

Reducing teen pregnancy:  
Neighborhood influences overlooked by  
PRWORA

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## **PRWORA**

In 1996, Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) was replaced with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The major provisions included greater program authority to states, increased work requirements, incentives to reduce nonmarital births, and a five-year maximum time limit. By 2002, at least 50% of families and 90% of two-parent families had to be working or in work preparation programs (Blank, 2002). Clearly, the bill achieved a reduction in caseload, and it arguably increased the number of working recipients. Considering these two facts alone, many have contended that the bill was successful. Less attention, however, has been directed toward PRWORA's failure to reduce illegitimacy. Although some are less concerned with adult single mothers, everyone should be worried about teenage pregnancy. What can be done to address teenage problems in ways PRWORA failed to?

### **Negative Consequences of Teenage Motherhood**

Sexual activity among adolescents is undeniably on the rise, and with this comes negative consequences. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, children and adolescents accounted for 590,000 of the new HIV/AIDS cases in 1997, and 13% of the births in the United States in 1996. Rates of STDs have skyrocketed in the recent decades, and AIDS is the second leading cause of death for adolescents. African Americans represent 13% of the entire United States' population, yet are 36% of AIDS cases (Chapin, 2001).

PRWORA cited many negative outcomes for unwed teen births for both mothers and their children within the bill. These include "greater risk of premature or low-birth

weight babies, interruption of mothers' schooling, cognitive deficits and poor school achievement of their children, and a greater probability that the child will become an unwed parent" (Kelly & Grant, 2007, p. 879). Past research supports these claims. Single parents are the poorest group in society today. Over half of all single-mother families earn below \$12,400, an income that is shockingly low. To control for certain factors like parental education and income, Geronimus and Korenman (1990) focused on the outcomes of teenage mothers compared to their sisters, who had not had children out-of-wedlock. The researchers found that on average, the difference in economic well-being between these sisters in their 20s and 30s was about one-third. Having a child out-of-wedlock as a teenager increased their chances of being poor, receiving welfare, and decreased educational attainment compared to their sisters.

Since primary care-giving still traditionally falls on the mother, it is up to her to buffer the negative effects of poverty. However, how capable are adolescent mothers at doing so? Musick (1993) notes that "many of the same developmental, psychological and social forces drawing disadvantaged young women to premature parenthood in the first place, are carried forward to shape their childrearing practices...that magnify the risks already associated with growing up in poverty" (p. 180). Adolescent moms use more physical punishment, hostile and childlike behaviors, vocalize less, and are more self-absorbed than adult mothers. Musick (1993) argues that all of these factors may be significant contributors to their children's depressed cognitive function later on in life.

Children growing up in an impoverished single-parent home are faced with a double negative effect. Both single-parent homes and poverty increase the risk of cognitive and physical development, dropping out of school and becoming single parents.

Thus, experiencing poverty within a single parent home increases these devastating risks at a much larger rate than either of those factors alone. Steps need to be taken to reduce teenage motherhood.

### **Teenage Childbirth**

Since some provisions of PRWORA were enacted under the assumptions of the rational choice model, states were encouraged to increase costs of nonmarital childbirths through economic incentives and disincentives. However, research conducted by Kelly et al. (2007) found that “economic-based incentives have only a weak and inconsistent impact on the reproductive behaviors of women” (p. 897). Other research has found similar results, demonstrating that women do not always base childbearing decisions on economic factors. Edin & Kefalas (2005) followed the lives of single mothers in eight poor neighborhoods in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Camden, New Jersey. They found that, although these women believed in the institution of marriage, the mothers wanted to be able to support themselves and wait until their partner had a steady job. Most mothers believed that having children was life-altering, and they believed that the most important role for a woman is that of motherhood. These women were not thinking about the amount of money that they might be able to obtain on welfare, or the child support that they could receive. When structural constraints are taken into account, decisions not considered rational in an economic sense may still be rational when seeking the best possible outcome within the opportunities available (Friedman & Diem, 1993). Purely economic incentives or disincentives are unlikely to affect the particular choices policy-makers are trying to invoke.

