a great deal of concern about school violence these days—and for good reason. Though some people maintain that the media greatly exaggerate the problem, those who work in schools in New York City or Chicago or Baltimore know better. And recent polls and surveys show that a majority of parents and other citizens agree with teachers about its seriousness. However, there is considerable confusion about how to deal with violence in the schools.

A high percentage of parents see the issue in matter-of-fact terms. Schools are places where kids are supposed to learn. Youngsters who consistently threaten the learning—and even safety—of others undoubtedly need help, but they have no business in the classroom.

But there are some well-meaning educators and policymakers to whom this is not self-evident. For them, the schools' most important mission is to "save" the violent and disruptive kids.

A report of the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) is a good example of this kind of thinking. "Schools Without Fear" says that schools should be "advocates for all children," but it focuses almost exclusively on the needs and "rights" of disruptive students.

The report tells us that schools should restructure themselves to accommodate violent and disruptive youngsters; they should provide special programs and curricula to teach teachers and other kids how to cope with violent students. Above all, schools should bend over backwards not to exclude violent or disruptive students or even, in most cases, put them out of class. The report acknowledges

the value of alternative programs but says that students should be placed there only when other possibilities have been exhausted and with a view to returning them as quickly as possible to their regular classes. The basic formula is: We must not give up on these kids, no matter what.

This sounds very good—and it is quite right that turning violent and disruptive kids out onto the street will not help them; quite right that they need special programs and alternative facilities. But the kids who are forgotten in this picture are the vast majority of students, who don't make trouble. Why do we place so much value on youngsters who come to class with knives or guns and so little on their classmates who want to learn—or would give it a try if their classes were not disrupted by violence or fears of violence? What kind of message does it send when youngsters who are chronically disruptive get all the attention? And what does it mean for the future of public education?

John Cole, president of the Texas Federation of Teachers, recently attended the annual Scholastic "Summit on Youth Violence," and what he heard led him to ask some of the same questions.

"The consistent theme," he writes in his report on the conference, "is that society's responsibility is to the perpetrators of violence, and that we should lavish our attention on those who commit violence, in an effort to save those individuals, without regard to the effect that attention has on other, nonviolent members of society."

"The message," Cole continues, "came through time and time again. Those who commit crimes, abuse drugs or disrupt school are

crying out for help, and we should rush to help them. My problem with this line of logic is that if young people learn that the way to obtain help is to strike out in acts of violence, that will become the normal method for seeking special help in our society. By rushing to help these young people, are we not encouraging others to emulate their behavior?"

Cole does not think we should abandon violent young people, but he thinks that absolving them from responsibility is ultimately destructive: "We need programs to work with them, and we should try to salvage as many as we can. However, if we assume that society is to blame for all their problems and responsible for developing solutions, we take away from them the responsibility for their own lives. Once a person assumes that he has lost control of his destiny, he has no difficulty in justifying any act because he feels no responsibility for the consequences."

Cole's conclusion: "If the philosophy espoused at this conference wins the debate over the role of schools in our society, public schools will become the place where we try to salvage lost lives, and private schools will become the place where people send well-behaved children who want an education."

Most ordinary parents and citizens understand this—it explains why a lot of people who have supported public education are turning, in frustration, to vouchers. And it's time the well-meaning people who believe that schools should put violent kids first realize that they are helping to destroy public education.

*Albert Shanker is president of the American Federation of Teachers.*

[allowing] classes [to be plagued] with interruptions, and if they had that, I think the students would learn more, too.”

## The Basics

Teaching the basics is the third element in people’s triumvirate of goals for the public schools. Sixty percent of Americans say that “not enough emphasis on the basics such as reading, writing, and math” is a serious problem in their local schools—a finding, again, that is particularly revealing because people generally rate local schools more highly. Surveys have consistently shown that Americans believe schools nationwide should put more emphasis on basic academic subjects. At least 75% of Americans feel that more emphasis should be given to basic high school subjects such as science, English, and math.

In focus groups for this and other recent Public Agenda projects, people repeatedly expressed their frustration at children’s lack of command of the basics.

“I have a twelve-year-old grandson—he’s in accelerated classes—but if he didn’t have a spell-proofer on his computer, he’d misspell a lot of words.”

—*Hartford grandmother*

“It seems to me that when I went to school, we started with the basics, with the basic building blocks. You didn’t start writing compositions until you had all the grammar down . . . Now, it’s more like they get plopped down right in the middle and are told, ‘Write us a story and if the spelling isn’t right, we’ll take care of that later’ . . . It’s backward. It’s like telling an auto mechanic, ‘You don’t have to worry about how the engine works and how the transmission works. We want you to fix these brakes on this car. If you mess up, that’s OK, we’ll take it back and work on it some more.’”

—*Minneapolis father*

“Education is becoming more about social issues as opposed to reading, writing, and arithmetic. Some of it’s fine, but I think schools need to stay with the basics . . . You can’t get by in the business world on social issues if you can’t add and subtract.”

—*Des Moines father*

“They talk all the time about this ‘whole child educational process’ . . . It’s not your business to make a ‘whole child.’ Your business is to teach these students how to read, how to write, and give them the basic skills to balance their checkbook. It’s not to make new Emersons out of them.”

—*Minneapolis father*

It is not uncommon for some in the educational reform movement to refer to “the basics” with disdain, and numerous observers have interpreted the public’s continuing focus on basics as evidence of lack of support for more rigorous and challenging coursework. From the public’s point of view, however, making sure public school children complete their education with a firm command of the basics is not a trivial or inconsequential goal. It is the essential foundation on which chil-

dren build their futures.

To many Americans, “education experts” seem to give surprisingly short shrift to basics—skipping over them to discuss issues such as the importance of “critical thinking skills,” the need to learn teamwork, and other “higher-order” skills that are at the top of reformers’ agendas. But when people talk about “the basics,” they are not necessarily suggesting that children can’t do more, or that higher levels of achievement are not desirable. What most people seem to mean is “first things first.” Indeed, the vast majority of Americans (96%) support having “tougher, and more challenging courses” in the basics.

In focus groups for this study and other Public Agenda education projects, people express a sense of frustration and even bewilderment at the inability of the public schools to make mastery of the basics commonplace among the nation’s children. Most people wonder how it is possible, after twelve years of schooling, that so many children seem to have learned so little.

## FINDING:

### The Public and Higher Standards

Americans believe the higher standards promoted by leadership are necessary—indeed, the public strongly supports them—but they do not believe they are sufficient.

Like leadership, the public has its own very clear agenda for improving the schools. There is extraordinary agreement among all segments of the population—in all parts of the country and across ethnic and racial lines—on what helps children learn and what schools need to do to improve student performance. Like leaders, people believe that academic standards should be raised, that schools and teachers should be clear and specific about what they expect children to learn, and that schools should hold students accountable for doing their best.

But for the public, raising standards is only half an answer. Since Americans are most concerned about whether schools furnish a safe, orderly environment in which children learn the basics, leadership’s education agenda sometimes seems mystifyingly incomplete.

The public endorses leadership ideas about higher standards and more science and math—and they increasingly assent to leadership arguments that the workers of tomorrow need new, more advanced skills. But education reform may seem misdirected and unresponsive to many Americans unless it addresses their chief goals for the nation’s children: safety, order, and mastering the basics.

There can be very little doubt that the American public supports the goals leaders have set for raising academic standards in the public schools. Surveys conducted in the last decade have repeatedly shown support for requiring students to pass an exam to qualify for a high school diploma. Six in ten (61%) Americans questioned in this study say academic standards are too low in their own local schools, a figure that rises to seven in ten (70%) among African-American parents with children currently in public school.



# Summary

## Ten Major Findings

**First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools** is the latest in a series of Public Agenda surveys focused on education reform. It is based on interviews with more than 1,100 Americans, including 550 white, African-American, and traditional Christian parents of children currently in public school. The report describes ten findings with important implications for those aiming to improve education and regain the necessary broad public support to do so. Public Agenda is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and education organization.

### **FINDING 1: First Things First: Safety, Order, and the Basics**

For the large majority of Americans, too many public schools are not providing the minimum prerequisites for education—a safe, orderly environment and effective teaching of “the basics.”

It seems axiomatic to people that schools should be safe, orderly, and conducive to teaching and learning, but Americans in all parts of the country and across every demographic category say their local public schools are not providing this basic underpinning for sound education. This study captures decisively what opinion research has suggested over the last decade: Americans are concerned that too many public schools are so disorderly and undisciplined that learning cannot take place. And the public's concern about order has been joined in the last few years by a disturbing new fear—that schools are violent and unsafe.

### **FINDING 2: The Public and Higher Standards**

Americans believe the higher standards promoted by leadership are necessary—indeed, the public strongly supports them—but they do not believe they are sufficient.

Like leadership, the public has its own very clear agenda for improving the schools. People believe that academic standards should be raised, and that schools should hold students accountable for doing their best. But for the public, raising standards is only half an answer. Since Americans are most concerned about whether schools furnish a safe, orderly environment in which children learn the basics, leadership's education agenda sometimes seems mystifyingly incomplete.

### **FINDING 3: Public Response to Teaching Innovations**

The leadership agenda for education reform faces an additional stumbling block—widespread discomfort with new teaching methods that often accompany reform.

The reform movement risks losing public support if it ignores the public's concerns about safety, order, and basics. But there is another element of reform that leads many Americans to question whether those “in charge” really share the public's goals.

Among opinion leaders in the government, business and education, the drive to raise academic standards has been tied to a number of other teaching reforms: reforming math education to focus on concepts rather than rote learning; teaching composition with less emphasis on grammar and spelling; ending the “tracking” of students; and replacing standardized, multiple-choice tests with new, more “authentic” assessments that ask students to solve problems. But the large majority of Americans are uncomfortable with many of these changes. Overall, the public seems to have a more traditional view of what should be happening in the classroom. They want to see students learning some of the same things—in the same ways—that they learned in school.

### **FINDING 4: The Ideal Classroom**

People's traditionalism about education does not mean that they yearn for “the good old days” in every respect. They seem to want a new and improved version of the little red schoolhouse.

Despite their strong support for more order and discipline in the schools, and their commitment to more traditional teaching methods, the public overwhelmingly rejects the notion that schools should be domains of boredom or fear. People believe that learning can be fun and interesting and want schools to find ways to help children enjoy their education and become more confident and self-assured. They seem to reject both extremes in education—either intimidating students or pandering to them.

### **FINDING 5: The Public and the School Wars**

Most Americans are not preoccupied by concerns about sex education and multiculturalism that have caused such acrimonious debate in many communities.

Despite the attention they have attracted, "values" disputes about how history and science should be taught, how minorities are portrayed, what textbooks should be used, and what moral traditions should be conveyed in sex education are not at the top of the public's list of concerns. When most people consider how well public schools are serving the nation's children, these are not the issues that leap to mind.

### **FINDING 6: The Most-Valued Values: Tolerance and Equality**

People want schools to teach values. They especially want schools to emphasize those values that allow a diverse society to live together peacefully.

The public's lack of concern about "values issues" does not mean that Americans endorse education that is value-neutral or makes no judgments about moral behavior. There is a circle of broadly agreed-upon values people expect the schools both to teach directly and to reinforce by example. And there are some "lessons" that most Americans believe are not the business of the public schools—those that seem aimed at dividing people, rather than helping them live in harmony.

### **FINDING 7: Sex Education, Yes But . . .**

There is strong support for public schools playing a central role in sex education—an overwhelming consensus that parents need help. However, on questions of premarital sex and homosexuality, there are sharp divisions over how graphic and morally judgmental sex education should be.

Americans express broad support for giving students information about the biological aspects of sex, the dangers of sexually transmitted disease, and for older students, information about birth control. However, sex education is a far more divisive issue when it turns to topics such as abortion, sex outside marriage, and homosexuality. Americans have different viewpoints about these topics, and, because they are so emotionally charged, people hold their views intensely.

### **FINDING 8: Special Focus: Traditional Christian Parents**

Traditional Christian parents share most of the same concerns about the public schools—and support most of the same solutions—as other Americans, but they have a special perspective on issues related to sex and religion.

Public school parents who attend church regularly and say that they accept the Bible as the literal word of God or consider themselves "born-again" are just as likely to support solutions directed at improving safety, order, and command of the basics as other parents. They are, however, especially concerned about sex education that accepts premarital or homosexual sex. They are more concerned about profanity in assigned reading, and more eager to include Christian religious materials in public schools.

### **FINDING 9: Special Focus: African-American Parents**

African-American parents have the same concerns about the schools—and the same ideas about what needs to change—as other Americans. They strongly support setting and enforcing high standards for their children.

Like other Americans, African-American parents are concerned about safety, order, and the basics. However, they are significantly more dissatisfied with their local schools' performance. There are two areas where African-American parents have a distinctive viewpoint. They want more candid sex education and AIDS prevention programs for their children at an earlier age. And they are concerned about negative stereotypes in textbooks and curricula—an issue that troubles only a small percentage of white parents. What this study captures most among African-American parents is a magnified call for schools that are safe, for teaching that produces solid academic skills, and for programs that will help them protect their children from AIDS and early pregnancy.

### **FINDING 10: The Public and the Educators: The Fault Line Beneath the Trust**

Americans still trust teachers, principals, and school boards to make decisions about how to manage the schools—but the public's trust is wavering.

Americans believe that, compared to other decision makers, such as elected officials, business people and religious leaders, educators can be trusted with decisions about running the schools. But some specific findings about teachers and principals suggest that substantial numbers of Americans are not completely confident about their performance or judgment.

*Copies of the full report are available from: Public Agenda, 6 East 39th Street, Suite 900, New York, NY 10016. Tel: 212-686-6610, Fax 212-889-3461 (\$10 each or \$5 each for 10 or more copies, plus shipping and handling charges).*

Even more significant, people overwhelmingly endorse measures designed to set and enforce higher standards. Almost nine in ten respondents (88%) support not allowing students to graduate from high school unless they demonstrate they can write and speak English well, and 82% support setting up “very clear guidelines on what students should learn and teachers should teach in every major subject.”

More than two-thirds (70%) want to raise standards of promotion from grade school to junior high and let students move ahead only when they pass a test showing they have reached these standards. People say they believe all of these measures would be highly effective in improving students’ academic performance; support is strong among the general public and among white, African-American, and traditional Christian parents.

### Rejecting Social Promotion

Moreover, public support goes beyond lip service. People say the schools should follow through: enforce the standards and hold students accountable for mastering skills—not just for trying hard. Eighty-one percent say schools should pass students *only* when they have learned what was expected; only 16% say it is better to pass students if they have made an effort and tried hard. Seventy-six percent of Americans say teachers should toughen their grading and be more willing to fail high school students who don’t learn. People are somewhat less willing to see this “tough-love” approach applied to grade school students; nevertheless, 60% say we should do so.

Public Agenda explored public reactions to education standards in a 1993 series of focus groups conducted for The New Standards Project. That study also revealed broad and spontaneous support for the notion that higher expectations produce better performance. For parents, teachers, students, and members of the general public questioned in those focus groups, the premise made common sense: if you ask for more, you get more.

The public’s strong endorsement for higher standards is also a manifestation of its concern about basics. The current study presented respondents with 10 different proposals for improving student achievement—ideas that included removing troublemakers from classrooms, reintroducing spanking, and adapting teaching styles to students’ cultural backgrounds. Respondents rated each idea from one to five, based on its effectiveness in improving academic performance, with five being the most effective. At the very top of the list—with 76% of respondents giving it the top rating—is a proposal that responds to the public’s dual concerns about the basics and the importance of standards: a proposal that would deny students a high school diploma unless they clearly demonstrate they can write and speak English well.

The chief difficulty faced by education reformers is not resistance to the call for higher standards. Americans broadly embrace the need for higher standards, rigorously enforced. Rather, the difficulty is that the call for higher standards can seem inadequate to people given the depth of their concern about matters that they see as much more fundamental: safety, order, and the basics.

Among the National Education Goals originally



endorsed by President Bush and the nation’s governors—and reconfirmed by President Clinton—is the statement that “every school in the United States will be free of drugs, violence, and the unauthorized presence of firearms and alcohol and will offer the disciplined environ-

ment conducive to learning.” But education experts, government, local school districts, and the array of foundations and “think tanks” working on reform have emphasized this goal less than the others. In contrast, it is at the top of the public’s agenda—along with standards. It has been there for a while, and from the public’s perspective, the situation has gotten worse, not better.

## FINDING:

### Public Response to Teaching Innovations

The leadership agenda for education reform faces an additional stumbling block—widespread discomfort with new teaching methods that often accompany reform.

The national education reform movement risks losing public support if it ignores the public’s concerns about safety, order, and basics. But there is another element of reform that leads many Americans to question whether those “in charge” really share the public’s goals.

Among opinion leaders in government, business and education, the drive to raise academic standards and clarify outcomes has been tied to a number of other teaching reforms: reforming math education to focus on concepts and problem-solving (accompanied by use of calculators) rather than on rote learning of arithmetic; teaching composition by challenging students to use the written word early, widely, and creatively with less emphasis on grammar and spelling; ending the “tracking” of students that groups students by skill levels, and moving to heterogeneous grouping in which students of different skill levels are taught together; and replacing standardized, multiple-choice tests with new, more “authentic” assessments that ask students to solve problems and demonstrate that they know how to use what they have learned.

But this study and others Public Agenda has conducted in the last two years suggest that the large majority of Americans are uncomfortable with many of these changes. Overall, the public seems to have a more traditional view of what should be happening in the classroom. They want to see students learning some of the same things—in the same ways—that they learned in school.

Ideas such as using calculators to teach math, teaching composition without teaching spelling, and grouping students with different skills together in one class don’t make intuitive sense to most Americans. And they seem to have another, more important strike against them: most Americans don’t seem to think they are working very well.

### New Approaches to Teaching Math

Eighty-six percent of respondents say students should learn to do arithmetic “by hand”—including memoriz-

ing multiplication tables—before starting to use calculators, while only 10% believe that students “who use calculators and computers from the start learn to understand math concepts even better than those who spend a lot of time memorizing tables and doing math by hand.”

Skepticism about early use of calculators extends from the general public to public school parents, across all age groups and other demographic categories. The public’s view is nearly the opposite of that of professional math educators. In a 1993 study conducted by Public Agenda for the Mathematical Science Education Board and WQED, Pittsburgh, 82% of math education professionals responding said that “early use of calculators will improve children’s problem-solving skills and not prevent the learning of arithmetic.” Only 12% shared the public’s doubts about using calculators in the early grades.

In focus groups for this study and other Public Agenda projects on education, the inability of some children to do simple arithmetic without a calculator was frequently offered as foolproof evidence of educational failure. It may be that today’s math education reformers are paying the penalty of perceived failure in the past. American parents witnessed the rise and fall of the “new math,” and they seemed to draw from that experience a renewed devotion to the “tried and true.” Whatever the source of people’s skepticism, this study makes it clear that some aspects of math education reform face an exceedingly uphill battle and may, in fact, poison the waters for other, more broadly accepted elements of the reform movement.

## New Approaches to Teaching Composition

Sixty percent of Americans reject the educational strategy that encourages children to write creatively and express themselves from the beginning, without much attention to spelling and grammar. Instead, most people endorse the idea that, “unless they are taught the rules from the beginning, they will never be good writers.” Grammar and spelling mistakes—like the inability to do arithmetic without technological help—were frequently cited in focus groups as evidence of public school failure.

“My son is in third grade and he’d come home, and we’d see his journals. He wasn’t getting the basics. He would just ramble—not complete sentences, not even complete thoughts. Sure, it’s creative, and they should try to help him be creative. But also, [students] need the structure.”

—*Minneapolis father*

“In my job, I work with younger people, and they give me written work which I am supposed to type. I didn’t go to college, but what I see coming from these people is probably about eighth-grade level, as far as spelling and sentence construction.”

—*Hartford man*

The implication here is that children’s command of spelling and grammar—of proper English—is an



important form of “authentic” assessment for the public, and for parents with students in school. It is one way people measure public school performance, and it may be as significant to them as test scores or grades on report cards or reports from national commissions.

## Heterogeneous Grouping

Only 34% of Americans think that mixing students of different achievement levels together in classes—“heterogeneous grouping”—will help increase student learning. People remain skeptical about this strategy even when presented with arguments in favor of it. Eighty-seven percent of those opposing heterogeneous grouping remain doubtful even when told that one benefit of heterogeneous grouping is that more accomplished students serve as good role models for underachievers. Focus groups on heterogeneous grouping conducted for another Public Agenda research project suggest that other arguments in favor of the idea—such as academic research indicating its benefits or the need to avoid stigmatizing students—are equally unconvincing to most people.

Some proponents of heterogeneous grouping, professional educators and others, have suggested that parental opposition to it is a camouflage for racial prejudice—the fear of white parents that their children will be put in classes with “underachieving” African-American students, but opposition to heterogeneous grouping is as strong among African-American parents as among white parents, and support for it is equally weak.

Another recurrent theme among proponents of heterogeneous grouping is that “tracking” of students stigmatizes low achievers, whom they fear are routinely under-served in public schools. Significantly, the public’s concern may be somewhat different from that of the experts. This survey asked people which students receive the most attention in school—fast learners, slow learners, or average learners. The overwhelming majority of people (72%) are convinced that average learners get less attention than either fast learners or slow learners. The public’s concern, in other words, seems to be that average students don’t get the attention they need because the teacher is distracted trying to deal with the youngsters at the extremes. This may be one reason heterogeneous grouping has so little appeal. For many Americans, separating students by ability may be the way for average learners to get just as much attention as fast and slow learners.

When Public Agenda focused exclusively on this issue in its earlier research, comments by respondents in focus groups suggested that people’s doubts about heterogeneous grouping also stem from their own experiences in school or at the workplace. People recalled incidents when they suffered from being in a class that was too

advanced for them, or when they watched someone else fall farther and farther behind because his skills were just not equal to those of the rest of the class. People often cite differences in the needs of their own children as arguments in favor of grouping students by skill

level and tailoring teaching to their level of advancement. In short, heterogeneous grouping makes no intuitive sense to people and seems to fly in the face of their real-world experiences.

## Replacing Multiple-Choice Tests with More 'Authentic' Assessments

Previous research by Public Agenda has suggested that large numbers of Americans, like leaders, question the usefulness of multiple-choice exams and favor alternatives such as essay tests, portfolios, and demonstration projects when they are used in conjunction with grades. In this study, 54% of respondents say replacing multiple-choice tests with essay tests would improve academic performance—an endorsement, but one that falls significantly short of people's support for removing disruptive students (73%) or making correct English a requirement for graduation (88%).

The problem that education reformers face in their drive to replace multiple-choice tests with more "authentic" forms of assessment is not that people object to the idea. The problem is that this particular recommendation seems somewhat tangential to people's chief concerns about the schools. It is as if people are saying, "Well, that's all well and good, but what about the guns, the drugs, the truancy, and the students who can't add, spell or find France on a map?"

## Outcomes-Based Education

Both the general public and parents with children currently in public schools express very strong support for the core concept of "outcomes-based education" or OBE. More than eight in ten (82%) say that "setting up very clear guidelines on what kids should learn and teachers should teach in every major subject" would significantly improve academic achievement. Despite the very strong endorsement for the concept, focus group interviews suggest that local initiatives risk becoming far less popular if they are accompanied by too many unfamiliar, poorly understood, "newfangled" teaching innovations.

