

CHAPTER 10

ILLEGITIMACY AND DEPRIVATION

In Western communities two types of illegitimacy are distinguishable, the first of which is socially accepted and the second of which is socially not accepted. Among the illegitimacy which is relatively accepted in certain Western communities can be placed the convention that, before it is wise to marry her, the girl should demonstrate her fecundity. Another example is the convention for a couple to live together as though married despite not having gone through a legal ceremony. Finally, there are sub-cultures, usually among the poorer classes, where the possession of an illegitimate child is not held against the mother and both are given support within the greater family.

Unfortunately, official statistics relating to illegitimacy do not make this vital distinction and are consequently of little use. From the point of view of the prevention of children growing up deprived of a normal home life, it is imperative to have accurate figures showing the rates of illegitimacy of the socially unacceptable kind, since it is only these children who are at risk. This report will be concerned only with such cases.

Character and Home Background of Parents of Illegitimate Children

Until recently, the fact that some girls become pregnant illicitly was looked upon somewhat fatalistically and dismissed as just human nature. Apart from moral exhortation, little attention was given to prevention. Studies carried out in America make clear, however, that the girl who has a socially unacceptable illegitimate baby often comes from an unsatisfactory family background and has developed a neurotic character, the illegitimate baby being in the nature of a symptom of her neurosis.

Young,¹⁵⁸ for instance, carried out a study of 100 unmarried mothers between the ages of 18 and 40, who, although representing wide variations in intelligence, education, and social and economic backgrounds, were if anything rather above average in intelligence. She found that 48 of these girls had dominating and rejecting mothers and another 20 had dominating and rejecting fathers, and that the girl's relation to the dominant parent "was a battleground on which a struggle was fought, and the baby was an integral part of that struggle". No fewer than 43 of the 100 girls had been brought up in broken homes, a finding confirmed by a Toronto study¹⁴² which gives a figure of 30 broken homes in the histories of 57 unmarried

mothers, and a further 10 with quarrelling parents. All the girls studied by Young had grown up to have

“fundamental problems in their relationships with other people. Some of them could not carry on even superficial contacts successfully ; others did well with casual acquaintances and friends but were unable to enter into a close or intimate relationship with anyone . . . The problems followed them into their work and few of them were able to use more than a small part of their native intelligence and ability . . . All these girls, unhappy and driven by unconscious needs, had blindly sought a way out of their emotional dilemma by having an out-of-wedlock child. It is not strange that one finds among them almost no girl who has genuinely cared for or been happy with the father of her baby.”

Practically none of these girls was promiscuous and only one-quarter of the group had had more than a fleeting relationship with the father of the child. In all of them there appeared a strong unconscious desire to become pregnant, motivated sometimes by the need for a love-object which they had never had and sometimes by the desire to use the shame of an illegitimate baby as a weapon against their dominating parents. It was noteworthy that a large group insisted in a rigid and irrational way on their mother looking after the baby, despite her objections. Running side by side with the need to use the baby as a weapon against the parents was the need to use it as a weapon against themselves.

“One of the most frequent tendencies to be found in their personality patterns was that of self-punishment. Almost none of the cases was completely free of it and with many of them it represented the major force in their lives. So deeply ingrained and so powerful was this force that often the girl would permit nothing and nobody to interfere with its self-destructive progress.”

Though it is impossible to know how typical Young's findings are, it is the opinion of many social workers with psychiatric knowledge and experience of this problem that with many girls becoming an unmarried mother is neurotic and not just accidental. In other cases the girls are psychopathic or defective. For instance, of 93 unmarried mothers whose children were in the care of Dr. Barnardo's Homes,¹¹⁰ 25 are described as moral defectives, and were no doubt promiscuous, a further 10 were dull and backward, mentally defective, or insane. No particulars are given regarding the others, though some, no doubt, were similar in character to those described by Young.

The character of the unmarried father is rarely studied and not much is known of him. It is the opinion of experienced social workers that many are unstable and that they often promise marriage irresponsibly. Compared to the unmarried mother, they are more often promiscuous and get several girls into trouble within a short time. The psychology of habitually promiscuous men has been studied in connexion with the prevention of venereal disease. Wittkower,¹⁵² after studying 200 soldiers suffering from this disease and a control group numbering 861 matched for age, army service, and location, suffering from impetigo, concluded :

“The all-round picture which emerges is that venereal disease patients are often emotionally, sexually, and socially immature, whereas physically and intellectually they

may have reached full maturity. As may be expected, evidence of immaturity is more striking in habitually promiscuous than in occasionally promiscuous individuals . . . Fifty-nine per cent. of our venereal disease patients, against 19% in the control series, were found to be emotionally immature. Only 11% of the venereal disease patients, as compared with 62% in the control series, could be regarded as mature personalities."