Many adolescents decide to have a baby when they are still psychologically developing. Musick (1993) states, “Although identity formation is a continuous process throughout the life cycle, it has its crisis during the adolescent years...A girl becomes a mother because it fits in with her internal sense of who she is” (p. 187). Early work done by Erik Erikson (1968), a prominent developmental psychologist, explains why some girls possibly choose this route. He states that during the school years, children develop a sense of industry. They master basic skills, take pride in achievement, and this provides them with a sense of identifying themselves as being someone who is successful. These all become protective factors to ensure that they do not develop identity confusion (Erikson, 1968). Disadvantaged girls, however, are more likely to have poor home-lives, where they bear greater responsibility than they should, as well as have poorer academic quality. To some girls, the idea of having a child is the most rewarding facet of their lives; they obtain a sense of who they are, a mother.

Although some adolescents think they want to have children themselves, others do not truly understand the consequences of engaging in sexual activity. John Chapin (2001) conducted a study to explain why adolescents engage in risky sexual behavior, regardless of knowing the consequences of such actions. He argues that children engage in optimistic bias, “the misperception that one is less likely than others to experience the negative consequences from health behaviors” (Chapin, 2001, p. 49). Chapin (2001) explored the possibility of the invulnerability hypothesis, which states that adolescents ignore and underestimate the actual risks associated with certain behaviors. They often feel special, unique, and they believe that negative outcomes will not happen to them. Greene, Rubin, Hale, and Walters (1996) found that high school students who scored

highest on perceived invulnerability believed to be less susceptible to sexual risks and reported the greatest number of sexual partners.

Thus, Chapin used a sample of 10-17 year old at-risk minority youth from Trenton, New Jersey, a low-income community among the worst in the state for health statistics. His results indicated that these adolescents did indeed exhibit optimistic bias, and believed that they were less likely than others to become pregnant, or cause pregnancy. He also found that sexually active and experienced adolescents were more optimistic than sexually inexperienced adolescents. The average age of sexually active students was age 12, and 51% of the respondents believed that most people began having sex in middle school (Chapin, 2001, p. 55-56). These children know the possible negative consequences of engaging in sexual activity. Yet, 14% of respondents had engaged in sexual activity without a condom in the past 30 days.

Although Chapin admits that caution must be exercised in regards to his small sample size, implications for strategies in reducing risky behavior can be made. If an adolescent believes that he or she will not get pregnant or cause pregnancy, then awareness campaigns are useless. Sex education will not curb teenage pregnancy, whether emphasizing abstinence or contraceptive use. Chapin calls for personalized messages in which the audience can identify with others, and thus they feel that they share the risk of such behaviors. Although these approaches follow logically from his findings of optimistic bias, education might not be the answer in reducing teenage pregnancy, especially among impoverished populations.

There are also other factors that shed a considerable amount of light on single motherhood. For example, single mothers are also more likely to have experienced

significant amount of physical and sexual abuse. In *It takes a Nation*, Blank (1997), an established economist, cites research that found 60% of welfare recipients in Washington state reported past sexual and/or physical abuse, and there was a significant correlation between sexual abuse as a child and teen pregnancy. Blank (1997) also states that about half of teen mothers under the age of 17 were impregnated by older non-teen men. Thus, other avenues besides economic policy and sex education need to be taken into account to examine out-of-wedlock birth.

### **PRWORA Policies**

Although no argument can be made to refute the negative outcomes of teenage motherhood, there is insufficient evidence to indicate that the components of the 1996 Welfare Reform would decrease such negative behavior. Proponents of reducing illegitimacy through PRWORA argue their case through an economic rational choice model. The model is based on the idea that higher levels of state support would encourage women to bear children outside of marriage, while lower levels of TANF benefits persuade women to marry or sacrifice childbearing altogether. Yet one question remained unasked throughout the legislative process. Are teenagers actually rational actors? Will they truly change their decisions about teenage pregnancy because of policy-making? The preceding literature about teenage decision making clearly provides evidence that this is not the case.

