

Why It Matters



Teen Pregnancy, Poverty, and Income Disparity

Continuing to reduce teen pregnancy will help sustain the recent decreases in poverty, especially persistent child poverty. Poverty is a cause as well as a consequence of early childbearing, and 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 burdens that young women shoulder, having a baby during adolescence only makes matters worse:

- Two-thirds of families begun by a young unmarried mother are poor.¹
- Almost one-half of all teen mothers and over three-quarters of unmarried teen mothers began receiving welfare within five years of the birth of their first child.^{2,3}
- Some 52 percent of all mothers on welfare had their first child as a teenager.⁴
- Teen mothers are less likely to complete the education necessary to qualify for a well-paying job—only 40 percent of mothers who have children before age 18 ever graduate from high school compared with about three-quarters of similarly situated young women who delay childbearing until age 20 or 21.⁵ Furthermore, less than two percent of mothers who have children before age 18 complete college by the age of 30 compared to nine percent of young women who wait until age 20 or 21 to have children.⁵ This disparity in education, not surprisingly, tends to affect income level. In fact, over the past 20 years the median income for college graduates has increased 19 percent while the median income for high school dropouts has decreased 28 percent.⁶

WHAT ARE THE CHANCES?

What are the chances of a child growing up in poverty if: (1) the mother gave birth as a teen, (2) the parents were unmarried when the child was born, and (3) the mother did not receive a high school diploma or GED?

- 27% if one of these things happen
- 42% if two of these things happen
- 64% if three of these things happen
- Only 7% if none of these things happen

Put another way, if these three things happen, a child's chance of growing up in poverty is **9 times greater** than if none of these things happen.⁷

- Virtually all of the increase in child poverty between 1980 and 1996 was related to the increase in nonmarital childbearing, and half of never-married mothers begin their childbearing as teens.⁸
- Nearly 80 percent of fathers of children born to teen mothers do not marry the mothers. These fathers pay less than \$800 annually in child support, often because they are quite poor themselves.⁹ Since child support can be an important source of income for poor children—accounting for 23 percent of the family income among those families who do receive child support—children born to young fathers are at further disadvantage.¹⁰

- Teen mothers are likely to have a second birth relatively soon—about one-fourth of teenage mothers have a second child within 24 months of the first birth—which can further impede their ability to finish school or keep a job, and to escape poverty.¹¹

Clearly, preventing teen pregnancy is a highly effective and efficient way to reduce poverty and improve overall child and family well-being.

WHAT IF?

The significant decrease since the early 1990s in the teen pregnancy and birth rates has led to important declines in the rate of child poverty. In fact if the teen birth rate had not declined by one-third between 1991 and 2002:¹²

- **1.2 million** more children would have been born to teen mothers.
- **460,000** additional children would be living in poverty.
- **700,000** more children would be living in single mother households.

SOURCES

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