

# COUNTING IT UP

## What Policymakers Can Do

The teen birth rate in the United States has declined one-third since the early 1990s. Even so, teen childbearing cost federal, state, and local taxpayers at least \$10.9 billion annually, including public sector costs for health care, child welfare and incarceration, and lost revenue due to lower taxes paid by the children of teen mothers over their own adult lifetimes.

It is estimated that the impressive decline in the U.S. teen birth rate saved taxpayers an estimated \$8.4 billion in 2008 alone (information on the costs of teen childbearing and savings related to the decline in teen birth rates in each state can be found at [www.TheNationalCampaign.org/costs](http://www.TheNationalCampaign.org/costs)). Further reductions in teen pregnancy and childbearing hold enormous potential for additional cost savings. Given the important social and economic consequences of teen childbearing, we present a few ideas below on what policymakers can do to both improve the prospects of children and families and reduce public sector costs.

### 1. Recognize the problem isn't solved

Despite impressive declines, three in ten teen girls in the United States still become pregnant by age 20 and there were more than 400,000 teen births annually. In some communities and among some racial/ethnic groups, rates of teen pregnancy are even higher. Moreover, teen pregnancy remains far higher in the United States than in other countries with which we compete. Simply put, teen pregnancy is a problem that still deserves attention and investment.

- Use your bully pulpit to generate attention for teen pregnancy.
- Share information about the public sector costs of teen childbearing with other policymakers, the media, and business and civic leaders.
- Hold legislative hearings and community forums; write op-eds; highlight the issue in your constituent newsletters.

### 2. Help parents

Teens consistently report that their parents most influence their decisions about sex. Too many parents, however, believe they have

little influence when it comes to their children's' decisions about sex. More than two decades of research makes clear that overall closeness between parents and their children, shared activities, parental presence in the home, and parental caring and concern are all associated with a reduced risk of early sex and teen pregnancy.

- Make teen pregnancy and how it specifically relates to parents a focal point of your communication with your constituents.
- Post a link to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy's tips for parents (available at [www.TheNationalCampaign.org/parents](http://www.TheNationalCampaign.org/parents)) on your website and encourage various state and local leaders and agencies to do likewise.
- Provide tips for parents in your regular constituent mailings.
- Hold forums with parents to provide them with information about the critical role they play in helping their children make good decisions and provide resources to support them in playing this role.
- Encourage employers, community groups, and faith-based organizations to provide parents with information and resources to help parents communicate with their children about sex, love, and relationships.

### 3. Support proven teen pregnancy interventions

There is now persuasive evidence that a number of programs have proven effective in delaying sexual activity, improving contraceptive use among sexually active teens, and/or preventing teen pregnancy. Communities have more choices and opportunities than ever to find programs that suit local values, opportunities, and budgets. In addition, important federal funding has been dedicated to effective programs.

- Fund programs—and encourage others to do so—that have shown positive results through careful evaluation.
- Go to [www.TheNationalCampaign.org/resources/programs.aspx](http://www.TheNationalCampaign.org/resources/programs.aspx) to find a list of programs with proven results.

#### **4. Support youth programs more broadly**

Even those programs that do not focus specifically on sex education can help young people avoid early sexual activity, pregnancy, and parenthood. Initiatives that give young people opportunities for growth and achievement as well as meaningful relationships with adults and older peers—community service programs, Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCAs and YWCAs, youth groups at religious organizations, for example—help them safely navigate adolescence.

- Support after-school, community service, community- and faith-based programs that provide young people with engaging activities and a chance to develop their talents and interests.

#### **5. Connect teen pregnancy to other policy priorities**

Teen pregnancy has well-documented negative consequences for children, families, and society, including lower educational attainment, poorer health outcomes, increased risk of involvement with the foster care system, and a less competitive workforce.

- As you work to achieve other policy priorities, ensure that preventing teen pregnancy is integrated into other efforts such as reducing drop-out rates, helping youth transition from foster care, and reducing low-birth weight and infant mortality.