Contemporary Themes

Newer fashions in illegitimacy

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Summary

In 1968 Illsley and Gill examined the rise in illegitimacy in the decade 1955-65 and showed that this rise, unlike rises in the first and second world wars, had not been accompanied by a fall in prenuptial conceptions but by a rise. Statistics from 1970 to 1975 have been examined and a third parameter, legal abortion, added. After a period characterised by an apparent rise in the total of extramarital conceptions there has since 1972 been a decline; and in the age group 20-24 this fall dates from 1971. Improved contraceptive practice is probably the reason.

Introduction

In a paper entitled "New Fashions in Illegitimacy" published in 1968, Illsley and Gill¹ examined the rise in illegitimate births in the decade 1955-65. They pointed out how it had begun in London and had spread first to the other conurbations then the larger and the smaller cities and finally the rural areas. They then pointed out two factors important in analysing this phenomenon. The first is that illegitimacy should not be looked at in isolation but always together with prenuptial conceptions—for example, in the two world wars while the number of illegitimate births rose the prenuptial conceptions fell because of the inability of the putative father to make the child legitimate because of death or absence from home. There had been no apparent "decline" or change in sexual morality.

The picture in the decade 1955-65 was quite different; the rise in illegitimate live births had been accompanied by a rise in prenuptial conceptions (fig 1). Furthermore, while illegitimacy had once been preponderantly a working-class phenomenon, this preponderance had decreased. The second point was that not all illegitimate births are first births to single women; indeed, they quoted Thompson,² who, studying illegitimate births to Aberdeen women from 1949 to 1952, found that fewer than half were first births to single women; most of the remainder were to married, widowed, and divorced women. In 1955-65 this ratio too had altered in favour of single women. Finally they pointed out that such changes were not a peculiarly British phenomenon but were widespread in Western industrial societies.

Illsley and Gill concluded that

(1) for a complex of social and biological reasons there had been more premarital and extramarital intercourse;

FIG 1—Premaritally conceived live births (to women married only once) and illegitimate live births to women resident in England and Wales 1939-75. (See appendix for definitions.) Source of data: Office of Population, Censuses, and Surveys.)

(2) there was indecision about societal attitudes to contraception in the face of this change of behaviour: "In general society wishes to prevent unintended conception by the most efficient means but it fears the emergence of a generation which does not cherish chastity"; and

(3) changed ideas related to the state of marriage and what it has to offer to both sexes had led to a weakening of pressures to make children legitimate by marriage, and this was especially true of the upper social classes, who tended to emphasise the mutual satisfaction and equality of modern marriage. They suggested that illegitimacy and the stigma attached to it could virtually be abolished by permitting easier divorce; by efficient sex education; by making contraceptives freely available; by abortion on demand; and by supports for both mother and child.

A new look and a new factor

We examined changes since 1968 and continued to look at illegitimacy together with premaritally conceived live births (see appendix) but added a third parameter not available to Illsley and Gill—namely, abortion. After all, there are three alternatives open to a single girl who finds herself pregnant. She may marry and make the child legitimate; she may carry to term without marriage; or she may have an abortion, either legal or illegal. In the decade 1955-65, and indeed up to 1968, legal abortion was not readily available, and the incidence of illegal abortion could only be guessed at. But since April 1968 legal abortion has been widely if unevenly available and that too may be looked at. It is reasonable to suppose that since legal abortion became more widely available illegal abortion has become much less common, and as its true incidence is unknowable we have ignored it.³ Similarly, spontaneous abortion is not discussed. It is not notifiable; cases occur without the knowledge of the health professional; indeed, if it

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occurs early enough the patient may be unaware of its occurrence. In short such statistical information as we have is incomplete and unreliable.

In looking at the three parameters together, however, we were faced with certain statistical difficulties. For premaritally conceived live births and abortions we were largely concerned with all unmarried women (single, widowed, and divorced). But, as has been pointed out, illegitimate births may also occur to married women, and the information the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys receives does not distinguish these. Clearly, in the age group under 16 this problem is not relevant; in the age group 16-19 it may virtually be ignored because only about 10% of girls in this group are married; we can look at the age group 20-24 usefully in this way but bearing in mind that some young women may be having a child by someone other than their husband (with whom they may perhaps be cohabiting in a stable relationship). After the age of 24 this factor becomes too important to be set aside. Further, as abortions occur about six months before the expected date of a birth we have carried them forward by six months so that they are on a compatible basis with illegitimate and premaritally conceived live births (see appendix).

What has happened?

Contrary to what is sometimes thought, since 1967 there has been an almost uninterrupted decline in the number of illegitimate live births in England and Wales (fig 1). Because the decline in legitimate live births has been even steeper the number of illegitimate live births per 1000 total live births has continued to rise.

