ing that when experts in the 1970s labeled "teenage pregnancy" a fundamental cause of poverty, Americans were willing to listen.

Questions

1. What evidence does Luker present to indicate that teenage pregnancy was actually on the decline during the 1970s, '80s, and '90s when it was constructed as a problem of epidemic proportions, while premarital sex, abortion, and out-of-wedlock births were on the rise and yet not similarly constructed as epidemics?
2. Among the issues listed in Question 1, why was teenage pregnancy constructed as the key social problem for the public to be alarmed about and for policymakers to address? Answer by discussing how, in Luker's words, the epidemic of teenage pregnancy seemed to "explain a number of dismaying social phenomena, such as spreading signs of poverty, persistent racial inequalities, illegitimacy, freer sexual mores, and new family structures (pp. 361–362)?"
3. How is seeing teenage pregnancy as a leading explanation for poverty consistent with the political ideology that has been prevalent in the United States since the early 1980s?
4. What is the case Luker makes in arguing that the core problem that needs to be addressed is not the problem constructed by claimsmakers—teenage pregnancy—but instead poverty itself?

and support a family. Even if they work at one or more of the "lousy jobs" at the bottom of the wage structure, full-time year-round employment is insufficient to keep a family out of poverty. . . . The idea that young people would be better off if they worked harder, were more patient, and postponed their childbearing is simply not true—and is unlikely to become true in the foreseeable future—for a great many people at the bottom of the income scale. Even when poor people obtain more education, for example, they only displace other people at the end of the queue, and the problem of poverty and childbearing among young people continues.

A compelling body of scholarship now shows that although people who become parents as teenagers will eventually be poorer than those who do not, a very large proportion of that difference is explained by preexisting factors. Well over half of all women who give birth as teenagers come from profoundly poor families, and more than one-fourth come from families who are slightly better off but still struggling economically. Taken together, more than 80 percent of teenage mothers were living in poverty or near-poverty long before they became pregnant.Teenage parents are not middle-class people who have become poor simply because they have had a baby; rather, they have become teenage parents because they were poor to begin with. More than two decades of research, summarized in the National Academy of Sciences' report *Risking the Future,* make clear a point not highlighted in the report itself: at every step of the process that leads to early childbearing, social and economic disadvantage plays a powerful role. Poor kids, not rich ones, have babies as teenagers, and their poverty long predates their pregnancy. By the same token, poor kids, not rich ones, have babies without being married. . . .

* * *

But if teenage mothers are poor before they ever become mothers, if in many cases they would be poor and in need of welfare at whatever age they had their first child, and if marriage brings its own set of problems to poor people, much of the easy equation that identifies early pregnancy as a cause of poverty breaks down. If the real problem is poverty, not the age or marital status of young women when they give birth, then it is not surprising that poor women tend to have children and even grandchildren who grow up to be poor. Preventing teenagers from getting pregnant and persuading them to delay their childbearing would merely postpone the problem of poor women and their dependence on welfare. Childbearing among teenagers has relatively little effect on the levels of poverty in the United States. But income disparities have become a pervasive fact of American life, and it is scarcely surpris-

ing but unrealistic fantasy to explain the fact that some people were getting poorer in an uncertain economy. By noting that young mothers were poor mothers, advocates persuaded the public that young mothers are poor *because* they had untimely pregnancies and births. This in turn led to the conclusion that if young poor women simply did what young affluent women do, then they, too, would be affluent. It is not surprising that when affluent people dramatically change their attitudes and behavior toward marriage and childbearing but poor people do not, the well-to-do would try to explain the existence of poverty by saying the poor have failed to adapt. In recent years, both liberals and conservatives have tended to ascribe poverty to the sexual and reproductive decisions that poor women make. What gives this argument resonance is the fact that the affluent are postponing their childbearing and early motherhood is increasingly the province of the "left behind"—poor women who realistically know that postponing their first birth is unlikely to lead to a partnership in a good law firm. But the deep cultural belief that it *might* continues to attract people of every ideological persuasion. Commentators as diverse as Charles Murray and David Ellwood, one a conservative bent on undoing the welfare system and the other a liberal bent on saving it, agree on the foolishness of early pregnancy.

There is no arguing the case that teenagers who bring a child into the world put a strain on public patience, values, and funds. The public assumes that teenagers are unable to support a child financially, and in the overwhelming majority of cases this is true. Moreover, poor mothers tend to have children who will themselves grow up to be poor. Not surprisingly, teenagers and their babies have come to be perceived (to use the words of a *Time* essayist) as "the very hub of the U.S. poverty cycle," often creating up to three generations of poor people who will depend on the public purse. Congress, the media, reports by the National Academy of Sciences, and statements by private voluntary groups all associate poverty with childbearing among teenagers. But this linkage depends on an assumption that reducing pregnancy among teenagers, specifically among unmarried teenagers, can reduce poverty.

In the opinion of many well-meaning middle-class people, the trouble with poor and pregnant teenagers is that they do not do what middle-class people do: invest in an education, establish themselves in a job, marry a sensible and hardworking person, and only then begin to think about having a baby. Many poor people do these things, of course, and so do many poor teenagers. But the deck is stacked against people at the lower levels of a world in which the job distribution has been hollowed out. People who lack an education are less well off than ever before, and thus find it ever harder to maintain a marriage

it mainly to poor women. The new, bifurcated economy, in which good jobs got better and bad jobs got worse, was paralleled by a bifurcated family pattern, in which the affluent postponed their childbearing and had their babies in wedlock while the poor did not.

