

COMMENTARY

# Holding off on parenthood makes success easier

**Special to Sentinel-Voice**

How long does it take for an ethnic group in America to climb out of poverty? And how can we know when significant progress is being made? What will the rate of progress be for African-Americans?

The answer to that old American question is being fashioned right before our eyes these days through the stories of strivings and success African-Americans have posted in the three decades since the civil rights triumphs of the 1960s.

The answer is also being crafted by the nation's — and Black America's — response to the problems which continue to beset poor black neighborhoods, families, and individuals.

I was drawn to consider this very broad question when the federal National Center for Health Statistics released its annual study of births in America earlier this month.

Its most surprising finding: The birth rate for unmarried black women, one of the flash points in the debate over race in America, has reached its

lowest point in 40 years.

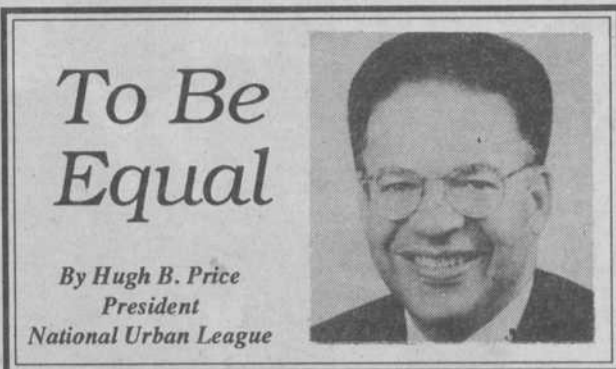
According to the federal survey, encompassing 3.9 million births in 1996, the last year for which figures are available, the birth rate for unmarried black women was 74.4 births per 1,000 women. That is a remarkable drop from the peak birth rate reached just nine years ago of 90.7 per 1,000 unmarried black women.

The out-of-wedlock birth rate has declined for all age groups of black women, federal researchers found; and it comes amid a significant overall downward trend in births. Fewer babies were born in 1996 than in any year since 1987.

But black teen girls, until recently the group with the highest level of births, showed the most dramatic birth-rate decline.

Teen births among African-Americans fell by 21 percent between 1991 and 1996, to just over 9 percent of all black teenage girls.

Hispanic-American teens are now most likely to give birth, although their rates also fell, from nearly 11 percent in 1995 to just over 10 percent in



## To Be Equal

By Hugh B. Price  
President  
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1996, the first significant drop since 1991.

For all teens, the overall 1996 birth rate was 54.7 for every 1,000 young women ages 15 to 19, down from the 1991 rate of 62.1.

"There's been no letup, and it's not been slowing down," Stephanie J. Ventura, the federal demographer who wrote the report, told the *New York Times*. "And it's not just for teenagers. For all black women under 30, the declines have been really big."

The figures took much of the health community by surprise.

But demographers and health experts said that the good news probably results from a



combination of several different things: the precaution, including both increased use of contraceptives and abstinence from sex, that the AIDS epidemic is causing some men and women to take; the impact of sex education, either within or outside of schools; and efforts by some organizations to encourage abstinence or the use of contraceptives.

Dr. Donna E. Shalala, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, referring to the decline in the black teen birth rate, said, "What is significant is that these declines are in every state. I give a lot of credit to the African-American community, which has put out

a clear, consistent message from the churches, from the schools, and all sorts of civic organizations, a drumbeat to young women and young men that they should not become parents until they are truly ready to support a child; that having children too early will limit their options."

That's one of the significant points to consider about this positive surprise: the importance of sending out a clear, consistent message.

The message "beamed" to young people more intensely over the past decade has alerted them to a vitally important fact of life: Nearly 80 percent of children born to unwed teenage mothers grow up in poverty.

Put positively, the message has urged them to follow three simple steps to give themselves — and their future children — a chance to avoid a life of poverty:

First, finish high school. Second, get married before having the first child.

And third, hold off having that child until they're over 20 years old themselves, and equipped to provide for their

family. The federal statistics indicate that our children are getting the message.

It's not being Pollyannish to celebrate that — even as we recognize the need to continue to work to reduce the still unacceptably high out-of-wedlock birth rate. (69.8 percent of black children were born out-of-wedlock in 1996, compared to nearly 22 percent for non-Hispanic whites, and nearly 41 percent for Hispanics.)

