

UNMARRIED MOTHERHOOD: A NOTE ON RECENT TRENDS,
COMPOSITION, AND BLACK-WHITE DIFFERENCES

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ABSTRACT

The National Survey of Family Growth (1982) is used to determine whether race differences in premarital birth rates can be explained by differences in parents' socio-economic status, family structure, and residential characteristics. The findings document large diversity in premarital births within both populations. Black women from "high risk backgrounds" (single parent family, parents did not complete high school, and residence in a central city in the Northcentral region) are three times more likely to have a premarital birth than black women from "low risk backgrounds" (two-parent family, parents completed high school, and residence in the South or outside a central city in the Northeast.) Race differences in premarital births arise from the fact that (1) black women are more likely to come from high risk backgrounds and (2) black women from LOW risk backgrounds are more likely to have a premarital birth than white women with similar characteristics. Blacks and whites from high risk backgrounds have similar rates of premarital births.

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Unmarried Motherhood: A Note on Recent Trends, Composition, and Black-White Differences

Unmarried motherhood is a major contributor to single-parent families, and hence to poverty experience among children. It matters greatly that one of every five births in the U.S. is now born to an unmarried mother. While this proportion is higher among blacks than whites – almost 60 percent as compared to 13 percent in 1984 (National Center for Health Statistics, 1987) – the level among whites is substantial. Moreover, the rate of unmarried childbearing among white women has been increasing since the early 1970s while it has been decreasing among blacks. This note explores some of the social and demographic factors behind these trends, and then concludes with an examination of the extent to which the levels among blacks can be characterized as a distinct cultural pattern.

It seems likely that the stigma associated with being an unmarried mother has seriously eroded over the last two decades. Two major forces are at work. On the one hand, a primary buttress of the taboo against "illegitimacy" has been the desire to assure a two-parent setting for the socialization and support of societies' new members. The trend in marital disruption has left marriage a very weak guarantee in this regard. A pregnant unmarried woman may well ask what gain there is for her, or her child, in marrying the father if a divorce is likely to follow soon. Furthermore, in spite of the serious problems involved, the high prevalence of formerly-married mothers makes it clear that

many women do cope with parenthood in the absence of a husband.

The second major force eroding the stigma of unmarried motherhood has been the separation of sex and marriage. In part as a consequence of demographic trends to be discussed momentarily, most adults have had sexual intercourse before marriage, and public attitudes have become increasingly approving of this behavior. Several decades ago, the fact of a nonmarital pregnancy would have been stigmatizing evidence of immoral sexual behavior—it gains little stigma from this perspective in the current setting. The increase in rates of childbearing among unmarried white women over the last decade is very impressive: there has been approximately a two-thirds increase among all age groups between 18 and 35, including an 80 percent increase at ages 20-24. It is clear that these trends do not just reflect a teenage problem. Rather, more basic changes in the meaning of marriage are likely involved.

Along with the erosion of stigma, unmarried motherhood has become more visible over the last several decades as a consequence of the extension of the period of risk through earlier sexual activity and later marriage. Sexual activity among teenagers more than doubled over the 1970s (Zelnick, Kantner and Ford, 1981) and first marriage rates among women in their early 20s declined by almost one-half (National Center for Health Statistics, 1986b). Under such circumstances, constant rates of age-specific childbearing among never married women would yield a marked increase in both annual rates and lifetime experience of a premarital birth. In addition, the increase in premarital births is particularly noticeable because of the decline in total fertility rates from 2.5 to

1.8 over the early 1970s. When we view nonmarital fertility as a proportion of all births (the circumstances of entry of new cohorts), the numerator has increased while the denominator has decreased.

It is common to think of nonmarital fertility as a problem of first births among young women. While this is true of many such births, both social policy and our understanding of these issues is better informed by the recognition that only about half of nonmarital births are first births and only about a third occur to teenagers. In 1982, 39 percent of the nonmarital births to whites and 54 percent of these births to blacks were second or higher order. Seventeen and 27 percent, respectively, were third or higher order births (National Center for Health Statistics, 1986a). The fact that such births often occur at higher parities and later ages is a reminder that some proportion of these births are to previously married women.