Next, from 1968 onwards, there has been an uninterrupted decline in premaritally conceived live births (fig 1). Expressed as a percentage of marriages the decline dates from 1967. Specifically, marriages where there were live births within eight months of marriage, expressed as a percentage of all marriages, fell from 20.4 in 1967 to 12.6 (provisional) in 1974.

From 1968 onwards, with the Abortion Act, the decline was more than counterbalanced by the rise in legal abortions to unmarried women; but since 1972 this has no longer been true, and there has been a decline in the three parameters looked at together, although abortions continued to rise until 1974 (table, col 2 and fig 2). Figure 3 illustrates changes in the ratio of the three possible "outcomes" of pregnancy from 1970 to 1975.

For the younger age groups the picture is clearly shown in the table.

(a) Firstly, for the age group 20-24 extramarital conceptions began to decline from 1971 onwards, and indeed the total has fallen by about 25%. Reference to the table, col 9, will show that this decline is not due to changes in cohort size.

(b) Secondly, for the age group 16-19 the downturn is apparent a year later—namely, from 1972—and from 1972 to 1975 the total of extramarital conceptions fell by about 10%. Expressed as a rate to take into account cohort size the fall is even greater (see table).

(c) Finally, for the under-16 age group the picture is less satisfactory. After 1968 the number of extramarital conceptions rose sharply both

FIG 2—Extramarital conceptions to all women resident in England and Wales 1970-5. (See appendix for definitions.) (Source of data: Office of Population, Censuses, and Surveys.)

Pregnancies conceived outside marriage to women resident in England and Wales by selected age bands 1970-1975

	Year (1)	No of pregnancies according to ages					Rate/1000 unmarried women			
		All ages (2)	<16 (3)	16-19 (4)	20-24 (5)	Total Under 25 (6)	<16* (7)	16-19 (8)	20-24 (9)	Total Under 25 (10)
Abortions (under 1967 Act) to unmarried women	1970	33 262	911	9 280	13 243	23 434	0.5	7.9	17.3	6.5
	1971	47 964	1302	14 444	18 699	34 445	0.8	12.5	25.1	9.5
	1972	58 081	1683	18 159	21 492	41 334	0.9	15.6	30.0	11.3
	1973	63 523	1922	20 783	22 316	45 021	1.1	17.7	31.5	12.2
	1974	65 282	2107	22 045	22 475	46 627	1.1	18.2	31.3	12.3
	1975	62 959	2200	21 958	21 074	45 232	1.2	17.6	29.7	11.7
Illegitimate live births	1970	64 744	1403	19 460	22 265	43 128	0.8	16.6	29.0	11.9
	1971	65 678	1513	20 042	22 043	43 598	0.9	17.4	29.6	12.0
	1972	62 511	1587	20 150	19 802	41 539	0.9	17.3	27.7	11.4
	1973	58 097	1678	19 045	18 164	38 887	0.9	16.2	25.7	10.5
	1974	56 486	1553	19 308	17 568	38 429	0.8	16.0	24.5	10.1
	1975	54 891	1489	19 001	16 757	37 247	0.8	15.2	23.6	9.6
Premaritally conceived live births to women married only once	1970	70 623	15	34 800	30 157	64 992	0.0	29.6	39.3	18.0
	1971	67 294	1	34 597	26 933	61 531	0.0	30.0	36.1	17.0
	1972	59 836	2	31 934	22 266	54 202	0.0	27.5	31.1	14.8
	1973	52 293		28 503	18 488	46 991		24.3	26.1	12.7
	1974	45 981	14	25 258	15 840	41 112	0.0	20.9	22.1	10.8
	1975	40 293	17	21 870	13 818	35 705	0.0	17.5	19.5	9.2
Premaritally conceived live births to remarried women	1970	3 547		55	732	787		0.0	1.0	0.2
	1971	3 728		54	692	746		0.0	0.9	0.2
	1972	4 432		49	872	921		0.0	1.2	0.3
	1973	4 992		34	911	945		0.0	1.3	0.3
	1974	4 809		62	967	1 029		0.1	1.3	0.3
	1975	4 756		53	950	1 003		0.0	1.3	0.3
Total	1970	172 176	2329	63 595	66 397	132 321	1.4	54.1	86.5	36.7
	1971	184 664	2816	69 137	68 367	140 320	1.6	59.9	91.7	38.2
	1972	184 860	3272	70 292	64 432	137 996	1.8	60.4	90.1	37.8
	1973	178 905	3600	68 365	59 879	131 844	2.0	58.3	84.6	35.6
	1974	172 558	3674	66 673	56 850	127 197	2.0	55.1	79.3	33.5
	1975	162 899	3706	62 882	52 599	119 187	1.9	50.4	74.1	30.8

*Population base for rates are women aged 11-15 years.