We can take to heart Donna Shalala's point that teenage pregnancy is most often a consequence of a girl's feeling of hopelessness about the future.

If adolescents — girls and boys — think they have a future, she pointed out, they put off having babies.

We must reach more of our teens with that message — that is, convince them they have a future — for it will mean that our young people and the children they eventually bring into the world will have a much easier shot at the American Dream.

### Carl Rowan's Commentary

## Building relations with China excellent for America's future

**Special to Sentinel-Voice**

Richard Nixon was not the first or only American leader to see that it wasn't in America's interest for China to go on as an estranged behemoth, locked in a menacing embrace with the "evil empire" Soviet Union. He was just the first to have the guts to defy his own Republican



Party and engage China in a way that broke up the Sino-Soviet Communist monolith.

Bill Clinton is not the only American who knows that it is not in the interest of our children and grandchildren to have China and its 1.2 billion people as their raging enemies in the 21st century. He is just the president who, already hounded and beleaguered on several fronts, had the courage and wisdom to gamble that on a journey to China he could make a budding friendship flower.

In Beijing, he articulated with eloquence and rare sensitivity the ideas and ideals that undergrid America's greatest blessings. He has done what could not be accomplished by a thousand broadcasts of the Voice of America or Radio Free Europe: he expressed the American commitment to freedom in ways that surely touched the vast millions of Chinese who got a rare chance to see and hear him on television. The effects and repercussions may last for a generation or more.

China's future leaders among those students at Beijing University will not soon forget the American president who challenged the view of their leader Jiang Zemin that the basis of China's recent great economic

progress is "order," or the stultifying tranquillity produced by the Tiananmen massacre. Clinton wasn't a holier-than-thou blunder-buss. He said, "we do not want to impose our vision on others," but then added that China hasn't seen any progress compared with what it will get if it unshackles the minds and spirits of its brilliant people.

That the Chinese government would telecast his appeal to the students as well as his confrontation with Jiang over human rights is a breakthrough of immense importance.

It doesn't mean that democracy will soon be breaking out all over China, or that all the repressions and trappings of tyranny will soon be lifted. It doesn't mean that the immediate future will be free of bitter disputes with China over trade policy, or China's assistance to countries that we regard as enemies. It doesn't mean that new churches, temples and synagogues can now sprout like mushrooms in new freedom in China. It means only that in expressing to the mass of Chinese the fundamental yearnings of man for freedom, and the fruits that flow from freedom, our president cast wide the seeds of liberty. Some of those seeds are bound to take root, even in places far removed from that university setting.

It may first be our grandchildren who clearly see the harvest as they live in a less dangerous world where what Mr. Clinton called "an imperfect friendship" with China endures.

## Common sense will end parties plagued by violence

**Special to Sentinel-Voice**

Las Vegas' monikers stretch nearly as long as its famous Strip: tourist town U.S.A.; the city that never sleeps; the entertainment capital of the world.

Its decades as a gambling neonopolis have created a "party anytime" atmosphere that's felt by locals and tourists alike. But it's also a violent town, from its beginnings to the present, from its glitzy mountain homes and suburbs to its poorer neighborhoods. It seems to become even more violent during nearly every holiday and, increasingly, blacks are involved in some way.

This past 4th of July was no different, with several incidents involving blacks and violence.

We as a community seem bent on destruction. Many of us now think that the fight or confrontation at the party is "the event" within the event.

We expect the jeri-curl, pants-sagging menaces to society to show up at every function and wreak havoc, sometimes with fatal

consequences.

Though not guilty of instigating the violence, those of us who receive the information second-hand and immediately start calling around to get the play-by-play on who punched who and who was trampled in the process only to spread gossip and innuendo further fan the flames of animosity.

We must change. Let me clear my throat (symbolically) and say it again: We must change.

It's a given that troubles lurk around every corner of the club. But as intelligent and respectful blacks we should make it our business to do like momma said and "act like we've got some sense."

Sure, promoters must do their part to ensure that people can party safely, but in the entertainment capital of the world where partying goes on round the clock, ultimately it's up to the partiers — be they locals, tourists, or transients — to stop the madness so that we all can have a good time.

Peace, Jazz Matazz (W.U.N.)

## SPEAK OUT!

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