Births between marriages were indeed a very common experience for remarried women in the 1960s, one-fourth of whom had borne a child after separation and before remarriage (Rindfuss and Bumpass, 1977). Over the 1970s this proportion was cut almost in half (Bumpass, 1985), reflecting in part the enormous increase in the proportion contraceptively sterile (Bumpass, 1987). Data from the June 1985 CPS replicate closely the estimates for the early 1970s and suggest that there has been no further reduction in this experience. Life-table estimates for separations occurring since 1975 suggest that about 10 percent will experience a birth within two years of separation, about 15 percent within 4 years.

We can examine the marital status of births by treating births reported by a woman in the June 1985 CPS as the units of analysis, and then comparing the date of each birth to the mother's marriage history (see Bumpass, 1984). The proportion classified as nonmarital by this procedure matches closely the vital statistics estimates. Of the 18 percent of all births 1980-85 that were nonmarital, 4 percent were born after a divorce. Births between separation and divorce add another 3 percent of all births. These births to separated women are, of course, not counted by the vital statistics system as births outside of marriage, but they nonetheless represent children born into one-parent families. Thus, about a third of births out of marriage occur to previously married mothers.

BLACK-WHITE DIFFERENCES

A dominant feature of nonmarital fertility in the United States is the marked difference between blacks and whites noted earlier. The large racial disparity raises the question of whether there is a different orientation towards marriage and childbearing in the black community, and if so, why.

This question is embedded in renewed attention more generally to the issues made salient almost 30 years ago by the Moynihan Report: the interrelationships of marital instability, female headed families and the intergenerational transmission of poverty in the black population. Then, as now, a critical issue in the debate was whether the black family structure was a cause or a consequence of poverty. Today this debate continues,

with one side emphasizing the role of female headship and nonmarital births in reproducing economic dependence and social alienation in the black population (Murray, 1984) and the other side emphasizing the importance of declining employment opportunities for black males in undermining the black family (Wilson and Neckerman, 1986).

Recently, Hogan and Kitagawa (1985) have made a very provocative contribution to this discussion, by drawing attention to the importance of variation within the black population. Based on detailed interviews with blacks in Chicago (among whom about three-quarters of all births are to unmarried women), they estimated levels of premarital fertility for subpopulations with varying characteristics and found that blacks in the low risk category had birth rates that were comparable to national statistics for whites. Those classified as at low-risk lived in stable families of higher socio-economic status and in "high quality" neighborhoods. All had parents who exercised strict control over their dating, and none had sisters who became teenage mothers.

These results stimulated us to expand our work on the intergenerational transmission of single-parenthood in a similar direction. Although we cannot include all of the measures of risk that were used in the Hogan-Kitagawa analysis (e.g. ghetto residence, parental supervision, sibling fertility), we can examine black-white differences in a national (as opposed to a Chicago) sample, controlling for parental background and family experience.

Data and Methods

We examine these issues using data from the 1982 National Survey of Family Growth. These data were collected by the National Center for Health Statistics through interviews in respondents' homes with 7969 women 15-44 years of age of all marital statuses. This is a national stratified random sample, with oversampling of blacks and young women. These data are particularly useful for our purposes because they include parental education, whether the parental family remained intact, and if not, the age the respondent first lived apart from both parents, and the parent they were living with at age 14). In a prior paper, we have examined separately by race the role of parental family disruption on a number of adult outcomes, including premarital birth (McLanahan and Bumpass, 1986). The present analysis focuses attention on the extent to which the high level of premarital fertility among blacks can be explained by family background and other compositional differences between blacks and whites. Differences with respect to fertility among previously married women must be left for a subsequent analysis.

As noted at the outset, there are a number of different perspectives on levels of nonmarital fertility, each appropriate to a distinct set of questions. The common focus on the proportion of births that occur out-of-wedlock captures an important policy-relevant consequence of nonmarital fertility: the entry conditions of each new cohort of children. Similarly, changes in the absolute number of nonmarital births are significant indicators of the level of need for social policies and for levels of demands on social transfer programs such as AFDC. However, the central theoretical questions raised by these concerns relate to differential propensity for single women to give birth, rather

than to prevalence as captured in the above measures.