Among factors which make for promiscuity, Wittkower lists the need for affection, situations which arouse anxiety, and situations which arouse resentment. "The so-called biological sex-urge, strange though it may appear, plays a minor part in most cases of promiscuity", in the same way that thirst has little to do with chronic alcoholism.

In seeking to understand the origins of these unstable, immature characters, whose antisocial behaviour brings so much misery in its train, one is led back, as in the case of many of the unmarried mothers, to their childhoods and their relationships with their own parents. Abstracts of two studies relating promiscuity to broken homes are given in Appendix 1,¹ but for completeness sake are repeated here. In their study of 255 promiscuous males, Safier et al.¹²⁷ discovered that 60% came from homes which had been broken by death, separation, or divorce, the average age of the child when the home broke up being six years.

"Among the patients whose homes had been broken, it was not unusual for the patient to have been placed in boarding schools, foster homes, institutions, or in the homes of relatives. A number of the patients had had a series of such placements. Some patients had had no care by either parent from birth or shortly thereafter. Some of those had been born out of wedlock. In other instances one or both parents had remarried and the patients were reared in homes with stepfathers or stepmothers. The patients reported difficulties in adjusting to successive changes in the family pattern. Inconsistencies in training and discipline were frequently the result of constant shifting from the care of one parent to that of another . . . Conflicts were most pronounced in the cases where the family life had been unstable and the patient had been entrusted to the care of first one person and then another" (page 10).

This picture is confirmed by Bundesen et al.³⁵ who, with a group of 50 similar patients, found evidence of abnormal childhood conditions leading to a broken home in 56%.

Preliminary studies such as these go far to demonstrate that, in a Western community, it is emotionally disturbed men and women who produce illegitimate children of a socially unacceptable kind. Moreover, they give further prominence to the social process already emphasized as being of the greatest consequence for the production of children who will grow up deprived of maternal care—the process whereby one generation of deprived children provides the parents of the next generation of deprived children.

Care of Illegitimates

There are two ways of approaching the problem of preventing the illegitimate child becoming in need of care away from home—to prevent his

¹ See page 511.

being conceived and to make realistic plans for his care if he is. The reduction of the birth-rate of socially unacceptable illegitimates is a matter for long-term measures of mental hygiene which are discussed later. Meanwhile it seems likely that for many decades to come Western communities will have to face the problem of how best to care for such children. Though it is evident that in this, as in all problems, the most effective measures are possible only if there is real knowledge and understanding, the absence of studies on how illegitimates may best be cared for is conspicuous.

In several countries of Europe, e.g., the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, policy is strongly in favour of the unmarried mother keeping her child. For instance, in a circular issued by the British Ministry of Health,⁷⁴ the duties of a social worker in helping the unmarried mother are stated as, first, "whenever possible to persuade the girl to make known her circumstances to her parents and, if the home is likely to be a satisfactory one, to persuade the grandparents to make a home there for the little one", to continue by considering alternatives such as residential employment, day nurseries, foster-homes, or residential nurseries, and only "in special cases, e.g., where the mother is very young or is the wife of a man not the father of the child, to give advice about legal adoption". In the Netherlands adoption is not legal. Yet when one inquires in these countries for studies of how the illegitimate child who is not adopted actually fares, none seems to be available. Reports such as that of the Medical Officer of Health for Willesden¹⁴⁸ are far from reassuring, however. In a very disturbing account of the hazardous and ever-changing lives of foster-children in the borough in 1939, he writes :

"The majority of foster children are illegitimate. Their mothers are frequently in employment and may work up to a month before confinement. During this last month when they are not employed they must keep themselves and make some provision for the child. They are generally confined in hospital. At the end of ten days or a fortnight they are discharged. They have no money left. They have nowhere to go. They are handicapped by the child. It is important that they get work at once. What often happens seems to be that such a mother finds some woman who, perhaps out of kindness or perhaps in hope of money later on, takes the child whilst the mother searches for work. The child may be well cared for or not, but in any case the mother probably in the circumstances does not inquire too closely. She is glad to get anybody to take the child. If she gets work and pays the woman it may be that the child stays on for a time but if the payments are small and irregular the child may be passed from one woman to another, finding no stability in life at all."

