



Adoption and the
problem of illegitimacy

Professor Harriet Ward

About Professor Harriet Ward CBE

Harriet Ward is Emeritus Professor of Child and Family Research at Loughborough University and an Honorary Research Fellow at the Rees Centre, University of Oxford.

In 2002 she founded Loughborough's Centre for Child and Family Research (CCFR), an independently funded research centre designed to produce methodologically sound, policy relevant research on issues concerning children's social care. She directed the Centre until she stepped down in 2014.

Harriet has over 30 years of experience both as a research director and field researcher, as an adviser to policymakers and service providers, and as a social work practitioner. She was academic adviser to the joint DH/DfE research initiative on safeguarding children and chaired the DfE working party on neglect. She has given invited expert evidence to parliamentary committees and inquiries on looked after children, child and family social work, child protection and foster care.

She represents England on the Board of EUSARF (European Scientific Association on Residential and Family Care for Children and Adolescents), and is a founder member of the international network of research on transitions to adulthood from care (INTRAC). In 2019 she co-founded the International Research Network on Infants and Child Protection Systems (<https://www.irnicp.org>), which she co-directs. She has a EUSARF lifetime achievement award and was awarded a CBE for services to children and families in 2012.

Harriet is currently researching how the adoption of children has developed in this country over the last hundred years for her forthcoming book: *A Century of Adoption in England and Wales: Present and Future Implications of Past Policy, Practice and Experience* (forthcoming) London: Coram.

About Coram

This report is published by the **Coram Institute for Children**, the dedicated research and development organisation for children.

Established as the Foundling Hospital in 1739, Coram is today a vibrant charity group of specialist organisations, supporting hundreds of thousands of children, young people and families every year. We champion children's rights and wellbeing, making lives better through legal support, advocacy, adoption and our range of therapeutic, educational and cultural programmes.

Coram's vision for children is a society where every child has the best possible chance in life, regardless of their background or circumstances.

Building on our legacy as the first and longest continuing children's charity, the new **Coram Institute for Children** is instrumental in realising this vision by acting as a catalyst for change and collaboration, seeking evidence-based solutions to the challenges facing children in the 21st century in policy, law and practice.

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Introduction to series

The Adoption of Children Act 1926 introduced for the first time in England and Wales, a legal process by which the rights and responsibilities for a child could be transferred from birth parents to adoptive parents. It gave adoptive parents the same rights and responsibilities as birth parents; it secured the child's new position within their adoptive family; and it prevented birth family members from reclaiming their children.

However, this deceptively simple description of the outcomes of the introduction of adoption legislation hides a wealth of complexity. Adoption arouses strong emotions, for it has a life-changing impact on all the parties involved. Throughout the century that has passed since the legislation was first introduced, the pros and cons of placing children for adoption have been hotly debated and Parliamentary committees, legislators and family justice and social work professionals have struggled with such issues as how to balance the rights of birth parents with those of their children when they appear to be in conflict; the need to ensure birth parents freely give consent to adoption and the grounds under which such consent can be dispensed with; the perceived need for secrecy or transparency; the desirability of post-adoption contact with birth family members; appropriate criteria for the selection of adoptive parents; and the desirability of providing post-adoption support. Those who have been personally affected by adoption have increasingly participated in the discussion. Most of these issues are still debated today; it seems unlikely that they will ever be resolved, for they raise contentious questions to which there is rarely an obvious answer, and adoption itself has changed over time and will continue to do so.

Papers in the Adoption Centenary series

This is the second in a series of papers that explores these and other similar issues raised by the practice of domestic adoption in England and Wales^[1] over the last century. Others will be released over the course of the Centenary Year and eventually be brought together in a forthcoming book.^[2]

As part of its Adoption Centenary Programme, the children's charity, Coram, has invited those touched by adoption (adopted people, adoptive parents, birth family members and others) to tell their personal stories. These constitute the Coram Adoption Centenary Archive, which aims to bring together 100 stories of adoption from across the years. All papers in this series draw extensively on these testimonials, which offer a starting point for understanding how adoption legislation, policy and practice, and the changes that have occurred over the last century are reflected in the personal experiences of those involved.

Some of the stories in the Coram Adoption Centenary Archive have been published to illustrate the Timeline of Adoption (coramstory.org.uk/adoptionstory/timeline/). The timeline sets out the key dates in the development of adoption law and policy in England and Wales, and the publication of research that had an impact on policy, from 1889, when the first (failed) Bill was introduced to Parliament to 2026, 100 years after the first Act was passed. The timeline provides a guide for those who wish to familiarise themselves with the chronology of events as they read the individual papers.

[1] Scotland and Northern Ireland had slightly different legislation, introduced at different times. Much of the debate in these and other countries has covered similar issues to those explored in this series of papers, which focusses specifically on England and Wales.

[2] Ward H (forthcoming) *A Century of Adoption in England and Wales: Present and future implications of past policy, practice and experience*, London: Coram

The first, introductory, paper[3] attempted to shed some light on the debate by focusing on three questions: Was it necessary to introduce adoption legislation a hundred years ago? Should the practice now be abandoned, or is there still a place for adoption in England and Wales today? And if so, how is adoption likely to continue in the future? Up until at least the 1980s, the difficulties she might face in supporting her child and the stigma she would encounter as a single parent were major factors underlying an unmarried mother's decision to agree to the adoption of her child. This second paper focuses on the question of illegitimacy and asks why it attracted such stigma for so long; what the consequences were for mother and child; why so many unmarried mothers agreed to relinquish their children to the care of others (or were persuaded to do so); and why, from 1968 onwards, the numbers who were adopted for socio-economic reasons started to fall dramatically.

Adoption and the problem of illegitimacy

Summary

Until the late 20th century, illegitimate children and their mothers were vilified and ostracised, while their fathers largely escaped censure. A woman who gave birth to an illegitimate child had challenged the authority of the Church and questioned the sanctity of holy matrimony – and marriage was regarded as the bedrock of a stable society. Marriage was also the means by which the boundaries of a family, with its reciprocal rights and responsibilities, were defined. An illegitimate child was born outside these boundaries, and therefore *filius nullius* – nobody's child. In law, illegitimate children had no relations and no right to a surname, or to an inheritance. Under the 1834 Poor Law, the mother was the only person legally responsible for the care and maintenance of an illegitimate child.

Unmarried mothers and their children therefore represented a significant challenge to the stability of the society in which they lived and were punished accordingly. In the 17th and 18th centuries, unmarried mothers could be whipped and publicly humiliated. In the 20th century, treatment was less harsh, but they were still regarded as “fallen women” who had lost their claim to respectability. The majority (70%) were in stable cohabiting relationships, or married relatively soon after the birth; they could keep their and the child's history secret. The greatest challenges were faced by sole mothers who had no partner and whose families were unsupportive. Many were disowned by their relations or only offered help on condition that they gave up caring for the baby. It was difficult for a woman who had “lost her character” to find work, and in any case, few women could earn enough to support a child. Moreover, accommodation and some residential occupations were barred to single women with children. Until the Poor Law was abolished in the 1940s, statutory support was punitive, minimal and often required the mother to be separated from her child.

Illegitimate children faced even greater challenges. Until the mid-19th century, many were abandoned, and infanticide was relatively common. By the 1920s, they were still twice as likely to die in infancy as those who were legitimate. Poor antenatal care, premature birth and low birth weight all contributed to continuing differences in infant mortality rates. In the 1960s, illegitimate children were still more likely to be growing up in impoverished and unstable homes and showed signs of compromised development. Many grew up believing that their mother was their aunt or sister, with long-term adverse consequences if the secret was revealed. However, their identity could not be completely concealed: their birth certificates identified their status, and many experienced overt discrimination when this became known.