This perspective is best represented in some formulation of the rate of childbearing among unmarried women for which RATE models are particularly apt (Tuma and Hannan, 1984). The underlying concept of such models is to estimate duration-specific risks on the basis of experience at each duration represented in the sample data. We use proportional hazard models to provide multivariate estimates of the independent effect of our variables on the rate of each transition of interest. As the label implies, the procedure estimates that proportion by which rates at all durations are altered upward or downward by a unit change in (or contrasting categories of) a predictor variable. The models are estimated using Cox's (1972, 1975) partial likelihood method which allows the time dependence of the hazard to be determined by the data. Once the multivariate equation is solved, the estimates of the parameters can be used to determine the predicted rates of premarital births for women in high risk and low risk categories.

Variables

The dependent variable is premarital birth, coded 1 for women who experience a birth before their first marriage. A woman is considered to be at risk for a nonmarital birth up until the time she marries or the time of the interview. Note that this approach automatically removes the effect of age at marriage differences on the length of exposure to risk so there is no need to include that variable in the analysis.

The independent variables include race (BLACK); whether respondent lived with

both parents or not (BOTH PARENTS), mother's and father's education (MEDUC and FEDUC - coded into less than high school, high school, and some college), region of the country (NCENTRAL, NEAST, SOUTH, WEST) and whether respondent lived in a central city (URBAN). We also constructed a variable indicating whether respondent lived in a central city in the north east or north central region (NORTH - CC).

Results

We know from our prior analysis that there are substantial racial differences in the effect of background factors on the risk of premarital fertility (McLanahan and Bumpass, 1986). And for this reason our main procedure will involve estimating levels from models run separately for blacks and whites. Nonetheless, additive models in which race is a variable are useful to set the stage for this analysis. As can be seen in Table 1, the rate model for the combined sample indicates that the risk of premarital fertility is 7.68 times higher among blacks than among whites (Top panel, column 5). These results are consistent with results reported by Dryfoos and Bourque-Scholl (1981), for teenage girls. They found that in 1978, there were 13.8 births per 1000 unmarried white women aged 15-19 compared to 90.3 among blacks.

Controlling for differences by race in parent' education, region and SMSA residence, reduces the relative risk for blacks from the 7.68 noted above to 6.12 (Second panel, column 5). Further control for whether respondent was living with both natural parents at age 14 reduces the relative risk to 5.49 (Third panel., column 3). Thus, the additive

model suggests that, at most, about 30 percent of the difference between blacks and whites can be accounted for by mean differences in background variables. [We also estimated a model that included whether respondent graduated from high school (Fourth panel). Although the coefficient for respondent's education was significant, the overall risk associated with race was not altered by this specification.

The next step in the analysis was to run separate models for blacks and whites that compared the premarital birth rates of women in high and low risk categories. The high risk category includes women from disrupted families, whose parents did not complete high school, and who lived in central cities in the north central part of the United States. The low risk category includes women who were living with both parents at age 14, whose parents completed high school and who lived either in the South outside a central city in the Northeast.

It must be kept in mind that these are life-table like cumulative proportions with an event. They represent the proportion of women at each age who would be expected to have had a birth among those who have not married, assuming that they experience the age specific rates of unmarried women at all ages preceding. This latter assumption can depart considerably from reality at later ages if there is a substantial association between the probabilities of nonmarital birth and marriage. However, since similar conclusions would be drawn from the estimates for either age 20 or age 30, the results are not likely to be seriously biased by such selection. These results can be summarized very succinctly.

First, for both blacks and whites, the variables included in the analysis make a very

substantial difference in the risk of premarital motherhood. Among unmarried white women, less than 5 percent of those with low-risk characteristics would be expected to have a birth by age 25 compared to about 58 percent of those with high risk characteristics. Among blacks, the estimates are about 25 percent and 65 percent for the low and high risk groups respectively. These estimates are fairly consistent with those of Hogan and Kitagawa for the high-risk group but not for the low-risk women. Recall that their study showed that about 57 percent of young black women in the high-risk group were expected to have a premarital birth before age 18 as compared with only 9 percent in the low-risk group.