Comments in focus groups suggest that the concept of setting clear goals for learning can be undermined by the shock of the new—new jargon, new kinds of report cards, new kinds of assignments—unless they are *very* well explained and crystal clear in their responsiveness to the public's concern about basics. Focus groups conducted in Minneapolis and Des Moines for this project uncovered a surprising degree of frustration and even ridicule for outcomes-based education:

"They have this outcomes-based education. I never did fully understand it, but when I got my son's report card, I was fully confused. It just had columns and check marks of 'has not fully accomplished' or 'needs work accomplishing.' I had no idea where he was at, what level he was at. What *was* he accomplishing? It was a real arbitrary thing—the opinion of the teacher. *She* couldn't even tell us where he was at. It was real vague, without those boundaries and concrete measures that say, 'Yes, he can do fractions, or he knows his multiplication tables.' All of that was totally lost."

—Minneapolis father

"Outcomes-based education? That's sort of on the idea where the students are all in the classroom, and they decide the way it's going to be and [assign] their own grades."

—Des Moines father

"Outcomes-based education is supposed to be the hot topic, but it doesn't look like anything that I ever saw. They have these real vague, self-esteem-oriented goals, and even the teacher can't tell you what the heck it is that they're supposed to be evaluating. It's fluid. You try to grab on to it and there's nothing there. It just kind of runs through your fingers and leaves a mess on the table. It's like they're trying out someone's pet theory. It's like they all go to this conference over the summer, the teachers—the educational professionals I guess they have to call them now—and someone comes out and says, 'Hey, why don't we try out this outcomes-based education thing,' and everyone says, 'Yeah!'"

—Minneapolis father

The public's reactions to many of the newer educational approaches and trends that often accompany the drive for higher academic standards share a common thread: People don't understand why the reforms are considered better, and people haven't really been all that impressed with the teaching reforms they have seen in the past. Respondents in focus groups were often unnerved by what they regarded as a "fuzziness" and lack of precision in the way some teachers approach basics such as arithmetic and writing, and people seemed to fear that teaching "fads" were replacing time-honored ways of doing things.

Americans read newspaper stories about the impressive achievements of students in other countries, and they are repeatedly confronted with young people behind the cash register who can't make change. The reaction of many people seems to be something like this: "Maybe the old-fashioned methods weren't perfect, but schools are getting even worse results now! I learned the old-fashioned way, and at least I can spell and add."

## FINDING:

### The Most-Valued Values: Tolerance and Equality

People want schools to teach values, but they especially want schools to emphasize those values that allow a diverse society to live together peacefully.

There is a circle of broadly agreed upon values people expect the schools both to teach directly and to reinforce by example. And there are some "lessons" that most Americans believe are not the business of the public schools—those that seem strident to people and aimed at dividing them, rather than helping them live together in harmony.

As part of the study, respondents were given a list of 22 items and asked whether they were appropriate for public schools to teach. They rated each item from one to five, with one being "not at all appropriate" and five being "highly appropriate." Results indicate that over-

(Continued on page 44)

# A DE-MORALIZED SOCIETY: THE BRITISH/AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

BY GERTRUDE HIMMELFARB

“THE PAST is a foreign country,” it has been said. But it is not an unrecognizable country. Indeed, we sometimes experience a “shock of recognition” as we confront some aspect of the past in the present. One does not need to have had a Victorian grandmother, as did Margaret Thatcher, to be reminded of “Victorian values.” One does not even have to be English; “Victorian America,” as it has been called, was not all that different, at least in terms of values, from Victorian England. Vestigial remains of that Victorianism are everywhere around us. And memories of them persist, even when the realities are gone, rather like an amputated limb that still seems to throb when the weather is bad.

How can we not think of our present condition when we read Thomas Carlyle on the “Condition of England” one hundred and fifty years ago? While his contemporaries were debating “the standard of living question”—the “pessimists” arguing that the standard of living of the working classes had declined in that early period of industrialism, and the “optimists” that it had improved—Carlyle reformulated the issue to read, “the condition of England question.” That question, he insisted, could not be resolved by citing “figures of arithmetic” about wages and prices. What was important was the “condition” and “disposition” of the people: their beliefs and feelings, their sense of right and wrong, the attitudes and habits that would dispose them either to a “wholesome composure, frugality, and prosperity,” or to an “acrid unrest, recklessness, gin-drinking and gradual ruin.”

In fact, the Victorians did have “figures of arithmetic” dealing with the condition and disposition of

*Gertrude Himmelfarb is professor emerita of history at the City University of New York. She is the author of numerous books, including The Idea of Poverty, The New History and the Old, and On Looking Into the Abyss. This essay is reprinted with permission of the author, from The Public Interest, Number 117, Fall 1994, ©1995 by Gertrude Himmelfarb. It is adapted from a chapter in the author's forthcoming book, The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values, to be published in early 1995 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.*

the people as well as their economic state. These “moral statistics” or “social statistics,” as they called them, dealt with crime, illiteracy, illegitimacy, drunkenness, pauperism, vagrancy. If they did not have, as we do, statistics on drugs, divorce, or teenage suicide, it is because these problems were then so negligible as not to constitute “social problems.”

It is in this historical context that we may address our own “condition of the people question.” And it is by comparison with the Victorians that we may find even more cause for alarm. For the current moral statistics are not only more troubling than those a century ago; they constitute a trend that bodes even worse for the future than for the present. Where the Victorians had the satisfaction of witnessing a significant improvement in their moral and social condition, we are confronting a considerable deterioration in ours.

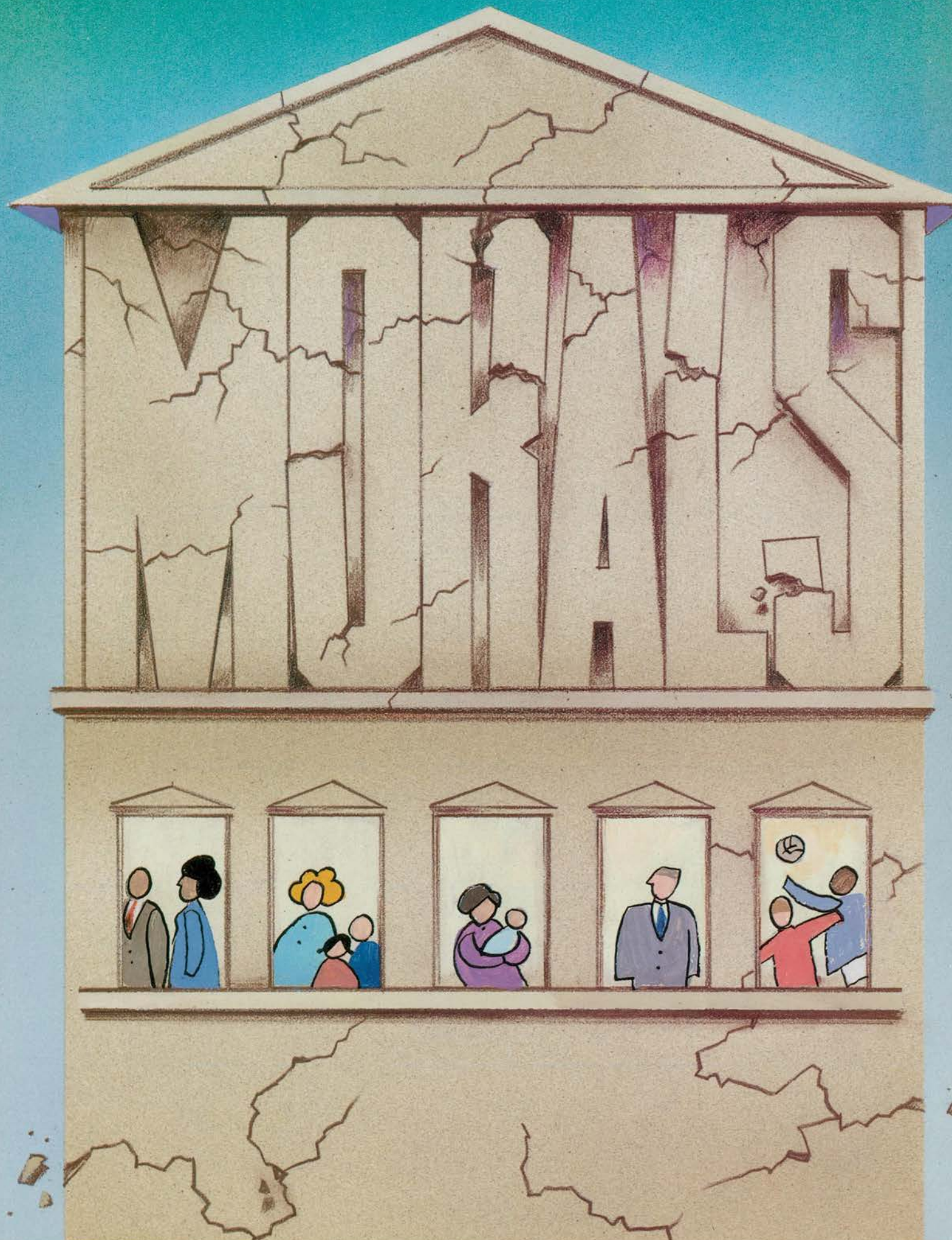
## The ‘Moral Statistics’: Illegitimacy

In nineteenth-century England, the illegitimacy ratio—the proportion of out-of-wedlock births to total births—rose from a little over 5 percent at the beginning of the century to a peak of 7 percent in 1845. It then fell steadily until it was less than 4 percent at the turn of the century. In East London, the poorest section of the city, the figures are even more dramatic, for illegitimacy was consistently well below the average: 4.5 percent in mid-century and 3 percent by the end of the century. Apart from a temporary increase during both world wars, the ratio continued to hover around 5 percent until 1960. It then began to rise: to over 8 percent in 1970, 12 percent in 1980, and then precipitously, to more than 32 percent by the end of 1992—a two-and-one-half-times increase in the last decade alone and a sixfold rise in three decades. In 1981, a married woman was half as likely to have a child as she was in 1901, while an unmarried woman was three times as likely. (See Figure 1.)

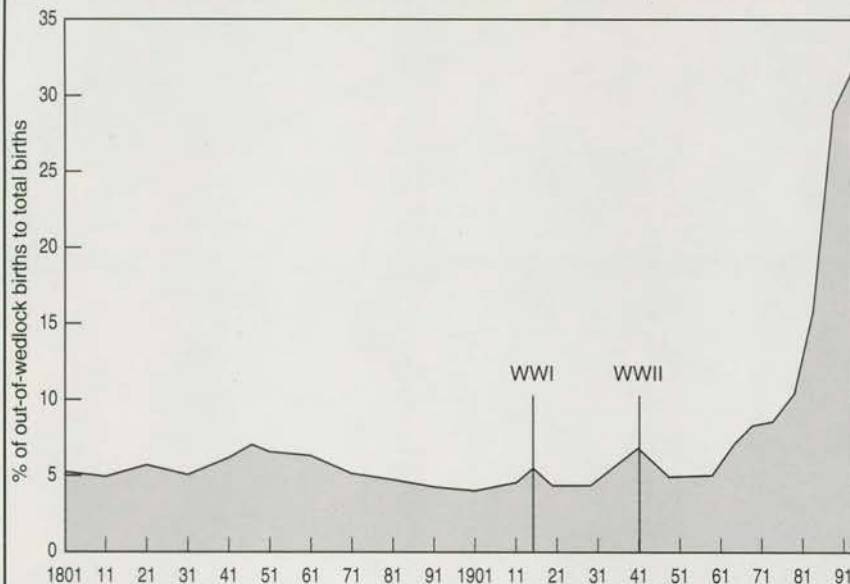
In the United States, the figures are no less dramatic. Starting at 3 percent in 1920 (the first year for which there are national statistics), the illegitimacy ratio rose gradually to slightly over 5 percent by 1960, after which it grew rapidly: to almost 11 percent in 1970, over 18 percent in 1980, and 30 per-





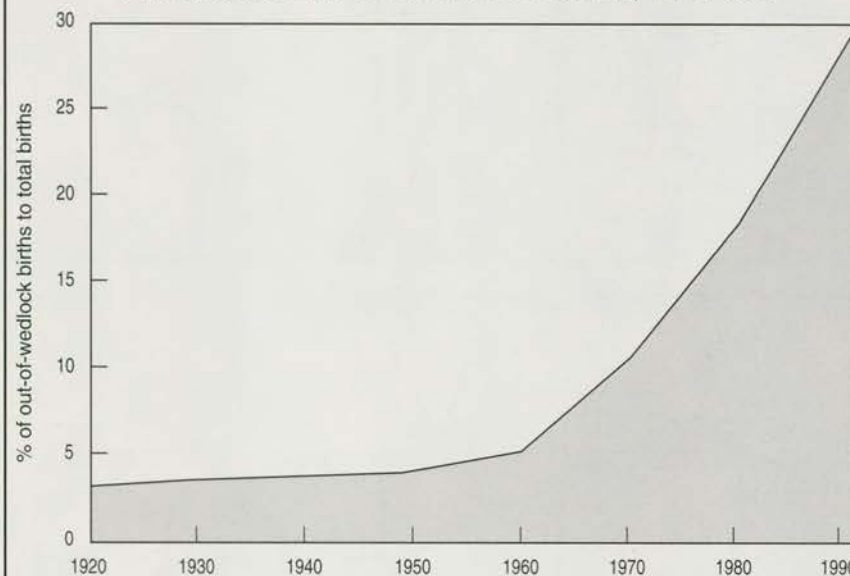


**FIGURE 1  
ILLEGITIMACY IN ENGLAND AND WALES, 1801-1992**



Source: For 1801-1840: *Bastardy and Its Comparative History*, ed. Peter Laslett, et al. (Cambridge, Mass., 1980); for 1841-1992: United Kingdom Office of Population Censuses and Surveys.

**FIGURE 2  
ILLEGITIMACY IN THE UNITED STATES, 1920-1991**



Source: For 1920-1930: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Vital Statistics of the United States*, 1940; for 1940-1991: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Center for Health Statistics.

cent by 1991—a tenfold increase from 1920 and a sixfold increase from 1960. For whites alone, the ratio went up only slightly between 1920 and 1960 (from 1.5 percent to a little over 2 percent) and then advanced at an even steeper rate than that of blacks: to almost 6 percent in 1970, 11 percent in 1980, and nearly 22 percent in 1991—fourteen times the 1920 figure and eleven times that of 1960. If the black illegitimacy ratio did not accelerate as much, it was because it started at a higher level: from 12 percent in 1920 to 22 percent in 1960, over 37 percent in 1970, 55 percent in 1980, and 68 percent by 1991. (See Figure 2.)

by 1856, in the country at large. Although this undoubtedly had the effect of deterring crime, it also improved the recording of crime and the apprehension of criminals, which makes the lower crime rates even more notable. One criminologist, analyzing these statistics, concludes that deterrence alone cannot account for the decline, that the explanation has to be sought in "heavy generalizations about the 'civilizing' effects of religion, education, and environmental reform."

The low crime rate persisted until shortly before the First World War when it rose very slightly. It fell during the war and started a steady rise in the mid-twenties,

Teenage illegitimacy has earned the United States the dubious distinction of ranking first among all industrialized nations, the rate having tripled between 1960 and 1991. In 1990, one in ten teenage girls got pregnant, half of them giving birth and the other half having abortions. England is second only to the United States in teenage illegitimacy, but the rate of increase in the past three decades has been even more rapid. In both countries, teenagers are far more "sexually active" (as the current expression has it) than ever before, and at an earlier age. In 1970, 5 percent of fifteen-year-old girls in the United States had had sexual intercourse; in 1988, 25 percent had.

### The 'Moral Statistics': Crime

Public opinion polls in both England and the United States show crime as the major concern of the people, and for good reason, as the statistics suggest. Again, the historical pattern is dramatic and disquieting. In England between 1857 and 1901, the rate of indictable offenses (serious offenses, not including simple assault, drunkenness, vagrancy, and the like) decreased from about 480 per 100,000 population to 250—a decline of almost 50 percent in four decades. The absolute numbers are even more graphic: While the population grew from about 19 million to 33 million, the number of serious crimes fell from 92,000 to 81,000. Moreover, 1857 was not the peak year; it is simply the year when the most reliable and consistent series of statistics starts. The decline (earlier statistics suggest) started in the mid or late 1840s—at about the same time as the beginning of the decline in illegitimacy. It is also interesting that just as the illegitimacy ratio in the middle of the century was lower in the metropolis than in the rest of the country, so was the crime rate.

The considerable decrease of crime in England is often attributed to the establishment of the police force, first in London in 1829, then in the counties, and,

reaching 400 per 100,000 population in 1931 (somewhat less than the 1861 rate) and 900 in 1941. During the Second World War, unlike the First (and contrary to popular opinion), crime increased, levelling off or declining slightly in the early 1950s. The largest rise started in the mid-fifties, from under 1,000 in 1955 to 1,750 in 1961, 3,400 in 1971, 5,600 in 1981, and a staggering 10,000 in 1991—ten times the rate of 1955 and forty times that of 1901. Violent crimes alone almost doubled in each decade after 1950. (See Figure 3.) (On the eve of this rise, in 1955, the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer remarked upon the extraordinary degree of civility exhibited in England, where “football crowds are as orderly as church meetings.” Within a few years, those games became notorious as the scene of mayhem and riots.)

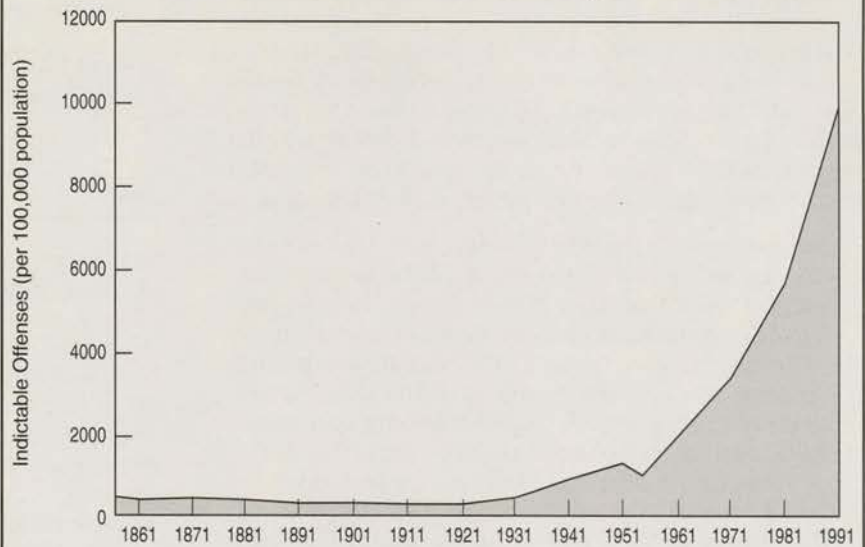
There are no national crime statistics for the United States for the nineteenth century and only partial ones (for homicides) for the early twentieth century. Local statistics, however, suggest that, as in England, the decrease in crime started in the latter part of the nineteenth century (except for a few years following the Civil War) and continued into the early twentieth century. There was even a decline of homicides in the larger cities, where they were most common; in Philadelphia, the rate fell from 3.3 per 100,000 population in mid-century to 2.1 by the end of the century.

National crime statistics became available only in 1960, when the rate was under 1,900 per 100,000 population. That figure doubled within the decade and tripled by 1980. A decline in the early 1980s, from almost 6,000 to 5,200, was followed by an increase to 5,800 in 1990; the latest figure, for 1992, is somewhat under 5,700. The rate of violent crime (murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault) followed a similar pattern, except that the increase after 1985 was more precipitous and continued until 1992, making for an almost fivefold rise from 1960. In 1987, the Department of Justice estimated that eight of every ten Americans would be a victim of violent crime at least once in their lives. (See Figure 4.)\*

Homicide statistics go back to the beginning of the century, when the national rate was 1.2 per 100,000 pop-

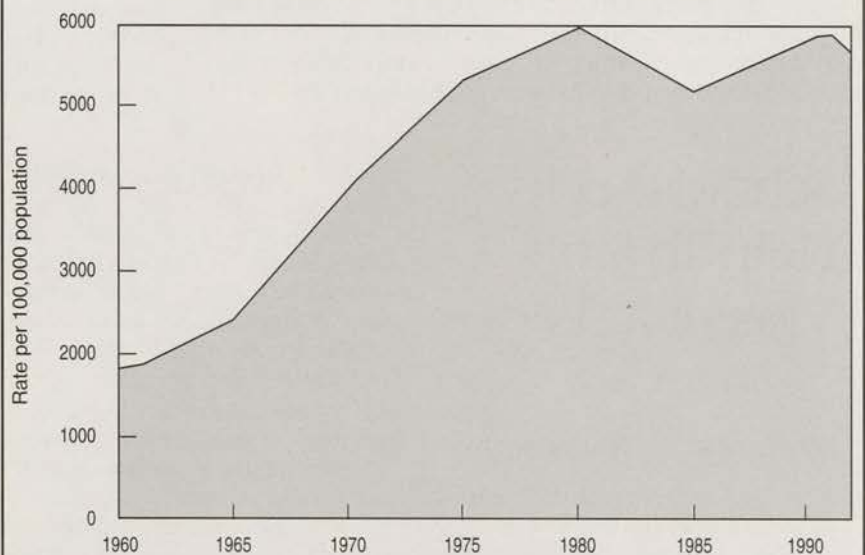
\*Because of differences in the definition and reporting of crimes, the American index of crime is not equivalent to the English rate of indictable offenses. The English rate of 10,000 in 1991 does not mean that England experienced almost twice as many crimes per capita as America did. It is the trend lines in both countries that are significant, and those lines are comparable.

**FIGURE 3**  
**CRIME IN ENGLAND AND WALES, 1857-1991**



Source: For 1857-1980: B. R. Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, England, 1988), pp. 776-778; for 1981-1991: Home Office *Criminal Statistics*.  
Note: I have converted absolute numbers into rate per 100,000 population.

**FIGURE 4**  
**CRIME IN THE UNITED STATES, 1960-1992**



Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation.  
Note: Because of differences in the definition and reporting of crimes, the American index of crime is not equivalent to the English rate of indictable offenses. It is the trend lines in the two countries that are comparable.

ulation. That figure skyrocketed during prohibition, reaching as high as 9.7 by one account (6.5 by another) in 1933, when prohibition was repealed. The rate dropped to between five and six during the 1940s and to under five in the fifties and early sixties. In the mid-sixties, it started to climb rapidly, more than doubling between 1965 and 1980. A decline in the early eighties was followed by another rise; in 1991 it was just short of its 1980 peak. The rate among blacks, especially in the cities, was considerably higher than among whites—at one point in the 1920s as much as eight times higher. In

the 1970s and early 1980s, the black rate fell by more than one-fourth (from over 40 to under 30), while the white rate rose by one-third (from 4.3 to 5.6); since then, however, the rate for young black males tripled while that for young white males rose by 50 percent. Homicide is now the leading cause of death among black youths.

For all kinds of crimes the figures for blacks are far higher than for whites—for blacks both as the victims and the perpetrators of crime. Criminologists have coined the term “criminogenic” to describe this phenomenon:

In essence, the inner city has become a criminogenic community, a place where the social forces that create predatory criminals are far more numerous and overwhelmingly stronger than the social forces that create virtuous citizens. At core, the problem is that most inner-city children grow up surrounded by teenagers and adults who are themselves deviant, delinquent, or criminal. At best, these teenagers and adults misshape the characters and lives of the young in their midst. At worst, they abuse, neglect, or criminally prey upon the young.

### More Moral Statistics

There are brave souls, inveterate optimists, who try to put the best gloss on the statistics. But it is not much consolation to be told that the overall crime rate in the United States has declined slightly from its peak in the early 1980s if the violent crime rate has risen in the same period—and increased still more among juveniles and girls (an ominous trend, since the teenage population is also growing). Nor that the divorce rate has fallen somewhat

***Violent crime has become so endemic that we have practically become inured to it.***

in the past decade, if it had doubled in the previous two decades; if more parents are co-habiting without benefit of marriage (the rate in the United States has increased sixfold since 1970); and if more children are born out of wedlock and living with single parents. (In 1970, one out of ten families was headed by a single parent; in 1990, three out of ten were). Nor that the white illegitimacy ratio is considerably lower than the black, if the white ratio is rapidly approaching the black ratio of a few decades ago, when Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote his percipient report about the breakdown of the black family. (The black ratio in 1964, when that report was issued, was 24.5 percent; the white ratio now is 22 percent. In 1964, 50 percent of black teenage mothers were single; in 1991, 55 percent of white teenage mothers were single.)

