

# Why It Matters



THE  
NATIONAL  
CAMPAIGN TO  
PREVENT TEEN PREGNANCY

## Teen Pregnancy, Poverty, and Income Disparity

March 2010

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.<sup>1</sup>
- Approximately one-quarter of teen mothers go on welfare within 3 years of the child's birth.<sup>2</sup>
- Teen mothers are less likely to complete the education necessary to qualify for a well-paying job—only 38 percent of mothers who have children before age 18 obtain a high school diploma.<sup>3</sup> In addition, other data indicate that 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>
- 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.<sup>6</sup>
- Nearly 80 percent of fathers of children born to teen mothers do not marry the mothers. These fathers pay

### 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.<sup>7</sup>

less than \$800 annually in child support, often because they are quite poor themselves.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

- 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.<sup>10</sup>

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:<sup>11</sup>

- **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

1. Sawhill, I.V., *Analysis of the 1999 Current Population Survey*.
2. Kaye, K. & Chadwick, L., *The Lives of Teen Parents After Welfare Reform and the Role of TANF*, 2006, Unpublished manuscript, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Assistant Secretary of Planning and Evaluation.
3. Perper, K., Peterson, K., & Manlove, J., *Diploma Attachment Among Teen Mothers*, 2010. Child Trends, Fact Sheet: Washington, DC. Retrieved March, 2010 from [http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child\\_Trends-2010\\_01\\_22\\_FS\\_DiplomaAttainment.pdf](http://www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-2010_01_22_FS_DiplomaAttainment.pdf)
4. Hoffman, S.D., *By the Numbers: The Public Costs of Adolescent Childbearing*. 2006, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy Washington, DC.
5. National Campaign analysis of, *Historical Income Tables - Households*. 2004, U.S. Census Bureau.
6. Sawhill, I.V., *Teen pregnancy prevention: Welfare reform's missing component*. Brookings Policy Brief, 1998. 38.
7. Committee on Ways and Means Democrats, *Steep Decline in Teen Birth Rate Significantly Responsible for reducing Child Poverty and Single-Parent Families*, in *Committee Issue Brief, April 23, 2004*. 2004, Author: Washington, DC.
8. Brein, M.J., & Willis, R.J., *Costs and consequences for fathers*, in *Kids Having Kids: economic and social consequences of teen pregnancy*, R. Maynard, Editor. 1997, The Urban Institute Press: Washington, DC. p. 95-143.
9. *Child Support and Fatherhood Proposal, Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Human Resources Committee on Ways and Means*, in *U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Human Resources Committee on Ways and Means*. 2001, Urban Institute: Washington, DC.
10. Kalmuss, D.S., & Namerow, P.B., *Subsequent childbearing among teenage mothers: The determinants of closely spaced second birth*. *Family Planning Perspectives*, 1994. **26**(4): p. 149-153.
11. Zill, N., & O'Donnell, K., *Child Poverty Rates by Maternal Risk Factors: An Update*. 2004, WESTAT: Rockville, MD.