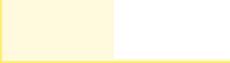




HALFWAY THERE:



*A Prescription for Continued Progress
in Preventing Teen Pregnancy*



Acknowledgments

The National Campaign gratefully acknowledges its many funders. Special thanks go to the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Summit Foundation, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation for generously supporting all of the Campaign's activities and to the Turner Foundation and the Target Group of Stores for their support of our publications.

Thanks to *Teen People* magazine for a long-standing and productive partnership and for the remarkable insights provided by their network of "trendspotters," which are reflected throughout this publication.

Thanks also to the National Campaign staff for their insights and help in making this project a successful one. In particular, thanks to Sally Sachar, Ellen Fern, Andrea Kane, Marisa Nightingale, Christine Flanigan, Alexandra Gonzalez, and John Hutchins for their patience with this publication and their helpful suggestions. Most of all, the Campaign acknowledges the leadership, good cheer, and common sense of Bill Albert who worked through innumerable drafts of this report, competently assisted all along the way by Ingrid Sanden.

Design: *amp&rsand graphic design, inc.*, 1700 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 401, Washington, DC 20009

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Suggested citation: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. (2001). *Halfway There: A Prescription for Continued Progress in Preventing Teen Pregnancy*. Washington, DC: Author.



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SUMMARY

Despite significant progress during the past decade, the United States still has the highest rates of teen pregnancy and birth among comparable nations. Four out of ten girls become pregnant at least once before age 20 and nearly half a million give birth a year, some 55 teen births each hour. But the good news is that rates of teen pregnancy and birth are now declining, showing that progress on this seemingly intractable social problem is possible.

In an effort to build on recent success, and on the occasion of the National Campaign's fifth anniversary, we offer the following findings and recommendations to policymakers, parents, teens, the media, schools, and others. They are based on sound research, insights from people working on this issue from around the country, extensive conversations with both teens and parents, and respect for the public's common-sense approach to this often-contentious issue.

How Big Is the Problem?

Nearly one million teens become pregnant annually, and the vast majority (78 percent) of these pregnancies are unintended. Nearly eight of ten births to teenage mothers are now out-of-wedlock. While the most recent news on teen pregnancy and birth rates is encouraging, this new trend follows a much longer period during which the rates increased. After rising 23 percent between 1972 and 1990, the teen pregnancy rate for girls aged 15-19 decreased 17 percent between 1990 and 1996. The teen birth rate increased 24 percent between 1986 and 1991. Since then, the rate has fallen 20 percent to 50 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19 in 1999. Research shows that both less sex and more contraceptive use among sexually active teens made important contributions to declining teen pregnancy and birth rates in the 1990s.

Why Should We Care?

Teen pregnancy and childbearing are risky for all of those involved. Compared to women who delay childbearing, teen mothers are less likely to complete high school and more likely to end up on welfare. The children of teen mothers are at significantly increased risk

of low birthweight and prematurity, mental retardation, poverty, growing up without a father, welfare dependency, poor school performance, insufficient health care, inadequate parenting, and abuse and neglect.

What Has the National Campaign Learned?

The National Campaign's intense interactions with teens and parents, researchers, program leaders, policymakers, and the media have given us new — and sometimes surprising — insights about the challenge of preventing teen pregnancy:

1. Too many parents and other adults in positions of leadership are unwilling to take a strong stand against teen pregnancy. This stems from a reluctance to judge the behavior of others, a culture that has become increasingly tolerant of unwed pregnancy and childbearing, and a fear of stigmatizing teen parents or their children. This reluctance, although understandable and often commendable, has impeded progress. But if we can't say clearly and forcefully that teen pregnancy and parenthood are in no one's best interest, how can we be surprised at our high rates?
2. Strident arguments over which strategy is better — sexual abstinence or contraceptive use — are a recipe for stalemate. This ideological struggle is obscuring an important cause of teen pregnancy: many teens are insufficiently motivated to adopt either approach. More of both strategies is needed.
3. Abstinence should be strongly stressed as the best choice for teens because of its effectiveness and its consistency with the beliefs of adults *and* teens. In a nationally-representative survey conducted this year for the National Campaign, large majorities of adults and teens said it was important for teens to be given a strong message from society that they should abstain from sex until they are at least out of high school *and* that those teens who are sexually active should have access to contraception. Few adults or teens saw this as a mixed message.