Nor is it reassuring to be told that two-thirds of new welfare recipients are off the rolls within two years, if half of those soon return, and a quarter of all recipients are on for more than eight years. Nor that divorced mothers leave the welfare rolls after an average of five years, if never-married mothers remain for more than nine

## Schools Seek Help To Stop Violent Acts

BY ROBERT O'HARROW, JR.

Fairfax County [Virginia] school officials, anxious about a rising number of assaults, weapon confiscations and incidents such as the recent drive-by shooting at J.E.B. Stuart High School, are acknowledging they cannot handle school violence problems alone and are appealing to the community for help.

Reflecting a growing national concern over the impact of violence on education, county officials have begun to form twenty-three school-community groups to try to reach out to parents, police, and other residents for solutions to

violence in classrooms and near schools.

During one organizational meeting at Stuart on Wednesday night, dozens of Fairfax parents, educators, police officers, and community activists swapped ideas and fretted about rising gang activity.

One man suggested sending delegations of parents and educators to troubled neighborhoods near the school. A mother appealed for more hallway guards to make her teenage daughter feel safer. Someone else talked about starting a newsletter to circulate ideas about violence prevention.

School officials said they welcomed any and all suggestions.

“I don't have the National Guard to go around the perimeter” of campus, Stuart Principal Nancy Weisergerber said during the meeting. “The only way we can fight this is by working together.... We cannot do it alone.”

School officials nationwide say that increases in weapons, fights,

gangs, and drug use on campuses are community problems that educators can't hope to solve alone. And increasingly, they are turning to programs similar to Fairfax's in search of solutions.

“We've seen it in every part of the country, in rich and poor schools,” said William Modzeleski, director of drug planning and outreach for the U.S. Department of Education. “Schools need to break down the isolation and insulation.”

In Prince George's County [Maryland], school officials have developed strong ties with churches, public housing groups and tenant associations, and they regularly hold off-campus seminars on ways to stop youth violence.

Montgomery County [Maryland] officials have been working closely with a volunteer group called Voices Versus Violence, which held more than a dozen town meetings last spring with parents, students, teachers, religious leaders, police, and others.

years, and unmarried mothers who bore their children as teenagers stay on for ten or more years. (Forty-three percent of the longest-term welfare recipients started their families as unwed teenagers.)

Nor is the cause of racial equality promoted by the news of an emerging "white underclass," smaller and less conspicuous than the black (partly because it is more dispersed) but rapidly increasing. If, as has been conclusively demonstrated, the single-parent family is the most important factor associated with the "pathology of poverty"—welfare dependency, crime, drugs, illiteracy, homelessness—a white illegitimacy ratio of 22 percent, and twice that for white women below the poverty line, signifies a new and dangerous trend. In England, Charles Murray has shown, a similar underclass is developing with twice the illegitimacy of the rest of the population; there it is a purely class rather than racial phenomenon.

### Redefining Deviancy

The English sociologist Christie Davies has described a "U-curve model of deviance," which applies to both Britain and the United States. The curve shows the drop in crime, violence, illegitimacy, and alcoholism in the last half of the nineteenth century, reaching a low at the turn of the century, and a sharp rise in the latter part of the twentieth century. The curve is actually more skewed than this image suggests. It might more accurately be described as a "J-curve," for the height of deviancy in the nineteenth century was considerably lower than it is today—an illegitimacy ratio of 7 percent in England in the mid-nineteenth century, compared with over 32 percent toward the end of the twentieth; or a crime rate of

about 500 per 100,000 population then compared with 10,000 now.

In his *American Scholar* essay, "Defining Deviancy Down," Senator Moynihan has taken the idea of deviancy a step further by describing the downward curve of the concept of deviancy. What was once regarded as deviant behavior is no longer so regarded; what was once deemed abnormal has been normalized. As deviancy is defined downward, so the threshold of deviancy rises: Behavior once stigmatized as deviant is now tolerated and even sanctioned. Mental patients, no longer institutionalized, are now treated, and appear in the statistics, not as mentally incapacitated but as "homeless." Divorce and illegitimacy, once seen as betokening the breakdown of the family, are now viewed more benignly; illegitimacy has been officially rebaptized as "nonmarital child-bearing," and divorced and unmarried mothers are lumped together in the category of "single-parent families." And violent crime has become so endemic that we have practically become inured to it. The St. Valentine's Day Massacre in Chicago in 1929, when four gangsters killed seven other gangsters, shocked the nation and became legendary, immortalized in encyclopedias and history books; in Los Angeles today, James Q. Wilson observes, as many people are killed every weekend.

It is ironic to recall that only a short while ago criminologists were accounting for the rise of the crime rates in terms of our "sensitization to violence." As a result of the century-long decline of violence, they reasoned, we had become more sensitive to "residual violence"; thus, more crimes were being reported and apprehended. This "residual violence" has by now become so overwhelming that, as Moynihan points out, we are being

Montgomery school security officials also plan to broaden contacts with parent and minority groups when they finish adding security teams to all twenty-one secondary schools this year.

The initiative in Fairfax is one of the most far-reaching in the region, and it follows several years of increasing trouble with weapons, gang fights, and assaults.

The number of recommendations for expulsions considered by the School Board, for example, increased from fourteen in the 1985-86 school year to 133 last year.

This school year has been marred by an unprecedented amount of gunfire. In September, two teenagers were wounded while watching a fight after a Lake Braddock football game, when a bystander pulled out a handgun and started shooting. On Nov. 3, a man riding in a car fired a gun several times near Stuart shortly after classes had ended. No one was

injured, but one of the bullets shattered a window in the school gym. Police described both incidents as gang related.

Officials hope to head off future incidents by creating the community groups that will come up with ideas for safer schools and redirect teenagers regarded as prone to violence or involved with drinking or drugs.

With the help of about \$425,000 in federal grants, volunteers from schools, churches, business and parents groups have been receiving training this year on how to organize themselves and prevent violence. Eventually, each group will involve students.

At Wednesday's meeting of the new Stuart Circle Community Coalition, parents wanted to start by talking about the recent shooting. While many were still aggrieved by the incident, others, such as Togi Foldvary, wanted to talk about why their children dismissed it as nothing particularly

important.

"She said, 'Mom, get used to it. That's the way it is,'" Foldvary said of her fourteen-year-old daughter, Melissa, a freshman at Stuart. "We can't accept it. They're growing up with it. It's a natural part of their lives."

Gerald Jackson, a senior probation officer in Fairfax, said the group will be critical to the school.

"This is a crucial time in the history of the community," said Jackson, who helped organize the group.

But others seemed skeptical.

"I'm all in favor of community involvement, but I personally don't know. What kind of leverage do you have?" asked Thomas Grossman, the parent of a senior. "Who do you leverage?"

*Robert O'Harrow, Jr. is a staff writer for The Washington Post. This article is reprinted with permission from the November 18, 1994, issue of that newspaper.*

desensitized to it.

Charles Krauthammer has proposed a complementary concept in his *New Republic* essay, "Defining Deviancy Up." As deviancy is normalized, so the normal becomes deviant. The kind of family that has been regarded for centuries as natural and moral—the "bourgeois" family, as it is invidiously called—is now seen as pathological, concealing behind the façade of respectability the new "original sin," child abuse. While crime is underreported because we have become desensitized to it, child abuse is overreported, including fantasies imagined (often inspired by therapists and social workers) long after the supposed events. Similarly, rape has been "defined up" as "date rape," to include sexual relations that the participants themselves may not at the time have perceived as rape.

The combined effect of defining deviancy up and defining it down has been to normalize and legitimate what was once regarded as abnormal and illegitimate, and, conversely, to stigmatize and discredit what was once normal and respectable. This process too, has occurred with startling rapidity. One might expect that attitudes and values would lag behind the reality, that people would continue to pay lip service to the moral principles they were brought up with, even while violating those principles in practice. What is startling about the 1960s "sexual revolution," as it has properly been

called, is how revolutionary it was, in sensibility as well as reality. In 1965, 69 percent of American women and 65 percent of men under the age of thirty said that premarital sex was always or almost always wrong; in 1972, those figures plummeted to 24 percent and 21 percent. For women over the age of thirty, the figures dropped from 91 percent to 62 percent, and for men from 62 percent to 47 percent—this in seven short years. Thus language, sensibility, and social policy conspire together to redefine deviancy.

### Understanding the Causes

For a long time, social critics and policy makers found it hard to face up to the realities of our moral condition, in spite of the evidence of statistics. They criticized the statistics themselves or tried to explain them away. The crime figures, they said, reflect not a real increase in crime but an increase in the reporting of crime; or the increase is a temporary aberration, a blip on the demographic curve representing the "baby boomers" who would soon outgrow their infantile, antisocial behavior; or criminal behavior is a cry for help from individuals seeking recognition and self-esteem; or crime is the unfortunate result of poverty, unemployment, and racism, to be overcome by a more generous welfare system, a more equitable distribution of wealth, and a more aggressive drive against discrimination.

## Talk Shows 'Normalize' Deviant Behavior

PHIL, SALLY and Oprah's increasing reliance on bizarre tales of deviance and pathology could have a dangerous consequence: a society numb to once-obvious maxims of right and wrong, say two Penn State professors.

"In their competition for audience share, ratings, and profits, television talk shows co-opt deviant subcultures, break taboos and eventually, through repeated, non-judgmental exposure, make it all seem banal and ordinary," write Drs. Vicki Abt and Mel Seesholtz in *The Journal of Popular Culture*.

Abt and Seesholtz's research on television talk shows, titled "The Shameless World of Phil, Sally, and Oprah: Television Talk Shows and the Deconstructing of Society," appeared in the journal's summer 1994 edition.

Abt, professor of sociology, and Seesholtz, assistant professor of English, both at Penn State's Ogontz campus in suburban Philadelphia, spent six months studying the program content of sixty talk shows, watching twenty

episodes each of television's three most visible daytime talk shows: "The Donahue Show," "The Sally Jessy Raphael Show," and "The Oprah Winfrey Show."

"The implication of this research is that television talk shows obliterate the boundaries that society has created between issues of good and evil, public and private, shame and pride," said Abt. "Our culture used to give us boundaries. Today, there are no boundaries. Nothing is forbidden any more. Society's conventions are flouted with impunity. Television emphasizes the deviant so that it becomes normal. If you are really normal, no one cares."

Talk show hosts, meanwhile, continue to rationalize their programs' sensational focus by claiming to serve a valuable role in educating the public. The article cites specific instances when talk-show hosts "use pseudo-professional phrasing to mask voyeurism."

For instance: "I ask this question not to pry in your business, but to educate parents in our audience."  
—Oprah, talking to a female guest

who claims to have been sexually abused by her father. And during the same program: "This is a country that doesn't recognize child abuse, and that's why we're doing this show."

Such proclamations, the article says, strain credulity, given the "... countless similar talk shows on the same subject." Talk shows have also created a culture of "victims" who are rarely held accountable for their actions, according to Abt and Seesholtz.

"Rather than being mortified, ashamed or trying to hide their stigma, guests willingly and eagerly discuss their child molesting, sexual quirks and criminal records in an effort to seek 'understanding' for their particular disease," they note.

According to talk show ideology, "people now are sick," Abt says, "rather than possibly being irresponsible, weak people.... They are not to blame for anything. These shows destroy the whole notion that people are responsible for their behavior."

—Pennsylvania State University  
Department of Public Information

These explanations have some plausibility. The rise and fall of crime sometimes, but not always, corresponds to the increase and decrease of the age group most prone to criminal behavior. And there is an occasional, but not consistent, relation between crime and economic depression and poverty. In England in the 1890s, in a period of severe unemployment, crime (including property crime) fell. Indeed, the inverse relationship between crime and poverty at the end of the nineteenth century suggests, as one study put it, that "poverty-based crime" had given way to "prosperity-based crime."

In the twentieth century, the correlation between crime and unemployment has been no less erratic. While crime did increase in England during the depression of the 1930s, that increase had started some years earlier. A graph of unemployment and crime between 1950 and 1980 shows no significant correlation in the first fifteen years and only a rough correlation thereafter. The crime figures, a Home Office bulletin concludes, would correspond equally well, or even better, with other kinds of data. "Indeed, the consumption of alcohol, the consumption of ice cream, the number of cars on the road, and the Gross National Product are highly correlated with rising crime over 1950-1980."

The situation is similar in the United States. In the high-unemployment years of 1949, 1958 and 1961, when unemployment was 6 or 7 percent, crime was less than 2 percent; in the low-unemployment years of 1966 to 1969, with unemployment between 3 and 4 percent, crime was almost 4 percent. Today in the inner cities there is a correlation between unemployment and crime, but it may be argued that it is not so much unemployment that causes crime as a culture that denigrates or discourages employment, making crime seem more normal, natural, and desirable than employment. The "culture of criminality," it is evident, is very different from the "culture of poverty" as we once understood that concept.

Nor can the decline of the two-parent family be attributed, as is sometimes suggested, to the economic recession of recent times. Neither illegitimacy nor divorce increased during the far more serious depression of the 1930s—or, for that matter, in previous depressions, either in England or in the United States. In England in the 1980s, illegitimacy actually increased more in areas where the employment situation improved than in those where it got worse. Nor is there a correlation between illegitimacy and poverty; in the latter part of the nineteenth century, illegitimacy was significantly lower in the East End of London than in the rest of the country. Today there is a correlation between illegitimacy and poverty, but not a causal one; just as crime has become part of the culture of poverty, so has the single-parent family.

### The Language of Morality

These realities have been difficult to confront because they violate the dominant ethos, which assumes that moral progress is a necessary byproduct of material progress. It seems incomprehensible that in this age of free, compulsory education, illiteracy should be a problem, not among immigrants but among native-born Americans; or illegitimacy, at a time when sex education, birth control, and abortion are widely available. Even

***We are constantly beseeched to be "nonjudgmental," to be wary of crediting our beliefs with any greater validity than anyone else's.***

more important is the suspicion of the very idea of morality. Moral principles, still more moral judgments, are thought to be at best an intellectual embarrassment, at worst evidence of an illiberal and repressive disposition. It is this reluctance to speak the language of morality, far more than any specific values, that separates us from the Victorians.

Most of us are uncomfortable with the idea of making moral judgments even in our private lives, let alone with the "intrusion," as we say, of moral judgments into public affairs. We are uncomfortable not only because we have come to feel that we have no right to make such judgments and impose them upon others, but because we have no confidence in the judgments themselves, no assurance that our principles are true and right for us, let alone for others. We are constantly beseeched to be "non-judgmental," to be wary of crediting our beliefs with any greater validity than anyone else's, to be conscious of how "Eurocentric" and "culture bound" we are. *Chacun à son goût*, we say of morals, as of taste; indeed, morals have become a matter of taste.

Public officials in particular shy away from the word "immoral," lest they be accused of racism, sexism, or elitism. When members of the president's Cabinet were asked if it is immoral for people to have children out of wedlock, they drew back from that distasteful phrase. The Secretary of Health and Human Services replied, "I don't like to put this in moral terms, but I do believe that having children out of wedlock is just wrong." The Surgeon General was more forthright: "No. Everyone has different moral standards . . . You can't impose your standards on someone else."

It is not only our political and cultural leaders who are prone to this failure of moral nerve. Everyone has been infected by it, to one degree or another. A moving testimonial to this comes from an unlikely source: Richard Hoggart, the British literary critic and very much a man of the left, not given to celebrating Victorian values. It was in the course of criticizing a book espousing traditional virtues that Hoggart observed about his own hometown:

In Hunslet, a working-class district of Leeds, within which I was brought up, old people will still enunciate, as guides to living, the moral rules they learned at Sunday School and Chapel. Then they almost always add, these days: "But it's only my opinion, of course." A late-twentieth century insurance clause, a recognition that times have changed towards the always shiftingly relativist. In that same council estate, any idea of parental guidance has in many homes been lost. Most of the children there

*(Continued on page 40)*

# THE FAILURE OF SEX EDUCATION

*Under the old arrangement, adults were the custodians of a moratorium on adolescent sexual activity. It never worked perfectly, of course, but it gave the overwhelming majority of young people a relatively protected period of years during which they could acquire the competencies and credentials of adulthood before they took on the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood. The new way of thinking rests on a radically different set of assumptions. The social and cultural norms, institutional reinforcements, and adult oversight that were once employed to enforce the moratorium have been greatly relaxed. Responsibility has been shifted, in large part, from adults to the teenagers themselves. Provided with "comprehensive sex education," contraceptives, and "communications skills"—the "tools" to manage their own sex lives—adolescents are set adrift to fend for themselves. But it's a pretty stormy sexual environment out there, and by all accounts, they're not faring well. The moratorium has collapsed. It's time to re-think.*

BY BARBARA DAFOE WHITEHEAD

**A** MID RISING concern about the hazards of teenage sex, health and school leaders are calling for an expanded effort to teach sex education in the schools. At the moment, the favored approach is called comprehensive sex education. The nation's highest-ranking health officer, Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders, has endorsed this approach as the chief way to reduce unwed childbearing and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) among teenagers. The pillars of the health and school establishments, including the National Association of School Psychologists, the American Medical Association, the National School Boards Association, and the Society for Adolescent Medicine, support this approach. So do a growing number of state legislatures. Over the past decade seventeen states have adopted mandates to

*Barbara Dafoe Whitehead is a vice president of the Institute for American Values, in New York City. She is at work on a book about parents and children in a post-marriage society. This article was first published in The Atlantic Monthly, October 1994, and is reprinted by permission of the author.*

teach comprehensive sex education, and thirty more support it.

Sex education in the schools is not new, of course, but never before has it attempted to expose children to so much so soon. Comprehensive sex education includes much more than a movie about menstruation and a class or two in human reproduction. It begins in kindergarten and continues into high school. It sweeps across disciplines, taking up the biology of reproduction, the psychology of relationships, the sociology of the family, and the sexology of masturbation and massage. It seeks not simply to reduce health risks to teenagers but also to build self-esteem, prevent sexual abuse, promote respect for all kinds of families, and make little boys more nurturant and little girls more assertive. As Dr. Elders explains, comprehensive sex education is not just about giving children a "plumbing lesson."

This approach is appealing for several reasons. First, it reaches the vast majority of American schoolchildren through the public school system. Second, it is inexpensive. Principals have to do little more than buy a sex-education curriculum and enroll the coach or home-eco-





DAVIS

nomics teacher in a training workshop, and their school has a sex-education program. Third, to panicky parents, worried about their ability to protect their children from AIDS and other STDs, comprehensive sex education offers a reassuring message: The schools will teach your children how to protect themselves.

Nonetheless, comprehensive sex education has provoked vigorous opposition, both at the grass roots and especially in the organized ranks of the religious right. Its critics argue that when it comes to teaching children about sex, the public schools should convey one message only: abstinence. In response, sex educators point to the statistics. Face facts, they say. A growing number of teenagers are engaging in sex and suffering its harmful consequences. It is foolish, if not irresponsible, to deny that reality. If more teenagers are sexually active, why deprive them of the information they need to avoid early pregnancy and disease? What's more, why insist on a standard of conduct for teenagers that adults themselves no longer honor or obey? As usual, the Surgeon General states the basic proposition memorably: "Everybody in the world is opposed to sex outside of marriage, and yet everybody does it. I'm saying, 'Get real.'"

This rhetoric is politically shrewd. It is smart to identify sex education with realism, honesty, and sexual freedom. (Its opponents are thereby unrealistic, hypocritical, and sexually unliberated.) Similarly, it is advantageous to link the sex education campaign with the struggle against religious fundamentalism and, more generally, with opposition to religious argument in public life. When the issue is cast in Scopes-trial terms, it appears that an approach to sex education based in science will triumph over one rooted in blind faith.

But the sex educators' rhetoric is double-edged. As credentialed professionals, trained in the health and pedagogical sciences, advocates for a "reality-based" approach must at some point submit to reality tests. Their claims raise the inevitable question: How realistic is their approach to solving the problems associated with teenage sex? Or, to be more specific: What is the evidence that comprehensive sex education can achieve its stated goals? Does comprehensive sex education respond to the real-life circumstances of teenagers today? Does the new sex pedagogy take into account the realities of teenage sex in the 1990s?

### The New Jersey Model

**A** FEW MONTHS ago I set out to answer these questions by venturing into a state with a long and strong commitment to comprehensive sex education. Few states have worked harder or longer than New Jersey to bring sexual enlightenment to schoolchildren. In 1980 the state adopted one of the nation's first mandates for comprehensive sex education—or family life education, as it is called there—and it was the very first state to require sex education for children in the primary grades. Its pioneering efforts have earned New Jersey the equivalent of a five-star rating from the Sex Information and Education Council of the U.S. (SIECUS), a national advocacy organization that promotes comprehensive sex education.

Virtually every public school student in New Jersey receives sex education (the average is twenty-four hours a year), and some schoolchildren, like those in the Irv-

***Like many sex educators, Wilson rejects the classic notion that a latency period occurs between the ages of about six and twelve, when children are sexually quiescent.***

ington public schools, have an early and full immersion. Overall, teachers are trained and experienced, averaging close to ten years of teaching a family life curriculum.

According to recent opinion polls, public support for sex education in New Jersey is strong. In one survey an overwhelming majority of adults said they favored teaching teenagers about sex in school, including controversial topics such as contraception, homosexuality, and "safer sex." Slightly more Catholics than Protestants surveyed favor sex education (88 percent to 84 percent), and support is nearly as high among parents as among nonparents. Parents tend to be more knowledgeable about the content of sex education programs, and a majority say their school's offerings are excellent or good. Another survey, conducted by Rutgers University's Eagleton Institute, found that 61 percent of parents with school-age children say they would permit their child to get condoms from the schools.

Politically, therefore, sex education has been an all-but-unqualified success in New Jersey. Since 1980 popular support has steadily increased, and over that period the state mandate has held up against repeated legislative challenges, including a recent proposal to stress sexual abstinence.

The key to this success is a well-organized advocacy effort. A state mandate alone rarely achieves the goal of comprehensive sex education, because local school authorities often fail to act vigorously to observe the mandate. It takes a strong and sustained campaign to win over parents and teachers, beat back political opponents, and stiffen the spines of timid school administrators. In New Jersey two closely allied organizations advance the sex education cause. Rutgers, the state university, administers grants and provides office space to the advocacy campaign. It is, though, the small but ubiquitous New Jersey Network for Family Life Education that conducts the daily business of winning support for sex education across the state.

### The Philosophy of Sex Education

**S**USAN WILSON runs the Network from her handsome gated home in Princeton. (The Network is officially headquartered at Rutgers.) Wilson, who has been an indefatigable crusader for comprehensive sex educa-

tion for more than a decade, helped to write and pass the state mandate in the late 1970s, while she was a member of the state Board of Education. A few years later she took over as the head of the Network. With a budget of about \$200,000 this year, mostly from foundations and the state government, Wilson and her small staff publish a newsletter, testify at hearings, train teachers, develop sex-education materials, fight efforts to overturn the mandate, and perform the scores of other duties required in their advocacy work. But Wilson's single most important task, which she clearly enjoys, is traveling up and down the state making the case for comprehensive sex education.