There is no reason to suppose the position in Great Britain to have changed in the past decade. One London agency concerned with the care of unmarried mothers, reporting on the placement of over 1,000 babies in the period 1949-1950, shows that 22% were placed with foster-parents or in a residential nursery soon after birth. Only 17% were adopted. The bulk of the remainder were living with their unmarried mothers. That many of these will sooner or later also find their way into foster-homes or nurseries is indicated by another London agency which, stating that it

is its policy in all suitable cases to encourage unmarried mothers to keep the custody of their children and to give the mothers, when necessary, financial and other assistance to make it possible, proceeds: "It has to be faced however that lack of accommodation makes it increasingly difficult for an unmarried mother to have her baby with her continually from its birth, and during some considerable part of its childhood it is more than likely to be fostered or placed in a residential nursery" (personal communications).

The absence of satisfactory figures for any country of Western Europe is a measure of their neglect of this problem, while such information as is available makes it clear that in some countries at least a large fraction of illegitimates, perhaps more than half, under the present haphazard arrangements grow up suffering from some degree of maternal deprivation and into characters likely to produce more of their kind. The absence of studies of the later development of unmarried mothers (despite strong opinions being expressed about this or that course being in their best interests) is also symptomatic of the absence both of public concern and of a scientific approach to the problem.

The picture in Canada and the USA is rather different. In the last decade there have been a few studies of what has actually happened to illegitimates who have not been adopted. In 1943, the Welfare Council of Toronto and District¹⁴² published a study of the history and adjustment of illegitimate children aged 14 and 15 years who had remained with their mothers or relatives. Of the 92 children studied (49 boys, 43 girls) only 25 had remained with the same family group since birth, though a further 19 had been accompanied by their mothers through a variety of changing circumstances. The remaining 48 (52%) had changed their mother-figures—usually two, three, or more times. The study goes further, however, in that it demonstrates first that a large proportion of these children (47%) are showing signs of maladjustment and secondly that this is related to their experiences. This is shown clearly in table XII, which relates the

TABLE XII. INCIDENCE OF MALADJUSTMENT RELATED TO AGE AT WHICH ILLEGITIMATE CHILD IS PERMANENTLY SETTLED (TORONTO STUDY)

Adjustment of child	Age in years by which settled			Total
	before 3	4-7	after 7	
	%	%	%	%
Maladjusted	33	50	84	47
Adjusted	67	50	16	53
	100	100	100	100
Number of children . . .	55	18	19	92

Note: P is less than .01.

incidence of maladjustment to the age at which the child became a permanent member of a family group.

From this it is evident that the earlier the child is settled the better—hardly a surprising conclusion. In 21 cases (17 boys, 4 girls) their maladjustment took the form of delinquency, mostly stealing and truancy. One girl of 15 had already run away and become pregnant—another example of the vicious circle of the deprived reproducing themselves. How many of the other 20 delinquents—nearly one-quarter of the whole group—will grow up to produce illegitimate or deprived children ?

The report states that with few exceptions the homes from which the delinquents came were unstable and unhappy. “ Children were taken out of homes where they were happy and thought they belonged into homes where they were not wanted. Others have been rejected practically since birth by the people with whom they lived.” Here is more evidence, if it is still needed, that deprivation causes maladjustment.

The Toronto inquiry reveals a sorry state of affairs, which its authors relate directly to the policy pursued by the agencies advising these unmarried mothers at the time of the children’s births—that the unmarried mother should look after her own baby. It was clear that this rather rigid policy had over-influenced many of the mothers, some of whom having cared for their babies during the period of greatest dependency found it impossible to release them later, even when they learned that the future offered little opportunity for satisfactory living for themselves and little chance of normal growth for their children. Others had quickly rebelled against the agencies’ rulings and had got rid of their children as best they could. In other cases again the mother’s parents had been forced, urged, or encouraged to provide homes, despite the relationship between the mother and her parents having for long been unhappy, with the result that the baby became the cause of yet further friction. Naturally there were cases where the arrangement of the mother or her parents looking after the baby had worked well, but this seems to have occurred only when the mother was stable, had good relations with her parents, and was fond of the baby and his father—not a very frequent set of circumstances.

A little earlier, in New York, Rome¹²⁵ had studied 30 mothers who had committed their illegitimate babies to an institution pending a final decision, and had come to a similar conclusion. Of the 30, only 8 were finally taken home by their mothers, 4 were adopted and, after a lapse of three years, 15 remained in the institution or in foster-homes. But not only does she demonstrate that, after three years, half these mothers were still unable to come to a long-term decision, but she points to the fact that the outcome could with a high degree of certainty have been predicted from the time of the baby’s birth. Only if at least four of the following conditions are present is the mother likely to take the baby home : that she is of stable personality, takes a realistic attitude towards her problem, is loving and accepting

of the child, had a positive relation to the putative father, and has a family which does not insist on the child being disposed of. If Young's findings regarding the psychology of unmarried mothers are typical, and the Toronto study suggests that they may be, it will be seen that such conditions are present in only a minority of cases.

