

Briefly...

Policy Brief: What Policymakers Can Do

Who We Are

The National Campaign is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization whose mission is 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 for reaching this goal is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults.

The National Campaign works on many fronts to reach its goal, including cultivating relationships with such key sectors as the entertainment and news media, faith communities, policymakers, the business community, state and local leaders, parents, and both youth and young adults themselves. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and responsible policies in both the public and private sectors.

Why It Matters

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

If we succeed, child and family well-being will improve. In particular, there will be less poverty, more opportunities for young men and women to complete their education or achieve other life goals, fewer abortions, a reduced burden on taxpayers, and a stronger nation. For example, although teen childbearing cost taxpayers \$9.1 billion nationally in 2004, the one-third decline in teen childbearing between 1991 and 2004 saved taxpayers \$6.7 billion in 2004 alone.

What We Know

Although the nation has met the National Campaign's initial challenge to reduce teen pregnancy by one-third over a decade, there is much work to be done. Three in ten teen girls still get pregnant at least once before the age of 20, resulting in well over 400,000 teen births each year, and the United States still has the highest teen pregnancy and birth rates in the industrialized world. Recent data also suggests that we cannot afford to become complacent: teen birth rates have increased for the first time in 15 years.

While we have been making significant progress with teens, the size and scope of unplanned pregnancy among single young adults is not well understood and consequently has not yet been well addressed. Approximately one-half of the 6.4 million pregnancies in 2001 (most recent data available) in the United States were unplanned. More than one-third of these unplanned pregnancies (1.1 million) were to unmarried women in their 20s.

The majority of children born as a result of an unplanned pregnancy are born to unmarried women, and children born outside of two-parent married families are more likely to be poor, have lower academic achievement, and drop out of high school. In addition, women experiencing an unplanned pregnancy are less likely than women who have an intended pregnancy to obtain early prenatal care and their babies are at increased risk of both low birthweight and infant mortality. And, births resulting from unplanned pregnancies lead to higher levels of chaos and turmoil between the parents and within the family. Such relationship turmoil creates troubling environments for children, especially young children.

What Policymakers Can Do

There are many different solutions to the widespread problems of teen and unplanned pregnancy, at the individual and societal level, and public policy certainly plays a key role. The following public policy actions would help ensure that teens and young adults have the necessary tools to make wise choices regarding pregnancy and childbearing:

- **Include pregnancy prevention as an essential element in health care reform.** While chronic disease prevention has become a key element in the discussion of health care reform, more attention should also be paid to pregnancy prevention, which has both health and fiscal implications for consumers and tax payers alike.
- **Help change social norms by using various media.** Teens and young adults are voracious media consumers—for entertainment, information, and communicating with peers. Lawmakers have harnessed the power of the media for other important public health goals by funding various public service and communication campaigns.
- **Invest in preventing teen pregnancy among vulnerable populations.** Despite substantial progress in reducing teen pregnancy in all states and among all ethnic and racial groups, there are disparities in that progress. For example, 53 percent of Latina teens become pregnant at least once before age 20. Additionally, by age 19, nearly half of all teen girls in foster care have been pregnant at least once.
- **Support parents and other caring adults in communicating their values to the teens in their lives.** Teens consistently say that parents most influence their decisions about sex. However, the vast majority of parents (82%) agree that when it comes to talking about sex, they often don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to start the conversation.
- **Increase the focus on the responsibilities of men in preventing teen and unplanned pregnancy.** More than half of pregnancies reported by unmarried men in their 20s are unplanned. More must be done to involve men in a meaningful way to prevent unplanned pregnancy—both primary prevention and prevention of subsequent pregnancies by men who already have a least one child.
- **Ensure greater access to affordable services and information that help prevent unplanned pregnancy, including subsequent pregnancies, for the uninsured and underinsured.** Medicaid, Title X, and SCHIP all play a vital role in providing family planning to lower-income families, but are not able to meet the need. In 2002, 16.8 million women were in need of publicly subsidized family planning services, yet public funding was able to serve only 6.7 million women. Also, investing in evidence-based programs that help reduce subsequent unplanned pregnancies—which make up 72 percent of all unplanned pregnancies among unmarried 20-somethings—could improve maternal and child health and well-being.
- **Eliminate barriers to affordable family planning.** A key element of preventing unplanned pregnancy is ensuring that sexually active individuals have access to affordable family planning, whether through private insurance or safety-net clinics including college health centers.

- **Provide states and communities with the flexibility and funding to put in place medically-accurate interventions to educate young people about responsible sexual behavior.** Most American parents and teens agree that young people benefit from both a strong message of abstinence and information that will help them avoid pregnancy and STDs if and when they become sexually active. There is evidence that a growing number of programs that include abstinence messages and also give complete and accurate information about contraception can delay sexual activity, improve contraceptive use, and/or prevent teen pregnancy. States and communities would benefit from funding for such programs, along with flexibility to select teen pregnancy approaches that they believe are best suited to local values and cultures. It is also important to invest in developing, refining, and assessing the effectiveness of a full range of programs to reduce teen pregnancy.
- **Emphasize the connection between prevention of teen and unplanned pregnancy and healthy relationships and marriage.** There has been a significant policy focus on and investment in promoting healthy relationships and marriage in order to advance child well-being. Unplanned pregnancy has a negative impact on relationship stability and child well-being. Seven in ten pregnancies among unmarried women are unplanned. Programs addressing relationships and marriage should also educate women and men about the benefits of pregnancy planning both on their relationships and on outcomes for their children.
- **Strengthen data collection and knowledge on pregnancy and childbearing.** Although birth data is generally accessible, comparable data on sexual activity, contraceptive use, pregnancy, and abortion are more difficult to obtain, are collected episodically, and tend to become available years after they are collected. Additionally, only 38 states and New York City collect data about unplanned pregnancy in their state or community, making it challenging to determine progress and needs at the state level.