Because the case that she makes represents today's comprehensive-sex-education orthodoxy, it deserves close attention. It has several tenets. First, children are "sexual from birth." Like many sex educators, Wilson rejects the classic notion that a latency period occurs between the ages of about six and twelve, when children are sexually quiescent. "Ever since I've gotten into this field, the opponents have used that argument to frighten policymakers," she says. "But there is a body of developmental knowledge that says this is not true." And, according to Wilson, it is not simply that children are born sexual or that their sexuality is constantly unfolding. It is also that sexuality is much broader than most imagine: "You are not just being sexual by having intercourse. You are being sexual when you throw your arms around your grandpa and give him a hug."

Second, children are sexually miseducated. Unlike Europeans, who learn about sex as matter-of-factly as they learn about brushing their teeth, American children grow up sexually absurd—caught between opposing but equally distorted views of sex. One kind of distortion comes from parents. Instead of affirming the child's sexuality, parents convey the message that sex is harmful, shameful, or sinful. Or, out of a misguided protectiveness, they cling to the notion of childhood innocence and fail to provide timely or accurate information about sex. The second kind of distortion comes from those who would make sex into a commodity. While parents withhold information, the media and the marketplace spew sexual misinformation. It is this peculiar American combination of repressiveness and permissiveness that leads to sexual wrong thinking and poor sexual decision making, and thus to high rates of teenage pregnancy and STDs.

Third, if miseducation is the problem, then sex education is the solution. Since parents are failing miserably at the task, it is time to turn the job over to the schools. Schools occupy a safe middle ground between Mom and MTV. They are places where "trusted adults" can teach children how to protect themselves against the hazards of sex and sexual abuse.

Moreover, unlike homes, schools do not burden children with moral strictures. As Wilson explains, schools can resolve the "conflict between morality and reality" by offering unbiased statements of fact. Here, for example, is how a teacher might handle the subject of masturbation in a factually accurate way: "Some people think it is okay to masturbate and some people think it is not okay to masturbate, but most people think that no harm comes to you if you masturbate." Consequently, when it comes to sex, schools rather than homes offer a haven in

the heartless world.

A fourth and defining tenet is that sex education must begin in the earliest grades. Like math or reading, comprehensive sex education takes a "building blocks" approach that moves from basic facts to more sophisticated concepts, from simple skills to more complex competencies. Just as it would be unthinkable to withhold math education until the sixth grade, so, too, is it unwise to delay the introduction of sex education until the eighth grade.

In the beginning, before there is sex, there is sex literacy. Just as boys and girls learn their number facts in the first grade, they acquire the basic sex vocabulary, starting with the proper names for genitalia and progressing toward an understanding of masturbation, intercourse, and contraception. As they gain fluency and ease in talking about sexual matters, students become more comfortable with their own sexuality and more skillful in communicating their feelings and desires. Boys and girls can chat with one another about sex, and children can confide in adults without embarrassment.

Early sex education readies grade schoolchildren for the onslaught of puberty. By the time they reach adolescence, they are cognitively as well as biologically primed for sex. Moreover, with early sex training, teenagers are much more likely to engage in what Wilson and her colleagues consider responsible sexual conduct: abstinence, noncoital sex, or coitus with a condom. Since abstinence will not lead to pregnancy or STDs, and noncoital and protected sex are not likely to do so, comprehensive sex education will help to reduce the incidence of these problems among teenagers.

This is the philosophy of comprehensive sex education. But how to translate it into lessons for little children? Although the state mandate allowed school districts to shop around for a suitable curriculum, at first not much was available for primary schoolers. Most teachers had to improvise a curriculum or adapt higher-grade-level texts to the early grades. What was missing was a standard text: a Dick and Jane reader for the Michaels and Ashleys of the post-sexual-revolution generation.

### Family Life

**R**UTGERS UNIVERSITY Press seized the opportunity. With a growing number of states adopting comprehensive-sex-education mandates, and with the 595 school districts of New Jersey seeking to meet their state mandate, the market for a sex primer looked promising. The press set out to fill that market niche. It assembled a small, sympathetic advisory panel, including Susan Wilson, and then hired Barbara Sprung, an independent consultant from New York City, to write its pathbreaking sex-education text.

A graduate of Sarah Lawrence and the Bank Street College of Education, Barbara Sprung spent eight years as an elementary school teacher before she embarked on a second career as a diversity-education specialist. During the 1970s and the 1980s, working first for a feminist organization and then for her own organization, Educational Equity Concepts, Sprung produced books, teachers' guides, and other materials based on a "nonsexist, multicultural, disability-sensitive, early childhood approach." The Rutgers project was her first venture into sex education.

With her advisers, she came up with *Learning About Family Life*, a "textbook package" described as a "pioneering" approach to family-life education for schoolchildren in kindergarten through third grade. The textbook also carries a pioneering price tag—\$250 a package. As befits a fundamental text, the curriculum sets forth its guiding principles: "Sexuality is a part of daily living, as essential to normal functioning as mathematics and reading." And as befits a primer, it offers the sex basics. Here is a representative sampling:

*On female genitalia:* "The vulva is the area enclosing three parts: a vagina, the opening you urinate from, and a clitoris.... Clitoris is a small sensitive part that only girls have, and it sometimes makes you feel good."

*On sexual intercourse:* "To have sex, the man and woman lie very close to each other so that their bodies are touching. Usually it happens in bed, and they don't have any clothes on. Together the woman and man place the man's penis inside the woman's vagina, and while they are loving each other, many sperm come from the testicles into the man's penis. After a while, the sperm come through the little hole at the end of the man's penis, and they swim up the vagina and meet the egg in the fallopian tube."

*On masturbation:* "Grown-ups sometimes forget to tell children that touching can also give people pleasure, especially when someone you love touches you. And you can give yourself pleasure, too, and that's okay. When you touch your own genitals, it's called masturbating."

*On sex:* "When you are older, you can decide if you want to have sex. Most people do, because they like it and it's a very important way of showing that we love someone."

These sex facts are presented in a particularly captivating form. Unlike standard sex-education curricula, which are about as exciting to read as an IRS Form 1040, *Learning About Family Life* tells a story. The text follows a fictional class of primary school children and their teachers, Ms. Ruiz and Mr. Martin, as they experience a series of family events during the course of the school year. The teachers and children are characters in a continuing saga, full of drama and incident. Primary school teachers tell Sprung that children eagerly ask, "When are we going to talk about those kids in Class 203 again?" Little wonder. This is sex education packaged as *Sesame Street*.

Like *Sesame Street*, *Learning About Family Life* deals with the social and family issues of the day. During the year Classroom 203 encounters the following events: Ms. Ruiz's pregnancy and childbirth, the death of Mr. Martin's father, the drug arrest of Martine's cousin, the birth of a child to Joseph's teenage sister, the arrival of Natan's grandmother from Russia, Sarah's trip to see her divorced father, and the visit of Seth's HIV-infected uncle. These events and others, presented in forty-three vignettes, provide an occasion for straight talk about genitalia, sexual intercourse, pregnancy and childbirth, HIV and AIDS, masturbation, sexual abuse, physical disability, drug abuse, death, divorce, grandparents, and all kinds of families.

As they read about Classroom 203, children acquire a scientific sex vocabulary. "Adults in the children's families probably don't use accurate terms like anus and buttocks," the teachers' resource guide warns. "You, as the

***Though illegitimacy is not treated cavalierly, it is depicted as a family crisis that is quickly resolved, because all the folks pitch in. Apparently there are no longer-term consequences for Joseph's sister or his little nephew—such as poverty, welfare dependency, or diminished school and job prospects.***

teacher, are the best role model for creating comfort." Indeed, the teacher is to insist on replacing even words that are perfectly apt for a six-year-old's vocabulary with more-scientific terms. In a lesson on pregnancy, Brian talks about how his mother's tummy felt when the baby was growing inside. Ms. Ruiz says, "I know we are used to saying *baby* and *tummy*. But *fetus* and *uterus* are more accurate words." And when it comes to a hot issue like masturbation, a teacher's cool command of the facts is crucial: "Masturbation is a topic that is viewed negatively in many families, based on long-standing cultural and religious teachings. Assure parents that your approach will be low keyed and will stress privacy, but also make it clear that you will not perpetuate myths that can mar children's healthy sexual development." Teachers must also debunk the myth that masturbation is only for boys. Girls must be granted equal time to ask masturbation questions.

If girls need nudging in the sex department, boys need coaxing in the emotions department. Indeed, one of the strongest themes in the text is the problematic nature of boys. Boys are emotionally clogged, unable to cry or to express feelings. And little boys may enter grade school with the idea that such sex-related matters as pregnancy, childbearing, and baby care are only for girls. Therefore *Learning About Family Life* enlists boys in nurturing and "feelings" activities. These may be difficult for boys who come from macho backgrounds. But here again the school provides a cultural haven. If the lessons in nurturing conflict with a boy's family or cultural teachings, the teachers' manual advises, the teacher should say, "In school, talking about feelings is a part of learning."

In early sex education, feelings talk and sex talk are closely related for good reason: little schoolchildren do not have the capacity to understand big adult issues directly. But many are now exposed to big adult issues at an early age, and so it is necessary to find routes to understanding. Early sex education thus turns to affective pathways and to a therapeutic pedagogy.

### Stuff Happens

ACCORDING TO its publishers, *Learning About Family Life* provides a realistic slice of contemporary family life. Nonetheless, it is a highly selective slice.

There is a vignette designed to expose children to an "amicable divorce." But there is no corresponding vignette to give children a picture of an amicable, much less a long-lasting, marriage. (Susan Wilson believes that you "can't beat kids all over the head" with marriage.) There is a story about sex as a way to show love but no story about commitment as a way to show love. There is an effort to give children positive messages about expressing sexuality, but no effort to give children positive messages about the advantages of not expressing sexuality before they are grown. And this family world is only thinly populated by men. Ms. Ruiz is a well-defined character in the story; the male teacher, Mr. Martin, is more of a bit player, taking center stage in one story to talk about masturbation and in another to cry. There are grandmothers but no grandfathers. A brand-new father makes a cameo appearance to show off his nurturing skills, but the only other father is divorced and a plane ride away.

Here is the dilemma: *Learning About Family Life* is caught between two competing tendencies. On the one hand, it works hard to reflect the real-life family circumstances of many children. It deals with some hard-edged issues: sexual abuse, unwed teenage motherhood, drug dealing, and divorce. On the other hand, it takes a deeply sentimental view of these gritty realities. Consider, for example, the story "Joseph Is an Uncle":

Joseph's seventeen-year-old sister has a new baby. She is not married. The baby's father is gone. Joseph's parents are mad and sad at the same time. His sister is tired and out of sorts. Yet things work out. The family rallies round. An aunt takes care of the baby during the day. Joseph's sister returns to school. Joseph shows the photograph of his new nephew to his best friend, but he doesn't want anyone else to know about his sister's baby. His friend encourages him to show the photo to Mr. Martin and Ms. Ruiz.

Of all the sex tales, Joseph's story merits the closest attention. Early sex education, after all, purports to help children avoid the fate of Joseph's teenage sister. So what are we to make of this story? First, though illegitimacy is not treated cavalierly, it is depicted as a family crisis that is quickly resolved, because all the folks pitch in. Apparently there are no longer-term consequences for Joseph's sister or his little nephew—such as poverty, welfare dependency, or diminished school and job prospects. Second, in a curriculum designed to teach personal responsibility, the text misses an opportunity to do so. Unwed teenage parenthood is not an affliction visited on people like hurricanes or drought, yet that is the message of the story. Among the families in Classroom 203, stuff happens.

Finally, think about the baby's father. Joseph's sister's boyfriend has sex as an expression of love, exactly as the sex primer describes, but then he takes off. Though *Learning About Family Life* has stern messages for boys about caring and sharing, it ducks the basic question of male responsibility. A seven-year-old boy listening to this story might well conclude that illegitimacy is a girl's topic.

As it turns out, then, early sex education is not straight talk at all but a series of object lessons. And these are offered not so much with a nose for the facts as with an eye to the sex educator's philosophy. *Learning About*

*Family Life* is no less didactic in its views on family life than Dick and Jane. To be sure, a truly fact-based approach would have to deal with some hard truths. For example, it would have to say that unwed teenage parenthood carries grave consequences for teenagers and their babies; that not all families are equally capable of caring for children; and that absent long-term commitment, responsibility, and sacrifice, love does not conquer all. Since some children grow up in broken or unwed teenage families, there is an understandable concern that children not feel stigmatized by such facts. Yet such tender concern raises a tough question: If the classroom is the source of unbiased factual information, how can the problems of illegitimacy and broken families be dealt with without touching on the key facts in the matter?

## The Pedagogy of Sex Education

IN THE middle grades sex education takes a more technical turn. At eleven and twelve many young people are approaching the threshold of puberty while others are already in full pubertal flower. (Today the average age of menarche is twelve and a half.) Now, as hormones kick in, children are ready to express themselves sexually. Thus the focus of sex education shifts from sex literacy to building sexual skills. This is when students must acquire the knowledge and technical skills to manage their emerging sexuality.

Sex-education advocates agree that abstaining from sex is the best way to avoid STDs and early pregnancy. But they reject an approach that is limited to teaching abstinence. First, they say, abstinence-based teaching ignores the growing number of adolescents who are already sexually active at age twelve or thirteen. One Trenton schoolteacher said to me, "How can I teach abstinence when there are three pregnant girls sitting in my eighth-grade class?" Second, abstinence overlooks the fact that, as Susan Wilson explains, "it is developmentally appropriate for teenagers to learn to give and receive pleasure."

Consequently, the New Jersey sex-education advocates call for teaching middle-schoolers about condoms, abortion, and the advantages of "protected" sex. But given the risks to teenagers, they are not crazy about sexual intercourse either. Indeed, Wilson says, Americans are fixated on "this narrow little thing called intercourse." The alternative is a broad thing called noncoital sex or, in the argot of advocates, "sexual expression without risk."

Noncoital sex includes a range of behaviors, from deep kissing to masturbation to mutual masturbation to full body massage. Since none of these involves intercourse, sex educators see them as ways for teenagers to explore their sexuality without harm or penalty. And from a broader public-health perspective, risk-free sexual expression has great potential. According to the Rutgers education professor William Firestone, who conducted a study of sex-education teaching in New Jersey for the Network for Family Life Education, noncoital sex offers "real opportunities to reduce dangers to many teens who engage in sexual behavior, despite recommendations for abstinence." Yet as Firestone's survey research shows, many teachers shrink from this approach. Wilson says, "We hardly ever talk to teens about necking and petting and admiring your body and maybe massage."

As Wilson points out, noncoital sex is most practical when teenagers can communicate with each other. "A lot of people think that once you start down the road to sex, you can't stop, and that's the problem. But I think that by talking about these things and by role playing, you give kids control and you give them the language to say, 'That's enough—I don't want any more. I don't want to have intercourse.'"

Since safe petting and good talking go together, middle school students need to continue to practice their communication skills. But in teaching these skills teachers cannot rely on old-fashioned didactic methods. Middle school students are still short-term thinkers, reckless in deed. Therefore sex education in middle school does not yet enter the realm of thinking and ideas but remains lodged instead in the realm of what one teacher calls "feelings and values."

### 'Hello, Vulva'

I ATTENDED a teacher-training conference sponsored by the Network for Family Life Education to get acquainted with the way sex is taught. In New Jersey, as in other states with mandates for comprehensive sex education, such one-day workshops are a mainstay of teacher training. For a small investment of time and money—a day out of the classroom and \$35—teachers learn the latest in sex-education theory and practice. On the day I attended, the crowd was made up of physical-education, home-economics, and health teachers with a scattering of elementary school nurses as well. Almost all were women.

Deborah Roffman, an independent sex education consultant from Maryland who teaches in several private middle and high schools, was the keynote speaker. (Like Roffman, most of the trainers at this conference came to it from the world of advocates, family planners, and private consultants. Only one teaches in the public schools.) She was an engaging speaker with the timing and phrasing of a good comedian. (*Teacher in audience*: "What do you say when a student asks you to define 'blow job'?" *Roffman*: "You say it is oral sex." Pause. *Roffman again*: "But what if the student's next question is 'Does that mean you talk while you screw?'"") To kick off the conference, Roffman gave a rousing talk, urging teachers to adopt bolder teaching methods. I was curious to see what she had in mind, so I attended her workshop.

She began the workshop session with these instructions: "Turn to the person next to you. Make eye contact. Say 'Hello, penis.' Shake hands and return the greeting; 'Hello, vulva.'" This warmup exercise underscores a central idea in sex pedagogy: for teachers no less than for students, talking about sex provokes anxiety and embarrassment. Such embarrassment stands in the way of good communication, and good communication is crucial to responsible sexual conduct.

So is emotional literacy. To become more emotionally articulate, middle-schoolers engage in a series of feelings exercises. The purpose is to help students "normalize" and share common growing-up experiences. Roffman handed out a list of sample questions. "What is the worst thing your parents could find out about a child of theirs who is your age?" "Have you ever experienced the death of someone close to you?" "What is a way in which your parents are 'overprotective'?" In the middle schools as in

the elementary schools, there is a continuing effort to break down boys' emotional reserve. Encourage your students to sit boy-girl, Roffman suggests, and ask the biggest boy in the class the first feelings question.

The Consortium for Education Equity, at Rutgers, offers a similar set of feelings-and-values exercises in a sex curriculum designed for seventh- and eighth-graders. Some are sentence-completion exercises. In one, seventh-graders are asked to complete the sentence "If someone loves me, they ..." and then elsewhere to "compare their ideas [about love] to [Eric] Fromm's and [Leo] Buscaglia's material on love." In another, students are to "write a positive self-statement ... —'I am strong' ... 'I am happy' ..."—and then discuss the "impact of positive self-statements on feelings of self-esteem."

Other exercises draw on more therapeutic methods, such as role playing and small-group work. There are gender-reversal exercises, in which girls and boys each play the role of the opposite sex. In small groups students may brainstorm about ways to deal with an unwanted pregnancy or come up with a list of their expectations of non-marital sex.

Some of the gender-reversal exercises sound like birthday-party games. In one exercise, called the Fish-Bowl, girls are seated in a circle in which there is one empty chair. Boys form a circle around the girls. Girls talk about what they like and dislike about boys. If one of the boys wishes to speak, he sits in the empty chair in the girls' circle. After a time the boys repeat the exercise, with the girls in the outer circle.

Because of its intimate subject matter, the feelings-and-values classroom institutes a new code of classroom conduct. There are confidentiality rules. Roffman's middle school students are told that nothing said in sex education class goes out of the class without students' express permission. In discussions middle-schoolers must protect the privacy of individuals who are not class members; except for classmates', no names may be used. Another rule is that any student who does not want to answer a question may pass. In some classes students agree to use only "I" statements, rather than "you" statements, in order to express their thoughts more positively.

In therapeutically oriented classrooms, moreover, the teacher assumes the role of confidant and peer. Like students, teachers are encouraged to share personal experiences. An idea book for New Jersey teachers, published by the Network, tells the inspirational story of a high school teacher who talks to his class about his vasectomy and how he feels about it. Yet although they are advised to share experiences, teachers are not to impose their opinions, even when it comes to arguably the most important question: "What is the right time to begin having sex?" The teacher is encouraged to turn the question back to the students: "How would you begin to make that decision?"

Sex educators defend this approach with the language of empowerment. Students, they say, must acquire the knowledge and skills to answer these questions for themselves. After all, grown-ups aren't around to supervise teenagers every minute of the day. Teachers can't follow students home, and working parents can't check up on teenagers who are home alone. Why not invest teenagers with the power to make wise choices on their own?

***As Kirby puts it,  
"Ignorance is not the solution, but  
knowledge is not enough."***

### Reality Tests

ON ITS face, this new therapeutic sex pedagogy does not seem all that therapeutic or all that new. Teenage girls have enjoyed self-inventory tests at least as long as *Seventeen* magazine has been around. And there's nothing particularly revolutionary about small-group discussions of feelings and values. This, after all, is why teenagers invented the slumber party.

But on second glance there is something radically new about comprehensive sex education. As both a philosophy and a pedagogy, it is rooted in a deeply technocratic understanding of teenage sexuality. It assumes that once teenagers acquire a formal body of sex knowledge and skills, along with the proper contraceptive technology, they will be able to govern their own sexual behavior responsibly. In brief, what comprehensive sex education envisions is a regime of teenage sexual self-rule.

The sex educators offer their technocratic approach as an alternative to what they see as a failed effort to regulate teenage sexuality through social norms and religious values. Face facts. In a climate of sexual freedom the old standard of sexual conduct for teenagers—a standard separate from adult sexual standards—is breaking down. Increasingly teenagers are playing by the same sexual rules as adults. Therefore, why withhold from adolescents the information and technologies that are available to adults?

To be sure, sex educators have a point. Traditional sexual morality, along with the old codes of social conduct, is demonstrably less effective today than it once was in governing teenage sexual conduct. But although moral standards can exist even in the midst of a breakdown of morality, a technocratic view cannot be sustained if the techniques fizzle. Thus comprehensive sex education stands or falls on the proven effectiveness of its techniques.

For a variety of reasons the body of research on sex-education programs is not as rich and robust as we might wish. However, the available evidence suggests that we must be skeptical of the technocratic approach. First, comprehensive sex education places its faith in the

power of knowledge to change behavior. Yet the evidence overwhelmingly suggests that sexual knowledge is only weakly related to teenage sexual behavior. The researcher Douglas Kirby, of ETR Associates, a nonprofit health-education firm in Santa Cruz, California, has been studying sex-education programs for more than a decade. During the 1980s he conducted a major study of the effectiveness of sex-education programs for the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and he has since completed a review for the Centers for Disease Control of all published research on school-based sex-education programs designed to reduce the risks of unprotected sex. His research shows that students who take sex education do know more about such matters as menstruation, intercourse, contraception, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases than students who do not. (Thanks to federal funding for AIDS education in the schools, students tend to be very knowledgeable about the sources and prevention of HIV infection.)

But more accurate knowledge does not have a measurable impact on sexual behavior. As it is typically taught, sex education has little effect on teenagers' decisions to engage in or postpone sex. Nor, according to Kirby, do knowledge-based sex-education programs significantly reduce teenage pregnancy. And although teenagers who learn about contraception may be more likely to use it, their contraceptive practices tend to be irregular and therefore ultimately unreliable.

Comprehensive sex education assumes that knowledge acquired at earlier ages will influence behavior. Yet the empirical evidence suggests that younger teenagers, especially, are unlikely to act on what they know. An analysis of a Planned Parenthood survey concludes that a "knowledgeable thirteen-year-old is no more likely to use contraceptives than is an uninformed thirteen-year-old. As Kirby puts it, "Ignorance is not the solution, but knowledge is not enough."

If knowledge isn't enough, what about knowledge combined with communication skills? Sex education does appear to diminish teenagers' shyness about discussing sexual matters. One study shows that girls who have had sex education may be more likely to talk about sex with their parents than those who have not. Since talking with their mothers about sex may help some girls avoid pregnancy, this is a mildly positive effect. There does not seem to be a parallel effect for boys, however.

Overall, parent-child communication is far less important in influencing sexual behavior than parental discipline and supervision. One study, based on teenagers' own reports of levels of parental control, shows that teenagers with moderately strict parents had the lowest level of sexual activity, whereas teens with very strict parents had higher levels, and those with very permissive parents had the highest levels. Moreover, there is a strong empirical relationship between diminished parental supervision and early sexual activity.

