

# Briefly...

## Faith-Based Urban Youth Workers Focus Group Summary

Since its inception, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy has been pleased to present findings from focus groups with teens, those who work with teens, parents, and 20-somethings. This fact sheet highlights findings from focus groups with Christian youth workers.

In May 2008, The National Campaign, in partnership with the Urban Youth Workers Institute, the Miranda Center, and Urban Strategies, conducted three focus groups with youth workers. The purpose of the focus groups was twofold: (1) to learn from youth workers about the ethnically diverse teens they serve and to explore teens' attitudes and beliefs about sex, relationships, teen pregnancy, and parenting; and (2) to hear from youth workers themselves about unplanned pregnancy among their 20-something peers.

We hope that the findings from these focus groups—presented through the unique and valued perspective of youth workers—will enhance the understanding of practitioners and others about young people generally considered at high risk of early and unplanned pregnancy. The results of the focus groups will also help inform The National Campaign's own efforts. The findings presented here represent some of the key themes that emerged from the focus group discussions.

### Teen pregnancy is common within the urban communities served by these youth workers.

- Many said that there is widespread acceptance of early pregnancy and parenthood among their peers. Whether urban or suburban, rich or poor, many suggested that sex, pregnancy, and becoming a teen parent was a "badge of honor" or a "right of passage."

- Others noted that many teens have multiple children and are still in high school. One participant spoke of a 17-year-old girl who has three children—"It wrenches your heart, there is no childhood."
- Some believed that teen pregnancy was "hidden" in past years—now, it's accepted and expected.

### Challenging community and home environments paint a disturbing picture of life lived on very "shaky ground."

- "We are dealing with mostly dysfunctional, broken homes. Some times becoming a parent at an early age is encouraged."
- "Some say it's good to have a child because of the financial benefits—others just don't care."
- Many suggested that early pregnancy and parenthood stems from issues in the home. As one participant noted, "nobody cares." Others suggested that becoming a parent at an early age is a way for young people to rebel while others noted the following sentiment among some young people: "If I have a baby, then I'm going to be important."
- Others simply lamented: "A lot of families are *not* families"

### Many youth are growing up in uncertain environments.

- "I work with youth in the justice system where the issues are magnified. They start out with an intention to support the child, stay with the baby's mother, and get a job. Few stay."
- Others said that some teens stayed away from formal jobs "because they fear their wages will be garnished."

- “We teach abstinence before marriage, but a lot of these kids have never seen a healthy marriage and it’s not a reality for them.”

**Many young people are frustrated about how adults talk to them about sex and related issues—being talked *at* instead of being talked *with*.**

- “Just talking about sex is a taboo topic for many adults. But young people are talking about it in their discipleship group. The kids are *on it*. They don’t want to stop talking about it.” Said another focus group participant: “The kids want to talk and they want to be heard.”
- “A lot of kids, in the past, we’ve talked at them. They don’t feel like they have a voice. Today’s generation is a ‘Why Generation.’ Since they’re the main part of the problem we need to bring them into it.”
- Some youth workers noted: “We can’t change the thinking of young people unless we know what they’re thinking.”

**Many of the youth report unfulfilled dreams as a result of an unplanned pregnancy.**

- “So many are naïve. They think it’s cool. I saw one girl running around the church showing her sonogram like saying—this is going to be wonderful. Like a fairy tale. Reality hasn’t set in. A year later and they still want to be a teenager, and they’re dealing with adult issues.”
- “When the kid comes, reality comes. I have to stay home while my friends go out.” As one youth worker noted, “Girls drop out from the group because now they have to do things differently.”

**The youth workers offered a prescription for improving the lives of the youth they serve:**

- The first suggestion was begin addressing the issue of pregnancy prevention with kids at an earlier age. “It is critical that we not stick our heads in the sand and recognize that this is going on along with self-esteem issues.”

- Repeatedly, the youth workers expressed frustration about the number of pregnant girls with whom they work. Noted one, “It is ridiculous to see the growing numbers of pregnant girls.”
- One worker noted that programs should address and enhance self-esteem. “If your self-esteem is non existent, you’ll do lots of things because you don’t think you’re worth anything. Until you grasp your worth, you get pregnant to fill that gap.”
- In general, the youth workers believed that funding for programs should be focused on helping young people with the range of challenges they face. They insisted that current programs are “not getting to the core of the problem.”