Consequently, just as the issue of pregnancy among teenagers was being debated in Congress and in the media, many Americans were viewing it from the vantage point of their own restructured lives. People who were affluent and well educated, who had delayed marriage in order to further their schooling, who were members of two-earner couples, and who were postponing and limiting their childbearing had little sympathy for teenage mothers (who were often conflated in the public mind with unwed mothers). The behavior of these young women seemed not only unwise and self-destructive, but unwise and self-destructive in ways that hit particularly close to home. They seemed to be having babies before they were ready, and, worse, to be doing so without a legal husband, at a time when many Americans were becoming keenly aware that it took two or more workers in a family to maintain a middle-class lifestyle. People who had scrimped and saved until they could marry and set up a household, who lived with all of the burdens of the "second shift" (the burdens incurred when wives enter the labor force but are still expected to fulfill their traditional nurturant role), and who were postponing childbearing until they could afford it were particularly unsympathetic: teenagers who had babies seemed to be heedless, irresponsible, and heading for trouble. And those in the middle, the ones whose highly paid blue- and white-collar jobs were becoming scarce and who were having difficulty passing on these middle-class jobs to their children, were no more understanding: young people who had sex and babies too soon seemed to be bringing their troubles on themselves.

In short, pregnant teenagers made a convenient lightning rod for the anxieties and tensions in Americans' lives. Economic fortunes were unstable, a postindustrial economic order was evolving, sexual and reproductive patterns were mutating. Representing such teenagers as the epitome of society's ills seemed one quick way of making sense of these enormous changes. This was particularly true as poverty was becoming ever more visible and being poor appeared to be the direct result of immoral or unwise behavior. Pregnant teenagers seemed to embody the very essence of such behavior. Indeed, the phrase "teenage pregnancy" continues to be a powerful shorthand way of referring to the problem of poverty.

The rhetoric of the 1970s, generated in good faith by advocates who wanted to ensure that young women had access to contraception, created a comfort-

making its family structure more *concentrated.* These people are postponing marriage and childbearing to an ever greater extent, having fewer and fewer children, and forming a growing number of two-career marriages. This trajectory, which we might call the yuppie pattern (after the Young Urban Professionals who adopt it), is the new middle-class norm. Women in particular are investing more time in their education, are training for careers rather than jobs, and are continuing to work even after they have children. This pattern has become so prevalent among the middle class that we often forget what a major shift in behavior it represented when it first appeared. For much of U.S. history, American women married fairly young, had their children fairly early, and retired from the work force until their children were grown. But the new yuppie pattern is available only to the affluent, people who can realistically expect that the market will reward their sacrifices. For people who have fewer resources, there is another shift in the American family: these people *rearrange* the traditional family. They either never get married or start a family at all, or they have children without being married.

* * *

. . . Traditional married couples in which only the husband worked were becoming scarcer, while two-income families and single-parent families were proliferating. In many cases changes in family structure were closely related to—in fact, an adaptation to—changing economic circumstances, and differed according to race. In the 1950s and 1960s virtually all American women married at an early age (especially in comparison to European women), had their first child soon afterward, and completed their childbearing within a few years. But this pattern became less common as fortunes declined and the middle class shrank. The lucky and prosperous were able to invest more in education, obtain a greater return on their investment, and move into the professional upper-middle class. (College-educated people began to receive more of a return on their educational investment than they had in earlier years.) And when men and women invested more in education, they tended to postpone marriage and childbearing, to form two-income families, and to have fewer children. Among people with less money and less cultural capital, this pattern seems to have been less attractive. They may have postponed or forgone marriage, or entered into a partnership that was not a legal marriage, but they did not give up bearing children: poor women continued to do what all American women had done in the postwar era—namely, have babies at an early age—but more and more of them had children out of wedlock. Affluent and successful men and women tended to forsake this older pattern, leaving

virtually all of them show that income distribution is "hollowing out," meaning that individuals are more likely to find themselves at the top or bottom of the income distribution and less likely to find themselves in the middle. And inequality among *families* is growing even faster. Poor families are not only getting poorer, but they now tend to be poorer in the United States than elsewhere. When we compare the income of the poorest 20 percent of households in the United States to that of the poorest 20 percent in other industrialized countries, it is clear that Americans are faring very badly. . . .

* * *

But growing disparities in income are not the whole story. As international comparisons reveal, such inequalities have long existed in the United States, and the increases in the 1980s were well within historical trends. In 1969 the richest one-fifth of families earned about $7.25 for each dollar the poorest fifth earned; by the late 1980s the richest fifth were earning $9.60 for each dollar the poorest earned—an increase, to be sure, but one that occurred in the context of an income distribution that was already fairly polarized.

* * *

In the 1970s there were also dramatic changes in the nature of poverty and the structure of families. Once, the poor had been elderly and the elderly had been poor: in 1959 more than a third of all elderly people had been poor. But the program instituted under Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, in particular the indexing of Social Security to inflation, altered the makeup of the poor population. The poverty rates for older people fell by half between 1959 and the mid-1970s, and have continued to decline. Today the poverty rate among the elderly is lower than the national average.

Children, in contrast, are moving in the opposite direction. Although their poverty rates likewise declined as a result of Great Society legislation, during the past fifteen years the risk that an American child will grow up in poverty has increased by about a third. Children, in comparison to adults and the elderly, are now twice as likely to be poor: 20 percent of all children are poor, accounting for fully 40 percent of the poor people in the United States. The fact that poverty among children is growing and that poverty in general is becoming more apparent all across the United States is one cause of the public's concern about pregnancy among teenagers. Looked at from a broad perspective, American families seem to have followed two trajectories. The pattern of traditional families has hollowed out, just like the income distribution.

One large group of Americans has responded to declining real wages by