



Teen Pregnancy: A Preventable Epidemic

Our nation is facing an adolescent reproductive-health crisis, with one in four teenage girls having a sexually transmitted disease, and one in three becoming pregnant before the age of 20.¹ To address this challenge, teens must be able to obtain confidential and affordable reproductive-health services. However, anti-choice politicians have stymied efforts to give teens the tools they need to protect themselves against unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). We continue to call on lawmakers – pro-choice and pro-life alike – to work together to achieve real solutions – instead of divisiveness.

The Facts

In spite of a recent decline, the United States still has the highest rate of teen pregnancy in the western industrialized world.² Studies show that the United States' teen-pregnancy rate is nearly twice that of Canada and approximately four times that of France and Sweden.³

- Approximately 750,000 young women in the United States become pregnant each year and nearly one in three becomes pregnant before she reaches the age of 20. Eighty-two percent of teen pregnancies are unplanned⁴ and nearly a third end in abortion.⁵
- The overall teen-pregnancy rate increased three percent between 2005 and 2006 – the first increase since 1990.⁶
- Teen mothers are less likely to complete school, less likely go to college, more likely to have large families, and more likely to stay single – increasing the likelihood that their children will live in poverty.⁷
- In addition to other consequences for young women and their children, teen childbearing costs U.S. taxpayers at least \$11 billion annually.⁸
- A sexually active teen that does not use contraceptives has a 90-percent chance of becoming pregnant.⁹

Potentially due to factors such as decreased access to health-care services and information, racial and ethnic disparities persist in the reproductive health of young Americans.

- The problem of teen pregnancy is more pronounced in the African-American and Latino communities, where rates of teen pregnancy are higher than those in white communities – 15 percent and 14 percent respectively, compared to five percent.¹⁰
- Fifty-three percent of Latina teens and 51 percent of African-American teen girls will become pregnant at least once before they turn 20. In comparison, only 19 percent of non-Hispanic white teen girls will become pregnant before the age of 20.¹¹

A Failed Approach

Throughout his tenure, President Bush and his administration repeatedly failed to offer a meaningful, effective response to the problem of teen pregnancy. He and his allies in Congress spent more than \$1 billion in taxpayer funds on “abstinence-only” programs¹² – programs that have been utterly disproven. Making matters worse, the Bush administration actually *cut* programs that gave much needed assistance to families and teens.

- Research shows that “abstinence-only” programs do not work and that comprehensive sex-education programs do. In 2007, a report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services concluded that students in abstinence-only programs are no more likely to abstain from sex, delay initiation of sex, or have fewer sexual partners.¹³ More recently, an extensive academic evaluation of abstinence-only programs and comprehensive sex education programs found strong evidence supporting the supposition that sex education can both delay initiation of sex and increase condom or other contraceptive use among youth.¹⁴
- Instead of providing teens with important information and health care, the Bush administration worked to restrict access to birth control and other health care for teens.¹⁵
- President Bush slashed funding for after-school programs that keep teens occupied during the hours when they are most likely to engage in risky behavior, like sex, crime, and substance use.¹⁶

Clearly, anti-choice politicians’ response to the issue of teen pregnancy didn’t work. In fact, these types of policies only perpetuated the cycle of harmful consequences to young women, their children, and communities as a whole:

- Daughters of teen mothers face a much greater risk of ending up teen moms themselves; nearly a third of daughters of teen moms had their first child when they were teens.¹⁷

- About one in four teen mothers under age 18 have a second baby within two years after the birth of the first child.¹⁸
- Children of teen mothers do worse in school than those with older parents. They are more likely to repeat a grade, less likely to complete high school, and have lower standardized-test scores.¹⁹
- Teen mothers are more likely to drop out school, increasing the likelihood that young mothers and their children will live in poverty.²⁰

A Better Way

NARAL Pro-Choice America believes that with pro-choice allies in Congress and a pro-choice president, a better plan for helping teens prevent pregnancy can be achieved through sex-education programs, better access to birth control, and investing in critical after-school programs. These interventions are proven to reduce rates of teen pregnancy and STDs, and promote responsible behavior.

- **Teens must be given the information necessary to protect themselves against unintended pregnancy and STDs.**
 - Comprehensive sex-education programs work. They delay initiation of sex, reduce frequency of sex, and increase contraceptive use.²¹
 - Sex education and condom availability *do not* increase sexual activity among teens.²²
- **Teens must have access to confidential and affordable reproductive-health services.**
 - Research shows that restricted access to reproductive-health services and parental-involvement mandates have negative consequences on teen health. Studies show that even parental consent for birth control would deter teens from seeking other reproductive-health services, including testing and treatment for STDs.²³
 - A recent study found that 86 percent of the recent decline in teen-pregnancy rates was due to more teens using contraceptives.²⁴
- **After-school programs reduce risky behavior by involving teens in activities that provide safe settings and positive role models.**

