Growing Trend Toward Single Parents
Means Big Problems for South Carolina

By Professor James Hite

1999

In 1960, about one baby out of every eight born in South Carolina was born out of wedlock. In 1993, almost one out of every three babies born in the state were to a single parent.

While the problem is more pronounced in the African-American population, it is also a growing trend among whites.

This startling trend is full of ominous significance for the future of South Carolina. Children born to single mothers, especially teenage mothers, come into the world with two strikes against them.

In the first place, children without fathers present are more likely to be poor. Almost half of the households headed by a single female are in poverty. According to the 1995 Kids Count Report, "Children in father-absent families are five times more likely to be poor and ten times more likely to be extremely poor."

Girls from single-parent families are three times more likely to become pregnant themselves while still teenagers (which means the problem feeds on itself), and boys from such families are at greatly increased risks of dropping out of school, being unemployed, going to jail, and being uninvolved with their own children.

It is probably fair to say that this enormous increase in the number of children born out of wedlock is the single biggest threat to the future of South Carolina. It poses almost insurmountable difficulties for our schools, our law enforcement agencies, and ultimately for economic development.

Doing something about the problem requires, first, that we have some reasonable idea of the causes. There are some clues that tell us the causes are not unique to South Carolina. The same trend toward out of wedlock births is evident nationwide and even in most industrialized nations. Whatever is wrong is bigger than South Carolina or even the United States. And since the problem has grown in the last thirty years, the causes are relatively recent in origins.

Two possible causes come to mind. The first, one dear to the hearts of conservatives, is the growth of the welfare state, both in this country and overseas. Out of wedlock births clearly have risen in all those nations where welfare programs have grown up in the past thirty years. So there may be a casual relationship.

Another possibility is the increase in electronic media with all its subliminal messages that glorify sex. Teenagers have never behaved very rationally when it comes to sex. In early South Carolina there was always a big increase in local illegitimate births about nine months after big revival meetings that brought teenagers together and stirred up their emotions. But the big
increase we now see in illegitimate birth is correlated with the TV generation. If teenagers are constantly bombarded with music and television that re-enforce their already strong sex drives, we must expect them to keep having babies at alarming rates.

Whatever the causes, this problem must be dealt with or it will increase at exponential rates. If South Carolina continues on the trend of the last thirty years, we will become a state of bastards, crime will rise, a larger and larger percentage of the population will be unemployable in a high-tech economy, and life will be poor and nasty.

What can be done? There are no easy answers. Welfare reform might help, but taken alone, without some dampening of the sexual content of media messages, we cannot expect welfare reform by itself to solve the problem. Until we face up to the fact that teenagers are struggling to deal with hormones and give them some help in that struggle, we probably cannot expect to make much headway against this very serious problem.

Jim Hite is a senior fellow of the Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Public Affairs at Clemson University where he is alumni professor of agriculture and applied economics.