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The Future of Fearmongering

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Americans will be fearful in 2040, often about matters of minor consequence. I cannot predict which dangers will preoccupy the populace. I’m confident, though, that while the fears of that era will appear to be a random assortment, ranging from misjudgments about young people to disinformation about disease, in fact they will be part of a larger story about the state of the nation.

I also have little doubt that the scaremongers of 2040 will propagate their scares to the public largely through three means: repetition, trend claiming, and misdirection.

Purveyors of fear will continue to sell their wares the same way discount stores make their profits: on volume. Consider a pair of statistics about crime from the late twentieth century. Between 1990 and 1998, the murder rate in the United States decreased by 20 percent. During that same period, the number of stories about murder on network newscasts increased by 600 percent. Frequent viewers of evening newscasts could be excused for mistakenly thinking the crime rate was skyrocketing.

This chapter is adapted from Barry Glassner, The Culture of Fear (New York: Basic Books, 2010), and Barry Glassner, “Narrative Techniques of Fearmongering,” Social Research 1, no. 4 (2004). Please consult those sources for pertinent citations.
More than repetition is involved, however, in successful fearmongering. Fearmongers of the future will need to deploy narrative techniques to normalize what are actually errors in reasoning. I suspect the most common of these techniques will continue to be the christening of isolated incidents as trends, and misdirection.

Pervasive fearmongering about youth violence at the end of the twentieth century provides an instructive case in point of how these discursive maneuvers magnify risks. Beginning in the mid-1990s, the United States experienced a steep downward trend in youth crime, but in the face of comforting statistics year after year, fearmongers recast those statistics as “the lull before the storm,” as a *Newsweek* headline in 1995 put it. “We know we've got about 6 years to turn this juvenile crime thing around, or our country is going to be living in chaos,” President Bill Clinton asserted in his 1997 State of the Union address, even though the youth violent crime rate had fallen 9.2 percent the previous year.

Six years later the nation was not living with chaos, at least as a result of youth violence, but the bipartisan fearmongering that went on about juvenile crime had demonstrable effects on public perceptions. In surveys conducted during the second half of the 1990s, adult Americans estimated that people younger than age eighteen committed about half of all violent crimes, when the actual number was 13 percent.

The misperceptions were fueled largely by isolated incidents of school shootings that got portrayed as trends. After a sixteen-year-old in Mississippi and a fourteen-year-old in Kentucky went on shooting sprees in 1997, killing five of their classmates and wounding twelve others, fearmongers spoke of “an epidemic of seemingly depraved adolescent murderers,” as news commentator Geraldo Rivera put it. And three months later, in March 1998, when two boys, ages eleven and thirteen, killed four students and a teacher in Jonesboro, Arkansas, *Time* magazine declared that it was no longer “unusual for kids to get back at the world with live ammunition.” When a child psychologist on NBC’s *Today Show* advised parents to reassure their children that shootings at schools are very rare, reporter Ann Curry “corrected” him. “But this is the fourth case since October,” she said.

In point of fact, during the previous academic year (1996–97), violence-related deaths in the nation’s schools had hit a record low—nineteen deaths out of fifty-four million children—and only one in ten
public schools reported any serious crime. Yet *Time* and *U.S. News and World Report* both ran headlines that year referring to “teenage time bombs,” and William Bennett, the former U.S. secretary of education, proclaimed in a book, “America’s beleaguered cities are about to be victimized by a paradigm-shattering wave of ultra-violent, morally vacuous young people some call the superpredators.”

The superpredators never arrived, and over the next several years, although school shootings were rare, they made big news. In May 1998, when a fifteen-year-old in Springfield, Oregon, opened fire in a cafeteria filled with students, killing two and wounding twenty-three others, the event felt like a continuation of a “disturbing trend,” the *New York Times* reported. The day after the shooting, on National Public Radio’s *All Things Considered*, criminologist Vincent Schiraldi tried to explain that the recent string of incidents did not constitute a trend, that youth homicide rates had declined by 30 percent in recent years, and more than three times as many people were killed by lightning than by violence at schools. But the show’s host, Robert Siegel, interrupted him. “You’re saying these are just anomalous events?” he asked, audibly peeved. The criminologist reiterated that “anomalous” is precisely the right word to describe the events, and he called it “a grave mistake” to imagine otherwise.