4. Giving teens access to contraception is *still* important. Many teens are sexually active and better use of contraception is one reason teen pregnancy rates declined in the 1990s. But reliance on this approach *alone* is not sufficient. Very few teens believe that limited access to contraception is a major contributor to teen pregnancy. Despite widespread access to contraception and information about it, almost 80 percent of pregnancies to teens are unintended.
5. Parents can do much more to help. Kids want to hear about sex, love, and relationships from their parents but often do not. In our survey, teens cited parents more than any other source as having the *most* influence over their sexual decision-making. Over two decades of research confirms that — whether they believe it or not — parents are a very important influence on whether their children become pregnant or cause a pregnancy.
6. Peer pressure and teens' *perceptions* of the sexual behavior of others affect their own behavior. What teens *think* their friends are doing (or not doing) has an impact on their behavior. Most of the teens we surveyed *overestimated* their peers' level of sexual activity and *underestimated* the possible consequences of sex.
7. Effective programs to reduce teen pregnancy exist and should be expanded, but it is unrealistic to assume that community programs will solve this problem entirely. The high costs of most programs, combined with the recognition that programs must compete with many other influences, make it clear that programs *alone* cannot make lasting progress in reducing teen pregnancy. Using the media, including popular television programs and magazines, to change broader cultural messages about sex is also needed.
8. Preventing teen pregnancy requires a new commitment to protecting young girls and an increased emphasis on teen pregnancy prevention among boys and men. Teen pregnancy is rarely viewed as a failure to protect the lives and hearts of young women. At the same time, the nearly one million girls who get pregnant each year don't do it alone. Efforts to define manhood in a way that emphasizes teen pregnancy prevention should be applauded and expanded.
9. In a diverse country, it is essential to have multiple

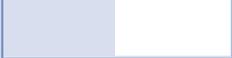
approaches to preventing teen pregnancy. It is unrealistic to think that individuals or groups will always be able to put aside their deeply held beliefs on this issue and agree on one single way to reduce teen pregnancy. Often the best strategy is “unity of goal, but tolerance for a diversity of means.”

10. Preventing teen pregnancy is an effective way to improve overall child and family well-being and, in particular, to reduce child poverty and out-of-wedlock childbearing. Policymakers dedicated to such goals as better schools, a more productive work force, less poverty, and fewer out-of-wedlock births should recognize that reducing adolescent pregnancy and childbearing is a highly leveraged and cost-effective way of achieving these broader social objectives.

What More Should Be Done?

How can we use these insights to drive the rates of teen pregnancy in the United States down further? We offer the following recommendations.

1. Policymakers, increase your commitment to preventing teen pregnancy. Although there are some funding streams already in place, the sums of money are relatively modest compared to the magnitude of the problem, and the purposes for which some of the funds can be spent are often constrained. In particular, Congress should create a new block grant for states and communities with the exclusive purpose being to reduce teen pregnancy. Funds should also support a national media campaign. In addition, preventing teen pregnancy should be a major focus in reauthorizing welfare reform in 2002, if this nation wants to end cycles of poverty and welfare dependence.
2. Public and private funders, invest more in research and dissemination. Funders should also support the translation of research findings into concrete help for states and communities. Finally, public and private funders should stop seeing teen pregnancy as a “single issue” and should, instead, support a wide variety of approaches to solving this problem that is at the root of so many social ills.
3. Parents, be more parental. Parents should engage their children early and often in discussions of sex, love, relationships, and values; set and enforce

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- curfews and related limits; discourage romantic relationships with older partners; and pay attention to what their kids are watching, reading, and listening to.
4. Teens, speak out. Since peer influence is so powerful, teens need to encourage one another to think before they act and to avoid risky situations.
 5. Media, tell the truth. The entertainment media can show teens saying “no” to sex or saying “no” even if they’ve said “yes” before. They can show sexually active teens using contraception. They can show good communication between parents and teens and between teens in romantic relationships. And, most important, they can show consequences. Teens tell us that although the media contains a lot about sex, it rarely portrays the real consequences of sex.
 6. Schools, do more than just offer sex or abstinence education. Preventing school dropout and expanding the number of afterschool activities are powerful ways that schools can reduce rates of teen pregnancy.
 7. Community leaders, put in place the best programs, but resist expectations that programs *alone* can solve the problem. Those searching for a programmatic solution to preventing teen pregnancy should pay close attention to the growing body of high-quality research that helps answer the “what works” question. But, since teen pregnancy is partly rooted in popular culture and social values, programs must be supplemented by broader efforts to engage parents, families, faith-based institutions, and the media in particular.