

Briefly...

Policy Brief: The Link Between Reducing Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and Poverty

Many elected officials, experts, and advocates are committed to reducing poverty and improving mobility in the United States and have put forth a number of worthwhile recommendations. However, with a few exceptions, these recommendations too often overlook how—and under what circumstances—families get started in the first place.¹

One strategic and powerful way to help reduce poverty is to help teens and young adults wait to have children until they are prepared for the lifelong responsibilities of raising a child. And for those who are already parents, we should do all we can to help them plan for their future family goals and to think about how additional children might affect their relationship, their finances, and their ability to be the best parents they can be for their child or children they already have.

After a 14 year decline, the teen birth rate increased five percent between 2005 and 2007 and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults in their twenties has remained stagnant. For these reasons and others, including pregnancy planning and prevention among a wide range of education, workforce, and social service programs must be a priority for policymakers and advocates seeking to reduce poverty and improve prospects for children and families.

Of course, poverty is both a cause and consequence of early and unplanned pregnancy. Some impoverished young mothers may end up faring poorly no matter when their children are born. Nevertheless, although disadvantaged backgrounds account for many of the challenges that young women and men face, having a baby during adolescence or as a young adult struggling to complete their education or obtains skills needed in today's job market certainly makes it harder to break the cycle of poverty.

Why Prevention?

Consider that *half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned.*² That is, of the 6.4 million pregnancies each year, roughly three million are unplanned. More than three-quarters of all unplanned pregnancies occur to women younger than age 30, and 7 in 10 pregnancies among unmarried women in their 20s are unplanned. Many unplanned pregnancies that result in a birth have significant negative consequences for the children and families, including poverty. Research has shown that there are important benefits to planning a pregnancy (typically through the effective use of family planning), including research directly linking the ability to plan pregnancies with decreased poverty and increased educational and workforce opportunities for women. Children born as the result of an unplanned pregnancy often suffer developmental and cognitive disadvantages, and children born to teen parents face educational challenges, all making it harder for them to escape the cycle of poverty themselves.³

A child's chance of growing up in poverty is *nine times greater* if the mother gave birth as a teen, if the parents were unmarried when the child was born, and if the mother did not receive a high school diploma than if none of these circumstances are present.

Recommendations

The National Campaign recommends the following actions as part of an effective poverty reduction strategy:

- Recognize that helping young people avoid early and unplanned pregnancy in the first place will help avoid negative consequences later in life, thereby contributing to reduced poverty and improved educational achievement and workforce preparation.
- Ensure that ample attention is given to issues of pregnancy planning and prevention as the Obama Administration and Congress work on Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) reauthorization, particularly since three of the four purposes of TANF deal with family formation.
- Provide grants to states, territories, tribes, and public and private entities for evidence-based teen pregnancy prevention programs that are age-appropriate and medically-accurate.
- Provide grants to community colleges to develop and implement innovative approaches to preventing unplanned pregnancy and promoting healthy relationships among students, thereby improving academic success.
- In reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act and other youth development and workforce initiatives, incorporate discussions of responsible sexual behavior, healthy relationships, and family goals to help ensure that young people aren't derailed from getting the skills they need to adequately prepare for the 21st century workforce.
- Include pregnancy planning and prevention, including education about the spacing and consequences of subsequent pregnancies, as an important part of healthy relationship, marriage, and responsible fatherhood programs.
- Dedicate research funding to developing a greater range of effective programs to prevent teen pregnancy, particularly those for underserved populations with high pregnancy rates, including communities of color and youth in foster care.
- Encourage public and private organizations to use provisions in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act to provide youth in and transitioning out of foster care with appropriate education and health services to help them avoid early pregnancy.⁴
- In *Promise Neighborhoods* and similar community-based approaches to combat the effects of poverty by improving education and life outcomes for children through comprehensive education, health, and social services supports, expand the activities to also help couples plan for future pregnancies to ensure that children have the benefit of prepared parents.
- Encourage home visiting, Early Head Start, and Head Start programs to discuss planning and spacing of subsequent pregnancies, with referral to community programs and services as needed. Similar discussions and referrals should be considered through the Women, Infant, and Children's nutrition program, and child support programs.
- Support federal funding of an innovative media campaign to help young adults focus on pregnancy planning and prevention, with a heavy emphasis on digital and social media.

Key Facts

The connection between teen and unplanned pregnancy and poverty is compelling.

- A child's chance of growing up in poverty is *nine times greater* if the mother gave birth as a teen, if the parents were unmarried when the child was born, and if the mother did not receive a high school diploma than if none of these circumstances are present.
- The 30 percent decline in the teen birth rate between 1991 and 2002 accounted for one-quarter of the decline in the number of young children living in poverty. Without this decline, some 460,000 more children would have been living in poverty in 2002 alone.⁵
- Two-thirds of families begun by a young unmarried mother are poor.⁶
- Approximately one-quarter of teen mothers go on welfare within three years of the child's birth.⁷

- Some 52 percent of all mothers on welfare had their first child as a teenager.⁸
- Early and unplanned pregnancy often derails educational attainment, which is crucial to succeeding in the 21st century economy and qualifying for a well-paying job. Only 40 percent of mothers who have children before age 18 ever graduate from high school compared with about three-quarters of similarly situated young women who delay childbearing until age 20 or 21.⁹ Furthermore, less than two percent of mothers who have children before age 18 complete college by the age of 30 compared to nine percent of young women who wait until age 20 or 21 to have children.¹⁰
- Community colleges play a key role in improving economic mobility, especially for low-income students. However, 61 percent of women who have children after enrolling in community college fail to finish their degree, which is 65 percent higher than the rate for those who didn't have children.¹¹
- Three-quarters of the recent increase in the teen birth rate is attributed to older teens ages 18 and 19, many of whom are outside the scope of traditional teen pregnancy prevention programs but could be reached through workforce, education, and social service programs.
- The ongoing recession in the United States has had a significant impact on the decisions women and their partners make about family planning. Recent research suggests that nearly half (44%) of women age 18-34 surveyed report they want to reduce the number of children they have or delay childbearing due to economic considerations. Lower income women are more likely to report changes in their fertility preferences than are higher income women. Women who say they want to delay having children or want to have fewer children because of the economy are more likely than others to report being more careful about using contraception (45% vs. 17%).¹²
- Virtually all of the increase in child poverty between 1980 and 1996 was related to the increase in nonmarital childbearing, and half of never-married mothers begin their childbearing as teens.¹³

Conclusion

In the current fiscal environment and with limited public sector dollars available, it is tempting to put prevention on hold. However, at a time when the teen birth rate is on the rise and the most recent available data show the rate of unplanned pregnancy has increased among poor women, more needs to be done to prevent teen and unplanned pregnancy. Investing in prevention also makes good economic sense. Teen childbearing costs taxpayers at least \$9 billion annually and the progress in reducing teen childbearing in recent years saved taxpayers nearly \$7 million in 2004 alone.¹⁴ Moreover, research confirms that preventing unplanned pregnancy through family planning services is cost effective.

Early and unplanned pregnancy among teens and young adults often makes it more difficult to complete education and career goals and to escape poverty. Thus, preventing teen and unplanned pregnancy is not only an important way to improve the prospects for this generation of young people and their children, it is also a concrete and powerful way to make progress on other critical issues facing our nation. Less teen and unplanned pregnancy will result in less poverty and more opportunities for young men and women to complete their education and achieve other life goals—achievements that benefit them, their future children and families, and our nation as well.

Sources

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