Illegitimate children were also at increased risk of growing up apart from their birth families. Some were placed in foster homes or children's homes so that their mothers could work to earn enough for their support. Thousands of others, whose parents felt unable to support them, were placed permanently in the care of relatives, friends or strangers, in informal adoption arrangements. These offered no legal protection for any of the parties involved, and left children at considerable risk of exploitation and abuse.

The position of illegitimate children began to improve in the 20th century. They could become legitimate if their parents subsequently married or if they were formally adopted under the Adoption Act 1926 – a reason why, in the 1970s, over 50 per cent of adoptions were to birth mothers and stepfathers. A growing international children's rights movement also made it increasingly difficult to sustain the legal position of *filius nullius*. However, although all formal discrimination was abolished in 1987, personal feelings of shame and stigma have been harder to eradicate.

Adoption by strangers appears to have provided better life chances than the other pathways followed by illegitimate children whose mothers were unable to support them. Nevertheless, many of these adopted people have grown up without a clear sense of belonging, and about one in two birth mothers have experienced long-term unresolved grief and distress. However, the numbers of babies adopted for these socio-economic reasons began to diminish from about 1970. Access to contraception and legal abortion meant that there were fewer unwanted infants. Welfare benefits and women's position in the labour force improved, and it became easier for single mothers to support their children. Divorce and separation became more common and cohabitation became more acceptable, with the result that lone mothers faced less stigmatisation.

Nowadays, the number of adoptions in England and Wales is far smaller, and only about two per cent are for socio-economic reasons; the vast majority are for abused and neglected children in care who cannot safely return home within a reasonable timeframe.

Introduction

For at least 50 years – between 1926, when the first Adoption of Children Act was introduced, and the mid-1970s – a high proportion of the children who were placed for adoption in England and Wales were babies born to unmarried mothers. These were by no means all the children who were adopted during the period, as the group is much more heterogeneous than often supposed. Kornitzer's (1968) study of 664 adoptions arranged by at least six agencies over more than 30 years found that 18 per cent were legitimate children whose parents were unable to look after them. Of the 546 (82%) who were illegitimate, 89 (17%) were the children of married women who had had an extra-marital affair. Most of these children had been “given up” by their mothers in order to save the marriage. However, 83 per cent (453) of the illegitimate children, and 68 per cent of the sample as a whole, were infants relinquished by single women. Many of the mothers were very young: although 10 per cent were aged over 30, between 25–40 per cent (depending on the agency) were aged under 21 (and therefore still children in the eyes of the law) at the time of the birth.

For centuries in many Western societies, women who gave birth to children outside marriage were vilified and ostracised, along with their children, while most fathers escaped opprobrium. Throughout the 20th century (and earlier), thousands of women lived with their partners in stable relationships “without benefit of clergy” and brought up families without attracting attention (and censure) unless their partner left them or died.

[3]Ward H (2026) Is Adoption Legislation Necessary? An introduction to a century of debate, London: Coram

Some had never married and others were in a relationship where one partner (or both) was unable to get a divorce (Thane and Evans, 2012). As the power of the Church diminished, marriage also became less of an imperative and cohabitation became more common. Nevertheless, although cohabitation became increasingly acceptable, until the late 20th century, an illegitimate birth was a catastrophe for many single women and their families that brought painful personal, social and economic consequences. From a 21st century perspective, it is difficult to comprehend why the birth of a child outside marriage was met with such opprobrium; an exploration of the experiences of some of those involved makes it easier to understand why so many mothers agreed to part with their children.

There are numerous autobiographical accounts of unmarried parenthood and illegitimacy in the 20th century; in addition to the testaments submitted to the Coram Adoption Centenary Archive, studies such as Howe et al (1992) and Robinson (2015) draw extensively on personal accounts. Many people with lived experience of illegitimacy in the 20th century also gave evidence to the Joint Committee on Human Rights Enquiry into Forced Adoption in 2022. Many unmarried mothers were faced with attitudes passed down from their parents and grandparents that had persisted for centuries. Autobiographical evidence of unmarried motherhood in the 19th century shows how their experiences were mirrored by those of mothers living 100 years later. Letters and case papers of children who were placed in the care of the children's voluntary societies in the 19th century so that their mothers could take up employment provide valuable insights into their situation.

Why did illegitimacy attract stigma?

Giving birth to an illegitimate child was regarded as an offence against Christian morality and the institution of marriage. The original words of the marriage service, still occasionally in use in some churches, give some indication as to the reasons:

Holy Matrimony is an honourable estate, instituted by God in the time of man's innocence... First it was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of His holy name. Secondly it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication, that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body... (The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony, Book of Common Prayer, 1549)

The parents of an illegitimate child therefore questioned the authority of the Church, as they provided irrefutable evidence that they had rejected the means by which they might remain 'undefiled members of Christ's body'. They were "living in sin" and could not be relied upon to bring up their children ("begotten in sin") in the 'fear and nurture of the Lord'. Until at least the middle of the 19th century, the established Church was a powerful means of social control (Thompson, 1981). To question or ignore its teachings was to threaten the good order of what was still a very hierarchical society. The Church could retaliate, as it did in the case of Oliver who was admitted to the Foundling Hospital in 1758, when he was a few months old:

Oliver was the second child of Richard Luke and Elizabeth Dixey who had never married. In 1754, the Archdeacon of Huntingdon had excommunicated both of Oliver's parents for the "crime" of producing an illegitimate child, Oliver's elder brother. An excommunicated person could not buy or sell any articles, be employed, give evidence in court, give bail or make a will, receive a legacy, hold land in a lease – the most common form of tenancy – and was excluded from all parish offices. Excommunication therefore made it almost impossible to trade or farm normally or to fulfil family or social responsibilities; it also brought with it exclusion from the life and sacraments of the Church and therefore, presumably, damnation (Jacob, 2002).

By the time Oliver was born, his elder brother whose birth had caused such a furore had died, but his parents had still not married, and it is likely that they were ostracised by their community and unable to find work. It seems probable that Oliver was sent to the Foundling Hospital to avoid destitution and semi-starvation as well as further condemnation. (Foundling Hospital archive; for further details see Clark, 2013)

By the 20th century, parents of illegitimate children were no longer excommunicated, but some of the autobiographical evidence demonstrates how the guilt at having committed a mortal sin could permeate their subsequent lives. One of the adopted people who gave written evidence to the Joint Committee on Human Rights Enquiry into Forced Adoption (2022) provided an example:

My mother was a trainee SRN [state-registered] nurse in England when she fell pregnant with me. She could not go back to Ireland as her parents would have disowned her. She told her brother, who was a priest, who offered to help financially as long as I was adopted.

When I initially contacted my mother in 1990 she denied being my mother. Two weeks later she rang back to say she was...For 27 years I visited my mother in Ireland, but it quickly became obvious she was petrified her relatives would find out who I was. This caused her anxiety every time I visited. She was petrified that if her world found out, she could not be buried in consecrated ground. To which she asked me not to come to her funeral and she made sure she was buried quickly.

She refused to consider marriage because she thought she had committed a mortal sin. (Anonymous, ACU0020, adopted 1951. Evidence to Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2022)

The birth of an illegitimate child was not only condemned because it weakened the control of the Church.

The challenge it posed to the sanctity of matrimony also questioned the basis on which interpersonal obligations were determined, as marriage defined the boundaries of a family. Within such a family, members had not only personal but also financial responsibilities towards one another. Before the introduction of the welfare state in the 1940s, under the Poor Laws parents and grandparents were financially responsible for dependent children, as were adult children for impoverished parents and grandparents who might otherwise become dependent on the state. They could be prosecuted, and indeed imprisoned, if they failed to fulfil these responsibilities.