To speak of these events is to bring to mind for many adult Americans an incident of horrific school violence; namely, the killings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Fourteen students and a teacher died, and twenty-four more students were injured. The Columbine incident, and its public reception, are worth reconsidering in the present context because they bring to light two realities that I suggest will persist well into the future: in a culture of fear, the perceived importance of extraordinary events diverges from their empirical reality, and so do the causal explanations for those events.

Nearly twelve months had passed between the killings in Oregon and the Columbine disaster. Yet after the shootings in Littleton, reporters, politicians, and pundits spoke as if the tragedy there were the continuation of a trend and further evidence of an epidemic, when in point of fact, the Columbine incident was unprecedented in American history. Moreover, the number of students killed in U.S. schools that academic year (1998–99) was half of what it had been in the early 1990s, when
journalists and politicians seldom talked about school violence. During the period of the so-called epidemic of school violence, fewer than 1 percent of all homicides of school-age children occurred in or around schools. Most of the remainder occurred in homes and other domestic settings, a story seldom told on newscasts or in other public discourse.

In attributing causes to the Columbine shooting, journalists, politicians, and pundits employed another tool as well in fearmongering about youth violence, one that, as I have suggested, I expect will be prevalent for decades to come: misdirection. The term comes from the world of magic. If a magician wants to make a coin appear to vanish from his right hand, he may try to direct the audience’s attention to his left hand while he gets rid of the coin.

A comparable form of misdirection occurs in political and media venues. Following the Columbine shootings, the public’s attention was directed away from real trends and persistent dangers that confronted children and adolescents, such as the fact that tens of millions did not have health insurance, were malnourished for parts of each month, and attended deteriorating schools. There was misdirection as well from the most proximate and verifiable factor in the deaths at Columbine and elsewhere; namely, the ready availability of guns to people who should not have access to them.

A study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* the same year as the Columbine shootings documented that even though the number of youth homicides had been declining, guns were responsible for an increasing proportion of the killings. Yet, instead of a clear, focused discussion on keeping guns out of kids’ hands, following the Columbine shootings, the public was treated to orations about all sorts of peripheral matters such as the Internet, video games, movies, trench coats, and recordings by Marilyn Manson (a musician popular with adolescents at the time), each of which pundits implicated in the Columbine tragedy.

### A New Story Line for a New Century

The three techniques for fearmongering I have discussed—repetition, the depiction of isolated incidents as trends, and misdirection—continued to prove effective in the early twenty-first century, but with new targets and
within a different story line. I anticipate the same will hold in 2040: the methods employed to exaggerate dangers and educe panic will remain reasonably constant, but the specific fears and the broader cultural narrative will change.

Radical changes in narrative and in choices of bogeymen can occur almost overnight in response to weighty events. The period following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001, demonstrate as much. In the weeks immediately following the far-too-real horrors of 9/11, counterfeit horrors that had occupied much of the popular media almost completely disappeared from public discourse. No longer were TV news programs and newsweeklies obsessed, as they had been just prior to the attacks, with dangers to swimmers from shark attacks and to Washington interns from philandering politicians. Gone were warnings about roller coaster accidents and coyotes prowling suburban neighborhoods.

Nor did the latest incident of violence in a school make headlines and provoke pundits to decry the sorry state of America’s youth. Part of the reason is plain: the loss of thousands of lives and the threat of more terrorism overshadowed any such stories. Even producers at local TV news programs and cable news channels could not fail to understand that for some time, stories about bioterrorism, airport security, and hate crimes against Arab Americans would hold more interest and importance for viewers than the usual fare.

But I suggest there was a more important, longer-lived, and foretelling reason that some of the old scare stories did not occupy the public discourse post-9/11: a powerful and pernicious narrative of the previous decades largely lost its usefulness for fearmongers in the news industry and for the politicians and pundits they quote—what might be dubbed the “sick-society” story. In that account, the villains are domestic, heroes are hard to find, and the story line is about the decline of American civilization. Post-9/11, a new narrative came to the fore, one about national unity, villains from foreign lands, and the greatness of American society.