Second, at least in relative terms, the difference between low and high-risk groups is greater for whites than for blacks. This difference is due primarily to differences between the low-risk groups where we had most expected to find a convergence. Here the estimated level among blacks is about three times that of whites at age 20 and over. Conversely, convergence does occur for the high risk groups.

DISCUSSION

Nonmarital childbearing is an important component of current fertility, and though rates have been increasing among whites and decreasing among blacks, racial differences continue to be very large. Hogan and Kitagawa made a very important contribution based on their Chicago survey in emphasizing the diversity of experience within the black population, contrary to what a "cultural" interpretation would imply. The final

section of this note used national data from the 1982 NSFG to examine the extent to which race differences in premarital birth rates can be explained by differences in parents' socio-economic status, family structure, and residential characteristics.

The findings are twofold. Most importantly, we too document very large diversity within the black population. It is clear that there is no monolithic culture that leads to the high rates of unmarried childbearing among blacks. Blacks in the high-risk category are nearly 3 times as likely to have a premarital birth as those in the low-risk group. Thus the major factor behind racial differences is the relative proportions in the high and low risk groups. This includes, of course, differences in the likelihood of growing up in a single-parent family. In part, this just moves the argument back one level, and to familiar ground (Moynihan, etc). It remains an open question how much the higher levels of marital instability among blacks reflect the economic conditions of black males as opposed to a more general cultural adaptation to those realities.

The second finding is that we are not able to explain all of the racial differences in premarital fertility, particularly among presumably low-risk groups. One explanation for the difference between our findings and those of Hogan and Kitagawa could simply be our inability to measure more of the relevant variables. For example, in the Chicago study the indicator for parents' socio-economic status was based on parents' income, education, occupation, housing, and labor force/ unemployment experience. In addition, information on neighborhood quality was used in distinguish between low and high-risk groups. In our analysis, residential controls were very crude: region of the country and

whether respondent lived in a central city. However, it does not seem that our differences results from a failure to capture ghettoization (as focussed on by Wilson) since we do find convergence among the high risk groups.

Alternatively, Hogan and Kitagawa may find more convergence among low risk blacks and whites because they include some variables of questionable causal ordering, in particular whether parents had strict control over respondent's dating and whether respondent had a sister who was (or who became) a teenage mother. After the fact, one may be more likely to judge that control was not very strict if the daughter became pregnant.

These topics remain critical items on the research agenda, not only because of the prevalence of nonmarital childbearing, but also because the convergence between blacks and whites that has been occurring has resulted from increases among whites. This latter trend may signal underlying changes in the nature of marriage and family that are reflected as well in low marriage rates and high rates of marital disruption.