If a father had equal responsibilities for his illegitimate children as for those born to his wife, his mistress would be given equal status, thereby encouraging immorality and threatening the stability of the marriage – and marriage was seen as the bedrock of a stable society. The solution was to declare children born outside marriage as existing beyond the clear boundaries of the family – and therefore illegal; in other words, they were illegitimate. According to Blackstone, who wrote his authoritative Commentaries on the Laws of England in 1765, the function of marriage was to create legal rights: illegitimate children therefore had none. In order to preserve the integrity of the family, they had no right to inherit unless they had been specifically named in a will. As late as 1956, the Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce declared that:

Legitimacy is the status held by a lawful child of the family. Any departure from that conception can only be made by ignoring the essential moral principle that a man cannot, during the subsistence of his marriage, beget lawful children by another woman. It is unthinkable that the State should lend its sanction to such a step, for it could not fail to result in a blurring of moral values in the public mind. A powerful deterrent to illicit relationships would be removed, with disastrous results for the status of marriage as at present understood. (Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce, 1956, Majority Report, para 1180)

In law, an illegitimate child was *filius nullius*, nobody's child. Illegitimate children had no legal relations. They could not claim the surname of either parent, although they adopted that of the mother by custom (National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child (NCUMC), c.1924). In the mid-19th century, the courts could and did argue that, if a child was illegitimate 'in point of law, neither the father, nor the mother has any particular right to its custody' (Re Margaret White, 1848). In 1936, the law still defined a child's relatives as: 'grandparent, brother, sister, uncle or aunt, whether by consanguinity or affinity, or in consequence of adoption, and, in the case of an illegitimate child, a person who would be so related if the child were legitimate (my italics) (Public Health Act 1936, s.220). Their lack of legal relations meant that, until the mid-19th century, illegitimate children were denied access to many skilled trades, as membership of the Trade Guilds and Livery Companies was primarily passed down within a family (Pinchbeck and Hewitt, 1973). Living outside the protection of their families, they were also particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Following the implementation of the Poor Law Amendment Act 1834, the only people who were legally responsible for illegitimate children were their mothers; they had sole responsibility for both financial support and care, and could be prosecuted if they neglected or abandoned their children. Fathers might be required to contribute financially if an affiliation order was made, but these were difficult to obtain and enforce (see below). If the mother died, the Guardians of the Poor, and not the father, became responsible for the child's care (NCUMC, c1924). Some fathers, including the father of one of the adopted people whose story was submitted to the Coram Adoption Centenary Archive, exploited this position:

Eva's parents had lived together for at least seven years. They had four children, but never married, although Eva's mother took her husband's surname. When her mother died in 1903, Eva's father registered her death under her maiden name and gave her occupation as "housekeeper", thus masking their relationship. Shortly afterwards he placed Eva and two of her sisters under the care of the Poor Law Guardians, in the local industrial school. Had they been legitimate, it is likely that, as an able-bodied man, he would have been refused support, or only been offered "indoor relief", which meant he would have had to enter the workhouse with them. Eva stayed in the industrial school for five years until she was "adopted" into a family.[4] (Lynne's family story, 1931, Coram Adoption Centenary Archive; Knight, 2011)

Giving birth to an illegitimate child was not only a challenge to the authority of the Church and a threat to the institution of marriage; it was also likely to cause expense to ratepayers and was therefore regarded as an offence to society. As a result, there were significant consequences for those who broke the taboo, and many of these endured until the middle of the 20th century and beyond.

[4] It is probable that, before placing her with her adoptive parents, the Guardians of the Poor assumed parental rights and responsibilities for Eva under the Poor Law Amendment Act 1889, on the grounds that she had been orphaned. These "poor law adoptions" ceased when the child reached 21, and did not give adoptive parents enduring rights and responsibilities. A legal framework for adoption, entailing complete transfer of parental rights and responsibilities, was not introduced in England and Wales until 1927, when the Adoption of Children Act 1926 was finally implemented.

Consequences of births outside marriage

Consequences for mothers

In the 17th and 18th centuries in England and Wales, unmarried mothers were whipped, publicly humiliated and made to wear distinctive clothing. As we have seen, they could also be excommunicated. A "lewd woman" could be sent to the house of correction for a year; repeat offenders until they could provide sureties for good behaviour[5] – which, at least in theory, could mean incarceration for life. There is similar, much more recent, legislation: under the Mental Deficiency Act 1913, a woman who was in receipt of poor relief at the time she gave birth to an illegitimate child could be declared a "moral imbecile" and incarcerated indefinitely. This legislation was not repealed until 1959.

Shame and stigma

Most unmarried mothers in the late 19th and 20th centuries were not incarcerated or subject to public humiliation. Nevertheless, for much of the period, a "fallen woman" was regarded as "ruined". She was no longer respectable, and many people regarded her as little better than a prostitute. The intense stigmatisation of unmarried mothers and their children acted as a powerful means of sanctioning behaviour patterns that were thought to undermine the stability of society; although there was greater acceptance towards the end of the period, there were continuing concerns that any attempt to improve their situation would only serve to encourage immoral behaviour (see, for instance, Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce, 1956).

Once she "lost her character", an unmarried mother was also likely to lose her job, together with any hope of being given a reference that would enable her to get another one.

[5] 1609 Act for Execution of Laws and Statutes against Rogues, Vagabonds and Sturdy Beggars and other Lewde and Idle Persons.

[6] Officially the Church of England Incorporated Society for Providing Homes for Waifs and Strays

The Waifs and Strays Society[6] (now the Children's Society) archive includes letters written at the end of the 19th century from several mothers who asked the Society not to inform their employers of their child's existence (Ward, 1990). One of them was from Malcolm's mother:

Malcolm was admitted to the care of the Waifs and Strays in 1894 so that his mother could earn enough money to support him. When he was five years old she discharged him from the Society's care. The summer before he returned to her care she carefully taught him to address her in future as Miss W. She was an assistant schoolmistress, and would have lost her job if the true relationship had been discovered. (Children's Society archive, 1894)

At the beginning of the 20th century, unmarried schoolteachers, nurses, typists and domestic servants would still expect to be sacked if their employers found out that they had had an illegitimate child (West, 1913). They might well also be asked to leave their accommodation (Thane and Evans, 2012). By the 1950s attitudes had begun to soften. In 1957, the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child (NCUMC) announced that the unmarried mother:

...is no longer ruined as a matter of course, but can usually go back fairly easily after her confinement, to whatever employment she had before. (NCUMC Annual Report, 1957–8, p.13)

However, this assertion proved premature, and the Council was criticised for 'making light of sin' (Thane and Evans, 2012). Until at least the 1970s, opinion was divided and attempts to improve the situation of unmarried mothers were constantly criticised for encouraging immorality.

While the obstacles put in the way of earning a living were an obvious problem, autobiographical accounts focus more on the ostracism, encountered both by mother and child, and the ways in which attempts to avoid opprobrium by keeping their situation secret distorted and sometimes fractured family relationships.

Many unmarried mothers were rejected by their relations. This was common in the 19th century, and there are cases in the Children's Society archive revealing how parents had cut their daughters off when they became pregnant, bewailing the 'wrong done us all' even if they thought their daughter was 'more sinned against than sinning'[7].

Parents of women who became pregnant in the 1950s and 60s would have had their opinions shaped by their own parents and grandparents, as attitudes to illegitimacy passed down the generations. Hostility and rejection continued to persist until at least the 1980s. Although there are many positive accounts of families that welcomed the baby, supporting their daughters through the pregnancy and refusing to be cowed by public opinion, there are also numerous accounts of women whose parents rejected them

'[My mum] turned round with this real nasty look and yelled at me, "Get out of here, you slut. I knew this would happen, get away, I can't stand the sight of you."
(Inglis, 1984, p.32)

Time and again the parents' overriding concern was the distress their daughter's pregnancy was going to cause them, as parents, and the horror they felt at the shame and ignominy that were about to fall on their shoulders.
(Howe et al, 1992, p.48)

Faced with the possibility of a hostile response, it is perhaps unsurprising that many women decided not to tell their parents of their pregnancy.

