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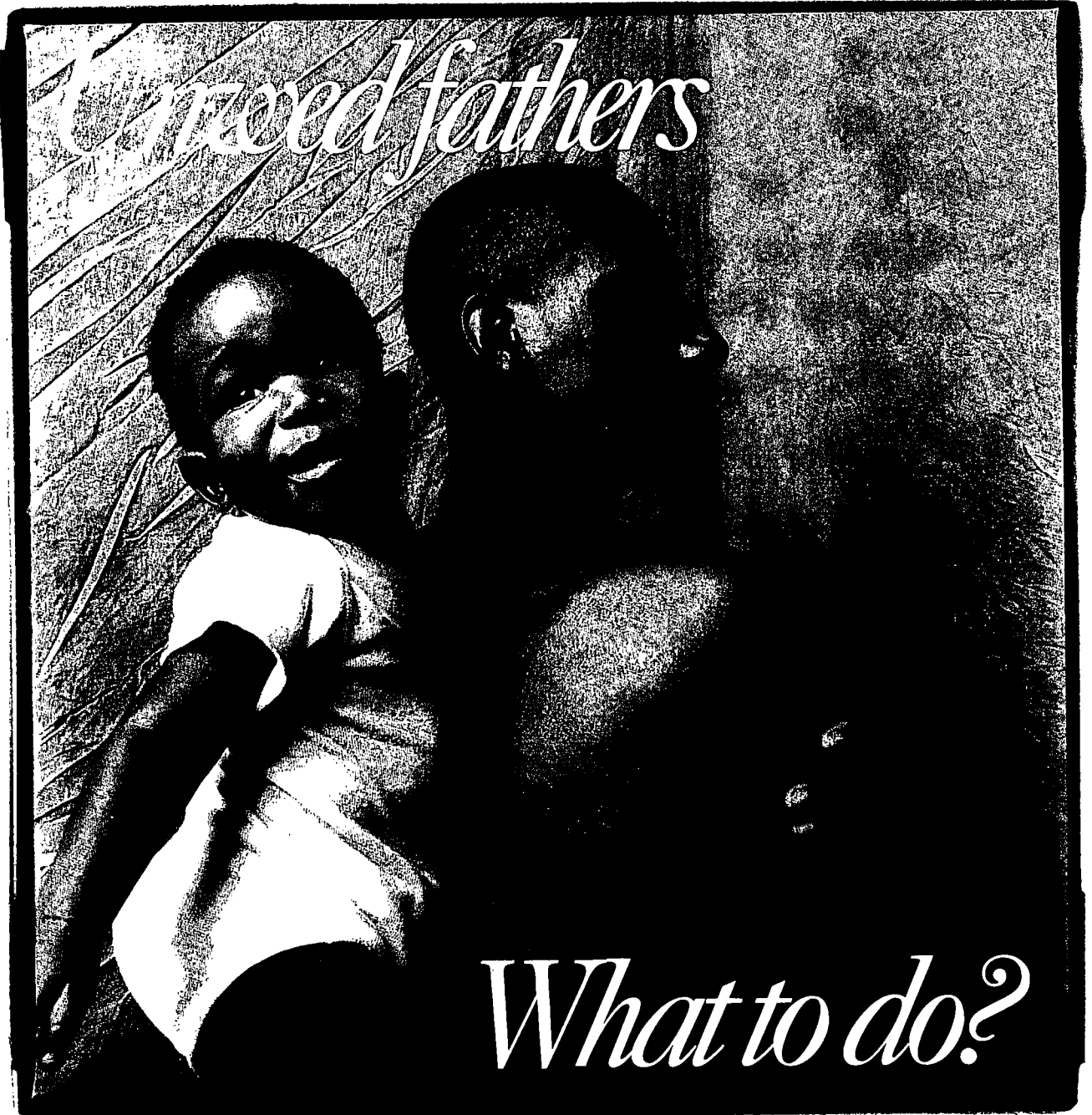
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SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1993



Unwed fathers

What to do?

Memo To: Kathy, Lyn, and Eliza
From: Marlowe
Re: The Boys

The AEI report, "Sex Codes Among Inner-City Youth," explores the way boys and girls relate to each other in the more impoverished areas of our cities. The picture that is painted is one of deception, manipulation and the aggressive pursuit of some kind of a status symbol that the children hope will elevate them beyond the hopeless futility of omniscient poverty. It is indicative of the intractability of this problem that after all is observed and learned we find that, far from a great social problem, babies are, in fact, entities that serve very well the needs of adolescents in the inner city, both psychologically and socially.

The AEI report goes to great lengths in describing the socioeconomic background in which teen pregnancies occur. Taking for granted that this is understood, the report goes on to delineate exactly the confluence of factors that eventually yields a baby. These factors are, in short form, the following; the girl dreams of a life better than the one she has now. In other words she dreams of a life with meaning; a family and a home, a man who will provide for the family so that she can, in turn, care for the family. The boy, meanwhile, is just coming into his sexuality and wants nothing more than to be free to explore it however he sees fit. He is encouraged by his peers to have sex with as many girls as possible, for it is a kind of validation of his manhood, a symbol that he is virile and attractive to women. But the boy knows about the girls' dreams of a good man and a home and a family so even though he may know that he cannot provide these things, if he wants to have sex with these women he is going to have to make them think that he is one of the good ones, that he can, in fact, provide these things. Thus the games begin.