One result of this change was a shift in the putative dangerousness of some categories of people and behaviors. The demise of the sick-society narrative augured especially well for young American males in their late teens and twenties, who were portrayed in the media throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century as heroes in the New York City
Fire Department and in the military or, alternatively, as campaigners for world peace. The change marked a striking departure from how this age group was characterized in the 1990s. Post-9/11, talk of adolescent superpredators didn’t fit the celebration of American society and its citizens or the appeals to young Americans to make wartime sacrifices. Nor did the supposed causes of youth violence I noted earlier fit into the new narrative. Suddenly it was no longer fashionable to disparage our popular culture. On the contrary, the culture was referenced not as an infectious agent that turns kids into killers but as a feature of American society that is wrongly reviled by our enemies. “We are battling a bunch of atavistic ascetics who hate TV, music, movies, the Internet (except when they’re planning atrocities), women, and Jews,” New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd put it.

The predominant foci for fearmongering following September 11, 2001, were foreign terrorists and dangers to the American homeland. I doubt there has been a phrase, at least in recent times, that was more effective at exploiting Americans’ anxieties than “the war on terror.” From late 2001 until they left office in early 2009, the Bush administration, their allies, and many people in the news media repeated the phrase incessantly. As former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski noted in the Washington Post in 2007, “The little secret here is that the vagueness of the phrase was deliberately (or instinctively) calculated by its sponsors. Constant reference to a ‘war on terror’ did accomplish one major objective: it stimulated the emergence of a culture of fear. Fear obscures reason, intensifies emotions and makes it easier for demagogic politicians to mobilize the public on behalf of the policies they want to pursue.”

In the first weeks after 9/11, when the homegrown scares of the previous three decades seemed trivial, obsolete, or beside the point, the nation’s collective concern sensibly coalesced against a hard target: Osama bin Laden and his organization, Al Qaeda. The administration of President George W. Bush quickly redirected that concern, however, to what it dubbed the “worldwide war on terror,” a war and associated enemies similar in their vagueness to those denoted in previous decades by the “war on drugs” and the “war on crime.” From those earlier wars, American journalists and their audiences had been conditioned to treat more seriously than they ought shocking statistics that were not fully
explained or verified, dire warnings that flared and faded, isolated incidents depicted as ominous trends, and testimony from self-appointed experts with vested interests in whipping up anxieties. Following 9/11 and throughout the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the same patterns ensued, only this time the statistics, warnings, and testimony came predominantly from the administration. A study found, for example, that more than 90 percent of news stories about Iraq on NBC, ABC, and CBS during a five month period in 2002 and 2003 came from the White House, Pentagon, or State Department.

Wearing flag lapel pins and crying on camera, journalists suspended even the pretense of objectivity as they affirmed the administration’s claim that the attacks of 9/11 constituted a fundamental turning point in human history. “The world is different,” another phrase repeated often in late 2001 and 2002, became a kind of password that opened the door for an extraordinary degree of fearmongering, as did its corollary, “9/11 can happen again.”

From the beginning, the language of the administration was apocalyptic. “Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign unlike any other we have ever seen,” President Bush proclaimed in late September 2001. The following January, in his State of the Union address, he announced that our enemies were not only bin Laden and Al Qaeda, but an “axis of evil” consisting of Iraq, Iran, and Korea, as well as any nation that harbored terrorists. At home, Americans should brace themselves for attacks by members of Al Qaeda sleeper cells who lived among us, as the 9/11 terrorists had, and could strike at any moment.

The administration began warning of a far more distant danger as well. Throughout 2002, it claimed that Iraq had aided bin Laden and was building weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Those claims proved false, but the administration used them to garner broad support from Congress, pundits, and the public for its 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq. And over the next five years, as casualties mounted and the financial costs of the president’s self-described “crusade” soared, it was crucial to the administration that Americans remain frightened about possible terrorist attacks on U.S. soil so that they would continue to support the Iraq war and the broader “war on terror.”

As time passed and such attacks did not occur, skeptics began to ask the obvious questions: Why hadn’t terrorists attacked freeways and
bridges? Poisoned the water supply? Grabbed an automatic weapon and shot up a mall? Americans with no connection to foreign terrorist organizations do such things in their own homeland, but it became increasingly evident that sleeper cells full of impassioned, highly trained terrorists did not exist.

How, then, to keep the fears alive? In large measure, the Bush administration relied on an ingenious repetition device, a color-coded terror alert chart created by the newly established Department of Homeland Security that reflected what the department deemed the degree of risk at any given time. The color chart reminded the populace, graphically and continuously, that they were in danger. Sometimes the risk was greater, sometimes lesser, but always there was danger.

