



State Policy Options

Connecting the Dots

Teen pregnancy, educational achievement, economic wellbeing, and child well-being are closely related. Policies that affect one of these issues often influence the others as well. Taking steps to address high teen pregnancy and birth rates in Texas has the potential to reduce high school dropout rates, improve college completion and overall educational attainment, boost tax contributions through higher earnings, and improve the economy. In addition, reducing births to adolescents can help strengthen families, improve child wellbeing and assist young people in achieving their goals, all of which reduce the likelihood that the cycle of teen pregnancy, economic hardship, and poverty will continue.

Connection to Education and Workforce Preparation

Given the increasing demands in education necessary to qualify for a well-paying job, it is more important than ever for teens to finish high school and attain post-secondary education or training in 21st century skills. Educational achievement for both teen mothers and their children are negatively impacted by teen pregnancy. In fact, one third of teen girls who drop out of high school cite early pregnancy or parenthood as a key reason. Only 40% of teen moms finish high school, compared to 89% of women who didn't have a teen birth. Less than two percent of teen mothers attain a college degree. To put this in perspective, one high school dropout costs the nation approximately \$260,000 in lost earnings, taxes, and productivity.

Connection to Child Well-Being

The educational challenges faced by teen mothers often set the stage for a cycle of economic hardship that repeats across generations. For example, a child born to a teen mom who has not finished high school and is not married is nine times more likely to live in poverty than a child born to an adult who has finished high school and is married. In fact, children born to teen parents face a number of challenges when compared to children born to mothers who are even just a little older (20-21 years old), including starting school at a disadvantage, dropping out of high school, relying on Medicaid and SCHIP for health care, experiencing abuse/neglect, entering the foster care system, and becoming teen parents themselves.

Foster Care and Teen Pregnancy

Research shows that teens in foster care are at a higher risk of pregnancy. Girls in foster care are nearly twice as likely to have had sex and one-third less likely to use contraception than other teens. Nearly half (48%) of teen girls in foster care have been pregnant before the age of 19, compared to 27% of all teen girls. Not only is the foster care system challenged by the need to house teen mothers and their children, but pregnancy and parenthood can be a barrier to the education and employment teens need to transition out of foster care into the larger society. Furthermore, the children of teen mothers are more likely to enter the foster care system than other children.

Policy Options for Texas State Lawmakers to Consider

Outlined below are a few ideas about what policymakers can do on this important issue to both improve the life trajectories of children and families and reduce public sector costs. The National Conference of State Legislatures also has excellent materials about teen pregnancy at <http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/teen-pregnancy-prevention.aspx>.

- 1. RECOGNIZE THAT THE PROBLEM ISN'T SOLVED.** Despite progress, Texas has the third highest pregnancy rate and the second highest repeat birth rate among teens. Simply put, teen pregnancy is a problem that still deserves attention and investment.
- 2. HELP PARENTS.** Teens consistently report that parents—not peers, not partners, not popular culture—have the most influence on their decisions about relationships and sex.
- 3. SUPPORT PROVEN TEEN PREGNANCY INTERVENTIONS.** Communities have more choices and opportunities than ever to put rigorously evaluated programs in place that suit local values, circumstances, and budgets. Access these programs through http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/oah-initiatives/teen_pregnancy/db/tpp-searchable.html
- 4. SUPPORT YOUTH PROGRAMS MORE BROADLY.** Even those programs that do not focus specifically on sex education can help young people avoid early sexual activity and pregnancy by giving them opportunities for growth and achievement.
- 5. CONNECT TEEN PREGNANCY TO OTHER POLICY PRIORITIES.** As you work to achieve other policy priorities, ensure that preventing teen pregnancy is integrated into efforts such as reducing high school drop-out rates, increasing the number of students who attend and complete college, improving opportunity and mobility, helping youth transition successfully from foster care, and reducing low birth weight and infant mortality. Convene cross-cutting hearings and forums that connect the dots across sectors.