- One study found that the likelihood of teens having sex for the first time increases with the number of unsupervised hours teens have during a week.²⁵
 - After-school programs help reduce the rate of teen pregnancy by instilling good decision-making skills and positive role models in a supervised setting.²⁶
 - Teenage girls who play sports are more likely to delay sex, have fewer partners, and are less likely to become pregnant.²⁷
- **And Americans agree.**
 - Ninety-nine percent of Americans agree that young people should be provided with medically accurate information about STDs, and 94 percent of Americans believe young people should learn about birth control.²⁸
 - More than eight of 10 Americans believe that young people should be taught how to use, and where to obtain, contraceptives.²⁹
 - More than 80 percent of Americans believe that comprehensive sex-education programs, which emphasize abstinence, but also encourage condom and contraceptive use, should be implemented in school.³⁰
 - Americans want schools to cover “real-life issues,” such as how to deal with potential consequences of having sex and the emotional consequences of being sexually active.³¹
 - Seven in 10 Americans oppose the use of federal funds to promote abstinence-only programs that censor information about condoms and contraception.³²

Legislative Solutions

Embarking on a new direction with his first budget proposal for FY'10, President Obama recommended eliminating funding for failed “abstinence-only” programs and called for a new investment in evidence-based sex-education programs to prevent teen pregnancy. Congress followed suit, allocating \$114 million to the new initiative and continuing to invest in the FY'11 cycle. Unfortunately, anti-choice lawmakers succeeded in reviving the Title V “abstinence-only” program in the health-care-reform law (the program had expired in June 2009).

Furthermore, pro-choice lawmakers have a serious, comprehensive plan to prevent teen pregnancy, embodied in a package of legislative proposals. Together the agenda represents a commonsense approach that incorporates honest sex education, promotes abstinence (but not censorship), funds after-school programs, and supports parents.

- **The Teen Pregnancy Prevention, Responsibility and Opportunity Act** (S.1137/H.R.2097 in the 110th Congress) sponsored by Sen. Robert Menendez and Rep. Steve Rothman (both D-NJ) would help schools and non-profit organizations set up programs that encourage teens to delay sexual activity and help parents communicate with their children about sex. In addition, the proposal would restore proposed funding cuts for essential after-school programs that keep young people on the road to success.³³
- **The Responsible Education About Life Act**, known as the REAL Act (S.611/H.R.1511 in the 111th Congress), has been authored by Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) and Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA). This bill would establish the first-ever federal program for comprehensive, medically accurate sex-education programs.³⁴
- **The Real Education for Healthy Youth Act (S.1782/H.R.3324)**, authored by Sen. Lautenberg and Rep. Lee in the 112th Congress, will expand comprehensive sex education in elementary and secondary schools and universities while ensuring that federal funds are spent on effective, age-appropriate, medically accurate programs.

Conclusion

For too many years, anti-choice politicians have offered up failed, ineffective “abstinence-only” programs as their only solution to the problem of teen pregnancy. What works is clear: providing teens with medically accurate health information, access to reproductive-health services – including contraceptives – and programs outside of school hours.

Now is the time to move beyond politically divisive tactics and chart a new course that helps teens avoid unintended pregnancy and plan for their futures.

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Notes:

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² Guttmacher Institute *Facts on American Teens' Sexual and Reproductive Health* (August 2011) at http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_ATSRH.html#n10 (last visited October 28, 2011).

³ Guttmacher Institute *Facts on American Teens' Sexual and Reproductive Health* (August 2011) at http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_ATSRH.html#n10 (last visited October 28, 2011).

⁴ Guttmacher Institute *Facts on American Teens' Sexual and Reproductive Health* (August 2011) at http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_ATSRH.html#n10 (last visited October 28, 2011).

⁵ Guttmacher Institute *Facts on American Teens' Sexual and Reproductive Health* (August 2011) at http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_ATSRH.html#n10 (last visited October 28, 2011).

⁶ Guttmacher Institute *Facts on American Teens' Sexual and Reproductive Health* (August 2011) at http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_ATSRH.html#n10 (last visited October 28, 2011).

⁷ Guttmacher Institute *Facts on American Teens' Sexual and Reproductive Health* (August 2011) at http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_ATSRH.html#n10 (last visited October 28, 2011); Kirby, Douglas, Ph.D., *Emerging Answers; Research Findings on Programs To Reduce Teen Pregnancy*, THE NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO PREVENT TEEN PREGNANCY (November 2007).

⁸ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, *Counting It Up, The Public Costs of Teen Childbearing: Key Data* (Jun. 2011) at <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/costs/pdf/counting-it-up/key-data.pdf> (last visited Oct. 28, 2011).

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¹¹ National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, *Policy Brief: Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Teen Pregnancy* (June 2010) at http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/Briefly_PolicyBrief_RacialEthnicDisparities.pdf (last visited October 28, 2011).

¹² Sharon Jayson, *Study: Abstinence classes don't stop sex*, USA TODAY, Apr. 13, 2007.

¹³ Mathematica, *Impacts of Four Title V, Section 510 Abstinence Education Programs; Final Report* (Apr. 2007).

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- ¹⁵ *FDA delays decision on OTC emergency contraception*, USA TODAY, Feb. 2, 2004.
- ¹⁶ Sharon Parrott and Jennifer Mezey, *Bush Administration Projects That the Number of Children Receiving Child Care Subsidies Will Fall By 200,000 During the Next Five Years; Actual Loss in Child Care Subsidies Likely Would Be Far Greater*, CENTER FOR BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES (Feb. 5, 2003).
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³³ S. 1137, 110th Cong. § 1 (2007); H.R. 2097, 110th Cong. § 1 (2007).

³⁴ S. 611, 111th Cong. § 1 (2009); H.R. 1551, 111th Cong. § 1 (2009).