Government officials repeatedly issued “code orange” (high-risk) terror alerts. In each instance, a public official such as the attorney general or the director of Homeland Security appeared before the press, promised that the alert was based on “credible” or “reliable” sources, and offered no further information. No attacks occurred, but the Bush administration benefited from the scares. A study published in 2004 found that when the terror warnings increased, so did Bush’s approval rating—an effect that was not lost on the administration. In a memoir published after Bush left office, Tom Ridge, the first director of the Department of Homeland Security, reported that senior members of the administration had pressured him to raise the terrorism threat level at key moments during Bush’s reelection campaign of 2004.

Some of the warnings were laughable from the start, as when the government advised citizens in late 2001 to stockpile duct tape and rolls of plastic to seal their homes against chemical weapon attacks—despite the fact that experts knew these measures were probably pointless. (When chemical agents are released outdoors, they are almost immediately diluted by the wind.) Since the risk of dying in a chemical weapon attack is far less than a million to one, an American was more likely to die in a car accident en route to purchase the duct tape.

Therein lies a lesson from this era worth keeping in mind in future panics: when it comes to sustaining fear, one scare supports another, and risk assessment by the frightened populace gets distorted. When fearful people buy guns, drive instead of fly, or isolate themselves in their homes, their probability of accidental death or injury increases. In 2001,
as a result of the attacks of 9/11, the number of deaths from terrorism in the United States was the highest in the nation’s history. Yet even during that eventful year, relative to other hazards, the danger from terrorism was low. According to figures published by the State Department, the number of deaths from terrorist attacks worldwide was 3,547, more than three-quarters of which were on 9/11 in the United States. By comparison, nearly three times as many Americans died from gun-related homicides that year, and five times as many died in alcohol-related motor vehicle accidents.

Continuity and Change

The war on terror did not bring an end, however, to worries about all low-level domestic dangers. Even as some groups, such as young American males, received a partial reprieve, the culture of fear, rather than narrowing, expanded to include new scares along with such enduring ones as child snatching.

Consider a little experiment I conducted just months after the attacks, in the summer of 2002. Over the course of a couple of weeks, whenever I had the chance, I turned on the TV and flipped between MSNBC, Fox News Channel, and CNN to see what they were covering. Rarely did I have to wait more than twenty minutes to hear a report about one or more child abductions. Editors and journalists defended spending so much air time on child abductions through declarations of a “trend” or “epidemic,” even as child abductions remained extremely rare, and they threw out bogus numbers. On his Fox News Channel show, Bill O’Reilly talked of “100,000 abductions of children by strangers every year in the United States,” though an exhaustive study from the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) that year found only 115 cases a year of “stereotypical kidnappings” (children abducted by nonfamily members and kept for long periods or murdered). “The majority of victims of stereotypical and other nonfamily abductions were teens—not younger children—and most were kidnapped by someone they knew somewhat—not by strangers or slight acquaintances,” a subsequent report in 2006 from the OJJDP noted.

The obsession with kidnapped kids showed no signs of slackening in subsequent years. When Madeleine McCann, just shy of her fourth
birthday, went missing in May 2007 from a resort in Portugal, the story drew attention for a couple of years, well after the Portuguese police had closed the case. After another child, Caylee Anthony, disappeared in June 2008, her case also attracted extensive coverage. Combining two archetypes that have been frequently featured, and are likely to continue so, in the U.S. media—the missing child and the monstrous mom (Anthony’s mother was eventually arrested for the murder)—Anthony’s story became nearly an obsession for some cable TV hosts. Most notable, perhaps, was Nancy Grace, a former prosecutor who has relentlessly covered missing children on her nightly HLN (CNN’s Headline News Network) program. CNN might as well rename HLN “CAN, as in Caylee Anthony Network, because HLN has been riding the toddler’s demise for hours each day,” Los Angeles Times media critic James Rainey noted after watching the network for a few days in 2009.

In public lectures and media interviews, when I mention examples such as those and the actual statistics about missing children, I am often asked: other than appealing to our baser appetites, what harm is there in the news media obsessing over missing children? My answer is, considerable harm, ranging from needless restrictions on children’s ability to play and get exercise to expensive and ill-conceived legislation. The nationwide Amber Alert system, named for a child murdered in Texas in 1996, costs the federal government $5 million annually, the states many times that amount, and produces frequent notices on roadways and in the media about kidnapped children. But “the system does not typically work as designed (i.e., to save children who are in life-threatening danger) and might be generally incidental to the safe return of most of the hundreds of children for whom the alert system is said to have been ‘successful,’” researchers concluded from their study of Amber Alerts over a three-year period.