Of the group of children whose mothers neither relinquish nor take responsibility for them, Embry⁵³ has written :

"The child continues in an institution or foster home, or more likely a series of foster homes, a tragic example of nobody's child. The mother visits occasionally. She may bring him presents. Rarely she pays a little for his board. When asked about plans for him she always reiterates that some day she will take him, but that some day never seems to come. By the time the agency is convinced of the need for an enforced surrender, the child has probably grown beyond the age when he can be easily placed for adoption."

In a booklet published by the Children's Bureau of the US Department of Labor, Morlock¹⁰⁵ gives an illustration :

"One such child at 10 years of age is a disturbed, bewildered boy with many behavior problems. He has lived in 20 foster homes. At the time of his birth his mother was a docile, receptive girl who agreed with the philosophy of the maternity home that she should keep her baby. Her parents refused to allow her to live at home if she kept him. She went to work in a store, paid the child's board regularly, and visited him in the foster home every 2 weeks. Gradually, however, her payments stopped. Twice she attempted suicide. Either the original plan was an unsuitable one for both her and the child, or the mother was not given enough case-work assistance in carrying out the plan" (page 28).

As a result of data such as these, progressive policy in the USA in regard to illegitimates has changed abruptly in the last ten years and far more adoptions are being arranged. Social workers now conceive it to be their duty to help the unmarried mother face the real situation before her, which so often is that of an immature girl, on bad terms with her family, with no financial security, having to undertake with little or no help the care of an infant for whom she has mixed feelings, over a period of many years. If this is in fact the real situation and it is put before her in a sympathetic way by someone whom she has learned to trust, the majority of girls recognize that it is in the interest of neither themselves nor the baby to attempt to care for him, and are prepared to release him for adoption. As a valuable paper by Young¹⁵⁹ and the booklet by Morlock & Campbell¹⁰⁵ go to show, American social workers have become self-critical of their previous inclination to avoid responsibility for making a long-term plan and for unwittingly helping the unmarried mother herself to evade it. For this is in fact what voluntary and public agencies are doing when they receive illegitimate children into care without insisting that the mothers either make realistic long-term plans to provide care themselves, or else permit others to do so—by arranging adoption. In some countries, e.g., Great Britain, the law is such that authorities have no option but to accede to the mother's temporizing measures, compelling them to care for the child while at the same time permitting the mother

indefinitely to refuse consent for adoption. In framing laws of this kind, the paramount consideration is clearly the parents' right to the possession of the child, the child's welfare taking second place.

Unfortunately, instead of considering objectively what is best for the child and what is best for the mother, workers of all kinds have too often been influenced by punitive or sentimental attitudes towards the errant mother. At one time the punitive attitude took the form of removing the baby from his mother as a punishment for her sins. Nowadays this punitive attitude seems to lead in the opposite direction and to insist that she should take the responsibility for caring for what she has so irresponsibly produced. In a similar way, sentimentalism can lead to either conclusion. Only by getting away from these irrational attitudes and preparing to study the problem afresh is a realistic set of working principles likely to be adopted. It is urgently necessary in many countries to make studies of what in fact happens to the illegitimate children of today—how many achieve a satisfactory home life with their mothers or immediate relatives, how many eke out their existence in foster-homes or institutions, and how many are adopted and what is the outcome. Furthermore, it is necessary to study the development of the unmarried mother and to devise means of helping her avoid such tangles in the future and to achieve a more satisfactory way of life. It may perhaps be that, in some cases, encouraging her to take the responsibility for her baby will help her become a more responsible citizen, but to act on the assumption that this is always the case is not only to be unrealistic but to be socially irresponsible ourselves. For it is a very serious thing to condemn a child to be parked in an endless succession of foster-homes or to be brought up in an institution when there are long waiting lists of suitable parents wishing to adopt children.

Hitherto most nations have preferred to forget the existence of illegitimate children or, in so far as they have aided them, it has been too little and too late. If a community is to remove this source of deprived children, it will have to be more realistic in its handling of the problem, both by providing economic and psychological assistance to the unmarried mother to enable her to care for her child and by providing skilled services to arrange for the adoption of those children who cannot be so cared for.