See appendix for definitions.

Source of data: Office of Population, Censuses, and Surveys.

FIG 3—Relative importance of the major components of extramarital conceptions to all women resident in England and Wales 1970-5. (See appendix for definitions.) (Source of data: Office of Population, Censuses, and Surveys.)

in absolute terms and as a rate reaching 2.0 per 1000 in 1973, but remaining steady thereafter. Clearly too the number per 1000 girls is low at these ages compared with succeeding age groups (and the issues of fecundity and exposure are relevant). In the first nine months of 1976, for the first time since 1968, the monthly cumulative total of abortions for this age group has actually shown a decline; perhaps a hopeful sign.

Discussion

It is interesting to speculate on these changes. The rate of increase in illegitimate live births and premaritally conceived live births began to fall even before the Abortion Act started to exert an effect, though clearly the precipitate falls since must have owed something to that Act. But since 1972 the total of extramarital pregnancies has been falling. This could be accounted for either by an alteration of behaviour, less premarital and extramarital intercourse, or possibly by improved contraceptive practice. The issue was discussed at some length by Jean Thompson¹ recently, who concluded that improved contraceptive practice is a likely contributory cause of these demographic changes—particularly in girls over 20. Unfortunately, little is known of changes in contraceptive practice by sexually active unmarried women. A survey carried out for DHSS in 1970 provided some base-line information.⁵ A second survey was conducted for the DHSS in 1975, and its results are awaited as a survey at a single point in time can tell us nothing certain about changes in contraceptive practice. The demographic changes are very sharp and large, and as they began first and are larger in older women improved contraceptive practice is surely more likely. A third possibility is a reversion on a large scale to illegal abortion but it is difficult to see a reason for this, and the evidence that we have available from maternal death statistics is against this.

Faced with the difficulties of choice between unwanted pregnancy and acquiescence in providing contraception to single girls, society has increasingly over the last few years pointed to the latter. Sex education—sometimes in schools; certainly in women's magazines, in the newspapers, and broadcasting media; and by word of mouth—has spread knowledge of contraception widely and frankly, and increasingly has indicated that if young ladies cannot be good they had best be clever. Clearly if, as it appears, society cannot have chastity then it prefers contraception, and this has also found expression in Government circulars.⁶ Increasingly, encouragement has been

given to making contraceptive facilities available to sexually active single girls and to altering attitudes among those providing such facilities so as to encourage use. In other words, many of the prerequisite factors mentioned by Illsley and Gill as being necessary to reduce illegitimacy and the stigma attached thereto are operative, or partially operative, and the results are apparent. How far has school health education, which has become increasingly a part of the curriculum over the past 10 years, played a part, perhaps a delayed part, in the recent changes? Many have blamed it for the decline in the nation's morals as evidenced by increasing illegitimacy, pre-nuptial conception, and abortion rates. What will now be said?

Finally, how far are the reduction in rates and the changes in their distribution class phenomena? Illsley and Gill have shown that the rise in extramarital pregnancies was, to a large extent, a phenomenon of the upper social groups but we do not know if this is true of the fall.

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References

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Appendix

Premaritally conceived live births are defined as legitimate live births occurring within eight months of marriage. Before 1961 the definition differed slightly but this will have little effect on the trends illustrated in fig 1. Specifically, 1939-40 data relate to birth registrations; 1939-42 data relate to first legitimate maternities of present marriage; 1943-4 data relate to legitimate maternities within nine months of present marriage; 1945-51 data relate to legitimate maternities of present marriage; 1952-60 relate to legitimate maternities. (The data are equivalent to prenuptial conceptions but exclude a small number of premaritally conceived still births and miscarriages.)

The abortion data have been carried forward by six months so that they relate to the period when the corresponding full term delivery would have been expected to take place. This has been done to make them compatible with illegitimate and premaritally conceived live births. An adjustment has also been made for the age group of the women concerned. Although statistics on abortions under the 1967 Act are available for the years 1968 and 1969 the data are thought not to give a true indication of the level of abortion and so have not been included in this paper. The data relate to occurrences apart from 1974 data that are based on half-year occurrences and half-year notifications and 1975 data that are based wholly on notifications.

The data include a small number of births occurring to women resident outside England and Wales.

All 1975 data are provisional.

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO An inquest was held this week before the Manchester coroner on the body of John M Guinness, three years of age. The child was troubled with worms, and his mother went to a druggist for some worm-lozenges. The lozenges were given to the child, who died in half an hour. The deceased had a powder as well as a lozenge. This powder consisted of santonine and a grain of calomel. The medical evidence showed that the child died from the administration of strychnine. The jury found a verdict of "Accidental poisoning." (*British Medical Journal*, 1877.)