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# FACT SHEET

## Literacy and Teen Pregnancy

### INTRODUCTION

#### The Facts About Teen Pregnancy

Teen pregnancy is a self-perpetuating social problem affecting families, schools, and communities across the nation. One third of American teenage girls will become pregnant at least once before they turn 20, a substantially higher rate than those in western developed nations. Less than a third of all child-bearing teenagers graduate from high school, and their children are born facing health, cognitive, and behavioral problems. These children, less likely to compete academically with their peers, are therefore more likely to drop out before graduation and more likely to become incarcerated than their peers, raising the associated costs of teen pregnancy to United States taxpayers above \$9 billion every year ("Why It Matters" 1). Even though teen pregnancy rates have dropped since the 1970s and 1980s, high numbers of teenage girls still get pregnant every year, resulting in a demand for more programs to prevent teen pregnancy before more children are born into poverty and physical danger. Their efforts are aimed not only at improvements to individual lives for their own worth, but also at saving large sums of taxpayer dollars spent on teen pregnancy-related social problems and lost potential.

How can we most effectively attack this phenomenon? Studies list and rate indicators of at-risk youth, finding academic failure and poor basic skills to be highly correlated with teenage pregnancy, and evidence-based studies of program success rates have also found youth development and early education-based interventions to be the most effective at curbing teenage pregnancy as the children advanced in age.

### PART 1: THE PROBLEM

#### The Risks of Early Illiteracy

Early elementary education has increasingly come under fire for inadequately preparing students for the rest of their education, with evidence pointing to an achievement gap in the second or third grade that, without intervention, most struggling readers will never be able to overcome. Early literacy problems become more pronounced in middle and high school, and research reveals that academic failure leads to other social problems, creating a high correlation between early elementary reading problems and the eventual dropping out of high school, teen pregnancy, and involvement with the

juvenile and adult corrections systems. An estimated six million middle and high school students struggle with reading below grade level and are at the highest risk of dropping out of high school, getting pregnant, or being incarcerated. While two thirds of teen mothers never graduate from high school, the correlation between early reading problems and teen pregnancy is even more direct than the joint connections of early illiteracy with dropping out and dropping out with becoming pregnant. A Northeastern University study showed that females 16 and older with poor basic skills are two and a half times more likely than their peers to be mothers, and struggling males 16 and older are three times more likely than their peers to become fathers. Further, University of Pennsylvania researchers found that women with lower literacy levels are much more likely to have a baby as a teenager than their classmates with higher levels of reading skill, independent of all other sociodemographic controls.

Whether young people are consciously deciding to start families or whether their pregnancies are unplanned effects of risk behavior, all evidence from the best research points to early reading problems as the best indicator of whether or not a student will become pregnant as a teenager. This knowledge can and must be applied to make teen pregnancy programs as effective as possible.

### PART 2: PREVENTION

#### Strategies to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

In the interest of improving lives, alleviating community suffering, overcoming multi-generational economic disparities, and lowering the cost to taxpayers for wasted potential and increased healthcare costs, money and energy must go to programs working to prevent teen pregnancy before adolescent risk behaviors turn into newborn citizens with needs and futures. Abstinence programs seek to influence those sexual beliefs and attitudes that lead teenagers to have sex outside of marriage, but only one mass communications abstinence program, "Not Me, Not Now," showed even weak evidence that it had influenced teen sexual behavior. The results of other programs are inconclusive. Abstinence-plus programs, however, which encourage abstinence and contraceptive use, have been proven to reduce teen sexual activity and increase condom and contraceptive use, behaviors that are all linked to reducing teen pregnancy.

Most research findings, however, now show that programs that rely solely on sex education are less effective

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than those that also address the non-sexual indicators linked to teenage pregnancy—particularly school performance and connectedness. Because early literacy is so clearly linked to later school connectedness and teen pregnancy, early literacy programs may be the most viable investment for those seeking to reduce teen pregnancy, even giving the teenagers who do have a child, better opportunities for success in life. These programs should monitor school attendance and performance to identify the students at the highest risk of dropping out, providing them with proper education, training, and support services.

### **Successful Prevention Programs**

Building upon and learning from the successes and failures of past and ongoing programs will help to prevent mistakes and the unnecessary waste of limited resources. A number of programs have already demonstrated these strategies with successful results, examples that can be replicated or incorporated as part of a larger program:

- The Children's Aid Society-Carrera Program had a positive impact on teen sexual initiation.
- The Seattle Social Development Program had a positive impact on teen sexual behavior.

- The Teen Outreach Program has demonstrated significant reductions in teen pregnancy and school failure.

The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project resulted in a significant reduction of out-of-wedlock births.

### **How We Move Forward**

Although the irrational elements of adolescent thinking make reducing teenage pregnancy difficult, programs and policymakers can easily target the young people who are at a higher risk of becoming pregnant by finding those with reading problems in elementary and middle school. Teaching them basic, necessary skills at an early age not only lowers their risk of becoming pregnant as a teenager, but also guides them through high school completion and toward other positive educational and occupational outcomes. For unmarried teen mothers, almost 80% will be on welfare at some point in their lives, their sons will more likely be in prison than the sons of their classmates, and their daughters are more likely to have a child as a teenager themselves. Investment in the education of these young women before they become pregnant and/or drop out of school will alleviate associated social problems and dramatically reduce the \$9 billion that teen pregnancy costs the U.S. every year.