Greenland's (1956) analysis of data collected from 3,444 women who had approached the NCUMC in 1953 found that 35 per cent were unwilling to tell their parents. However, he also found that a high number of those who did tell (85%) discovered that their parents were supportive. Even so, nine per cent of parents refused to have the child living in their home, and a further four per cent insisted that their daughters relinquish the baby for adoption.

Parents who rejected their daughter and grandchild cut them off from traditional sources of social support and reinforced their isolation. Many of the mothers were under 21,[8] and therefore officially still children when they became pregnant, and maternal grandparents, who could provide or withhold financial and emotional support, held much of the power in decision-making. Fathers, including those who wanted to play an active role in their baby's life, were frequently excluded from the family and from decision-making, creating enduring resentment and cutting off the mother from another potential source of support. Greenland found that some grandparents had refused to give their consent to their (under age) daughter marrying the father. Many fathers felt that they had been denied their traditional roles of breadwinner and protector (Clapton, 2003).

The shame that many grandparents felt at the thought of having an illegitimate child in the family meant that many young women were sent to a mother and baby home or to stay with distant relatives so that no one would know; they were often only allowed to return home after the birth if they did so without the baby. The following accounts are from women whose parents had been unable to face the shame of having an illegitimate child in the family, only about 50 years ago:

I had thought that I would be able to live with my dad and look after him (he was ill) and raise my child.

He refused for me to live with him. I couldn't believe it...I was specifically told that I could not have the help that I was looking for and that I was wrong to even think that getting such help would be possible...Some of my father's family disowned me.
(Anonymous, AC0001BM, infant placed for adoption 1971. Written evidence to Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2022)

My mother said that she would not be able to face her friends and neighbours again so I would have to go away to a Mother and Baby Home and not return until after my baby was born and had been adopted. She would not have let me home with my baby so the decisions about mine and my baby's future were determined by hers and society's view on babies born out of wedlock...After my baby was adopted my parents never mentioned the matter again, it was as though he never existed.
(Anonymous, AC0035BM, infant placed for adoption 1972. Written evidence to Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2022)

We now know that the popular assumption that an unmarried mother could hand over the baby to a family member or stranger and continue with her life as though nothing had happened was ill-founded. We know from testaments given in the 21st century that for many mothers the adverse consequences of producing an illegitimate child endured throughout their lives. Those who kept the baby often struggled with isolation and poverty; however, almost all unmarried mothers who relinquished their babies experienced an enduring sense of loss and grief, exacerbated by the perceived need for secrecy. The evidence from different studies is not uniform, but most indicate that, for about 50 per cent of mothers, the knowledge that they gave up a baby defined the rest of their lives, and they continually struggled with issues such as poor mental health, addiction and broken relationships (Pannor et al, 1978; Winkler and Van Keppel, 1984; Field, 1990).

Consequences for children

While the consequences for women of becoming an unmarried mother were painful and enduring, those for their children were even harsher.

[7] See, for instance, correspondence concerning Frank C, admitted to the Waifs and Strays Society in 1893.

[8] The age of majority was 21 until 1970.

Infant mortality

From at least the 18th century, it was known that a disproportionately high number of illegitimate children died in infancy. Jonas Hanway (1767) calculated that in 1763–4, in one of the London parishes, 237 out of 275 (86%) illegitimate infants placed with parish nurses died before their first birthdays. The infant mortality rate for London at the time has been calculated as 32 per cent (Woods, 2006) so illegitimate children were more than 2.5 times as likely to die in infancy as their peers.

	1918	1950	1955
Legitimate	91	29	23
Illegitimate	196	39	29

By the 20th century, routine data on infant mortality were being collected, and concerns were increasingly raised about disparities between legitimate and illegitimate infant deaths. As Table 2.1 shows, at the end of World War I, more than twice as many illegitimate infants died in infancy as those who were legitimate; by 1950 both the mortality rate and the differential had reduced, but there were still about 35 per cent more deaths of illegitimate infants; and by 1955 there were still 26 per cent more.

Infanticide and abandonment

Why did so many illegitimate children die? At least until the middle of the 19th century, infanticide and abandonment were relatively common, both in the UK and throughout much of Europe. Effective contraception was unavailable, and abortion was not only illegal but also extremely dangerous, becoming the leading cause of maternal death in the 20th century (Drife, 2010). As a result, many parents were faced with the prospect of bringing up an unwanted child who they could not afford. Extreme poverty drove some parents to abandon their legitimate infants or allow them to die; the unmarried mother, faced with humiliation, isolation and censure as well as poverty, had additional incentives. Foundling Hospitals were established in Florence, Rome, Paris, London and many other European cities in order to offer a safe place for parents to leave unwanted infants without abandoning them to almost certain death in the streets.

The Royal Charter that established the London Foundling Hospital (now Coram) in 1739 stated that His Majesty (George II) had been pleased to create a body that would oversee the establishment of a Hospital for the Maintenance and Education of exposed and deserted young children ‘in compassion to the Numbers of poor Infants, who are liable to be exposed to perish in the Streets or be murdered by their indigent and inhuman Parents’.

In the mid-19th century, there were general concerns about a perceived “epidemic” in infanticide, with one of the London coroners claiming that in his jurisdiction there were 300 such cases each year, although many were wrongly recorded as deaths by overlaying^[9] or stillbirths (Ryan, 1862).

The feeble wail of murdered childhood in its agony assails our ears at every turn and is borne on every breeze. The sight is horrified as, day after day, the melancholy catalogue of murders meets the view, and we try to turn away the gaze in the hope of some momentary relief. But turn where we may, still are we met by the evidences of a wide spread crime. In the quiet of the bedroom we raise the boxlid, and the skeletons are there. In the calm evening walk we see in the distance the suspicious-looking bundle, and the mangled infant is within. By the canal side, or in the water, we find the dead child. In the solitude of the wood we are horrified by the ghastly sight...
(Ryan, 1862, p.46)

The above was not written by a tabloid journalist seeking sensation, but in a serious academic book by an eminent doctor who lectured to the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science on the subject. Melodramatic accounts exacerbated (and were exacerbated by) a moral panic about the prevalence of infanticide, including the practice of enrolling children in burial clubs ‘in order that their deaths by more culpable means might bring profit to their unnatural parents’ (Chadwick, 1843).

We do not have sufficient objective evidence to know how many infants were in fact abandoned or quietly disposed of in the 19th century, but infanticide by this and other means does appear to have been relatively common. Concerns about infanticide persisted into the early years of the 20th century, when infant deaths by overlaying or “accidental suffocation” were among the major preoccupations of the NSPCC (see Waugh, 1905-1908). There was no legal requirement to register the death of a stillborn baby until 1927, and so many suspicious infant deaths – as well as foetuses that had been illegally aborted – were thought to have been masked as stillbirths (Drife, 2010). Perennial concerns about disproportionately high mortality rates among illegitimate infants arose partly from fears of hidden numbers of infanticides.

Concealed pregnancies, premature births and poor maternity care

In 1921 Edith Mary Roberts, an unmarried 21-year-old factory hand who lived with her family near Leicester, was accused of murdering her infant daughter. Although her stepmother had been worried about Edith’s health, no one appears to have thought that she could have been concealing a pregnancy. She also managed to conceal the birth, until the body of a newborn baby was discovered hidden in her bedroom ‘stuffed in a wooden chest beneath an old flock mattress’. The post mortem concluded that the death was caused by strangulation by a camisole that was tied tightly round the baby’s mouth. Despite Edith’s plea ‘I am not guilty. I did not kill my child’ she was convicted of murder.
(See Grey (2010) for further details)

Edith was initially sentenced to capital punishment and the subsequent furore led to the introduction of the Infanticide Act 1922. The case can be understood as a straightforward account of infanticide, but can also be seen as an illustration of how the fear of becoming an unmarried mother led to actions that placed both the baby’s and the mother’s lives at extreme risk. Concealing the pregnancy (or being unable to accept and admit to it), giving birth in secret and hiding the baby’s existence, all made it less likely that Edith’s baby would survive; this is the type of action that also contributed to the disparities in infant mortality figures.