In boy-girl communication, girls say that they want help in rejecting boys' sexual overtures. In a survey taken in the mid-1980s, 1,000 teenage girls aged sixteen and younger were asked to select from a list of more than twenty sex-related topics those areas where they would like more information and help. The girls were most likely to say they wanted more information on how to say no

*(Continued on page 46)*

# MUSIC AND MORALITY

BY WILLIAM KILPATRICK

NO, THIS article is not about the latest dirty lyrics in the latest rap group's latest album (although some are included). Nor does it deal with rumors that the members of such and such a rock group are devil worshipers (although they might be). Rather, it attempts to get at an effect of music that is more basic than the lyrics or the singer's persona. We can start our discussion of this effect with the common observation that we tend to learn something more easily and indelibly if it's set to a rhyme or song. Advertisers know this and use it so effectively that we sometimes have difficulty getting their jingles out of our heads. But there are more positive educational uses. Most of us learned the alphabet this way and some of our history as well ("Paul Revere's Ride," "Concord Hymn"). Recently some foreign language courses have been developed that employ rhyme and song as the central teaching method. Similarly, one of the most successful new phonics programs teaches reading through singing.

This raises an interesting possibility. If Johnny can be taught to read through rhyme and song, might he also begin to learn right and wrong in the same way? It seems that something like this did happen in the distant past. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, for example, played a vital role in the formation of Greek youth. But the ability of the Homeric bards to memorize these vast epics was due in large part to the rhythmic meter and repetitive structure of the poems. In turn, these epics were often sung to the audience to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument. In short, the foundational cultural messages of the Greeks were conveyed by sung stories. "Education in such cultures," writes Kieran Egan of Simon Fraser University, "is largely a matter of constantly immersing the young into the enchanting patterns of sound until they resound to the patterns, until they become 'musically' in tune with, harmonious with, the institutions of their culture."

Allan Bloom, in his controversial discussion of music

*William Kilpatrick is a professor of education at Boston College. His most recent book—an annotated guide to more than three hundred books and stories that capture both a child's imagination and conscience—is entitled Books That Build Character (Simon & Schuster: Touchstone, 1994). This article is drawn from Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong. Copyright © 1992 by William Kilpatrick. Reprinted by permission of Simon & Schuster. Now available in paperback from Touchstone.*

ILLUSTRATED BY GUY SCHUM



in *The Closing of the American Mind*, says that music should be at the center of education. It does the best job of giving raw passions their due while forming them for something better. Bloom feels that music now plays the decisive role in the formation of a young person's character. In this respect, nothing has changed since the days of Homer, when, in Egan's phrase, the young were immersed "into the enchanting patterns of sound." Of course, Bloom is not happy with the results because what today's youth are "musically in tune with, harmonious with" are no longer the institutions of their culture or anything on which a culture could be built. They are vibrating to the beat of a different drum—usually the one in a rock band.

Bloom's comments are based on several passages from Plato, who was much concerned with the moral effects of music—so much so that in the ideal society he describes, many kinds of music would be censored. According to Bloom, these observations in *The Republic* stir up today's generation of students as nothing else in Plato can. They take music very seriously—as did Plato. Plato's argument is that certain kinds of music can foster a spirit of lawlessness that can creep in unnoticed, "since it's considered to be a kind of play," and therefore harmless. Despite the innocent appearance, however, some kinds of music are capable of subverting the social order.

To appreciate Plato's thesis, and to appreciate the mobilizing power of music, we might recall the role that the "Marseillaise" played in the French Revolution, or the role that "We Shall Overcome" played in the American civil rights movement. But this kind of large-scale revolution is not exactly what Plato had in mind. He was more concerned with music of a sensual or romantic type that would undermine discipline, moderation, and other civic virtues. The most obvious modern analogy—the one Bloom makes—is to the role rock music plays in prompting young people to throw off cultural and sexual restraints. The common adolescent practice of playing rock at a deafening volume in streets, buses, and public parks suggests how readily it lends itself to the violation of the simplest rules of civil behavior.

In Plato's view, music and character are intimately connected. Certain modes of music dispose the individual to "illiberality," "insolence," and other vices. By the same token, other modes suggest peacefulness, moderation, and self-control and dispose one to an "orderly and courageous life." It's important to note that Plato is not talking



about lyrics (although he was concerned about them) but about the music itself. A man raised on harmonious music, he says, has a better chance of developing a harmonious soul: He will be better able to see life as a whole, and thus "he would have the sharpest sense of what's been left out," of what is and isn't fitting.

Plato also addresses himself to stories, poetry, painting, and craft and has much the same thing to say about them. Children ought to be brought up in an atmosphere that provides them examples of nobility and grace. This imaginative education is not a substitute for a reasoned morality, but it paves the way for it, making it more likely that the grown child develops an "erotic attachment" to virtue, by which Plato meant not so much "sexual" as "passionate." Just as the senses can be enlisted on the side of vice, so (with a little more difficulty) can they be enlisted on the side of virtue. Through the senses the child can come to love justice and wisdom long before he can grasp these notions in their abstract form. As an example, Allan Bloom mentions the statues that graced the cities of Greece and attracted young men and women to the idea of nobility by the beauty of the hero's body.

In our own society, however, we seem to have managed to create an erotic attachment to all the wrong things. Or more precisely, parents and teachers have, by default, allowed the entertainment industry ("a common highway passing through all the houses in America" is Bloom's description) to create these attachments. Rock music in particular, says Bloom, inclines children away from self-control and sublimation. It doesn't channel emotions, it pumps them up. Instead of a passionate attachment to what is good, noble, and just, youth develop passionate attachments to their own needs, wants, and feelings, and to people like Mick Jagger and Michael Jackson.

Bloom has been criticized for overdoing his attack on rock. And there is some truth in this. He fails to distinguish among various kinds of rock and he seems to believe that sex is rock's only appeal ("rock has the beat of sexual intercourse"). Nevertheless, the hysterical tone of some of the reaction suggests that Bloom has hit close to home. William Greider, writing in *Rolling Stone*, says that Bloom is guilty of a "nasty, reactionary attack on the values of young people and everyone else under forty" and of compiling "a laundry list of cheap slanders." Another critic of Bloom gives an elaborate (and not very convincing) argument that the beat of rock is not the beat of sexual intercourse but "is, in fact, much closer to the regular motion of the heavenly bodies."

But the question is not whether Bloom has presented a nuanced portrait of rock and youth. The real question is whether music has the profound influence on character formation that he and Plato (along with Aristotle, Con-

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fucius, and Shakespeare) assert. That question alone deserves serious consideration and debate, but as Bloom writes, "That kind of critique has never taken place." Of the criticism that has surfaced since Bloom's book, most has focused on the lyrics rather than the music, and it has been hard enough to get a hearing for that. The music itself seems to be a taboo area.

Yet the basic proposition—that different kinds of music produce different effects on the soul—is not entirely radical. Would anyone assert that "(You Ain't Nothin' but a) Hound Dog" has the same "soul" as Gregorian chant? The one inspires to prayer and contemplation, the other to shouting and stamping. Not that there's anything wrong with shouting and stamping once in a while, but children these days tend to be raised almost exclusively on that sort of music. Besides, they don't need much incentive to shout, stamp, whine, and demand. They do these things naturally. Why should we want music that validates and confirms such juvenile states? Shouldn't children be exposed to other states of soul? Even if we were to succeed in creating schools that once again took virtue and character seriously, we would still have an uphill fight as long as rock music remains the dominant cultural idiom and as long as chil-

children's "erotic attachments" are formed by an industry that panders to juvenile emotions. What we currently have is a censorship by omission. Either parents don't know about or don't have a taste for alternative forms of music because they themselves were raised on rock; or they do know but are afraid to exercise their parental rights for fear that their children's allegiance has already been captured and to stand up to the music would only widen the rift. What results, says Bloom, is a pattern of denial: "Avoid noticing what the words say, assume the kid will get over it. If he has early sex, that won't get in the way of his having stable relationships later. His drug use will certainly stop at pot."

Bloom is actually more interested in the educational rather than the moral influence of rock: "The issue here is its effect on education, and I believe it ruins the imagination of young people and makes it very difficult for them to have a passionate relationship to the art and thought that are the substance of liberal education." This kind of education depends on sublimation. But if Bloom is not mainly concerned with moral effects, we can be. If rock can wreck the liberal imagination (in the nonpolitical sense of the word "liberal"), it can also wreck or stunt the moral imagination.

Am I shortchanging rock? After all, it's not all heavy metal and megawatt amplifiers. Many of rock's defenders say there is a deeper meaning to it than the hormonal one assigned by Bloom—namely, the feeling of spiritual oneness it can create: the feeling that there are no boundaries, that the whole world is one large commu-

nity. Nietzsche understood the feeling. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he writes, "It is only through the spirit of music that we can understand the joy involved in the annihilation of the individual." Once we can get beyond the barrier of individuation, we can break through to life itself, which is "indestructibly powerful and pleasurable." The music at Woodstock (aided, no doubt, by considerable marijuana consumption) had this effect. So, apparently, did the Live Aid concert.

But the "soul" of rock music, even at its best and most brotherly, does not seem up to the task of creating a real community of purpose (as gospel music helped to do during the civil rights movement). The brotherhood rock yearns for is one that will come easily and not at the cost of self-discipline. Robert Pattison, in his book *The Triumph of Vulgarity: Rock Music in the Mirror of Romanticism*, argues that the spirit of rock music is really the spirit of nineteenth-century Romanticism, only with a heavier beat and a faster tempo. It is simply another version of Rousseau's belief that what is primitive is what is best, and that youthful passions, therefore, do not need to be educated or transformed. The rock myth, according to Pattison, is the same as the Romantic myth: a

belief that it is possible to have a community innocent of civilizing restraints in which everything can be done on instinct, and in which everyone is free to express himself to the fullest. Moreover, as Stuart Goldman observes in commenting on Pattison's book, "the rocker feels that we are kept from this—our 'natural' state of oneness with the universe—by 'them': the government, teachers, politicians, our parents. All the usual suspects."

Pattison is a defender of both rock and Romanticism; however, as Irving Babbitt points out, the essence of Romanticism is that it is never in love with a particular object or person but only with the feelings that that person or object evokes. Consequently, the Romantic spirit is fickle; it is always changing its object of devotion, always in search of a new high. By necessity its interest is in novelty rather than stability. I don't doubt the sincerity of feeling in listeners who respond to "We Are The World" (the theme song of the Live Aid concert), but I question whether those are the sorts of feelings that can translate into committed and sustained action. The actual behavior of many young people who are hooked on rock suggests that their real agenda is "I am the world" and "The world owes me a living." Rock music allows us to indulge in *expressions* of strong emotion while freeing us from the obligation of *doing* anything.

When one looks more closely at rock, the notion that it is solidarity music falls apart. What it is, essentially, is performance music. It is not intended for participation but for dramatizing the ego of the performer. For the most part, it is too idiosyncratic and exaggerated for any

***It is simply another version of Rousseau's belief that what is primitive is what is best, and that youthful passions, therefore, do not need to be educated or transformed.***



amateur to sing. People do not stand around pianos and sing "Cum On Feel the Noize" or "Let's Put the X in Sex"; songs like these are basically unsingable. Even if audiences at rock concerts tried to sing along, they would be drowned out by the amplification. Although there are some forms of participation, they do not involve singing. At heavy metal concerts, for example, the audience can engage in "head banging," a rapid jerking of the head from side to side to the beat of the music. Or they can try "air guitar." Any individual in the crowd who is so moved may stand up and start playing riffs on an invisible guitar. If he is lucky, he manages to capture some attention, at least for a few brief moments. At the outset, then, rock music denies its audience one of the most powerful of all unifying experiences, the opportunity to join together in song. In a sense, it is the culmination of the Romantic shift of emphasis from the work of art to the artist himself. The song doesn't matter; what matters is the artist and his emotions. If one were to seek a fitting motto for rock, it would be difficult to find a more appropriate one than that memorable refrain from *The Cat in the Hat*: "Look at me! Look at me! Look at me now!"

What is the trade-off? What do young people get in exchange for giving up genuine participation? The answer is that, like the performer on the stage, they get to feel and show their own emotions—if only through body language. Rock confirms their right to have and express strong, sensual emotions. The message is: "Your feelings are sacred, and nothing is set above them." At the beginning of adolescence, the discovery of one's emotional self seems like a profound discovery. This is part of the self that adults "just don't understand." But rock music does understand, and what's more, it sanctions these feelings.

This, in its essence, is all that rock is about. And it is precisely because of this juvenile core that rock never delivers on its promise of creating community. Thus, in a recent *Newsweek* article, John Leland, a writer sympathetic to rock, laments, "The Live Aid concert, and the lesser knockoffs that followed, was the last promise that there was something to pop music that held people of different ages, classes and ideas together. This promise didn't hold; even then it wasn't true...." Leland is more than a little concerned about all the "adolescent rage" that runs through hard rock and rap music. For example, he cites the following lyrics from *Straight Outta Compton*, an album by the rap group N.W.A.: "So what about the bitch that got shot / F— her. / You think I give a damn about a bitch? / I ain't a sucker." In a similar vein, *Billboard* in a November 1991 issue criticized rapper Ice Cube for an album titled *Death Certificate* because its "unabashed espousal of violence against Koreans, Jews, and other whites crosses the line that divides art from the advocacy of crime."

This surprise and shock puts me in mind of C.S. Lewis's comment about people who "laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in [their] midst." The kind of lyrics that *Newsweek* and *Billboard* complain of were always implicit in the music itself. If unrestrained emotion is to be king, there should be no complaining about violent emotions. There was every reason to predict that rock music would become increasingly violent. A music that proclaims that the gratification of one's immediate desires is paramount is bound to lead in the direction of frustration and then anger, because the world never provides such gratification for very long.

OF COURSE, there are softer brands of contemporary music that express kinder and gentler sentiments. But much of this is more properly classified as pop music rather than as rock. It lacks the heavy beat of rock, and it bears a strong resemblance to the pop music and the popular ballad that predate rock. Some performers alternate between the two modes. For example, when Elvis Presley sang "Love Me Tender," he dropped the heavy beat and reverted to the ballad form. And a similar changing of tone has been the pattern every since. Whenever rock musicians try to express sentiments that aren't merely self-centered, the distinctive rock sound is either lost or muted.

This reversion to other forms of music says a lot about the limitations of rock. Even more instructive, however, is the attitude taken by rock *aficionados* toward pop music. For the most part, they despise it as being too soft and sentimental. By contrast, the kind of rock that is considered "real" and "powerful" by the critics is almost always laced with themes of anger, frustration, or self-indulgence. For instance, a recent review of the "best discs" of 1991 included such terms of approval as "raging guitars," "angry guitars," "brutal sonic assault," "piercing screams," "barbed wire lyrics," and "nerve hitting." Anger is much closer to the center of rock than is kindness or caring, and it may even be edging out sex as the number-one preoccupation. Anger is, after all, a very common adolescent emotion, and it is easily exploited. "The anger is what helps you relate to the kids," said W.A.S.P. band member Blackie Lawless in a 1985 interview. "That's what makes rock 'n' roll what it is. You're pissed off. I'm still pissed off about a lot of things...."

One of the things that rock and the rock industry do best is to take normal adolescent frustration and rebellion and heat it up to the boiling point. A lot of this hatred is directed toward parents—the people who usually stand most directly across the path of self-gratification. Anti-parent themes are quite common on MTV, and heavy metal has been described as "music to kill your parents

***A lot of this hatred is directed toward parents—the people who usually stand most directly across the path of self-gratification.***



by." When I once asked some recent college graduates to explain what they thought was the deeper meaning of rock, I was surprised at how frequently the word "alienation" came up over the course of several separate conversations. Robert Pittman, the inventor of MTV, confirmed this interpretation of the "meaning" of rock in a published interview with Ron Powers: "It's all attitude. The attitude is: Nothing is sacred. We're all having a rilly good time. We're all in on something everybody else doesn't get. We're special 'cause we're keeping everybody else out." Thus much of the solidarity rock supplies its young audience is a negative solidarity, a bond achieved by excluding those who should be closest.

Parents are not the only focus of anger. Many types of rock have for a long time exhibited anger toward adults in general. What is fairly new, however, is the expression of contempt for age mates as well. Girlfriends—if that is the correct term—are not simply presented as sex objects but as objects of abuse. Most of the world only became aware of this trend with the flap that arose in 1990 over the rap group 2 Live Crew and their album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be*. The album, which sold several million copies, presents the sexual mutilation of women as the preferred way of obtaining sexual pleasure. But the trend was already pronounced by the mid-

eighties. The popular Mötley Crüe, a heavy metal group, specialized in lyrics like the following: "I'll either break her face / Or take down her legs, / Get my ways at will. / Go for the throat / Never let loose, / Going in for the kill."

And in a 1984 song by Great White titled "On Your Knees," the following lyrics appear: "Gonna drive my love inside you / Gonna nail your ass to the floor."

Just to be sure the album-buying audience puts the correct interpretation on such lyrics, album covers often present graphic illustrations that leave little to the imagination. For example, the cover of the W.A.S.P. single "F\*\*k Like a Beast" shows a close-up of a man with a bloody circular saw blade protruding from his genital area.

This attitude—that hostile sexual relationships are common and acceptable—is not new to rock music, but it is now much more widespread. Exactly what role rock plays in forming youthful ideas about sex is not something that can be quantified. But some children start to listen to the worst of rap and heavy metal at ages nine, ten, and eleven. And according to a report of the American Medical Association, the average teenager listens to 10,500 hours of rock between the seventh and twelfth grades—more time than he spends in school. To say that listening to rock music doesn't influence ideas and attitudes is tantamount to saying that we aren't influenced by our environment. Until recently, researchers debated

whether or not heavy exposure to television violence and pornography creates greater acceptance of violence toward women. That debate has died down now that new and more definitive studies have shown that it does. Is there any reason to suppose that heavy exposure to violent audio messages will have a different effect? The evidence is that a great many youths are already seriously confused about the relationship between sex and violence. For example, two recent studies conducted in the Northeast revealed that one third of high school girls who are in relationships are regularly abused by their boyfriends. That is disturbing in itself, but the report went on to say that fully one half of the girls accepted the violence as a sign of love.

One question that logically arises here is whether rock can be reformed. Some seem to think it can be, that it's simply a matter of changing the lyrics, or attaching the music to a proper cause. Thus teachers use rock in classrooms, and educational films are made with rock sound tracks, and thus we have Christian rock and even Christian versions of rock magazines. The idea is that the energy of rock can somehow be channeled toward virtuous ends. This hope, it seems to me, arises from a basic misunderstanding about the nature of rock. I have already indicated that though the lyrics are important, they are secondary. The music is its own message. No matter what the words might say, the music speaks the language of self-gratification. Rock can't be made respectable. It doesn't want to be respectable. A respectable rock is a contradiction in terms. "Some dreamers have hoped to harness rock to propagate the values of transcendent ideologies ...," writes Robert Pattison. "But rock is useless to teach any transcendent values ... Rock's electricity ... gives the lie to whatever enlightened propaganda may be foisted on it." Pattison, who has written what is perhaps the definitive book on the rock myth, and who is himself a defender of rock, argues that rock in its essence is vulgar and narcissistic, based on a denial of any value outside the self. So, while it is possible to set a Christian hymn or a song about undying love to the beat of rock, it cannot be done convincingly. The music will simply subvert the words. The same holds true for rap, which, though it is different in significant ways from rock, has a similar beat. Some rappers preach positive anti-drug, anti-gang messages in their songs. But it's not a very good fit of words to music. The music is composed of explosive bursts of sound, somewhat like the sound of a semiautomatic weapon being fired. On an aesthetic level the positive lyrics don't work nearly as well as the violent ones. No matter how many reforms are attempted, rock and rap will always gravitate in the direction of violence and uncommitted sex. The beat says, "Do what you want to do."

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A CHILD's musical environment is a large part of his moral environment. Right now, most of that musical environment is supplied by an industry that, as Allan Bloom says, "has all the moral dignity of drug trafficking." The first step in doing something about the situation is to wake up to its bizarre nature. For parents to give over a large part of their children's moral formation to people whose only interest in children is an exploitative one is a form of madness. But, as Bloom remarks, "It may well be that a society's greatest madness seems normal to itself."

In what direction does sanity lie? Parents need to realize that there is a *Kulturkampf*—a culture war—in progress. Rock and its representatives have known this for a long time; it's part of the reason they have been on the winning side. They have made no attempt to conceal their hostility toward parents and the values parents think are important. When Tipper Gore's group, Parents' Music Resource Center, asked the record industry to develop a labeling system similar to that employed by the movie industry, the rock world reacted with vicious personal abuse. And when Nikki Sixx, a member of Mötley Crüe, was asked by *Creem* (a teen magazine) how he felt about the concerns parents had with

explicit lyrics, he replied, "You know what I say? I say fuck 'em. It's freedom of speech; First Amendment."

Parents need to reclaim some territory for their children. Of course, the odds are very much against them. But at least one factor is in their favor. When children are young, they are still open to all kinds of music; they haven't yet learned they are supposed to like only one kind. It's a good time to help them cultivate good taste in music against the day when the forces of pop culture will attempt to dictate bad taste to them.

What kind of musical environment can help to create a good moral environment? Here are some broad suggestions.

1. **Music that can be shared.** Rock drives a wedge between generations. Parents and children can't share songs like Prince's "Darling Nikki" (about a girl masturbating with a magazine) or Van Halen's "Hot for Teacher." This divisive effect was evident right from the time Elvis first appeared on television—a moment of nationwide embarrassment for families gathered in front of the set. Our society needs to return (or "move forward," if you like phrases with a progressive ring) to music that brings families together in song: children's songs, folk songs, ballads, show tunes, parlor songs, carols, around-the-piano songs. Singable songs. Songs that don't need amplification, or stage sets, or a billion-dollar industry to keep them alive.

When the piano, not the television set, was the center of home entertainment, families enjoyed a common musical bond. The music belonged to everyone: not just

to adults, not just to teenagers. But singing together is not merely an old-fashioned custom, it is a basic expression of family love. It is one of many rituals of participation that have been lost, and for which we have not found adequate substitutes.

**2. Music that channels emotions.** The basic appeal of music is an emotional one. Education is not a matter of denying emotions but of civilizing them—of attaching them to fitting objects. This process of sublimation does not weaken emotions; rather, it gives them more power by giving them focus. And serious moral endeavors, whether individual or communal, need such channeling. One such example is the civil rights revolution of the sixties. Churches played the key role, and the music that accompanied this revolution was, for the most part, church music: hymns, spirituals, and gospel songs. Folk songs also played a part. Rock music did not. The civil rights movement was a movement of great seriousness and dignity. It was propelled by powerful emotions, but it was essential to the success of the movement that those emotions be controlled and restrained. Consequently, there was no part for rock to play even though rock derives from black music (the revolution that rock accompanied was the sexual revolution).

The point is that in both public life and private, we need to be able on occasion to channel our feelings toward goals that go beyond immediate gratification. It's inevitable that children will be exposed to popular music. It's important that in addition to the pop sound, they sometimes hear a more profound sound.

**3. Music that shapes the soul.** Morality is not simply about learning the rules of right and wrong; it is about a total alignment of our selves. Because music moves our whole being, it plays a major role in setting that alignment. Certain types of music convey a sense of order, proportion, and harmony. There is an ancient belief that the stars, the moon, the planets, all of creation, move to a heavenly music. The theme can be found in Plato, Plotinus, Shakespeare, Milton, and Dryden. According to some legends, God sang creation into existence. And this harmony extends to human nature.

Shakespeare wrote:

Such harmony is in immortal souls;  
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay  
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

Why not? Because, in Milton's words.

... disproportion'd sin  
Jarr'd against nature's chime, and with harsh din  
Broke the fair musick that all creatures made  
To their great Lord, whose love their motion  
swayed.

***Education is not a matter of denying emotions but of civilizing them—of attaching them to fitting objects.***



Milton concludes:

O may we soon again renew that song,  
And keep in tune with Heav'n,  
till God ere long  
To his celestial consort us unite,  
To live with him, and sing in endless morn of light.

One does not have to share Milton's Christian faith to appreciate the idea. Aristotle notes that "some philosophers say that the soul is a tuning." And he agrees that there exists in us an "affinity to musical modes and rhythms." In the ancient view the right kind of music helps to form character because it helps to tune the soul to the rhythms of a good life.

