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A Dubious Milestone

By BOB HERBERT

Some years ago, I wrote about a teenager named Kendra Newkirk, who was raised by her mom and had only seen her dad once in her life. Because of an emergency, Kendra and her mom had to meet the father at a particularly busy public location in Brooklyn.

Kendra had no idea what he looked like. "It was hard," she told me. "He could have been any one of those men walking on the street. I kept asking my mother: 'Is that him? Is that him?'"

I've been thinking about Kendra ever since Barack Obama spoke on Father's Day about the tragic flight of so many American fathers, especially black fathers, from their children's lives.

His comments came as the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston was compiling data that revealed a dubious milestone. In 2006, for the first time in U.S. history, a majority of all births to women under 30 — 50.4 percent — were out of wedlock. Nearly 80 percent of births among black women were out of wedlock.

By comparison, when John F. Kennedy was elected president in 1960, just 6 percent of all births were to unmarried women under 30.

Since then, the percentages have risen across the ethnic spectrum. One-third of white, non-Hispanic women under 30 who gave birth in 2006 were unmarried. For Hispanics, it was 51 percent.

"Of all the rocks upon which we build our lives, we are reminded today that family is the most important," said Senator Obama, in remarks he delivered at the Apostolic Church of God in Chicago. "And we are called to recognize and honor how critical every father is to that foundation ...

"But if we are honest with ourselves, we'll admit that too many fathers are missing — missing from too many lives and too many homes. They have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men. And the foundations of our families are weaker because of it."

This is not a simple matter. Obviously, fathers should care for their children. But just wagging a finger and telling them sternly to step up to their responsibilities is about as effective as hollering at the wind.

Senator Obama touched on this when he talked about the need for certain policy changes to make it easier for young men to fulfill their parental obligations — for example, offering tax incentives and job training to those making a sincere effort.

“We should be making it easier for fathers who make responsible choices and harder for those who avoid them,” he said.

But a lot more is needed. One of the main reasons out-of-wedlock births have skyrocketed in recent decades is because it has become so difficult for poor and poorly educated young men to earn enough to support a family.

There is no doubt that a lot of clowns have fathered babies when they shouldn't have, and too many have irresponsibly taken a walk. But it's also incredibly difficult for many of these young people to find the kind of employment that makes raising a family feasible.

The U.S. economy does not come close to providing decent employment — enough jobs — for everyone who wants to work. At the lowest end of the economic ladder the crisis in employment is reminiscent of the Great Depression in its intensity.

It is in this group of poor and educationally deprived young people that out-of-wedlock births are highest.

Andrew Sum, director of the Center for Labor Market Studies, put it this way in a research paper:

“The marriage rates of all native-born young males and young black males (22-32 years old) in the U.S. are strongly correlated with the annual earnings of these young men. The higher their annual earnings, the more likely they are to be married. Among native-born black males, those men with earnings over \$60,000 were four times more likely to be married than their peers with annual earnings under \$20,000.

“Unfortunately, the mean annual earnings of young men without four-year college degrees have plummeted substantially over the past 30 years, and declined again over the 2000-2007 period. Declining economic fortunes of young men without college degrees underlie the rise in out-of-wedlock child-bearing, and they are creating a new demographic nightmare for the nation.”

His words of warning echoed those I heard a few weeks ago from Walter Fields of the Community Service Society in New York. “These are the kids everyone forgets about,” he said. “It's a huge population, and I think of it as the hidden crisis of America.”

Employment is the master key to the thriving families that Senator Obama talked about and that are supposed to be the American ideal. If we can't achieve something close to full employment for the wider society, there is very little hope for those mired at the bottom.