



THE
NATIONAL
CAMPAIGN TO
PREVENT TEEN PREGNANCY

1776 MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE NW
SUITE 200
WASHINGTON DC 20036

Phone: 202.478.8500
Fax: 202.478.8588
Web: www.teenpregnancy.org
Email: campaign@teenpregnancy.org

January 31, 2003

White House Task Force on Disadvantaged Youth
Attn: Karen Morrison, Staff Director
Corporation for National Service
1201 New York Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20525

Dear Ms. Morrison:

In response to the Executive Memorandum dated December 23, 2002, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy would like to offer comments as the White House Task Force on Disadvantaged Youth goes about the important work of “developing a comprehensive Federal response, under existing authorities and programs, to the problems of youth failure, with a focus on enhanced agency accountability and effectiveness.” We applaud the Administration’s focus on the issues facing disadvantaged youth and hope our comments will assist in your efforts to improve the life prospects of young people.

The National Campaign believes that teen pregnancy is both a cause and consequence of the broad range of challenges facing disadvantaged youth. Teens who engage in risky sexual behaviors often also engage in other risky behaviors such as substance abuse. We have also long-recognized the deep connections between teen pregnancy prevention and youth development. In fact, some of the most effective teen pregnancy prevention programs are youth development programs -- typically in out-of-school time -- that give young people a sense of hope and both the motivation and tools to make good choices.

Solid research and experience make clear that preventing teen pregnancy is not only an important goal in its own right, but a powerful way to make progress on other key issues facing the nation – child poverty and overall child well-being, welfare dependency, out-of-wedlock childbearing, responsible fatherhood, educational achievement, workforce development, and crime. For example:

- C Virtually all of the increase in child poverty over the past two decades was related to the increase in nonmarital childbearing, and *half* of never-married mothers begin their childbearing as teens.
- C Compared to women of similar social-economic status who postpone childbearing, teen mothers are more likely to end up on welfare.
- C The teen years are frequently a time when unmarried families are first formed. Eighty percent of teen births are out of wedlock, and teenagers who have a non-marital birth are less likely to get married later.
- C Children of teen mothers are more likely to be born prematurely and at low birth weight raising the probability of a host of health and behavioral issues.
- C Less than 40% teen mothers who have a child before age 18 ever complete high school and teen dads complete less school than young men who wait to become fathers until they are at least 21 years old.
- C Children of teen mothers are 50% more likely to repeat a grade, are less likely to complete high school, and have lower performance on standardized tests than those children born to older parents.
- C The children of teen parents also suffer higher rates of abuse and neglect than would occur if their mothers had delayed childbearing.
- C Academic failure is often an early warning sign of other difficulties — half of teen mothers drop out of school *before* becoming pregnant.
- C About one-fourth of teenage mothers have a second child within 24 months of the first birth — further impeding their ability to finish school, keep a job, or escape poverty.
- C Teen fathers are unlikely to marry the mothers of their children and, on average, they pay only \$800 a year in child support.
- C The sons of teen mothers are 13% more likely to end up in prison than sons of mothers who delay childbearing even a few years. If teens waited until they were at least 20 years old to have a baby, it is estimated that the national incarceration rate would fall by 3.5%, a savings of \$1 billion a year in correctional costs (in 1996 dollars).

Simply put, if more children in this country were born to parents who are ready and able to care for them, we would see measurable progress in all these areas. Preventing teen pregnancy is a highly leveraged way to improve the prospects of young people across two generations -- avoiding early childbearing not only improves the prospects of teens themselves, but also greatly improves the chances for their children.

There are also compelling financial reasons to consider teen pregnancy as part of your effort to address the challenge of disadvantaged youth. Teen childbearing costs taxpayers at least \$7 billion each year in direct costs associated with health care, foster care, criminal justice, and public assistance, as well as lost tax revenues. A cost benefit analysis suggests that the government could spend up to eight times more than is currently being spent on teen pregnancy prevention and still break even.

Having made the case for the connection between teen pregnancy and other major issues facing young people, we offer some of our ideas about how to continue making progress on preventing teen pregnancy and improving the prospects for disadvantaged youth.