Inadequate maternal care, often related to concealment or denial of the pregnancy, continued to contribute to disparities in infant mortality rates in the 1950s. The Perinatal Mortality Survey collected and analysed data about all infants born in England, Scotland and Wales in one week in 1958 and found:

[9]Adoption of Children (County Court Rules) 1949 and High Court Rules (1950)

...clear evidence that a significant proportion of expectant mothers of illegitimate babies did not seek antenatal care at all and when they did so, it was comparatively late during their pregnancy. (Crellin et al, 1971, p.42)

Only 40 per cent of the mothers of illegitimate children had attended antenatal care by the 24th week of pregnancy, half as many as the mothers of legitimate children. The survey also found that unmarried mothers were less likely to have made concrete and timely plans for their confinement, with the result that they had a significantly higher rate of emergency hospital admissions, again putting both their own and the baby's lives at risk. Their babies were also twice as likely to be born prematurely and to be of significantly low birthweight. All of these factors are associated with infants dying before they reach their first birthday and survivors experiencing significant developmental disadvantages. The authors concluded:

There are still social sanctions against this type of behaviour [pregnancy outside marriage]. Not infrequently these facts create tensions and pressures, resulting in a stress situation for the mother-to-be which may well be detrimental to optimal pregnancy conditions in general or which may even be specifically linked to restricted foetal growth. Here we are thinking not only about emotional stress and psychosomatic links, equally important is what the woman does as a result of finding herself in this situation. Overt sanctions may, for example, cause a young girl to leave home; being unsupported, she may have difficulty in finding work or accommodation; being short of money, she may go short of food so that her diet becomes inadequate; prenatal care may also be insufficient, and so on. (Crellin et al, 1971, p.49)

'Social sanctions against this type of behaviour' were also evident in the difficulties unmarried mothers encountered in accessing adequate maternity care. Doreen Bates, who gave birth to illegitimate twins in 1941, found that:

St Mary's Hospital, Paddington "weren't admitting unmarried women" apparently because they were limited in numbers and so discriminated. (Quoted in Thane and Evans, 2012, p.72)

Twenty years later, one of the birth mothers who contributed to Goodacre's study of adoption in the 1960s recounted very similar difficulties in accessing care:

My mother made me go back to the doctor. He told me that our hospital didn't take unmarried mothers for confinement, and that I'd have to be booked in at the next nearest, fourteen miles away. I was too ashamed to question this...Going over for fortnightly checks to the hospital where I'd been booked meant a journey of an hour and a half each way, and a change of bus and a wait. (Quoted in Goodacre, 1966, p.151)

And Henriques and colleagues (1986) found that in 1970, not only were unmarried mothers still less likely to get adequate antenatal care, but they also were given significantly less pain relief during labour.

Compromised development

Illegitimate children not only encountered greater risks in the perinatal period, they continued to be subjected to sub-optimal experiences throughout their childhoods. The cohort of infants born in 1958 whose experiences at birth contributed to the Perinatal Mortality Survey (subsequently the National Child Development Study (NCDS)), were followed into adulthood (Sehmi et al, 2020). When the children were aged seven, the developmental progress of those who were illegitimate was compared with that of the legitimate children born in the same week. Those who were illegitimate and had remained with their mothers in both single and two-parent families were more likely to be growing up in an impoverished social environment than the population as a whole; they had more unsettled lives, with more frequent changes of accommodation and less stable family relationships; and they were more likely to be living in overcrowded accommodation or without basic amenities.

While their physical development matched that of their peers, they showed significantly slower academic progress, and a much higher incidence of maladaptive behaviour; they were also five times more likely to have spent time in local authority care (Crellin et al, 1971). The authors concluded that:

...illegitimately born children still continue in a very real and literal sense to suffer from the "sins" of their fathers (and mothers) – at least in all aspects that we were able to examine in our study. (Crellin et al, p.112)

In their view, longstanding attitudes to unmarried motherhood continued to have a negative impact on policy concerning illegitimate children, even in the late 1960s:

It is also still objected by many that to make adequate provision to improve the quality of life for unmarried mothers and their children, is not only to accept but to condone and possibly even to encourage such behaviour. (Crellin et al, p.31)

Stigmatisation, shame and rejection

While illegitimacy had a negative impact on children's cognitive and social development, the stigmatisation and discrimination to which many were subject also had a significant impact on their sense of identity and self-esteem. From 1801, one of the explicit objectives of the Foundling Hospital was 'the restitution to society and their friends of young persons [i.e. unmarried mothers] of previously good character' (see Pugh, 2007). Unmarried mothers could escape the stigma of giving birth to an illegitimate child by leaving their communities for the duration of the pregnancy and placing the baby in the care of others before they returned. No one would ever need to know. We now know that this was far too simplistic a view (see above). Nevertheless, it was possible for a mother to avoid the stigma of having given birth to an illegitimate child by having the baby adopted or by marrying and ceasing to be a single parent. Their children had fewer opportunities to escape.

Those whose situation was revealed continued to be shamed, and to be made to feel guilty for their parents' actions. At the beginning of the 19th century, children in the Foundling Hospital (now Coram) had to sing the following hymn at a service 'to return public thanks for their having been preserved and educated, before the sermon both morning and evening':

Dark on our sinful dreaded birth,
The day of shame and sorrow rose,
No pleasing hope, no joy on earth,
Could soothe a Mother's frantic woes.

To dearest ties of kindred dead,
Oh God we know no parent's care,
Til to thy throne of mercy led,
We found a Father's pity there...
(Foundling Hospital Archive)

One hundred and thirty years later, they were no longer publicly shamed in this way; but by now, stigmatisation was reinforced by fears of hereditary immorality and theories that "blood will out". Infants who were placed in the Foundling Hospital in the 1920s and 30s were constantly reminded that they were illegitimate, and therefore of lesser value than their peers.

I can never remember anyone saying to me 'You were born out of wedlock'. But it was made very, very clear that our mothers had done something wrong and that we were also to blame. We were guilty and we felt guilty, and the interesting thing is that guilt follows you through life – it doesn't disappear. (John, admitted to Foundling Hospital 1929)

And my anger at being illegitimate grew over time and I did have a very, very angry time before I left Berkhamsted and I became quite aggressive...the word "illegitimate" is possibly the most searing word in the English language...It argues that you shouldn't be here, you're illegal.
(Ruth, admitted to Foundling Hospital 1937)

Adoption, as we shall see, proved to be a means of escaping the stigma; however, research studies into its practice and outcomes undertaken in the 1960s provide evidence of the extent to which the fear of illegitimacy persisted. Goodacre's (1966) study of 'current adoption practices and the assumptions on which they are based' found that 'certain of the adoption societies reviewed will only help mothers with their first illegitimate child, and others will not accept third or subsequent illegitimate children' (p.131). Not only was it thought that relieving unmarried mothers of their responsibilities would encourage immorality, but their children were not considered suitable for adoption for fear that they might have inherited their parents' behaviour. Some of the adoptive parents shared similar concerns:

Whilst stoutly defending their child against allegations which, they said, only concerned the natural parents, numerous adopters were, nevertheless worried about the effects of illegitimacy on their child. Was there a connection between illegitimacy and a tendency towards promiscuity? Could it be hereditary, or was there a predisposition towards it? Even where adopters dismissed this idea, some were afraid that the disclosure of illegitimacy might precipitate their child into unmarried parenthood.
(Goodacre, 1966, p.73)

Goodacre also found that some adoptive parents were worried about telling the child they had been adopted because not only would they inevitably have to explain the "facts of life" – a difficult conversation at a time when there was virtually no sex education – but also reveal their birth parents' immoral behaviour.

