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Exploring blacks' high rate of abortion

By Dennis Byrne

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Among the most contentious issues in America today are race and abortion. Fuse them into a single issue and you've got a nuclear bomb.

And so, when a Texas minister last month posted pro-life billboards in African-American neighborhoods in Chicago, more than feathers were ruffled. With a picture of President Barack Obama, they proclaimed, "Every 21 minutes our next possible leader is aborted." It's part of a national campaign that warns, "Black children are an endangered species."

The campaign is designed to draw attention to the higher incidence of abortion among African-Americans. According to the Census Bureau, the rate of abortions in 2006 among black women was 50 per 1,000, compared with 14 for white women and 22 for "other" women. Those figures fairly reflect historical trends, although rates generally have declined somewhat over the years.

The rate of African-American abortions should trouble everyone and call for a calm, intelligent exploration of the causes. Not so was the response of the wedge-driving Planned Parenthood. It called the billboards an "offensive and condescending effort to stigmatize and shame African-American women while attempting to limit their ability to make private, personal medical decisions."

More thoughtful was the exploration of the issue by the Tribune's Dawn Turner Trice ("Debate over black abortion disparity," April 20, 2011), and although I'm neither black nor female, I hope to join the discussion. I'll start by saying that any implication that Planned Parenthood or other pro-choice people are waging racial cleansing against black Americans is goofy in the extreme. It's also counterproductive for activist champions of life in the womb to make the claim.

Trice's survey of experts reveals complex reasons for the higher rate among African-Americans: more unintended pregnancies, substandard health care, inadequate health insurance, ineffective use of contraceptives, poor sex education, higher rates of sexual violence and poverty. Combined, they all crush many into believing that abortion is their only choice.

Indisputable as these explanations are — and I agree with all of them — looking beyond them is necessary. And here we would wade into what sociologists call "multivariate analysis" of some other factors that are not so easily defined or as clearly measurable as demographics. Like culture, which is defined as the behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic or age group.

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Political correctness and ideological dictates discourage discussion of the culture of some black communities as explanative of violence, ignorance, high rates of abortion and other dysfunctions. But for those communities, culture is described by the growth of a matriarchy, as displayed by the many grandmothers raising their daughters' children. By the absence of men in child rearing. By men who prey on young women who have never learned what to expect from decent, caring and responsible men. By the collapse of the family and the destruction of men's and women's traditional, balanced roles in making children strong enough to resist the challenges of today's broader culture of irresponsibility, casual sex, substance abuse and other plagues.

Unfortunately, such dire circumstances have encouraged the thinking that "some communities" are better off with fewer children. Such thinking is found in the writings of Margaret Sanger, the founder of Planned Parenthood and an icon of pro-choice activists. She advocated exclusionary immigration policies, sterilization of the severely mentally challenged, birth control to improve society and other policies characteristic of eugenics.

This lends a kernel of truth to the odious suggestion that abortion supporters are complicit in a conspiracy to kill off blacks. You might also get the idea from reading my mail every time I write about abortion. Claiming to be compassionate, the writers declare that some children are better off never being born. Especially if they are born into disintegrating or dysfunctional communities. Especially certain black communities.

The pro-life billboards, as "offensive" as some find them, force us to face an issue that many prefer to ignore: Is the high incidence of abortion in the black community a civil rights issue? Is it a symptom of control and suppression of women that is endemic to the community? And more profoundly: Who "deserves" to live and whether mass extermination of babies in the womb on a scale that is under way in the black community is good for anyone?

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