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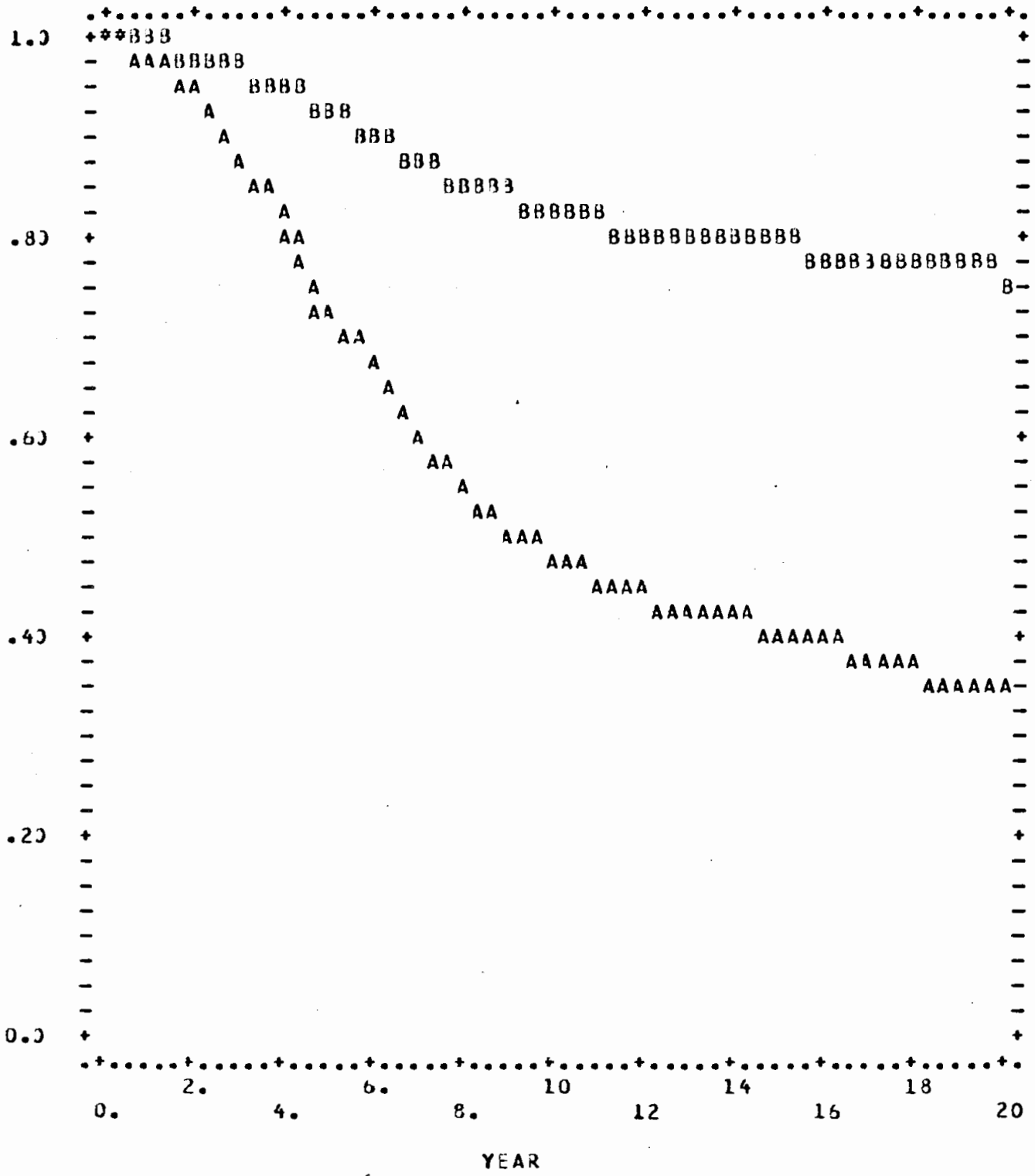
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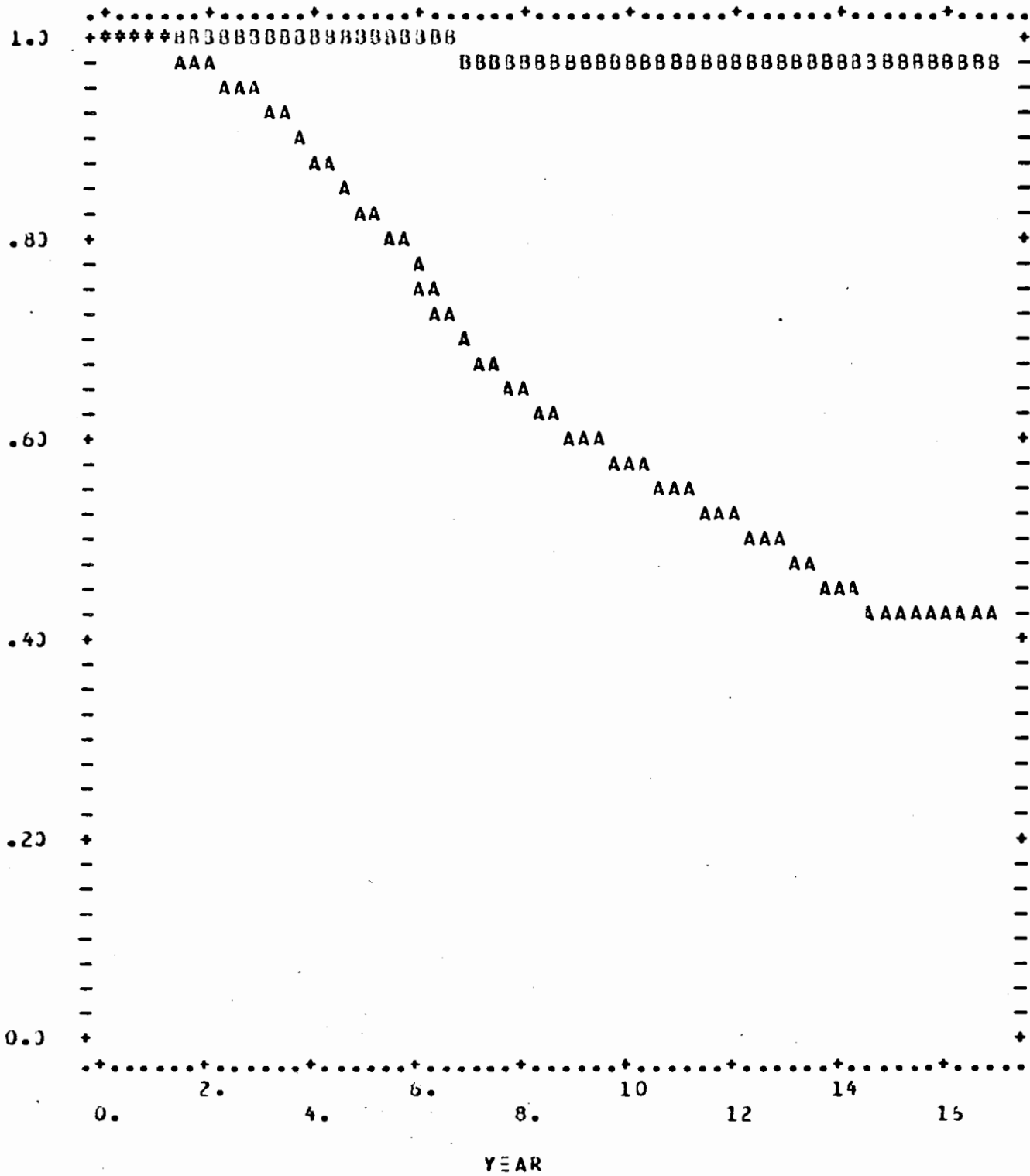
TABLE 1. Effects of Race, Region, and Family Background Characteristics on Risk of Premarital Birth.