Adults who were adopted in the mid-20th century often claim that the secrets surrounding their birth, and the lies they were told, are harder to come to terms with than the fact of adoption itself:

I wish so much that I'd known. The hurt is the secrets and lies, not the adoption. Everyone who could tell me anything useful was dead. My whole life was a lie. Everyone in the family knew. I was an only child but even cousins younger than me all knew. I have cut myself off from them now...At first I'm sure they were trying to protect me. Children can be cruel. But later I should have been told. They all knew MY truth except me...The secrecy and lies have devastated me. I feel like I was a dirty little secret.
(Anonymous, AC0039 adopted 1951, aged 65 when adoption revealed; written evidence to Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2022)

The experiences of illegitimate children brought up within their families but with their identities concealed reveal similar levels of hurt and confusion. Harold, for instance, whose mother had told him not to acknowledge their relationship in public, still talked about his sense of rejection and loss 60 years later.

Separation

Illegitimate children therefore experienced numerous, interconnected disadvantages. They were more likely to die before their first birthdays, be born prematurely, have low birth weight and potentially compromised development. Ostracism and stigmatisation gave them an enduring sense of shame and shattered their self-esteem, while attempts to shield them through hiding their identity often resulted in confusion and a continuing sense of rejection and loss. However, perhaps their greatest disadvantage, and certainly the most contentious issue, was that illegitimate children were more likely than their peers to grow up apart from their birth families.

Before the introduction of sufficient statutory financial support from which single parent families could benefit, separation was particularly likely in "unofficial" families where a birth parent died or deserted, or in isolated families where a solitary mother tried to bring up her child alone, without support from a partner or her own extended family. The pressures that led to separation were well known, at least by the 20th century, and the National Council for the Unmarried Mother and her Child was formed in 1918 with the specific aim of lobbying for measures that would make it easier for the mother and child to stay together (NCUMC, c.1918).

Socio-economic reasons for separation

Until the mid to late-20th century, women were not expected to be financially responsible for children, nor were they encouraged to take on employment that might allow them to stand in the way of men who were regarded as the natural breadwinners. Some women, such as schoolteachers, were required to resign from their posts if they married. Their weak and insecure position in the labour market meant that women's wages were pitifully low; very few could earn enough to support a child.

An unmarried mother could obtain an affiliation order, but only if she applied within 12 months of the birth and provided corroborative evidence of paternity (almost impossible to do if the father denied that they had had a relationship). Affiliation orders were difficult to enforce, and even when fathers were required to pay, the maximum amount was shamefully low. Until 1924 it was only 10 shillings (50p) a week (NCUMC, c.1924), equivalent to £20.53 today (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter), enough perhaps to feed and clothe a child, but not if the mother had to pay for child care so that she could work to support herself. Fathers could also claim that they could not afford to pay so much; at least 80 per cent of affiliation orders were for lesser amounts. Campaigns to increase the amount the father paid, though sometimes successful, were met with concerns that to do so would 'encourage immorality on the part of unscrupulous young women'.

The process of applying was humiliating for the mother and likely to damage any relationship she had with the father. (Horgan, 1976). In the 1970s, only 13 per cent of mothers applied (Eekelaar, 1971)

Even if she was able to find an employer who was prepared to offer a job to a single mother, and to pay sufficiently, it was difficult to find employment that was compatible with caring for a child. Until the early 20th century, many occupations available to women required them to live on the premises – not only domestic servants, but also apprentice dressmakers and some shop assistants were expected to live in, and very few employers would allow a child to accompany their mother.

As a result, single mothers who had no family to support them were often compelled to place their children in the care of private foster carers or one of the children's voluntary societies, such as Dr Barnardo's, the Waifs and Strays (Children's Society) or Dr Stephenson's Home (Action for Children) so that they could earn enough to support them. Private foster carers were difficult to find, and although sometimes the arrangement worked well, it was often very unstable (Wimperis, 1960). Until the middle of the 20th century, the voluntary societies did not usually offer temporary care, but required parents who applied for admission to sign an agreement committing the child to their care until adolescence, and allowing them to place them anywhere in the UK. Dr Barnardo's and Dr Stephenson's Home also required parents to agree to their child possibly being sent to the colonies as a juvenile emigrant. Parents could correspond with children placed in the voluntary societies and visit them (although Dr Barnardo's introduced various restrictions), but maintaining contact or developing a genuine relationship was problematic: over 70 per cent of children admitted to the Waifs and Strays Society in the 1890s, for instance, were placed more than 10 miles away from their parent's home, making it almost impossible for those who had no transport of their own to get there and back on their days off (Ward, 1990).

Moreover, the perennial argument against encouraging immorality was a major consideration for charities that claimed to take in the “better class of child” and relied on financial support from the general public. Some, such as Dr Muller’s Home in Bristol, refused to accept illegitimate children at all; others, such as the Foundling Hospital, would only accept the mother’s first illegitimate child; and others, such as the Waifs and Strays, charged their mothers more than other parents. Many mothers, faced with what must have felt like a lifetime of hardship for a child they barely knew, gave up the struggle to keep up the payments and dropped out of their children’s lives. Concerns about single parents who placed their children in care and then abandoned them, persisted at least until the 1970s (see Rowe and Lambert, 1973).

The alternative to private arrangements or care from the voluntary societies was the Poor Law. Single mothers who could not earn enough to support their children might apply for poor relief: outdoor relief (welfare benefit) was inadequate, punitive and deliberately stigmatising. Poverty was itself regarded as a moral failing, further proof of the unmarried mother’s failure to comply with societal norms. The amount of relief was determined by each individual Board of Guardians and, if they were offered it at all, unmarried mothers might receive less than other applicants, yet again in order not to encourage immorality (Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and the Relief of Distress, 1909). However, at least until the latter part of the 19th century, many unmarried mothers and their children were only offered admission to the workhouse; both of them would have to enter, so the mother could not go out to work. After entry they would be separated from one another, though in theory not while the child was “within the years of nurture” (under seven). Pauper children were sent to poor law schools, often deliberately at a distance from the adult workhouse, thereby making it harder to build and sustain parent/child relationships.

Adoption

Given the considerable obstacles they faced, it is not surprising that many parents of illegitimate children felt unable to look after them. Some parents chose to place their children permanently with others, convinced that in doing so they were giving the child a better life than they were able to offer. Others felt forced into it by grandparents who took the decision out of their hands, by fathers who refused to acknowledge the child or by the numerous challenges they faced in trying to support a child on their own (Thane and Evans, 2015). By the time they were seven, 30 per cent of the illegitimate children in the NCDS cohort had been adopted (Crellin et al, 1971).

There is evidence that, for many years before the introduction of a legal framework for adoption in 1926, thousands of “unwanted children” were placed permanently with relatives, friends or strangers in informal adoption arrangements. Not all were illegitimate – some were the children of parents who could not support a large family; others were the children of widows left destitute by the death of a husband, or widowers who felt unable to bring up their children without the practical and emotional support of a wife. However, a high proportion were illegitimate children whose parents were unable or unwilling to care for them. Many were informally adopted through unofficial private arrangements made between parents and often, but not always, family members or friends. Other, semi-official adoptions were arranged by doctors, clergy and other people in authority between birth mothers and couples they knew (patients and parishioners) who wanted children, a practice that was legal until 1982 (Department of Social Services and Welsh Office, 1984). Additionally, some of the children’s voluntary societies, such as Dr Stephenson’s Home (now Action for Children) and the Waifs and Strays Society (now the Children’s Society), arranged pseudo-adoptions for children in their care.