The trouble is, it is not at all easy to specify what that rhythm sounds like. Aristotle and Plato use words like "harmony," "melody," "grace," "order," and "proportion." But although it's difficult to say what arrangements of notes have the effect of bringing order to the soul, it's not as difficult to recognize them. We can hear this stately measure in Pachelbel, Handel, Mozart, Bach, and Beethoven. We can hear it in Gregorian chant, choral music, and the chanted Hanukkah blessings. We can hear it in ballads like "Barbara Allen," in spirituals like "Go Down, Moses," and in lullabies like "All Through the Night." We can hear it in "Taps." Although we may know the actual composer, such music seems to

originate from a higher source. It seems to transcend the composer's persona. Beethoven's personal life was rather a mess, but none of this is apparent in his music.

**4. Music that has stood the test of time.** The music mentioned above possesses another quality: timelessness. Thomas Day, in his short but instructive book *Why Catholics Can't Sing*, observes of certain chants, choral works, and hymns that "the melodies sounded important, as if they had existed forever." Many Christmas carols have the same quality. It is surprising to discover that some of them were written only a hundred years ago.

If I have been concentrating on sacred music, it is partly because rock invites the comparison. As Pattison writes:

The rocker lives his music with an intensity few nominal Christians imitate in their devotion to the faith. He goes to concerts and listens to his music with the same fidelity with which the Christian of earlier generations attended church and read his Bible. One of the most frequently repeated mottos in rock lyrics is "Rock 'n' roll will never die!"—a cry of belief. The stars of rock undergo literal apotheosis: "Jim Morrison is God" is a graffito now perpetuated by a third generation of rockers.

The question of whether or not rock 'n' roll will ever die is not one that needs to be settled in these pages. But

we do know that some other types of music have withstood the passage of time. The forty years that have passed since the introduction of rock are a short time when you consider that the music of Beethoven and Bach is still alive, or when you realize that in churches and cathedrals all over the world, you may hear hymns composed 500 years ago by Luther, or chants that were sung in monasteries 500 years before that. This timeless quality is not confined to church music or classical music. Some of the popular music of the thirties and forties seems to have this time-transcending quality: songs, such as "Night and Day," "Stardust," "Deep Purple," and "As Time Goes By." When the Beatles were in their heyday, they were hailed as original geniuses. But would anyone today argue that songs like "She Loves You," "I Saw Her Standing There," "I Want to Hold Your Hand," or any of a dozen others are in the same league as Cole Porter's "Night and Day"? Paul McCartney himself seems to be aware of rock's limited scope. His recently completed *Liverpool Oratorio* is in the tradition of Handel, not the Beatles. As McCartney said in an interview on the occasion of its Carnegie Hall debut, "You can't be a teenager forever."

**5. Music that tells a story.** Music has traditionally been linked to story. The Homeric poems recount long and detailed stories, the traditional ballad tells brief and simple stories of love and tragedy, country and western music tells everyday stories of marriage, betrayal, and hard times. Even orchestral music is often composed with a story in mind. "The 1812 Overture," *Swan Lake*, *Scheherazade*, and *Peter and the Wolf* are examples that come immediately to mind. Opera, of course, is the supreme blending of song and story. At another level the Broadway musical offers the same potent combination.

Songs that tell a story have a natural attraction for us because they suggest that the beauty and harmony of music is potentially present in lives. Put another way, the events of life seem more ordered and less chaotic when they can be given musical expression. Social and personal tragedy or joy, wars, revolutions, and unrequited love take their place in a larger perspective. Life conceived as a comic opera or even a tragic opera is preferable to life experienced as a random collision of random events. This sense of meaning is also essential to morality: Morality does not thrive in a climate of nihilism.

One of the characteristics of pure rock—that is, rock that is not combined with folk, blues, or ballad—is its absence of story. Robert Pittman is instructive on this point. He describes how he had to explain the concept of MTV to executives who wanted a beginning, a middle, and an end to their television. "I said, 'There is no beginning, middle, and end. It's all ebb and flow,'" boasts Pittman. What these executives failed to realize is that "this is a non-narrative generation." MTV, accordingly,

**Robert Pittman describes how he had to explain the concept of MTV to executives who wanted a beginning, a middle, and an end to their television.**



does away with narrative and replaces it with what filmmakers call montage: a rapid sequence of loosely connected images. This is the perfect fit of medium to music because rock is about the flow of experience, not about making sense out of experience. This is also the reason rock delights in nonsense syllables such as "sha da da da." They are, according to Robert Pattison, "the most honest form of language ... because they're meaningless."

Non-narrative is not exactly the same thing as nihilistic, but it's the next thing. Even the term "flow of experience" is misleading when applied to contemporary rock because the term suggests a connection or continuum. What rock presents, however, is not a flow but a series of disconnected episodes. This is also typical of rap. And the chief episodic unit is sexual intercourse. A representative example is a "tune," which consists almost entirely of one repeated refrain, "it feels good," accompanied by background groans that leave us in no doubt about what "it" is. There is no development of the story line beyond that single sensation. Every night, big-city radio stations play hour after hour of music that varies only slightly in sound and theme from "Feels Good." If, as Plato says, "musical training is a more potent instrument than any other," it

means that many youngsters are being trained to see life only as a series of sensual episodes that they are not obliged to connect.

In the world of MTV and rock radio, it is decidedly not "the same old story" of falling in love that song once celebrated and reinforced. For that matter, most of life's stories are missing from these formats. No connections are drawn to a life beyond the adolescent's fantasy life. No connections are drawn to past or future. Rock claims to be the most honest music, but this is not an honest picture of life. It does not help young people transmute immediate experience into something more. It does not teach them what happens when the limits are pushed too far, as, for example, country music—a much more honest form of music—does. It does not prepare them emotionally or cognitively for any sort of satisfactory adult life.

In summary, music has powers that go far beyond entertainment. It can play a positive role in moral development by creating sensual attractions to goodness, or it can play a destructive role by setting children on a temperamental path that leads away from virtue. Other cultures have found ways of helping the temperamental self keep time with the social self—that is, with the self that must live responsibly with others. That synchrony no longer exists in our society. Until it is restored, the prospects for a moral renewal are dim. □

# 'CITIZEN, WITH YOUR VOTE, YOU DECIDE THE FUTURE OF THE COUNTRY'

## *The Story of the Poster*

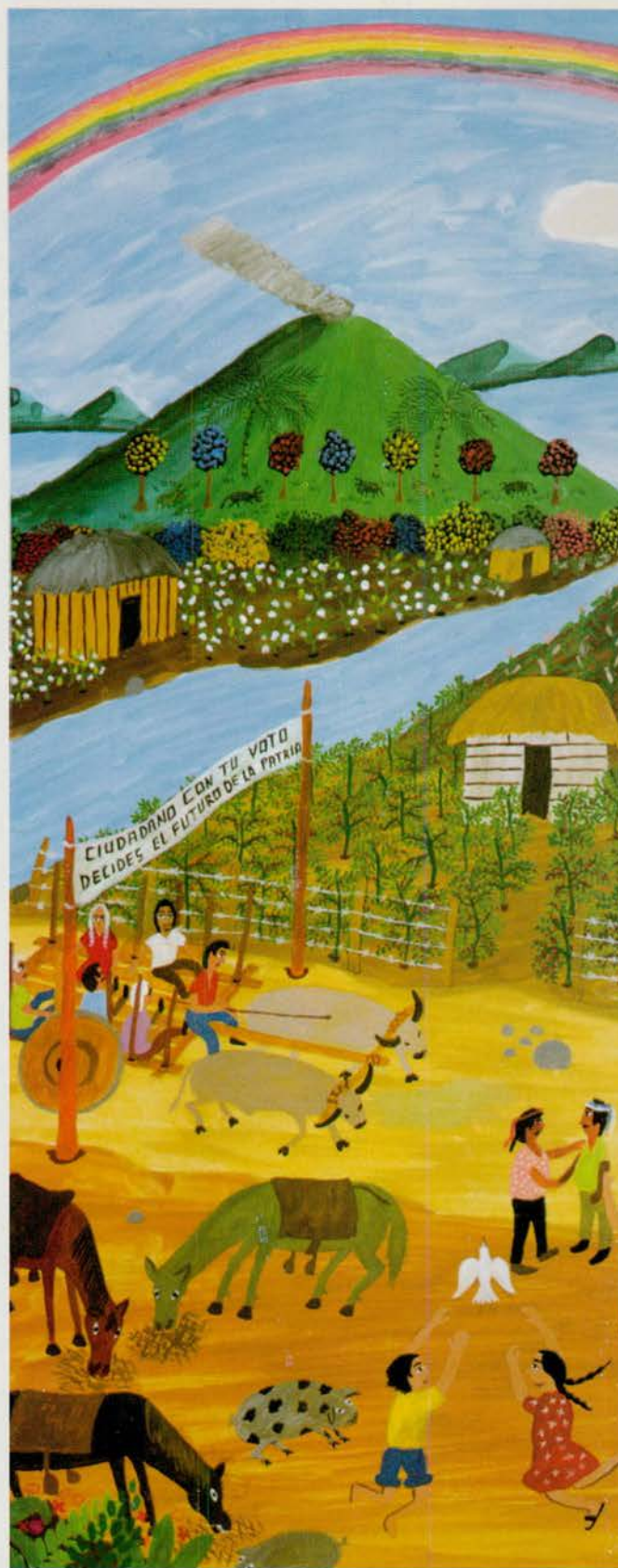
THE AMERICAN Federation of Teachers has been involved for the past three years in an Education for Democracy project in Nicaragua, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education of that country. The project's purpose is to strengthen Nicaraguan democracy through a new civics curriculum that emphasizes democratic principles and practices, supported by participative teaching techniques that promote the skills required by citizens of a democracy.

The project inaugurated an annual "Democracy Week" contest for high school students in 1993, in which students were invited to submit paintings, essays, and poetry that conveyed concepts of democracy. The objective of the contest was to promote an appreciation of democratic values among the students and their teachers, who were asked to collaborate in promoting the activity.

An estimated eight hundred to one thousand high school students submitted works to local and regional contests, from which 260 were selected as semi-finalists. The final selection was made by an independent group of experts in each area. Gioconda María Arburona Parrales, then thirteen years of age, submitted the painting from which the accompanying poster was produced. She won an "Honorable Mention" award.

Gioconda lives in the town of Diriamba, in the western part of Nicaragua, near the Pacific coast. An only child, she learned painting from her father. Among her aspirations are to learn English, study computer science and chemistry, and to become a painter.

The poster, which measures 27" x 30," is for sale through the AFT for \$8.00, which covers postage and handling. Checks should be made out to the American Federation of Teachers, together with your mailing address, and addressed to: Order Department, American Federation of Teachers, 555 New Jersey Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20001.



"Citizen, With Your Vote, You Decide the Future of the Country" by Gioconda María Arburona Parrales, 13 year old student, a winner of the ED

## BRINGING DEMOCRAC





and "Democracy Week" Competition, 1993, Nicaragua

# TO THE CLASSROOM

Education for Democracy/International (ED/I)  
A Project of the American Federation of Teachers  
Educational Foundation



## A DE-MORALIZED SOCIETY

(Continued from page 21)

live in, take for granted, a violent, jungle world.

### De-moralizing Social Policy

In Victorian England, moral principles and judgments were as much a part of social discourse as of private discourse, and as much a part of public policy as of personal life. They were not only deeply ingrained in tradition, they were also imbedded in two powerful strains of Victorian thought: Utilitarianism on the one hand, Evangelicalism and Methodism on the other. These may not have been philosophically compatible, but in practice they complemented and reinforced each other, the Benthamite calculus of pleasure and pain, rewards and punishments, being the secular equivalent of the virtues and vices that Evangelicalism and Methodism derived from religion.

It was this alliance of a secular ethos and a religious one that determined social policy, so that every measure of poor relief or philanthropy, for example, had to justify itself by showing that it would promote the moral as well as the material well-being of the poor. The distinction between pauper and poor, the stigma attached to the "abled-bodied pauper," indeed, the word "pauper" itself, today seem invidious and inhumane. At the time, however, they were the result of a conscious moral decision: an effort to discourage dependency and preserve the respectability of the independent poor, while providing at least minimal sustenance for the indigent.

In recent decades, we have so completely rejected any kind of moral calculus that we have deliberately, systematically divorced welfare from moral sanctions or incentives. This reflects in part the theory that society is responsible for all social problems and should therefore assume the task of solving them; and in part the prevailing spirit of relativism, which makes it difficult to pass any moral judgments or impose any moral conditions upon the recipients of relief. We are now confronting the consequences of this policy of moral neutrality. Having made the most valiant attempt to "objectify" the problem of poverty, to see it as the product of impersonal economic and social forces, we are discovering that the economic and social aspects of that problem are inseparable from the moral and personal ones. And having made the most determined effort to devise social policies that are "value free," we find that these policies imperil both the moral and the material well-being of their intended beneficiaries.

In de-moralizing social policy—divorcing it from any moral criteria, requirements, even expectations—we have demoralized, in the more familiar sense, both the individuals receiving relief and society as a whole. Our welfare system is counterproductive not only because it aggravates the problem of welfare, creating more incentives to enter and remain within it than to try to avoid or escape from it. It also has the effect of exacerbating other, more serious, social problems, so that chronic dependency has become an integral part of the larger phenomenon of "social pathology."

The Supplemental Security Income program is a case in point. Introduced in 1972 to provide a minimum income for the blind, the elderly, and the disabled poor,

the program has been extended to drug addicts and alcoholics as the result of an earlier ruling defining "substance abusers" as "disabled" and therefore eligible for public assistance. Apart from encouraging these "disabilities" ("vices," the Victorians would have called them), the program has the effect of rewarding those who remain addicts or alcoholics while penalizing (by cutting off funds) those who try to overcome their addiction. This is the reverse of the principle of "less eligibility" that was the keystone of Victorian social policy: the principle that the dependent poor be in a less "eligible," less desirable, condition than the independent poor. One might say that we are now operating under a principle of "more eligibility," the recipient of relief being in a more favorable position than the self-supporting person.

Just as many intellectuals, social critics, and policy makers were reluctant for so long to credit the unpalatable facts about crime, illegitimacy, or dependency, so they find it difficult to appreciate the extent to which these facts themselves are a function of values—the extent to which "social pathology" is a function of "moral pathology" and social policy a function of moral principle.

### Victims of the Upperclass

The moral divide has become a class divide. The same people who have long resisted the realities of social life also find it difficult to sympathize with those, among the working classes especially, who feel acutely threatened by a social order that they perceive to be in an acute state of disorder. (The very word "order" now sounds archaic.) The "new class," as it has been called, is not, in fact, all that new; it is by now firmly established in the media, the academy, the professions, and the government. In its denigration of "bourgeois values" and the "Puritan ethic," the new class has legitimized, as it were, the values of the underclass and illegitimized those of the working class, who are still committed to bourgeois values, the Puritan ethic, and other such benighted ideas.

In a powerfully argued book, Myron Magnet has analyzed the dual revolution that led to this strange alliance between what he calls the "Haves" and the "Have-Nots." The first was a social revolution, intended to liberate the poor from the political, economic, and racial oppression that kept them in bondage. The second was a cultural revolution, liberating them (as the Haves themselves were being liberated) from the moral restraints of bourgeois values. The first created the welfare programs of the Great Society, which provided counter-incentives to leaving poverty. And the second disparaged the behavior and attitudes that traditionally made for economic improvement—"deferral of gratification, sobriety, thrift, dogged industry, and so on through the whole catalogue of antique-sounding bourgeois virtues." Together these revolutions had the unintended effect of miring the poor in their poverty—a poverty even more demoralizing and self-perpetuating than the old poverty.

The underclass is not only the victim of its own culture, the "culture of poverty." It is also the victim of the upperclass culture around it. The kind of "delinquency" that a white suburban teenager can absorb with relative (only relative) impunity may be literally fatal to a black inner-city teenager. Similarly, the child in a single-parent family headed by an affluent professional woman is obvi-

ously in a very different condition from the child (more often, children) of a woman on welfare. The effects of the culture, however, are felt at all levels. It was only a matter of time before there should have emerged a white underclass with much the same pathology as the black. And not only a white underclass but a white upper class; the most affluent suburbs are beginning to exhibit the same pathological symptoms: teenage alcoholism, drug addiction, crime, and illegitimacy.

By now this "liberated," anti-bourgeois ethic no longer seems so liberating. The social realities have become so egregious that it is now finally permissible to speak of the need for "family values." President Clinton himself has put the official seal of approval on family values, even going so far as to concede—a year after the event—that there were "a lot of very good things" in Quayle's famous speech about family values (although he was quick to add that the "Murphy Brown thing" was a mistake).

### Beyond Economic Incentives

If liberals have much rethinking to do, so do conservatives, for the familiar conservative responses to social problems are inadequate to the present situation. It is not enough to say that if only the failed welfare policies are abandoned and the resources of the free market released, economic growth and incentives will break the cycle of dependency and produce stable families. There is an element of truth in this view, but not the entire truth, for it underestimates the moral and cultural dimensions of the problem. In Britain as in America, more and more conservatives are returning to an older Burkean tradition, which appreciates the material advantages of a free-market economy (Edmund Burke himself was a disciple of Adam Smith) but also recognizes that such an economy does not automatically produce the moral and social goods that they value—that it may even subvert those goods.

For the promotion of moral values, conservatives have always looked to individuals, families, churches, communities, and all the other voluntary associations that Tocqueville saw as the genius of American society. Today they have more need than ever to do that, as the dominant culture—the "counterculture" of yesteryear—becomes increasingly uncongenial. They support "school choice," permitting parents to send their children to schools of their liking; or they employ private security guards to police their neighborhoods; or they form associations of fathers in inner cities to help fatherless children; or they create organizations like the Character Counts Coalition to encourage "Puritan" virtues and family values. They look, in short, to civil society to do what the state cannot do—or, more often, to undo the evil that the state has done.

Yet here, too, conservatives are caught in a bind, for the values imparted by the reigning culture have by now received the sanction of the state. This is reflected in the official rhetoric ("nonmarital childbearing" or "alternative lifestyle"), in mandated sexual instruction and the distribution of condoms in schools, in the prohibition of school prayer, in social policies that are determinedly "nonjudgmental," and in myriad other ways. Against such a pervasive system of state-supported values, the traditional conservative recourse to private groups and voluntary initiatives may seem inadequate.

Individuals, families, churches, and communities cannot operate in isolation, cannot long maintain values at odds with those legitimated by the state and popularized by the culture. It takes a great effort of will and intellect for the individual to decide for himself that something is immoral and to act on that belief when the law declares it legal and the culture deems it acceptable. It takes an even greater effort for parents to inculcate that belief in their children when school officials contravene it and authorize behavior in violation of it. Values, even traditional values, require legitimation. At the very least, they require not to be illegitimated. And in a secular society, that legitimation or illegitimation is in the hands of the dominant culture, the state, and the courts.

You cannot legislate morality, it is often said. Yet we have done just that. Civil rights legislation prohibiting racial discrimination has succeeded in proscribing racist conduct not only legally but morally as well. Today moral issues are constantly being legislated, adjudicated, or resolved by administrative fiat (by the educational establishment, for instance). Those who want to resist the dominant culture cannot merely opt out of it; it impinges too powerfully upon their lives. They may be obliged, however reluctantly, to invoke the power of the law and the state, if only to protect those private institutions and associations that are the best repositories of traditional values.

### The Use and Abuse of History

One of the most effective weapons in the arsenal of the "counter-counterculture" is history—the memory not only of a time before the counterculture but also of the evolution of the counterculture itself. In 1968, the English playwright and member of Parliament A.P. Herbert had the satisfaction of witnessing the passage of the act he had sponsored abolishing censorship on the stage. Only two years later, he complained that what had started as a "worthy struggle for reasonable liberty for honest writers" had ended as the "right to represent copulation, veraciously, on the public stage." About the same time, a leading American civil liberties lawyer, Morris Ernst, was moved to protest that he had meant to ensure the publication of Joyce's *Ulysses*, not the public performance of sodomy.

In the last two decades, the movements for cultural and sexual liberation in both countries have progressed far beyond their original intentions. Yet, few people are able to resist their momentum or to recall their initial principles. In an unhistorical age such as ours, even the immediate past seems so remote as to be antediluvian; anything short of the present state of "liberation" is regarded as illiberal. And in a thoroughly relativistic age such as ours, any assertion of value—any distinction between the publication of *Ulysses* and the public performance of sodomy—is thought to be arbitrary and authoritarian.

It is in this situation that history may be instructive, to remind us of a time, not so long ago, when all societies, liberal as well as conservative, affirmed values very different from our own. (One need not go back to the Victorian age; several decades will suffice.) To say that history is instructive is not to suggest that it provides us with models for emulation. One could not, even if one so desired, emulate a society—Victorian society, for exam-

ple—at a different stage of economic, technological, social, political, and cultural development. Moreover, if there is much in the ethos of our own times that one may deplore, there is no less in Victorian times. Late-Victorian society was more open, liberal, and humane than early-Victorian society, but it was less open, liberal, and humane than most people today would think desirable. Social, ethnic, and sexual discriminations, class rigidities and political inequalities, autocratic men, submissive women, and overly disciplined children, constraints, restrictions, and abuses of all kinds—there is enough to give pause to the most ardent Victoriophile. Yet there is also much that might appeal to even a modern, liberated spirit.

### Victorian Lessons

The main thing the Victorians can teach us is the importance of values—or, as they would have said, “virtues”—in our public as well as private lives. The Victorians were, candidly and proudly, “moralists.” In recent decades, that has almost become a term of derision. Yet, contemplating our own society, we may be prepared to take a more appreciative view of Victorian moralism—of the “Puritan ethic” of work, thrift, temperance, cleanliness; of the idea of “respectability” that was as powerful among the working classes as among the middle classes; of the reverence for “home and hearth”; of the stigma attached to the “able-bodied pauper,” as a deterrent to the “independent” worker; of the spirit of philanthropy that made it a moral duty on the part of the donors to give not only money but their own time and effort to the charitable cause, and a moral duty on the part of the recipients to try to “better themselves.”

We may even be on the verge of assimilating some of that moralism into our own thinking. It is not only “values” that are being rediscovered but “virtues” as well. That long-neglected word is appearing in the most unlikely places: in books, newspaper columns, journal articles, and scholarly discourse. An article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, reporting on a spate of books and articles from “virtue revivalists” on both the right and the left of the political spectrum, observes that “even if the news that Virtue is back is not in itself particularly exciting to American pragmatism, the news that Virtue is good for you most emphatically is.” The philosopher Martha Nussbaum, reviewing the state of Anglo-American philosophy, focuses upon the subject of “Virtue Revived,” and her account suggests a return not to classical ethics but to something very like Victorian ethics: an ethics based on “virtue” rather than “principle,” on “tradition and particularity” rather than “universality,” on “local wisdom” rather than “theory,” on the “concreteness of history” rather than an “ahistorical detached ethics.”

If anything was lacking to give virtue the *imprimatur* of American liberalism, it was the endorsement of the White House, which came when Hillary Rodham Clinton declared her support for a “Politics of Virtue.” If she is notably vague about the idea (and if, as even friendly critics have pointed out, some of her policies seem to belie it), her eagerness to embrace the term is itself significant.