VARIABLE	COEFFICIENT	STANDARD ERROR	COEFF./S.E.	EXP(COEFF.)
• BLACK	2.0389	0.0688	29.6530	7.6822
• BLACK	1.8114	0.0734	24.6615	6.1189
MEDJC	-0.3646	0.0572	-6.3785	0.6945
FEDJC	-0.1457	0.0574	-2.5381	0.8544
NEAST	-0.3353	0.1151	-3.3458	0.6803
NCENTRAL	-0.1984	0.1093	-1.8155	0.8200
NORTH-CC	0.2718	0.1235	2.2004	1.3123
URBAN	0.2005	0.0661	3.1251	1.2293
• BLACK	1.7028	0.0744	22.8728	5.4893
MEDUC	-0.3472	0.0568	-6.1105	0.7067
FEDUC	-0.1825	0.0571	-3.1950	0.8332
NEAST	-0.3591	0.1149	-3.1244	0.6983
NCENTRAL	-0.1865	0.1096	-1.7018	0.8299
NORTH-CC	0.2506	0.1236	2.1089	1.2977
URBAN	0.1565	0.0662	2.5153	1.1812
BOTH PARENTS	-0.5324	0.0533	-9.9868	0.5372
• BLACK	1.7090	0.0742	23.0184	5.5237
MEDJC	-0.2796	0.0569	-4.9153	0.7561
FEDJC	-0.1228	0.0573	-2.1439	0.8844
NEAST	-0.3338	0.1154	-2.8919	0.7162
NCENTRAL	-0.1204	0.1094	-1.1003	0.8866
NORTH-CC	0.2298	0.1237	1.8576	1.2583
URBAN	0.1348	0.0663	2.0334	1.1444
BOTH PARENTS	-0.4390	0.0538	-8.1617	0.6447
EDUC	-0.9382	0.0568	-16.5076	0.3913

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