As we look to the future, it behooves us to ponder long-term ramifications of recurring scares such as child abduction. Even were the Amber Alert system and others like it to become more successful than the research suggests, crucial questions would remain. As criminologist James Alan Fox of Northeastern University noted in an op-ed in the New York Times, “More important than the risk of ineffectiveness is the danger of misuse. What should the criteria be for determining reliable information? Who might get hurt in the process of hurriedly chasing down inac-
accurate leads and wrong suspects? What might happen, for example, if an incorrect license plate of a suspected abductor is displayed on electronic highway signs? Might some poor motorist be pulled over by authorities or, worse, chased down by a group of vigilantes? These concerns are especially salient in the climate of fear and hysteria that surrounds what many have accurately called a parent’s worst nightmare.”

For children, too, fear and hysteria about stranger danger are harmful in ways that can have lasting effects on individuals and the larger society. While children should certainly be taught commonsense rules about interacting with strangers, too many warnings can lead to what some scholars have dubbed the “mean world syndrome.” Children raised to view every adult with distrust might have little desire to become engaged in civic life when they are adults.

Here, as in other instances I’ve reviewed, a focus on bizarre and uncommon cases misdirected attention from common dangers. In a UNICEF study in 2007 that looked at factors including poverty, health, safety, and education, children in the United States were found to be at greater danger than anywhere else in the developed world.

**America’s Most Serious Social Problem?**

For some scares—child kidnapping being a case in point—the particulars do not vary much from one year to the next. In others, the specific behaviors, subpopulations, alleged causes, and purported effects differ over time. Fearmongering about teen motherhood is an illustrative example, as a quick comparison of two recent periods—the 1990s and the years following September 11, 2001—point up.

Within the sick-society narrative of the 1990s, teen mothers were portrayed as much more ominous and plentiful than they were. Although only about one-third of teen mothers were younger than eighteen years old, and fewer than one in fifty was fourteen or younger, one would not have imagined as much. Numerous TV programs and print media promulgated the fiction of an epidemic of pregnancy among very young teens. These included not only hyperbolic programs of the Ricky Lake and Maury Povich genre but also more highbrow fare. In an interview on National Public Radio’s *Morning Edition* in 1995, for example, Gary Bauer of the conservative Family Research Council intoned, “It
was not many years ago in this country when it was not common for thirteen-year-olds and fourteen-year-olds to be having children out of wedlock. I’m enough of an optimist to believe that we can re-create that kind of a culture.” The interviewer, NPR’s Bob Edwards, failed to correct this misleading statement. Nowhere in the segment did he indicate that it remained extremely uncommon for thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds to have children. Nor did Edwards note that, until relatively recently, most thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds were unable to bear children. As recently as a century ago the average age for menarche was sixteen or older, whereas today girls typically have their first menstrual period by age thirteen, and some as early as age nine.

Scores of journalists, politicians, and social scientists gave intricate explanations for why adolescents get pregnant and ignored the obvious. As the British sociologists Sally Macintyre and Sarah Cunningham-Burley noted in an essay, “Ignorance about contraception, psychopathology, desire to prove adulthood, lack of family restraint, cultural patterns, desire to obtain welfare benefits, immorality, getting out of school—a host of reasons are given for childbirth in women under 20, while ‘maternal instinct’ is thought to suffice for those over 20.”

The causes of teen motherhood had to be treated as distinct and powerful during this period. Otherwise, it would have made no sense to treat teen moms themselves as distinct and powerful—America’s “most serious social problem,” as President Bill Clinton called them in his 1995 State of the Union address. Nor would it have made political sense for legislators to include in the 1996 Federal Welfare Law $250 million for states to use to persuade young people to practice premarital abstinence. In what may well qualify as the most sweeping, bipartisan, multimedia, multidisciplinary scapegoating operation of the late twentieth century, at various times during the decade of the 1990s, prominent liberals including Jesse Jackson, Joycelyn Elders, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan and conservatives such as Dan Quayle and William Bennett accused teen moms of destroying civilization. Journalists, joining the chorus, referred to adolescent motherhood as a “cancer,” warned that teen moms “breed criminals faster than society can jail them,” and estimated their cost to taxpayers at $21 billion a year. Newspaper and magazine columnists called out-of-wedlock births from young mothers “the smoking gun in a sickening array of
pathologies—crime, drug abuse, mental and physical illness, welfare dependency” (Joe Klein in *Newsweek*) and “an unprecedented national catastrophe” (David Broder in the *Washington Post*). Richard Cohen, also of the *Post*, asserted that “before we can have crime control, we need to have birth control” and deemed illegitimacy “a national security issue.”