Although some of these arrangements were supported by formal contracts signed in the presence of solicitors, none made before 1927 were legally binding, as before the implementation of the Adoption of Children Act 1926 it was not possible to transfer the rights and responsibilities for a child permanently from birth parents to third parties.

Lynne’s family story, submitted to the Coram Adoption Centenary Archive, includes details of two such semi-formal adoptions (and one formal one):

Dick was the child of a fairground couple who left him in the care of a barber, Joseph Nash and his wife, Mary, when they emigrated to America in 1865. He never saw or heard from them again. Although this was sixty years before adoption legislation was formally introduced into England and Wales, Dick’s parents had entered into a formal, written agreement with the Nashes, who brought Dick up as their son. This began a family tradition that ran through three generations of adopting children whose parents were unable to look after them. In 1909, Dick and his wife adopted a child whose father had not felt able to care for his four illegitimate children after their mother died, and had placed her in an industrial school; in 1931, Dick’s daughter and her husband formally adopted a baby under the provisions of the Adoption of Children Act 1926, through the National Children Adoption Association (NCAA). (Lynne’s family story, 1931; Coram Adoption Centenary Archive)

Dick was fortunate to be placed with adoptive parents who treated him as their own child. So was his adopted daughter, Eva. Many other infants were “adopted” by strangers who agreed for a fee (usually a lump sum) to take over their care.

There are numerous reports of mothers who, in the 19th and 20th centuries, answered an advertisement offering to adopt a child for “a premium” and who then handed the baby over, usually at a railway station, with no questions asked and no expectation of further contact (see Pinchbeck and Hewitt, 1973; Keating, 2009; Rossini, 2014). The baby farming scandals of the 1870s and 1890s revealed that many of these infants were kept in appalling conditions and left to die of neglect or starvation once the money ran out. The subsequent work of the Infant Life Protection Society found that between 60–90 per cent of babies placed with baby farmers died before their first birthdays. Continuing pressure from this society led to legislation designed to regulate private foster care and child minding in the 19th century and increasing pressure to introduce a legal framework for adoption 30 years later (Pinchbeck and Hewitt, 1973). Nevertheless, newspapers continued to carry advertisements from anonymous people offering to adopt a child until well into the 20th century; these advertisements were not made illegal until 1958.

Changes in the 20th century: from nobody's child to somebody's child

Introduction and impact of the Adoption of Children Act 1926

A high proportion of the children who were passed from birth parents to third parties were illegitimate and therefore their extended families had no legal responsibilities for them. Many were extremely vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, and informal, unregulated adoption provided no means of ensuring their safety. The Adoption of Children Act 1926 was perhaps the first initiative that improved both the legal status and the life chances of these children. Introduced in England and Wales in an attempt to regulate the practice of adoption, it focussed on the transfer of rights, providing a legal framework for permanently transferring parental rights from birth parents to adoptive parents, securing the child's new position within their adoptive family and preventing birth parents from reclaiming children who were settled in their adoptive homes. Among other objectives, subsequent legislation aimed to prevent malpractice and ensure that adopted children were properly safeguarded through rigorous vetting of adoptive parents and supervision between placement and adoption order.[9] The number of children who were made the subjects of adoption orders fluctuated during the course of the century, staying below 7,000 until the 1940s, peaking at over 20,000 in World War II and again in the 1960s, and then dropping dramatically from 1968 onwards. These figures are difficult to interpret, because they do not reflect the large number of children who continued to be placed informally or who remained in adoptive homes without an order (see Goodacre, 1966).[10]

However, they do show that many thousands of children were adopted, and we also know from other sources that until at least the 1980s the vast majority of these children were adopted for socio-economic reasons (Department of Social Services and Welsh Office, 1984).

Life chances

Outcomes of adoption for socio-economic reasons are complex. Data from the NCDS cohort of children born in 1958 show that, at the age of seven, in comparison with illegitimate children who remained with their birth parents, those who had been adopted were growing up in a more privileged material and educational environment and had experienced more stability. This was reflected in their developmental progress, which showed that:

...they achieved in most aspects a standard as good as, and in some areas even higher than, the legitimate sample; and they were much superior to the illegitimate children who had remained with their mothers.

(Crellin et al, 1971, p.106)

So adoption did provide illegitimate children with better life chances than they would have had if they had not been separated.

However, the picture is not entirely positive. In adolescence, the adopted people had developed similar levels of externalising problems (such as significant behaviour problems, criminal convictions and substance misuse) (Sehmi et al, 2020). Self-reports of people who were adopted before the 1970s, at a time when they were denied access to information about birth families and there was no expectation of contact, also constantly reveal a sense of confused identity, low self-esteem and inability to belong:

I want to know how it feels to belong but even though I have traced my birth parents I still do not feel I belong. I don't belong to my adoptive family and I don't belong to my birth family, so here I sit, confused and disappointed. How do you know when you belong, I mean really belong somewhere? (Jackie, adopted 1957, aged six months; Coram Adoption Centenary Archive)

Moreover, until the 1970s, adoption was often seen 'as a service for adults seeking babies rather than as a means of finding families for children' (Department of Social Services and Welsh Office, 1984), and there are numerous self-reports from people adopted before then who were placed in what would now be considered as inappropriate families. In the Coram Adoption Centenary Archive, for instance, Ann (who was adopted in 1948) was placed with her adoptive parents less than five months after their baby had died – a baby who, presumably, she was expected to replace. Annie (adopted 1949) had an adoptive mother who suffered from "nervous trouble". She was supposed to alleviate her mother's depression at not being able to conceive but instead 'I just exacerbated her sense of yet another lack of fulfilment. We never did bond'. Viv was placed with an adoptive mother who had been a refugee from Germany in World War II and struggled with acute depression, triggered by her guilt at having failed to enable more of her relatives to escape Hitler:

I imagine today she would probably not have been allowed to adopt. I don't think she meant to hurt me, but in her "bad" moments, her bitterness and self-loathing seemed to be projected onto me, the "stranger" in her midst, and I became, then, the object of her hatred, fear and abuse. It was almost as if I became the "Nazi tormentor". 'You must have been born from the Devil,' she would scream... When she "came back down" she would smother me effusively with apologies. I never trusted her – and on reflection, I can see that she was probably bi-polar. (Viv, adopted 1948; Coram Adoption Centenary Archive)

Autobiographical accounts also show how women could be made to feel overly grateful to the men who had married them "in spite of everything" and avoided standing up to bullying because they owed the men so much (Goodacre, 1966; Tofield, 2013). Continuing fears about illegitimacy and its consequences also provided an enduring rationale for keeping adoptions shrouded in secrecy (Keating, 2009). As Robinson's study attests, the stigma, shame and damaged self-esteem persisted well after deliberate discrimination had been abolished.

However, changes in social attitudes from the 1960s onwards began to reduce the stigma. As divorce and separation became more common, there were more single parents, and those who had never married no longer attracted attention. As cohabitation became more acceptable, the stigmatisation of illegitimate children diminished; there was less perceived need for secrecy, and less pressure on unmarried mothers to relinquish their infants for adoption. Unmarried women have also had more options: reliable contraception was made available to all women on the NHS from 1967, making it possible to avoid an unwanted pregnancy, and legal abortion was also introduced in the same year.