In fact, the idea of virtue has been implicit in our thinking about social policy even while it was being denied. When we speak of the “social pathology” of crime, drugs,

***We are accustomed to speak of the sexual revolution of this period, but that revolution, we are now discovering, is part of a larger, and more ominous, moral revolution.***

violence, illegitimacy, promiscuity, pornography, illiteracy, are we not making a moral judgment about that “pathology”? Or when we describe the “cycle of welfare dependency,” or the “culture of poverty,” or the “demoralization of the underclass,” are we not defining that class and that culture in moral terms and finding them wanting in those terms? Or when we propose to replace the welfare system by a “workfare” system, or to provide “role models” for fatherless children, or to introduce “moral education” into the school curriculum, are we not testifying to the enduring importance of moral principles that we had, surely prematurely, consigned to the dustbin of history? Or when we are told that organizations are being formed in black communities to “inculcate values” in the children and that “the concept of self-help is reemerging,” or that campaigns are being conducted among young people to promote sexual abstinence and that “chastity seems to be making a comeback,” are we not witnessing the return of those quintessentially Victorian virtues?

### The Present Perspective

It cannot be said too often: No one, not even the most ardent “virtue revivalist,” is proposing to revive Victorianism. Those “good-old”/“bad-old” days are irrevocably gone. Children are not about to return to that docile condition in which they are seen but not heard, nor workers to that deferential state where they tip their caps to their betters (a custom that was already becoming obsolete by the end of the nineteenth century). Nor are men and women going to retreat to their “separate spheres”; nor blacks and whites to a state of segregation and discrimination. But if the past cannot—and should not—be replicated, it can serve to put the present in better perspective.

In this perspective, it appears that the present, not the past, is the anomaly, the aberration. Those two powerful indexes of social pathology, illegitimacy and crime, show not only the disparity between the Victorian period and our own but also, more significantly, the endurance of the Victorian ethos long after the Victorian age—indeed, until well into the present century. The 4 to 5 percent illegitimacy ratio was sustained (in both Britain and the United States) until 1960—a time span that encompasses two world wars, the most serious depression in modern times, the traumatic experience of Nazism and Communism, the growth of a consumer economy that almost rivals the Industrial Revolution in its moral as well as material consequences, the continuing decline of the rural population, the unprecedented expansion of mass education and popular culture, and a host of other economic, political, social, and cultural changes. In this sense “Victorian values” may be said to have survived not

only the formative years of industrialism and urbanism but some of the most disruptive experiences of our times.

It is from this perspective, not so much of the Victorians as of our own recent past, that we must come to terms with such facts as a sixfold rise of illegitimacy in only three decades (in both Britain and the United States),\* or a nearly sixfold rise of crime in England and over threefold in the United States, or all the other indicators of social pathology that are no less disquieting. We are accustomed to speak of the sexual revolution of this period, but that revolution, we are now discovering, is part of a larger, and more ominous, moral revolution.

## A Society's Ethos

The historical perspective is also useful in reminding us of our gains and losses—our considerable gains in material goods, political liberty, social mobility, racial and sexual equality—and our no-less-considerable losses in moral well-being. There are those who say that it is all of a piece, that what we have lost is the necessary price of what we have gained. (“No pain, no gain,” as the motto has it.) In this view, liberal democracy, capitalism, affluence, and modernity are thought to carry with them the “contradictions” that are their undoing. The very qualities that encourage economic and social progress—individuality, boldness, the spirit of enterprise and innovation—are said to undermine conventional manners and morals, traditions, and authorities. This echoes a famous passage in *The Communist Manifesto*:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his “natural superior,” and has left no other bond between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous “cash payment.” ... The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation.

Marx was as wrong about this as he was about so many things. Victorian England was a crucial test case for him because it was the first country to experience the industrial-capitalist-bourgeois revolution in its most highly developed form. Yet, that revolution did not have the effects he attributed to it. It did not destroy all social relations, tear asunder the ties that bound man to man, strip from the family its sentimental veil, and reduce everything to “cash payment” (the “cash nexus,” in other translations). It did not do this, in part because the free market was never as free or as pervasive as Marx thought (*laissez-faire*, historians now agree, was less rigorous, both in theory and in practice, that was once supposed); and in part because traditional values and institutions

\*The present illegitimacy ratio is not only unprecedented in the past two centuries; it is unprecedented, so far as we know, in American history going back to Colonial times, and in English history from Tudor times. The American evidence is scanty, but the English is more conclusive. English parish records in the mid-sixteenth century give an illegitimacy ratio of 2.4 percent; by the early seventeenth century it reached 3.4 percent; in the Cromwellian period it fell to 1 percent; during the eighteenth century it rose from 3.1 percent to 5.3 percent; it reached its peak of 7 percent in 1845, and then declined to under 4 percent by the end of the nineteenth century. It is against this background that the present rate of 32 percent must be viewed.

continued to play an important role in society, even in those industrial and urban areas most affected by the economic and social revolution.

Industrialism and urbanism—“modernism,” as it is now known—so far from contributing to the de-moralization of the poor, seem to have had the opposite effect. At the end of the nineteenth century, England was a more civil, more pacific, more humane society than it had been in the beginning. “Middle-class” manners and morals had penetrated into large sections of the working classes. The traditional family was as firmly established as ever, even as women began to be liberated from their “separate sphere.” And religion continued to thrive, in spite of the premature reports of its death.

If Victorian England did not succumb to the moral and cultural anarchy that are said to be the inevitable consequences of economic individualism, it is because of a powerful ethos that kept that individualism in check. For the Victorians, the individual, or “self,” was the ally rather than the adversary of society. Self-help was seen in the context of the community as well as the family; among the working classes, this was reflected in the virtue of “neighbourliness,” among the middle classes, of philanthropy. Self-interest stood not in opposition to the general interest but, as Adam Smith had it, as the instrument of the general interest. Self-discipline and self-control were thought of as the source of self-respect and self-betterment; and self-respect as the precondition for the respect and approbation of others. The individual, in short, was assumed to have responsibilities as well as rights, duties as well as privileges.

That Victorian “self” was very different from the “self” that is celebrated today. Unlike “self-help,” “self-esteem” does not depend upon the individual’s actions or achievements; it is presumed to adhere to the individual regardless of how he behaves or what he accomplishes. Moreover, it adheres to him regardless of the esteem in which he is held by others, unlike the Victorian’s self-respect, which always entailed the respect of others. The current notions of self-fulfillment, self-expression, and self-realization derive from a self that does not have to prove itself by reference to any values, purposes, or persons outside itself—that simply is, and by reason of that alone deserves to be fulfilled and realized. This is truly a self divorced from others, narcissistic and solipsistic.

This is the final lesson we may learn from the Victorians: that the ethos of society, its moral and spiritual character, cannot be reduced to economic, material, political, or other factors, that values—or, better yet, virtues—are a determining factor in their own right; so far from being a “reflection,” as the Marxist says, of the economic realities, they are themselves, as often as not, the crucial agent in shaping those realities. If in a period of rapid economic and social change, the Victorians showed a substantial improvement in their “condition” and “disposition,” it may be that economic and social change do not necessarily result in personal and public disarray. If they could retain and even strengthen an ethos that had its roots in religion and tradition, it may be that we are not as constrained by the material conditions of our time as we have thought. A post-industrial economy, we may conclude, does not necessarily entail a postmodernist society or culture, still less a de-moralized society or culture. □

## FIRST THINGS FIRST

(Continued from page 13)

whelming majorities of Americans—across geographic and demographic lines—believe it is “highly appropriate” for public schools to teach an inner circle of consensus values.

### Top Priorities

Ninety-five percent of Americans say schools should teach “honesty and the importance of telling the truth,” with 89% giving this a “number five” rating. Ninety-five percent say schools should teach “respect for others regardless of their racial or ethnic background,” with 88% giving this the top rating. Ninety-three percent say schools should teach “students to solve problems without violence,” with 85% giving it the top rating.

Other items near the top of the public’s “values-to-teach” list reiterate a concern for equality, fairness, and “getting along.” Eighty-four percent of Americans say schools should teach “students that having friends from different racial backgrounds and living in integrated neighborhoods is good,” with 67% giving this a “number five” rating. Eighty percent say schools should teach “that girls can succeed at anything boys can,” with 63% giving this a top “number five” rating. Seventy-six percent say schools should teach about “the struggle for black civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s,” with 54% giving this the highest rating. And even though homosexuality is a more controversial area, as we explain later in this report, 61% of Americans say schools should teach “respect for people who are homosexual,” with 47% giving it a “number five” rating.

The public’s concerns about tolerance and equality extend beyond selection of textbooks and development of curricula and lesson plans. People expect the schools to enforce certain minimum standards of fair treatment for all children.

Study participants were presented with this scenario: “If a teacher passes a group of students in a public school playground who are teasing another child about his race, should the teacher: A) let the students work it out themselves; B) break up the situation; or C) break up the situation and emphasize that teasing about race is wrong?”

Ninety percent of Americans—across all geographic and demographic lines—want the teacher not only to break up the situation, but to explain that the behavior is wrong (Option C). Eighty-six percent would expect the same reaction if the child were being teased about religion. More than seven in ten (72%) would expect the same reaction if the child were being teased because a parent is homosexual: in this case, however, another 18% would have the teacher break up the situation, but not discuss the reason at length.

### Low Comfort Level

Several items are considered “not at all appropriate” by most Americans and fell to the bottom of the public’s list. What most of these items have in common is that people seem to find them strident and divisive. Eighty-one percent of Americans say that

schools should *not* “bring in a guest speaker who argues that the Holocaust never happened,” with 70% giving this idea the lowest possible rating. Seventy-one percent say schools should *not* “bring in a guest speaker who advocates black separatism,” with 61% giving this the lowest possible ranking. Contrary to what might be the conventional wisdom, there are no significant differences between the views of African-American parents and white parents on this issue—both oppose it. Sixty-six percent of Americans also reject the idea that schools should teach that “Columbus was a murderer because his explorations led to the mass destruction of Native Americans,” with 53% giving this the lowest rating possible.

Among leadership, there is an ongoing discussion about issues of Eurocentrism and patriarchy in the public school curriculum. Some have called for a more multicultural curriculum, while others fear that too great an emphasis on multiculturalism could undermine traditional American values. This dispute has a relatively low priority for the public, but Americans do bring a distinctive point of view to it—one that helps explain why they deem some kinds of lessons highly appropriate while rejecting others as highly inappropriate.

### Avoid Discord

First, most people do not believe that women and racial minority groups are treated unfairly in existing textbooks, although African-American parents view this issue quite differently (See Finding 9). Less than a third of the public thinks that African-Americans (32%), Hispanics (28%) or women (20%) are treated unfairly. Nonetheless, people support what they see as positive values emerging from the women’s movement and the advocacy of minority groups.

What they reject, at least as lessons in the public schools, are sharply negative critiques of American society. For example, 80% of Americans say schools should teach that “girls can succeed at anything boys can.” But public support drops off dramatically when people are asked whether schools should teach that “women need to have careers outside the home to be fulfilled.” Only 35% support this as a value that should be taught in the schools. What people seem to be saying is, “Yes, encourage girls to succeed at anything they want, but don’t criticize those who choose a more traditional lifestyle”—a variation of the “live and let live” theme.

A similar pattern emerges on race. People strongly endorse teaching respect for all people regardless of their racial background, and they want schools to teach children that it is good to have friends of different races and to live in integrated neighborhoods. People think it is utterly unacceptable for a student to be teased because of his race, and there is broad support for including lessons about the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s (76%). But support drops off dramatically when issues are

presented as a critique of mainstream society. Only 29% think schools should teach that “racism is the main cause of the economic and social problems blacks face today,” and



only 10% believe public schools should invite a black separatist to speak.

## A Goal for the Next Generation

The findings—strongly endorsing the teaching of “respect” for others and rejecting more contentious messages—suggest among the general public a longing for harmony and civility and some desire to put discord in the past. The public school system has played a historic role in enabling diverse Americans to learn about each other and live together without bloodshed—a goal that many other nations have not been able to achieve. During the 1950s and 1960s, the public schools became the symbol of the nation’s moral judgment that African-Americans and white Americans should live together in equality.

Few would argue that the United States has lived up to all of its goals, and it is indisputable that prejudice, anger, misunderstanding, and distrust continue to divide the country along racial and ethnic lines. Regardless of these failures, the vast majority of Americans accept the goal, and they want the public schools to play a central role in passing that goal along to their children.

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## AFTERWORD

By **DEBORAH WADSWORTH**  
*Executive Director, Public Agenda*

Not all of the findings in this report are new. Americans have voiced concern about too little attention to discipline and the basics in public schools for well over a decade. Indeed, it is the persistence of these concerns that should make them a priority for leadership attention.

Leadership-led reform is under way in communities across the country. Americans are beginning to learn about the changes being launched in schools their children and grandchildren attend. But their concerns about schools, rather than being alleviated, have become even more urgent. Public dissatisfaction about discipline and the basics has been joined by a potent new concern—fear about safety and security. Even though public fears may be exaggerated, this issue represents, for most Americans, the most fundamental breakdown in their compact with the schools. Warranted or not, fear is, as Franklin Roosevelt observed, the most corrosive and debilitating of emotions.

The purpose of this report is not to provide a “follow-the-instructions” recipe for educational policy. It is to ask leaders to stop, to listen, and to give the public’s point of view the same attention and respect, the same consideration, they naturally give to the “experts.”

Leaders, if they choose to listen empathetically to the public’s point of view, face three choices. One, they may decide that the public’s concerns require genuine changes in leadership’s agenda. In that case, leaders must either expand their agenda, for example, to take account of the public’s concerns about safety and order, or amend it to accommodate some of the public’s conclusions about what is most likely to work.

Second, leaders may determine—

after an honest and candid self-appraisal—that the public’s views stem from misunderstanding, and to respond with better, more effective communications. This does not mean a new slogan or public service announcement—or a slight repackaging of the old communications plan with the latest public “buzzwords” thrown in. It means an authentic, well-thought-out, and continuing communications effort to help people understand what is happening in the schools and what reform is all about—a communications effort that starts from the public’s concerns and priorities.

An anecdote told by the principal of a highly acclaimed magnet school in New York City suggests one approach. Every year parents of prospective students are invited to an “open house” where the curriculum is explained, teachers are introduced, and parents ask myriad questions about test scores, college admissions, elective courses, and so on. Toward the end of the day, the principal himself introduces a new topic: “There is one question I haven’t heard,” the principal will say. “Is this school safe?” And every year, he reports that he can see an almost visible sigh of relief among the parents, relief that the “unaskable” has been asked, that the topic on their minds is going to be addressed. The principal then invites the parents to visit the school, go anywhere on the premises they like, talk with the students, talk with the teachers. His approach is effective because, although he himself is confident about his school’s safety, he understands and respects parent’s fears for their children and takes it upon himself to ensure that those fears are addressed effectively.

In a third course of action, leaders may decide that the public’s point of view (in whole or in part) is mistaken. This decision demands the exercise of real leadership—the slow, exacting process of building a constituency for ideas that are not popular, but that are worthwhile. It has taken public health officials more than a decade, for example, to change Americans’ views on smoking and driving after drinking alcohol. Environmentalists have built public support for recycling and other measures, but only after long, multi-faceted, persistent education efforts. This is the most difficult path of all, but it is the one that is warranted if, after honest self-scrutiny, leaders are convinced their approach—not the public’s—will truly help children and their families.

What will not advance the cause of public education is to dismiss the public’s views out-of-hand or attempt to manipulate people by paying lip service to their ideas. The public’s concerns are fundamental. Many of the public’s views—the focus on order and basics, the discomfort with teaching innovations—have been around for a while. And at their very core, these are people’s very real concerns about the future of children they love. People are not likely to be persuaded just because leaders put a better spin on the same old messages.

Public education in America is, in the most fundamental sense, a public issue. Schools will not change because leaders want them to. They will change when parents, students and teachers go about their daily activities in different ways. That will only happen when the public is considered an equal and respected partner in reform—one whose views are worth listening to. □



## THE FAILURE OF SEX EDUCATION

(Continued from page 29)

without hurting boys' feelings. This is especially noteworthy given that all the girls in the survey were sexually active, and some were mothers.

Beyond "no," better communication about sex does not seem to contribute to higher levels of sexual responsibility. To be sure, there has been little research into this aspect of teenage sexuality. But even absent research, there is good reason to be skeptical of the claim. If free and easy sex talk were a key determinant of sexual behavior, then we might expect the trends to look very different. It would be our tongue-tied grandparents who had high rates of illegitimacy and STDs, not today's franker and looser-lipped teenagers.

### 'You Are Not Ready for Sex'

UNUSUALLY, there is not a shred of evidence to support the claim that noncoital sex, with or without communication, will reduce the likelihood of coitus. William Firestone, of Rutgers, who wrote the study for the Network for Family Life Education, concedes that his enthusiasm is empirically unfounded. In fact, several studies show just the opposite. Outercourse is a precursor to intercourse. But do we need studies to tell us this? Is it not graven in our memory that getting to third base vastly increases the chances of scoring a run? In fact, it could be argued that teaching noncoital sex techniques as a way of reducing the risks of coitus comes close to educational malpractice.

And what about empowering students to make their own sexual decisions? Douglas Kirby's work shows that teaching decision-making skills is not effective, either, in influencing teenage sexual behavior. Similarly, there is little empirical support for the claim made by comprehensive sex education's advocates that responsible sexual behavior depends on long years of sexual schooling. In fact, the evidence points in the opposite direction. Math and reading do require instruction over a period of time, but sex education may be most effective at a key developmental moment. This is not in grade school but in middle school, when pre-teens are hormonally gearing up for sex but are still mainly uninitiated.

In pursuit of a more effective sex pedagogy, researchers have turned away from technocratic approaches and dusted off that old chestnut, norms. According to Kirby's research review, several new and promising sex-education programs focus on sending clear messages about what is desirable behavior. When middle-schoolers ask, "What is the best time to begin having sex?" teachers in these programs have an answer. It is: "Not yet. You are not ready for sex."

Evidently, too, sex education works best when it combines clear messages about behavior with strong moral and logistical support for the behavior sought. One of the most carefully designed and evaluated sex-education courses available is Postponing Sexual Involvement, a program developed by researchers at Grady Memorial Hospital, in Atlanta, Georgia, and originally targeted at minority eighth-graders who are at high risk for unwed motherhood and sexually transmitted diseases. Its goal is to help boys and girls resist pressures to engage in sex.

The Grady Hospital program offers more than a "just

***Research does not support the idea that early sex education or franker communication or instruction about feelings and decision-making seem to have any measurable impact on sexual conduct. ...As we will see, the most important influences on teenage sexual behavior lie elsewhere.***

say no" message. It reinforces the message by having young people practice the desired behavior. The classes are led by popular older teenagers who teach middle-schoolers how to reject sexual advances and refuse sexual intercourse. The eighth-graders perform skits in which they practice refusals. Some of them take the part of "angel on my shoulder," intervening with advice and support if the sexually beleaguered student runs out of ideas. Boys practice resisting pressure from other boys. According to the program evaluator, Marion Howard, a professor of gynecology and obstetrics at Emory University, the skits are not like conventional "role plays," in which students are allowed to come up with their own endings. All skits must end with a successful rebuff.

The program is short: five class periods. It is not comprehensive but is focused on a single goal. It is not therapeutic but normative. It establishes and reinforces a socially desirable behavior. And it has had encouraging results. By the end of ninth grade only 24 percent in the program group had had sexual intercourse, as compared with 39 percent in the nonprogram group. Studies of similar programs show similar results: Abstinence messages can help students put off sex. It is noteworthy that although the purpose of the Grady Hospital program was to help students postpone sex, it also had an impact on the behavior of students who later engaged in sexual intercourse. Among those who had sex, half used contraception, whereas only a third did in a control group that had not taken the course.

Postponing Sexual Involvement and similarly designed sex education programs offer this useful insight: Formal sex education is perhaps most successful when it reinforces the behavior of abstinence among young adolescents who are practicing that behavior. Its effectiveness diminishes significantly when the goal is to influence the behavior of teenagers who are already engaging in sex. Thus teaching sexually active middle school students to engage in protected intercourse is likely to be more difficult and less successful than teaching abstinent students to continue refraining from sex. This seems to hold for older teens as well. In a 1991 study Kirby points to one curriculum for tenth-graders, Reducing the Risk, which has been successful in increasing the likelihood that abstinent students will continue to postpone sex



over the eighteen months following the course. However, although the program emphasizes contraception as well as sexual postponement, it does not increase the likelihood that already sexually active tenth-graders will engage in protected sex. "Once patterns of sexual intercourse and contraceptive use are established," Kirby writes, "they may be difficult to change." For that reason the Grady Hospital researchers have developed a program for sixth-graders, since 44 percent of the boys taking this course in the eighth grade were already sexually experienced (this was true of just 9 percent of the girls).

It does not follow, however, that this approach will work for younger children. The evidence strongly suggests that children who are sexualized at very early ages are likely to be victims of sexual abuse and other forms of traumatic sexualization. Teaching refusal skills to a "sexually active" nine- or ten-year-old is not the answer. Such children need far more intensive care and support than can be provided in the classroom.

In a sharp break with the surgeon general's approach, President Clinton's welfare-reform proposal strongly endorses the Grady Hospital approach. Similarly, the president's recent bully-pulpit message to teenagers, counseling sexual postponement and marriage before parenthood, is strikingly at odds with the surgeon general's message to "get real." Thus the administration finds itself in the awkward position of advancing contradictory approaches to sex education and pregnancy prevention.

Judging by the available evidence, the president has the stronger case. None of the technocratic assumptions of comprehensive sex education hold up under scrutiny. Research does not support the idea that early sex education will lead to more-responsible sexual behavior in adolescence. Nor is there reason to believe that franker communication will reduce the risks of early-teenage sex. Nor does instruction about feelings or decision-making seem to have any measurable impact on sexual conduct. Teaching teenagers to explore their sexuality through noncoital techniques has perverse effects, since it is likely to lead to coitus. Finally, although teenagers may be sexually miseducated, there is no reason to believe that miseducation is the principal source of sexual misbehavior. As we will see, the most important influences on teenage sexual behavior lie elsewhere.

Moreover, if comprehensive sex education has had a significant impact on teenage sexual behavior in New Jersey, there is little evidence to show it. The advocates cannot point to any evaluative studies of comprehensive sex education in the state. Absent such specific measures, one can only fall back on gross measures like the glum statistics on unwed teenage childbearing in the state. In 1980, 67.6 percent of teenage births were to unmarried mothers; eleven years later the figure had increased to 84 percent. Arguably, the percentage might be even higher if comprehensive sex education did not exist. Nevertheless, it is hard for advocates to claim that the state with the nation's fourth highest percentage of unwed births is a showcase for their approach.

The absence of empirical support for comprehensive sex education does not, however, discomfit or deter its advocates. Up and down the sex education ranks, from the surgeon general to local advocates, there has been little effort to make a reasoned case for comprehensive sex

education. Challenged, the sex educators simply crank up their rhetoric: Criticize sex education, they say, and you contribute to the deaths of teenagers from AIDS.

Nor, for that matter, has there been much critical challenge from the research community. Perhaps this is because comprehensive sex education is a policy crafted outside the precincts of the academy. It is not rooted in a single discipline, or even a set of disciplines, but can best be described as a jumble of popular therapies, self-esteem and assertiveness training, sexology, and certain strands of feminism.

The unifying core of comprehensive sex education is not intellectual but ideological. Its mission is to defend and extend the freedoms of the sexual revolution, and its architects are called forth from a variety of pursuits to advance this cause. At least in New Jersey, the sex education leaders are not researchers or policy analysts or child-development experts but public-sector entrepreneurs: advocates, independent consultants, family planners, freelance curriculum writers, specialty publishers, and diversity educators. However dedicated and high-minded they may be, their principal task is not to serve the public or schoolchildren but to promote their ideology.