**The focus groups also explored the perceptions and experiences of the youth workers themselves with their peers, rather than the youth they serve. The participants were a diverse group—male and female, African-American, Latino, and Caucasian—but all resided in urban areas across the United States.**

**Youth workers said that unplanned pregnancy, is common among their peers, not just the youth they serve.**

- “It is accepted in society as the thing to do. So many young people have grown up seeing that.”
- “If you’re a virgin it’s weird.”

**The young adults who participated in the focus groups believed that many of the bad decisions made by their peers was due to misinformation.**

- “Abortion is the first choice in high school, but unplanned pregnancy is thought to be manageable in the 20’s,” said one participant. “Some of my friends have said, ‘I can handle this, regardless of whether the father is in the picture. I can do this. I can get welfare, Section 8, food stamps; I’ll just find another man, a brother, an uncle to step in.’”
- One young person lamented, “Listen to song after song...I don’t even want you to be my lover.’ Women are dehumanized.”

- Another stated that “a girl is looked down upon if she is a virgin.”

**Opportunities to help young people make good decisions about sex and relationships are too often missed.**

- “The church doesn’t talk about sex, about pregnancy—the conversation never takes place.”
- Others noted that it would be easier for 20-somethings to discuss sex and related issues if conversations about these topics had begun at an earlier age.
- “These are issues that young adults are dealing with but the church isn’t talking about it,” said one youth worker.

**Considerable concern was expressed about the role of men. In particular, many of the young adults in the focus groups suggested that no one was providing guidance to men about their role in responsible relationships, pregnancy, and family formation.**

- “Males are going to mimic and do what they see. They need role models. The guys need positive leadership. We all make mistakes but you don’t need to continue making mistakes. You don’t need to keep having kids. They don’t think about the results.”
- Many noted that their male peers have traditionally viewed unplanned pregnancy as “...the girl’s problem. They don’t have to take the responsibility. The girl has to be responsible.”

**Young adults in the focus groups made clear that faith institutions, primarily churches, should more directly address sex and related issues.**

- “People in our age group are tired of the guilt trip. The message needs to be stated in a positive way. State what you can do. People want to make choices. There needs to be a shift in the rules and the language needs to change.”
- These young adults also believed that the church should be part of the solution. “The church can find common ground.

Jesus said, ‘He without fault’ for that reason alone, nobody in the church should be judging. Everyone has sinned. You made a mistake but we still love you.”

- “The only reason given for not doing it is that the Word says it. The real reason is not talked about. No one explains that God has created you as a sexual being, etc. Sex is about what is in your heart.”
- “Churches shouldn’t compete with ‘What’s cool’. Too many churches have come off as cheesy and second rate because they try to mimic what’s out there.”

**About The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy**

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy seeks to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and responsible policies in both the public and private sectors.

If we are successful, child and family well-being will improve. There will be less poverty, more opportunities for young men and women to complete their education or achieve other life goals, fewer abortions, and a stronger nation.

**About the Urban Youth Workers Institute**

The vision of the Urban Youth Workers Institute (UYWI) is to build transformational relationships with 20,000 urban leaders by 2010. Transformational relationships are defined as a combination of participation in training and development events combined with ongoing, regular two-way communication designed to build ministry capacity. The vision of this initiative is to develop the next generation of urban and multi-ethnic leaders for the urban world. UYWI’s goal is to strengthen 20,000 urban leaders who will in turn reach and disciple 1,000,000 urban youth by 2010.

### **About the Jesse Miranda Center for Hispanic Leadership**

The Jesse Miranda Center for Hispanic Leadership is focused on strategic networking and applied research relative to Hispanic communities of faith. The purpose is to link scholarship and faith together with experience and participation in service for the development of the church and the betterment of society in Southern California.

### **About Urban Strategies**

Urban Strategies is focused on connecting, tooling, and re-sourcing community-serving grass-roots organizations. Based in Washington, DC, the organization is engaged in national as well as community-based initiatives in Los Angeles, Phoenix, Chicago, and Texas that address issues related to at risk youth and young adults, low-income children and families, and adoption/foster care.