1. Recognize both the power and limitations of the federal government's role. From its inception, the National Campaign has argued that making a real impact on teen pregnancy requires the concerted effort of the all levels of government. Leadership is also required from the business community, faith leaders, the entertainment industry, parents and other caring adults, and teens themselves. The federal government has an important role to play in supporting research and disseminating the best available evidence on what works; encouraging different federal agencies and programs (such as those represented on the White House Task Force) to work together more closely in a way that supports teens, families, and communities; and using the power of the bully pulpit to send clear messages about the value of ensuring that *all* young people have the opportunity for a bright future.
2. Preventing teen pregnancy is as much about morals and values as it is about public health. Research shows that religious faith and a strong moral sense play important roles in protecting young people from too-early sexual activity, teen pregnancy, and other risky behaviors. Moreover, teens cite morals, values, and/or religious beliefs as the factors that most affect their decisions about sex. Teens need and want to be taught what is right as well as what is safe.
3. Efforts to improve the prospects of disadvantaged youth should not occur and will not succeed in a vacuum. Federal efforts to help disadvantaged youth need to support parents and other adults, as well as strengthen communities, in their vital role of helping young people to avoid pregnancy and other risky behavior. Over two decades of research confirms that families – mothers and fathers in particular – are an important protective influence on whether their teenagers become pregnant or cause a pregnancy. Close parent/child relationships, parental supervision, parent/child communication, and parents' attitudes and values about sex and relationships all make a real difference. Family structure also matters; children in single parent families are more likely to initiate sexual activity at a younger age. Finally, and especially relevant to the Task Force's charge, social context matters. Teens living in neighborhoods with high poverty, unemployment, and high crime rates are at increased risk for early sex and pregnancy.
4. Motivation is key. While we recognize and respect the differing views about how best to prevent teen pregnancy, these arguments often ignore the fundamental point that teens are unlikely to choose either to be abstinent or to use contraception effectively unless they are sufficiently motivated by ample opportunities, good schools, and solid families. As many have said, teens need something to say "yes" to, and they need the support of involved parents and other adults, and caring communities.
5. Target investments in after school programs to young people and communities with the greatest need, and focus on proven programs. In the face of growing demand for such services, it is important to guard against spreading the funds too thinly. While outside the scope of this Task Force, we also support more funding for after school programs given the large unmet need, especially for the young people at greatest risk for teen pregnancy.

6. Recognize and harness the powerful role media plays in the lives of young people. Given that teen pregnancy and other youth problems are deeply rooted in popular culture and that the media reaches far more youth than programs ever will, the federal government should consider support for constructive media-based efforts begun at the state and national level over the past several years. These funds should support both non-governmental efforts to work in partnership with the entertainment media to promote more responsible content, as well as traditional public service ads and media campaigns.
7. Continue supporting a strong abstinence message for school-aged youth. Public opinion polling data show clear support among both adults and teens for emphasizing abstinence – not just as one option, but as the best option. There is also support for helping sexually active teens reduce their risks through good health education and services.
8. Research and data matter. To foster accountability and focus attention, key indicators of the well being of youth need to be established, tracked in a timely manner, and spotlighted. In our experience, states and communities are highly motivated to focus on issues when they know how they are doing, and how they compare. For example, the federal government’s provision of timely state (and local) data on teen birth rates is very useful. As a result of both public and private investments in research, we now know a lot more about effective strategies to reduce teen pregnancy. The ongoing federally-funded evaluation of abstinence education will contribute even more to this knowledge base. Recognizing that resources are scarce, we encourage the federal government to maintain, and even expand, its commitment to high quality research that will deepen the nation’s understanding of “what works” to enhance the lives of disadvantaged youth.

While the Task Force is focusing on the challenges facing disadvantaged youth, it is important to also recognize the progress on what was once seen as an intractable social problem. Over the past decade, teen pregnancy and birth rates have declined steadily in all states and among all ethnic and racial groups, indicating that more young people are making responsible decisions. If teen birth rates had stayed at their 1991 level through 2001, there would have been *nearly 800,000 additional babies born to teenagers*. Nevertheless, there is much work to be done. Nearly one in four girls still gets pregnant at least once before the age of 20, resulting in nearly 500,000 teen births each year, and the U.S. still has the highest teen pregnancy and birth rates in the industrialized world.

Thank you for your consideration of these comments. If you have any questions, feel free to contact Andrea Kane, the Campaign’s Director of Public Policy, at 202-478-8554.

Sincerely,

Sarah Brown
Director

Cc: Sonia Chessen, Department of Health and Human Services