That an agglomeration of impoverished young women, whose collective wealth and influence would not add up to that of a single Fortune 100 company, do not have the capacity to destroy America seemed to elude the scaremongers. So did the causal order. Teen pregnancy was largely a response to the nation’s educational and economic decline, not the other way around. Girls who attended rotten schools and faced rotten job prospects had little incentive to delay sex or practice contraception. In the mid-1990s at least 80 percent of teenage moms were already poor before they became pregnant. Journalists put up astounding statistics such as “on average, only 5 percent of teen mothers get college degrees, compared with 47 percent of those who have children at twenty-five or older” (*People*, in an article bleakly titled “The Baby Trap”). Yet the difference is attributable almost entirely to preexisting circumstances—particularly poverty and poor educational opportunities and abilities. Studies that compared teen moms with other girls from similar economic and educational backgrounds found only modest differences in education and income between the two populations over the long term.

The panic over young mothers points up another enduring reality about a culture of fear. Warnings can become self-fulfilling, producing precisely the negative outcomes that the doomsayers warn about. Exaggerations about the effects of unwed motherhood on children stigmatize those children and provoke teachers and police, among others, to treat them with suspicion. Why do so many children from single-parent families end up behind bars? Partly, studies find, because they are more likely to be arrested than are children from two-parent households who commit similar offenses. Why do children from single-parent families do less well in school? One factor came out in experiments where teachers were shown videotapes and told that particular children came from one-parent families and others from two-parent families. The teachers tended to rate the “illegitimate” children less favorably.
While fearmongering of the 1990s about young women focused largely on low-income adolescent mothers, after September 11, 2001, the targets expanded to include young women from other income groups and even nonpregnant girls—indeed, even girls who had yet to have intercourse. Rather than the predominant metaphors being about a sick society, now they were about rapidity and about sexual practices adults found disturbing. As Katie Couric put it in 2005, the trouble was “kids growing up way too fast, having oral sex at ridiculously young ages.”

Among the most widely reported teen sex stories in the news media in the first decade of the twenty-first century was a supposed “pregnancy pact” at Gloucester High School in Massachusetts. First publicized by *Time* magazine, the tale was about a group of seventeen girls, none older than age sixteen, who, *Time* reported, “confessed to making a pact to get pregnant and raise their babies together. Then the story got worse. ‘We found out one of the fathers is a 24-year-old homeless guy,’ the principal says, shaking his head.” Numerous media outlets repeated the story, calling it “shocking” (CBS) and “disturbing” (CNN), wondering “shall we go to the mall—or get pregnant” (Salon.com headline) and “what happened to shame” (Fox News).

“The pact is so secretive,” CNN said, “we couldn’t even find out the girls’ names,” a difficulty that may have resulted from there being no such pact, as reporters who dug an inch deeper learned from other officials at the school and in the town, as well as from one of the pregnant students. The notion of a pact arose from stories about girls who had promised to help one another care for their children, she suggested. It was only after they’d learned they were pregnant, the student explained, that they made the promise.

In an op-ed after the pregnancy pact story had been roundly debunked, sociologist Mike Males proposed that politicians, reporters, and social scientists abandon the term “teenage pregnancy” altogether. Contrary to the misimpression that phrase conveys, in the majority of cases, the mother is not “a child herself,” she’s in her late teens, and the father isn’t a teen at all. He is in his twenties.

That the term “illegitimacy,” having largely disappeared from the lexicon, made a comeback at the end of the twentieth century, when nearly one in three children was born to an unwed mother, is not only paradoxical but underscores my principal prognostication about fearmongering.
While neither the targets of the predominant scares of 2040 nor the cultural narrative within which they’ll be placed can be foretold, the culture of fear will thrive; the tools I have reviewed in this chapter for amplifying risks will be at play; and many of the bogeymen and bogeywomen of that era will be considerably less dangerous than they’re portrayed.