As the girl's dreams ratchet themselves down to reality by boys who were never intending to commit to her and her child in the first place, are probably doing the same thing right now to another girl and won't even admit that the child is theirs, she finds that there are indeed other advantages to having a baby. The family, whose religious mores often cause them to rejoice in a new child, praise the daughter and accept responsibility for the child as a whole. Furthermore, the state now officially recognizes this woman and begins the process of aiding the mother in her bid to raise the child. Moreover, the woman finds that she now has ammunition in the status battles that occur between teen mothers in the inner city; whose baby is cuter, whose is more well taken care of, whose is better dressed etc. While these competitions may seem silly and superficial, the participants are now together in the form of a community or group of people with something in common. This is more than most of them had prior to the birth of their child. And finally, a baby and a steady income (AFDC) are strong attractors in the mating game five or ten

years down the road. In the context of these incentives, it begins to seem as though having a child is not so unreasonable a decision after all.

Unfortunately we find that the child is the one who loses in this game; without a male role model or a steady family. The correlations between out-of-wedlock birth and crime, welfare dependency, poverty, teen parenthood etc. are high. Yet the factors that conspire to give us a child borne of teen parents, as just explicated with the help of the AEI report, are complex and deep. What can be done?

For a problem whose roots are deep and far-ranging as Carrera understands the problem of teen pregnancy, the solutions must be holistic. The first and, for my purposes, most important aspect of this holism is the ability to address the boys who are involved in teen pregnancy as they seem to consistently escape scrutiny. Following is a summary of the ways in which Carrera would attract and effectively involve boys in his program, the program would have to include;

1. Teaching about sexuality through gender role. Here Carrera understands that the meaning of being a male for many of these boys centers around sexual conquest, without nurturing or tender feelings, through the use of force and strength. This, Carrera says, is largely due to the silence of social institutions on the many different ways one can be a male. To teach, in effect, that it is OK to be compassionate, sensitive and loving even as a man.

2. Teaching about sexuality through body image. This aspect strikes me as the most basic, but Carrera explains that if teens are uncomfortable with the functions and aesthetics of their and their partner's body than contraception and simple health measures become an anxious and uncomfortable process.

3. Teaching about sexuality through affection, love and intimacy. Similar to number one, this recommendation treats the subject of feelings and intimacy in the context of interpersonal relations rather than as a function of the individual alone as in 1. This is an attempt to delve into the substance of teenage relationships.

4. Getting feedback from adolescents and really listening.

5. Examining content of staff and staff patterns. This strikes me as one the most saient of Carrera's points. Namely that if the program is staffed exclusively with women and organized around the needs of girls, shouldn't we expect male attendance to be low? In Carrera's estimation there are different "gender dialects" and every program must ask itself, "Is the overall spirit of the work space and staff conducive to male involvement?"(277)

6. Using male organizers for recruiting. As in above.

7. Offering employment and/or sports opportunities. Both offers tend to attract males, Carrera says, and both provide occasion for physical examinations in which the subjects of contraception and sexually related issues can be brought up.

8. Providing concrete educational opportunities. If not guaranteed college admission (as in the Harlem program) than a free high school equivalency education program. Carrera believes this is imperative in instilling a sense of

self-worth in teenaged males.

9. Involving the parents. Carrera believes that parental advocacy of a particular program will always increase the adolescent participation rates. He recommends the program address issues like housing, employment, AIDS, drug abuse, child care and college admission in order to involve adults who can then involve their children.

Carrera believes that a program with these characteristics is well on its way to addressing some of the deepest and most fundamental causes of teenage pregnancy and sex abuse.

Statistics on Adolescent Males and Teen Pregnancy

Sex, Contraception and Education:

*The average age of first intercourse for white males is 15.9 yrs., for black males, 14.4 yrs. and a 1981 study found that the average of first intercourse for urban black males was 11.8 years.

* Only 52% of boys reported having sexuality education by age 19, while only 8% of boys receive sex ed by age 13.

*Among males who initiate sexual activity at age 15, only one of four has taken a sex ed course.

*Only 18% of boys report learning about sex from their parents, while male friends, doctors, teachers and female friends were reported as the most common sources of information about sexuality for young boys.

*Among all teens practicing birth control at first intercourse, a male method of contraception is most commonly used. 57% of sexually active teens report using a condom, 20% report using female methods: Pill, diaphragm, IUD, Sponge, etc..

Attitudes:

*In New York, 57% of boys as opposed to 27% of girls report that having sex is a high priority.

*62% of boys thought, incorrectly, that parental consent is always required for teenagers to visit a clinic. 51.6% of boys also thought, incorrectly, that parental permission was required to purchase non-prescription birth control in a drugstore.

*Many males do not feel comfortable attending family planning clinics as evidenced by the fact that in 1982, males comprised less than one half of one percent of clinic users.

Fatherhood:

*In 1987, 105,364 teenage boys became fathers and 85,637 babies were born to parents who were both teenagers.

*Percentage of young men reporting that they fathered a child while a teenager, by race: 10.9% - Latino, 14.8% - Black, 11.9% - Disadvantaged white, 4.8% - Non-disadvantaged white.

*Only 39% of teenage fathers receive high school certification by age 20, as opposed to 86% of male teens who did not father a child. Males who father a child while in their teens are half as likely to complete college as their peers who delay fatherhood.

*18 and 19 year olds with poor basic skills are three times as likely to be fathers as their counterparts with average basic skills.

*In 1984, 58% of all fathers aged 20-24 did not earn enough to keep their family above the poverty line.

* Teen fatherhood, like motherhood, is repeated from one generation to the next.