For better or worse, sex education advocacy is largely women's work. And there is an unmistakably female bias in the advocates' idea of what is sexually nice. It favors what thousands of American women have told Ann Lander: In their sex lives women would like more talking, more hugging, more outercourse. At the teacher-training workshop I attended, a family planner explained a classroom exercise designed to show all the things we can do without sexual intercourse: we can have children; we can show love and affection; we can gain self-esteem; we can achieve success in life. Reaching her summation, she proclaimed, we can have orgasm without sexual intercourse. After a moment, in the back of the classroom, one of the few men attending cleared his throat and politely protested this ideal of intercourse-free sex.

Comprehensive sex education reflects not just a gender bias but also a generational bias. Despite its verbal swagger, it offers a misty-eyed view of early-teenage sexuality. It assumes that the principal obstacles to responsible sexual conduct are ignorance, guilt, and shame. Once properly schooled in sex and freed of these repressive feelings, boys and girls can engage in mutual sexual pleasuring. But there is a dated quality to this view. Indeed, many of the arguments for sex education are filled with anecdotes from the fifties: Susan Wilson, for one, urges middle-aged teachers to think back and remember how inadequate their own sex education was. Though the educators' notions may accurately reflect what it was like for eighteen-year-old females to come of age before the sexual revolution of the 1960s, they have little to do with what fifteen-year-olds face in the 1990s. The MTV generation may indeed have a distorted image of sex, but it has not been distorted by shame or repression.

Thus comprehensive sex education flunks the reality test not just once but twice. Indeed, much of the evidence suggests that less-comprehensive, more-targeted sex education would be far more effective in reducing early sexual involvement and its associated risks. But more important, comprehensive sex education is woe-

fully out of touch with the realities of teenagers' sex lives. Surely any policy with claims to steely-eyed realism must begin with an appraisal of what the evidence tells us about the sexual lives of today's adolescents, especially teenage girls.

## The New Sexual Revolution

HERE IS a new sexual revolution in America. Unlike the old sexual revolution, which has been documented and celebrated ever since its boisterous beginnings, in the late 1960s, the new sexual revolution has arrived unheralded. Its vanguard is found not among confident, self-dramatizing students on college campuses but among gawky adolescents in the crowded hallways of the junior high.

The children of the Baby Boom generation are beginning to have sex at earlier ages than their parents did. In 1970, 5 percent of fifteen-year-old girls and 32 percent of seventeen-year-old girls reported having had sex; by 1988 the figures had increased to 26 percent of fifteen-year-olds and 51 percent of seventeen-year-olds. By age nineteen nearly 80 percent of young women have had sexual intercourse. As a result of earlier sexual initiation, among girls, the historical gender gap in first sexual experience is narrowing; according to the 1988 National Survey of Young Men, one third of teenage males have had sex by age fifteen, and 86 percent by age nineteen. With early initiation, today's adolescents are more sexually active. They have more partners: among never-married sexually experienced teenage girls in 1971, 38 percent had had two or more sexual partners; by 1988 the figure had increased to 59 percent. And they have sex more frequently: the 1988 National Survey of Family Growth reported that 45 percent of never-married sexually active girls had intercourse at least once a week, as compared with 40 percent when the survey was administered in 1982.

But these figures alone do not capture what may be the most striking feature of the new sexual revolution: the rise in the proportion of younger teenagers engaging in sex. The largest relative increase in sexual intercourse among teenage girls has occurred among those fifteen years of age, from 4.6 percent in 1970 to 25.6 percent in 1988. (Below the age of fifteen, the evidence strongly suggests, sexual initiation is involuntary for a large proportion of girls who report having had sexual intercourse.)

Within this overall pattern of earlier sexual initiation, there are significant racial and ethnic differences. African-American males are more likely than white or Hispanic males to engage in early sex. At age fourteen, 35 percent of black males have had intercourse; the comparable percentages for white and Hispanic males are seven and six respectively. Apparently because they begin their sexual careers earlier, black males also report more partners than white or Hispanic males (those who are sexually active at age fifteen, for example, report 6.4, 3.5, and 1.9 respectively). Though data comparing teenage girls from all three groups are not available, the evidence points to similar differences between African-American and white females. African-American girls are more likely to have had premarital sex in the early teen years than their white counterparts. However, the differences become less pronounced among older teens.

For example, at age sixteen, 24 percent of white girls, and 33 percent of black girls, report having experienced sexual intercourse; by age nineteen the percentages are nearly identical: 76 percent of white girls and 79 percent of black girls.

Family structure strongly influences early sexual activity as well. Daughters in single-parent families are more likely to engage in early sex than girls who grow up in two-parent families. Several factors may be involved: less supervision in the home, more exposure to adults' sexuality, and the lack of a father's steady affection and protection. Girls whose relationships with their fathers have been severely damaged by divorce or their parents' non-marriage are more likely to engage in a frantic quest for male approval and to seek love through early sex than are girls from intact families. Both parents and teenagers in divorced families have more permissive attitudes toward sexual intercourse outside marriage. In fact, there is evidence of a kind of sexual trickle-down in families, not just from parent to child but also from older siblings to younger. Teenagers with sexually active siblings are likelier to begin having sex at an early age.

Religiously observant teens are likelier than others to refrain from early sex; the highest level of premarital intercourse occurs among teens with no religious affiliation. At the same time, the University of Michigan sociologist Arland Thornton reports, cause and effect can work in the other direction. Early sexual activity can dampen religious ardor.

In the midst of this sexual upheaval one trend is quite clear: The new sexual revolution has been a disaster for teenage girls. Even more now than in the past, girls bear the heavy burdens and penalties of nonconjugal sex. Early sexual initiation puts girls at increased risk for sexually transmitted diseases. This is partly because teenagers who are sexually active at an early age have more partners and partly because young teenage girls are likely to have older, sexually experienced partners. Some researchers also contend that teenage girls are at greater risk for STDs than adult women because their cervical lining is not yet fully mature and is therefore more vulnerable to pathogens. Whatever their causes, STDs can lead to serious, sometimes permanent, damage to the reproductive system, including infertility, chronic pelvic pain, ectopic pregnancy, and cervical cancer.

And despite reported high levels of contraceptive use among adolescents, teenage girls continue to get pregnant. A million teenage girls each year find themselves pregnant. About 37 percent of teenage pregnancies end in abortion and about 14 percent in miscarriage. Roughly half of all these pregnancies result in childbirth, and since less than 10 percent of teenagers today give their babies up for adoption, teenage childbearing commonly results in teenage motherhood—usually unwed motherhood.

This fact constitutes one of the more perplexing aspects of the new sexual revolution. Teenage girls have greater control over their fertility today than they had in the past, and yet the percentage of births to unwed mothers continues to rise, having already increased from 30 percent among teenagers in 1970 to nearly 70 percent in 1990. In some cities in America 85 or 90 percent of all teenage births are to unwed mothers. Twenty-five percent of all babies born to teenagers are not first children.

And the earlier a teenager begins her maternal career, the more children she is likely to have.

Teenage childbearing on this scale has monumental social consequences, both for the mothers and for their young children. In fact, if one wanted to spawn a generation of vulnerable families, one would seek to increase the number of families headed by fifteen- and sixteen-year-old mothers. A single teenage mother is less likely to complete high school or to be employed than her peers, and her child is at greater risk than other children for a host of health and developmental problems, and also for physical and sexual abuse. Both mother and child are likely to experience poverty and its predictable social consequence, chronic welfare dependency. If three risk factors for poverty are present—teenage childbearing, failure to complete high school, and nonmarriage—then it is all but inevitable that the mother and her child will live in poverty: 79 percent of all children born to mothers with those three risk factors are poor.

### Exploitative Sex

**B**YOND THESE statistical measures researchers are beginning to piece together a portrait of teenage sexuality in the 1990s. There is still much to learn, but recent research tells us two things: first, fifteen-year-old sex is riskier than eighteen-year-old sex; and second, early-teenage sex is often exploitative sex. This evidence indicates that few young teenagers are ready or able to engage in kinder, gentler sex. In fact, sexual encounters between fifteen-year-olds are likely to be nasty, brutish,

and short.

To begin with, there are sharp polarities in the way male and female teenagers approach sex. Despite changes in teenage sexual behavior, boys and girls continue to view love and sex relationships in different ways. Girls look for security, and boys seek adventure. Boys are after variety, and girls want intimacy. The classic formulation still seems to hold true: girls give sex in order to get love, and boys give love in order to get sex. According to one study, more than 60 percent of sexually experienced girls were going steady with or engaged to their first sexual partners, whereas less than 40 percent of teenage boys had their first sex with a steady or a fiancée. Boys were more than twice as likely as girls to have had their first intercourse with someone they had only recently met. As Freya Sonenstein, of the Urban Institute, and her colleagues report, "A typical picture of an adolescent male's year would be separate relationships with two partners, lasting a few months each."

Such gender polarities are most pronounced in early adolescence. Boys and girls both experience physical changes during puberty, but these changes carry different psychological meanings. For boys, increases in body weight and size bring an enhanced sense of power and dominance, whereas similar changes frequently provoke ambivalence and anxiety among girls. In a culture obsessed with skeletal thinness as a standard of female beauty and achievement, weight gain can inspire feelings of "grossness" and self-disgust among teenage girls. Carol Gilligan and other researchers have noted a decline in

## The Importance of Fathers in the Lives of Girls

**I**N A LONGITUDINAL study that may be the only one of its kind, sociologist Frank Furstenberg of the University of Pennsylvania periodically followed the children of teen mothers from birth in the 1960s to as old as twenty-one in 1987. His findings couldn't be more dramatic: Kids with close relationships with a *residential* father or long-term stepfather simply did not follow the teenage mommy track. One out of four of the 253 mostly black Baltimoreans in the study had a baby before age nineteen. But *not one* who had a good relationship with a live-in father had a baby. A close relationship with a father not living at home did not help; indeed, those children were more likely to have a child before nineteen than those with little or no contact with their fathers.

Some social critics, most forcefully Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, have insisted on the profound importance of fathers in the lives

of adolescent boys. But for girls a father is just as central. Inez, one of the peer AIDS counselors, says she always bristled on hearing boys boast of their female acquaintances, "I can do her anytime" or "I had her." Any woman who had grown up in a home with an affectionate and devoted father would be similarly disapproving. Having had a first-hand education of the heart, a girl is far less likely to be swayed by the first boy who attempts to snow her with the compliments she may never have heard from a man: "Baby, you look so good" or "You know I love you."

The ways of love, it seems, must be learned, not from decision making or abstinence classes, not from watching soap operas or, heaven forbid, from listening to rap music, but through the lived experience of loving and being loved. Judith S. Musick, a developmental psychologist with the Ounce of Prevention Fund, explains that through her relationship with her father, a girl

"acquires her attitudes about men and, most importantly, about herself in relation to them." In other words, a girl growing up with a close father internalizes a sense of love, which sends up warning signals when a boy on the prowl begins to strut near her.

Further, a girl hesitates before replacing the attachment she has to her own father with a new love. I recently watched a girl of about twelve walking down the street with her parents. As she skipped along next to them, busily chattering, she held her father's hand and occasionally rested her head against his arm. The introduction of a serious boyfriend into this family romance is unlikely to come soon.

*Excerpted with permission from "The Teen Mommy Track" by Kay S. Hymowitz, which appeared in the Autumn 1994 issue of City Journal, published by the Manhattan Institute.*

young adolescent girls' feelings of competence and confidence at roughly the same time that adolescent boys are becoming more assertive and, well, cocky.

The younger a girl is when she begins to have sex, the more vulnerable she is to its risks. She is less likely than an older teenager to be in a steady relationship, to plan her first intercourse, or to use contraception. Thus girls who were fifteen or younger at first intercourse are almost twice as likely as eighteen-year-olds to experience pregnancy within the first six months of sexual activity. Nor can it be said that a fifteen-year-old girl really chooses to engage in sex, given the enormous gap between physical readiness on the one hand, and emotional and cognitive readiness on the other. On this point Laurie Schwab Zabin, a researcher at Johns Hopkins University, writes, "Whether or not to engage in coitus, whether or not to contracept, whether or not to bear a child when faced with an unintended conception—are all decisions. Unfortunately, they are often not true 'choices.'" David Ellwood, the assistant secretary of Health and Human Services, puts it even more plainly: "There seems to be ample evidence to support almost any model of teenage behavior except a model of pure rational choice."

Girls who are sexually active at early ages are likely to experience coercive sex. Teenage girls tend to have first sex with male partners who are three or more years older, whereas teenage boys are likely to have their first sexual encounter with girls who are less than a year older. Thus the balance of power is dramatically skewed. Surely one has to be skeptical of claims of "voluntary" sex between girls and much older partners. As one researcher put it, "Could one possibly call the pairings of eleven-year-old girls and twenty-five-year-old men 'dates'?"

Indeed, age disparities between girls and their sexual partners are often markers for sexual abuse. In one study of abused teenage mothers and mothers-to-be, only 18 percent of the girls reported abuse by men near their age, while 45 percent reported abuse by men ten or more years older. Sexual abuse is a significant factor in girls' early sexualization. Studies show that teenage girls who have been sexually abused are significantly more likely to engage in voluntary sexual intercourse and are likely to have intercourse at an earlier age, to be more sexually active, and to engage in a wider range of sexual activities than girls who have not been abused.

Girls' sexual conduct, unlike that of boys, is governed less by hormones than by social controls. But in a cultural climate of sexual freedom, girls have lost much of their authority in boy-girl relationships. Until quite recently girls organized, managed, and regulated the social pursuits of their peer groups, with the strong support of adults. In romantic relationships girls exercised their power by withholding sex, keeping boys in the role of craven sexual petitioners. At the same time, they moved their boyfriends in the direction of commitment and monogamy. "Going steady," the ultimate romantic achievement for teenage girls, offered a pseudo-marriage that might include parceling out some of the sexual favors of marriage. Of course, this system was seriously flawed. In the intimacy of a steady relationship, girls could lose control, "give in," and go all the way. Then they had to deal with the dire consequences of their sexual transgression—a guilty conscience, a ruined reputa-

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***Refusing sex, no less than having sex, becomes a matter of following individual dictates rather than following socially instituted and culturally enforced norms.***

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tion, and sometimes an unwanted pregnancy.

The sexual revolution overturned this system of social controls by giving women technological control over their fertility. Its emblematic moment came when college health services began providing birth-control pills to eighteen- and nineteen-year-old women. Liberated from many of the penalties of premarital sex and the burdens of a sexual double standard, some were able to behave like men in their sexual pursuits. Yet although a single standard for men and women promised greater honesty and equity in relationships, it tilted away from women's goals of intimacy and commitment in the direction of what one sociologist has aptly called sexual "freedom with a male bias": no holds barred and no strings attached. (A nosy mother, I once asked my college-age daughter if there were any differences in the way young men and women conducted their sex lives on campus. "Only that girls wait for a phone call the next day," she said.)

In the 1980s, with the advent of AIDS, the condom, an all-purpose contraceptive, gained new favor. As an appurtenance of the sexual culture, the condom led to a second shift in the control of sexuality: it brought back protection with a male bias. Although pressure to engage in early sex did not diminish, teenage girls' ability to protect themselves did. One of the great ironies of the new sexual revolution is that having won the "right" and the freedom to engage in sex at an early age, girls must resort to some of the old wiles and cajolery to get their male partners to use protection. Although girls may carry Trojans in their purse, as the surgeon general urges, they cannot wear them.

### **The Lure of Motherhood**

**R**ECENT THINKING about unwed teenage pregnancy has focused on the links between teenage motherhood and the economic incentives of the welfare system. Charles Murray and others argue that poor teenagers choose motherhood because it offers economic rewards such as health care, day care, and an apartment of one's own. Yet some of the most compelling research on unwed childbearing among poor teenagers suggests that the strongest incentives for early teenage motherhood may be psychological rather than economic. As Judith Musick argues in her book *Young, Poor and Pregnant*, early pregnancy and childbearing must be understood as a response to the developmental demands of adolescence.

According to Musick, whose research is based on her work as a developmental psychologist and her six years as the director of the Ounce of Prevention Fund, a public-private venture that runs pregnancy-prevention and teenage-parent programs in Illinois, many of the girls most at risk for unwed motherhood grow up without

adequate nurturance and protection. Some experience early and traumatic sexualization in households where they are left in the care of their mothers' boyfriends or other "play daddies." Thus the emotional lives of many of the most vulnerable girls are defined by "repeated experiences of personal harm at the hands of those who should be their protectors."

As these girls become teenagers, they bring limited inner resources to the key developmental task of adolescence: the formation of a stable identity. Whereas a more resilient teenager is ready to face the classic questions of adolescence—Who am I? and What will I do with my life? and How will I be different from my mother?—the fragile girl may still be wrestling with questions associated with an earlier developmental stage: Who cares about me? and Whom can I depend on? and Where can I find safety and security?

Through pregnancy and early childbearing a young woman finds a way to reconcile her contradictory needs for autonomy and security. She may be able to draw closer to her mother and to place a claim on maternal affection, albeit indirectly, through a grandchild. And she may even gain the fleeting attention of a wayward boyfriend or a faraway father. Thus early sexual activity and maternity offer a way to retrieve childhood and enter adulthood simultaneously.

Not to be ignored in this developmental drama are the universal satisfactions of motherhood itself. If most new mothers are thrilled with their infants, why would young girls not feel a surge of ecstatic fulfillment? And if mothers everywhere enjoy dressing and showing off their newborns, why would a teenage mother not derive maternal pleasures from such activities? For a disadvantaged girl with few outlets to express herself, exhibit her talents, or win recognition, becoming a mother is a way to be fussed over and admired.

Reinforcing the immediate benefits of maternity are the psychological costs of postponing sex and motherhood. Within the peer group as well as the family, going to school and doing homework can be far less appealing than showing off a baby, particularly if a girl's older sisters and friends have babies of their own. Moreover, as Judith Musick explains, pursuing a dream that does not include early motherhood involves a painful and radical kind of split from mothers and other influential women in a girl's life. So threatening is this separation that many teenage girls on the threshold of change—enrolling in high-school-equivalency classes, completing a job-training program, breaking off with a violent boyfriend—fall back into an abusive relationship, get pregnant a second time, or go back to an old drug habit.

Thus changes in economic incentives, however politically attractive, may not be enough to reduce unwed teenage childbearing. It may be necessary to alter the psychological-incentive structure as well, including "prettifying" the unglamorous business of going to school, doing homework, and earning respectable grades. The process may also include fostering strong relationships with adult women mentors who can exercise firm guidance and give direction as well as support. Finally, it may require some imaginative measures to "uglify" unwed teenage motherhood or even to re-establish some of the disincentives that worked in the past, including separation of the girl from her peer group. Per-

haps teenage mothers should attend special high schools, as they do in some cities, rather than mixing with the general high school population. This contemporary version of being "sent away"—though it would not interrupt education—would segregate teenage mothers from nonpregnant teenagers and perhaps change a peer culture that views schoolgirl pregnancy as an unobjectionable, even enviable, event.

## The Retreat from Adolescence

ADOLESCENCE IS a modern social intervention, designed to deal with a modern problem: the lengthening period between biological and social maturity. Earlier in the nation's history girls entered puberty and left school at about the same time—around age fifteen or sixteen. Although most young women waited another five or six years before marrying, they continued to live at home; teenage marriages were not common until the 1950s. By the beginning of this century, however, the age of menarche was declining and the period of formal schooling was lengthening. At the same time, parents, churches, and schools were relaxing their close supervision of young women. Many young people were living in cities, where the seductive attractions of the street, the saloon, and the dance hall replaced the more wholesome pastimes of rural life. Under these new social conditions youthful risk-taking became perilous, its penalties more severe.

As a social intervention, therefore, adolescence represented a clear effort to define, order, and regulate a life stage that was becoming socially chaotic. Among other things, adolescence provided institutional reinforcement for the moratorium on youthful sexual activity, giving young people the opportunity to acquire the competencies and credentials of adulthood before they took on the responsibilities of marriage and parenthood.

In the past decade or so, however, a new way of thinking about teenage sexuality has emerged. It, too, recognizes the gap between biological and social maturity, but responds with a different set of controls. The new approach contends that teenagers should be expected to express themselves sexually as part of their normal growing up, but should be able to do so protected from the risk of early sexual activity. The way to protect teenagers is to give them the interpersonal skills and the technical tools to manage their own sexuality.

These competing traditions assign radically different responsibilities to adults. In the classic model, adults are the custodians of the moratorium. They secure and maintain this special life stage by establishing familial and institutional controls over teenage sexuality. Indeed, this approach requires some measure of sexual restraint, or at least discretion, on the part of adults in order to set an example. In the contemporary model, adults have a more limited responsibility. Their job is to train teenagers in the management of their own sexuality and to provide access to contraceptives. In the new technocracy adults are called upon to staff teenagers in their sexual pursuits while teenagers themselves are left to decide whether or not to engage in sex. Refusing sex, no less than having sex, becomes a matter of following individual dictates rather than following socially instituted and culturally enforced norms.

One can, of course, imagine a creative synthesis of the

two models: a little more freedom for the kids, a little less supervision from busy grown-ups. But this is not what has happened. In the past decade the technocratic approach has gained ground while the classic approach has steadily lost it. This has brought about a corresponding shift in adult responsibility. Increasingly the litmus test of adult concern is one of access: Will grown-ups give teenagers the skills and tools to manage their sex lives? Seen in the broader historical context, two seemingly opposing responses to teenage sex—handing out condoms and teaching refusal skills—reflect the same trend toward technocratic solutions and diminished adult responsibility.

There has been a similar shift in public concerns. For most of this century the debate over youthful well-being covered a broad social terrain. The deliberations of the decennial White House Conference on Children, which began in 1909 and ended in the early 1970s, ranged widely from improving health and schooling to building character and citizenship. Today public ambitions and public concern for adolescents' well-being are narrower. Attention has turned to the task of managing the collapse of the moratorium. As a consequence, the entire public debate on the nation's youth has come down to a few questions. How do we keep boys from killing? How do we keep girls from having babies? How do we limit the social havoc caused by adolescent acting out?

There has been, as well, a shift in the notion of responsibility among health and school professionals. As an idea, adolescence is closely identified with the work of the American psychologist G. Stanley Hall. But it was a

liberal reform coalition of school, health, and social-work professionals that took the idea of adolescence and translated it into a set of new institutions designed to protect vulnerable city youth from the burdens and responsibilities of too-early adulthood. The juvenile justice system, the youth center, and child-labor laws are all part of that institutional legacy. This coalition also fought hard for sex education in the schools. But today a similar liberal coalition is turning its back on that larger legacy.

The health and school establishments did not create the problems associated with teenage sex. Thus it is impossible not to view their response to these problems with a measure of sympathy. On the front lines of the new sexual revolution, overwhelmed by the clinical evidence of breakdown—thirteen-year-olds with gonorrhea, sixteen-year-olds giving birth for the third time—the youth-serving professionals respond with the tools of the clinic. At the same time, they seem to have lost sight of the meaning and purpose of adolescence and of their own historical role in creating and sustaining it.

Despite its confident assertions, comprehensive sex education implicitly acknowledges a lifting of the moratorium and a return to a more Darwinian sexual environment. What sex educators are offering now is training in sexual survival. Once the kids have been equipped with refusal skills, a bottle of body oil, and some condoms, "reality-based" advocates send them into the world to fend for themselves. Perhaps that is the best protection that today's school and health leaders are able to offer from a harsh and predacious sexual environment. But it is not realism. It is retreat. □

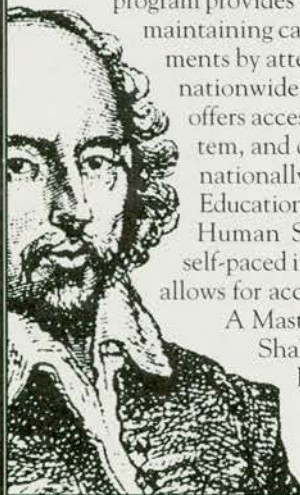
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