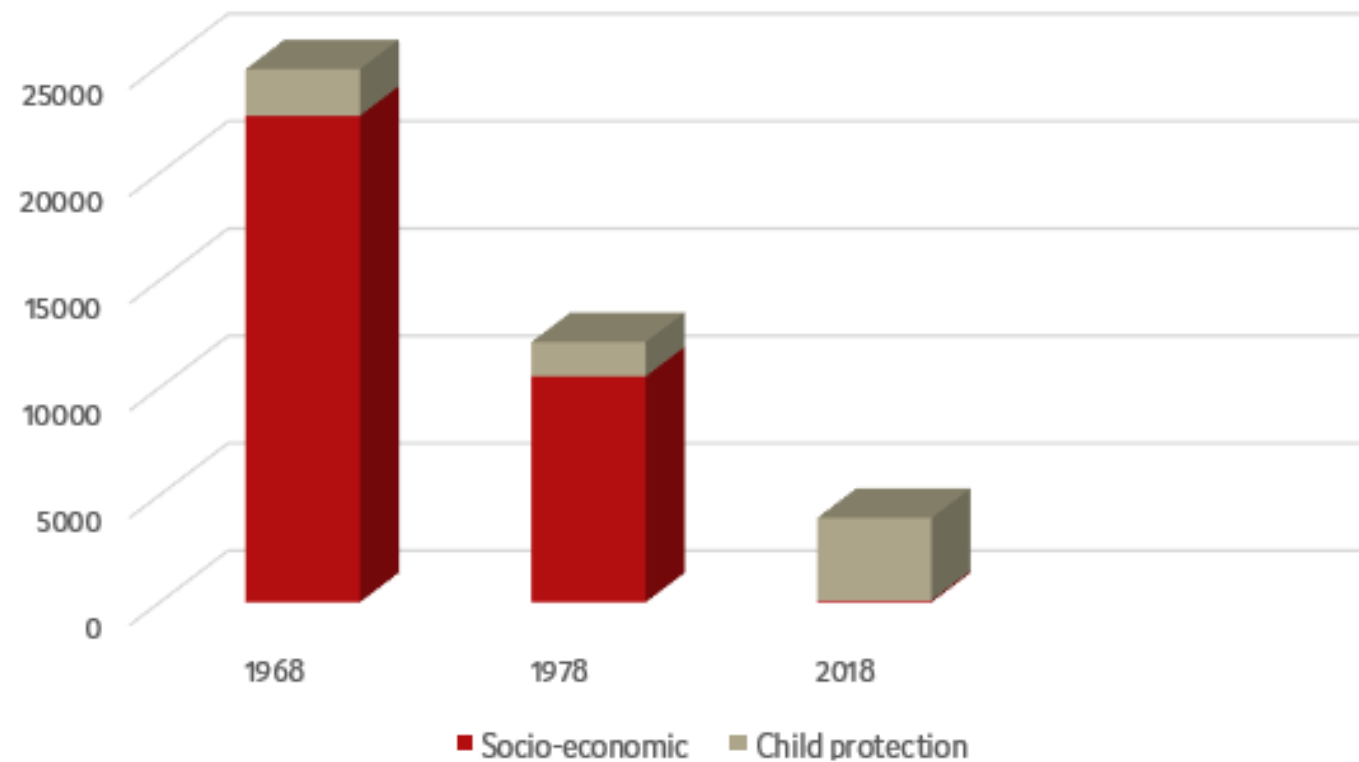
As Figure 2.1 shows, the number and percentage of infants from England and Wales placed for adoption for socio-economic reasons starts to diminish dramatically from this period, from 22,663 (93%) in 1968 to 80 (2%) in 2018, 50 years later. Nowadays, the vast majority of adoptions are for child protection reasons – for abused and neglected children looked after by local authorities who cannot safely return to their birth parents within an appropriate timeframe and who would otherwise remain in care until adulthood.

We do not know how far each of the factors discussed above has contributed to this fall in numbers, but one overriding driver has undoubtedly been the virtual end of the discrimination and stigmatisation that were previously directed at this very vulnerable group.

[10]The numerous issues adoption legislation attempted to address throughout the next 100 years, and the many questions the practice has raised are discussed in other papers in this series. See Ward H (2026) Is Adoption Legislation Necessary? An introduction to a century of debate, London: Coram.

[11]A further paper in this series explores the statistics on adoption in England and Wales since 1927 and the reasons for fluctuations in the numbers.

Figure 2.1: Adoptions 1968-2018



Conclusion

From a 21st century perspective, it is difficult to comprehend the vilification and ostracism of unmarried mothers and their children, supported by convention and legislation that was not fully repealed until 1987. Nowadays, when more than one in two (51.4%) children are born outside marriage or civil partnership in England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2023), overt stigmatisation is no longer a significant issue. However, until only about 50 years ago, unmarried mothers could be shunned by respectable members of society. Many had supportive partners or parents who welcomed them and the baby into their homes, but those who did not were often faced with inadequate wages, poor and insecure accommodation, sub-optimal childcare arrangements, and intense isolation.

Many had supportive partners or parents who welcomed them and the baby into their homes, but those who did not were often faced with inadequate wages, poor and insecure accommodation, sub-optimal childcare arrangements, and intense isolation. Many were forced to place their children with private foster carers or the children's voluntary societies so that they could work, and others agreed to permanent separation through formal or informal adoption. Illegitimate children experienced the same stigmatisation as their mothers, but in some ways they were subject to even greater disadvantages. They were literally born outside the law and therefore illegal: they had no rights, and, apart from their mothers, no legal relatives with responsibilities for them. They were more likely than other children to die in infancy, or to have their development compromised through growing up in poverty and an insecure environment. Many were lied to about their identity and remained confused and hurt when secrets were eventually revealed.

They were more likely than other children to spend time in local authority care or live permanently away from their birth families. Many children who grew up with these experiences are still alive as adults today; though their status has changed and they no longer face discrimination, memories of the past still colour their sense of identity.

However, as Thane and Evans (2012) describe in some detail, single mothers – particularly teenage parents – still act as scapegoats for many of the problems facing society.

In the 1990s they were held up as welfare scroungers, seen as deliberately getting pregnant in order to gain access to council housing, and responsible for the breakdown of marriage and the rejection of family values that were thought to have undermined social cohesion. In 2011, they were held responsible both by politicians and the press for riots thought to have been instigated by young men from the "broken homes" they headed, while evidence of the part played by multiple disadvantages (including cuts to welfare benefits and public services) was ignored (Thane and Evans, 2012, p.206). Old arguments about the dangers of encouraging immorality by providing too generous welfare benefits continue to reappear; yet single parent families are disproportionately likely to face poverty and inequality, and their children continue to bear the consequences. As Thane and Evans point out, the very fact that the NCUMC (now Gingerbread), founded in 2018, has survived for over 100 years testifies both to its ability to adapt and remain relevant through a period of profound change, but also to 'its failure to eradicate prejudice against single parent families and their persistent disadvantage' (p.208).

inally, although some of the appalling experiences faced by illegitimate children in the past are rarely seen in England and Wales today, they have not entirely been eradicated. Far fewer infants may nowadays be relinquished for adoption for socio-economic reasons in this country than there were in the past.

However, this still does occur here and (much more extensively) in low income countries, where there have been concerns that some infants are trafficked to wealthier countries such as the UK as part of international adoption initiatives (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2009). Child abandonment may also be rare in England and Wales; although again, it still does occasionally happen. However, where legal abortion is difficult to access or where there is extreme poverty, it has begun to increase. In the USA, all states now have Safe Haven laws, providing safe places where parents can anonymously leave unwanted infants within the first few weeks of life. The weakening of reproductive rights has resulted in a rapid growth of safe surrenders and abandonments – in California, more than five times as many infants were left in safe havens or abandoned in 2024 (121) as in 2001(22). (California Department of Social Services, 2024). The message perhaps is that all children need protection, and that children from isolated single-parent families are particularly vulnerable. Without constant vigilance, changes in economic circumstances, in legislation or in social mores can still increase their vulnerability and allow some of the gross injustices of the past to reappear.

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