

The Power of Prevention, by Andrea Kane, Senior Director for Policy and Partnerships, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

The Link between Poverty and Unplanned Pregnancy

A new Administration and Congress offer fresh opportunities to improve poverty and opportunity in America. A spiraling economy, broken health care system, two wars, and other pressing priorities will no doubt be vying for political capital and scarce resources. Even so, making a serious effort to reduce child poverty is both a moral and economic imperative.

Many thoughtful experts and advocates have developed recommendations to tackle poverty. There is great merit in many of the ideas that have been promoted. However, what is too often missing from these recommendations is serious attention to how, and under what circumstances, families get started in the first place.

Helping ensure that fewer children are born into poverty in the first place should be front and center on policy-makers' agenda for reducing poverty. One strategic and powerful way to accomplish this goal is by helping teens and young adults wait to have children until they are prepared for the lifelong responsibilities of raising a child. And for those young people who are already parents, we should do all we can to help them plan for their family's future and to think about how additional children might affect their relationship, their goals, and their ability to be the best parents they can be for the child or children they have.

The importance of helping young people plan for this aspect of their lives was brought home recently by a young low-income couple participating in a healthy marriage program. They are working hard to succeed in training and employment so that they can support the child they have together, while also improving their relationship and parenting skills. They recently learned they were expecting again, unexpectedly. When asked how that happened while they had so much else going on in their lives, the answer was akin to what many young adults say "...it just happened...we didn't think it was something you planned about."

Progress to Date, but More Work to Do

Although the nation has made extraordinary progress in reducing teen pregnancy (down 38% since the early 1990s), it is still the case that 3 in 10 girls in the United States get pregnant by age 20. In fact, recent data suggest that the progress the nation has made may be reversing—the CDC reported a 3% increase in the teen birth rate between 2005 and 2006, the first increase in 15 years.

But it is not just teens who are struggling with unplanned pregnancy. The rate of unplanned pregnancy among young adults has remained stable for the general population over the past decade and has *increased* among poor women and those with less education. At present, half of *all* pregnancies and seven in ten pregnancies among single women in their twenties are unplanned. And, contrary to popular perception, most unplanned pregnancies (and most abortions) occur to adults, not teens.

The Link between Unplanned Pregnancy and Poverty

The connection between early and unplanned pregnancy and poverty is compelling and underscores the power of prevention. Consider the following:

- 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.
- A 2004 analysis by Wendell Primus released by the Ways & Means Committee found that the 30% 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.

- Early and unplanned pregnancy often derails education attainment which is so critical to succeeding in the 21st century economy. Becoming a parent is a leading reason why teens drop out of high school. Only 40% of mothers who have children before age 18 ever graduate from high school. Only 3% of teen mothers and 9% of those who become mothers at age 20-21 go on to complete a college degree. Unplanned pregnancy is also a serious impediment for those trying to get additional education and training at the community college level. Six in 10 community college students who have a child after enrolling fail to complete their education—65% higher than the rate for those who don't have children.

Cause and Consequence

To state the obvious: 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 get the education or skills needed to get a foothold in the economy certainly makes it harder to escape poverty.

So what to do?

Given the strong connection between reducing teen and unplanned pregnancy and poverty, what should be done? Here are a few ideas:

- The President, Congress, and advocates working to reduce poverty should recognize that helping young people avoid unplanned pregnancy in the first place—rather than dealing with problems downstream—is an effective poverty reduction strategy.
- Provide grants to community colleges and similar post-secondary institutions to put in place a range of activities designed to help students avoid unplanned pregnancy and thereby improve academic success. Incorporate discussion of responsible sexual behavior, healthy relationships and family goals in youth development and workforce preparation programs to help more young people complete their education and be employed before they become parents.
- Ensure that pregnant and parenting teens and young adults are connected with health, education, and employment services that enable them to avoid a subsequent unplanned pregnancy and work towards self-sufficiency.
- Clarify that pregnancy prevention and planning, including discussion of the timing and consequences of subsequent pregnancies, are important components of responsible fatherhood and healthy marriage programs.
- Invest in replicating effective and medically accurate teen pregnancy prevention programs, with flexibility for states to pursue strategies that respect diverse local values and cultures. Research funding should also be dedicated to continue developing a range of effective, high-quality strategies, including programs with a strong abstinence message and programs for underserved populations with high pregnancy rates including youth in foster care and communities of color.
- Fund an innovative public health campaign to help young adults focus clearly and intensely on pregnancy prevention and planning, with a heavy emphasis on digital media.
- Ensure that improvements in pregnancy prevention and planning are included as an integral part of health reform, including enhancing publicly-funded family planning services for lower-income individuals.

In the current fiscal environment, it is tempting to put such things on hold. Prevention is often the first thing to go when money is tight. However, this would be penny wise and pound foolish. Teen childbearing costs taxpayers at least \$9 billion annually, and the progress in reducing teen childbearing in recent years saved taxpayers nearly \$7 billion in 2004 alone. Moreover, research confirms that preventing unplanned pregnancy through family planning services is cost effective. Additional progress on reducing teen pregnancy, not to mention unplanned pregnancy among young adults, is a good investment that we can't afford to pass up.

In Sum

Preventing teen pregnancy as well as unplanned pregnancy is not only an important way to improve the prospects for this generation of young people and their children, but is also a powerful way to make progress on other critical issues facing the nation. It 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.