As Kelly and Grant (2007) note, PRWORA did not successfully reduce the number of teenage pregnancies and subsequent births. First, PRWORA was enacted not only to reduce teenage pregnancy but also to reduce the number of abortions. Kelly and Grant (2007) examined the effects of state policies between 1996 and 2000 on rates of

abortion and nonmarital childbearing for teenagers and adult women. The researchers found that both the 2000 abortion rates as well as the 2000 rates of teenage unwed births were positively correlated to rates in 1996 for both teenage and adult women. PRWORA did not seem to affect these trends. Medicaid availability, informed consent laws, publicly funded contraception, and child support enforcement did not affect unwed births among teens. Thus, the economic disincentives incorporated within TANF do not appear to have an effect on nonmarital teen childbirth. Other factors are clearly playing a part in a woman's decision to have a child out of wedlock.

Blank (2002) also researched the effects PRWORA had on fertility changes. In *Evaluating welfare reform in the United States*, Blank finds that post-TANF, more children live with married parents as well as more children living in foster care. Although there are various explanations for this finding, one argument could be that some mothers are no longer able to care for their children after welfare reform. Haskins (2006) admits that there was a rise in the number of persons in deep poverty. The poorest single-mother families are actually worse off after welfare reform. The increase in the number of mothers in deep poverty, and thus PRWORA itself, pushed more children into foster care. Blank (2002) also examines the effects family caps have had on teenage childbearing. Family caps deny any increase in benefits to welfare recipients who have more children outside of marriage. Of the various literature that she examines, Blank was unable to make any concrete evaluations. Some literature found small evidence that family caps reduced the amount of out-of-wedlock births, while other studies found no correlation between family caps and reduction in illegitimacy. Blank calls for more



research on the subject, yet early evidence indicates that PRWORA had little to no effects on teenage childbirth.

All of the preceding evidence suggests that if enacted, Murray Light could have had disastrous effects on families headed by single mothers. Murray Light endorses the idea that all cash support should stop for unwed mothers. Legislators believed that such a negative consequence would curb the specific behavior of having out-of-wedlock children. However, past arguments provide evidence that a stronger 'punishment' for having children would not affect teenage pregnancy. Teenagers are not persuaded by policy. Murray, and a particular faction within Republican Party, were willing to cut off all support and thus substantially increase hardship for young unwed mothers and their children in an attempt to see if reducing welfare would reduce out-of-wedlock children. Fortunately, Democrats were not. Although persuasive arguments have been made in terms of justifying means for a particular end, there would not have been a successful end result for Murray Light. Illegitimacy rates would not be anymore reduced than they are now, but there would be an exponential increase in the number of mothers with children in deep poverty.

### **Educational Efforts**

PRWORA, and later the Bush Administration as well, have pushed for abstinence-only education programs. In 1996, the bill provided \$250 million over five years for programs promoting abstinence-only education, and has been increased to \$50 million per year in 2004. In 2005, approximately \$170 million will be spent on abstinence-only education, which promotes abstinence from sexual activity without teaching the facts about contraception (Committee on Government Reform, 2004).

Special Programs of Regional and National Significance (SPRANS) is the leading source of abstinence-only education, which provides federal grants to community-based organizations. By 2004, the program had over 100 grantees with over a \$75 million budget, and \$104 million was appropriated for the 2005 fiscal year. The Committee on Government Reform (2004) prepared a report at the request of Representative Henry Waxman and found that many of the abstinence-only education programs contained false, misleading, and/or distorted information about reproductive health (p. 3). The committee believes that “these programs have not been shown to protect adolescents from sexually transmitted diseases and youth who pledge abstinence are significantly less likely to make informed choices about precautions when they do have sex” (p. 4). The committee found that when virginity pledgees engage in sexual activity, they are likely to use contraception and seek STD and pregnancy testing. As a growing number of adolescents and teenagers engage in sexual activity, government policy should not be founded on the false reality that discouraging such behavior in schools will produce successful results. Many critics of abstinence-only programs have called for more comprehensive programs. However, are they anymore worthwhile?

As sex education increases within American schools, more and more adolescents understand the consequences of sexual activity as well as the necessity for contraceptives. However, these programs have not been effective in reducing the number of teen pregnancies. As the literature compiled by Chapin (2001) provides, adolescents think they are less likely than their peers to get pregnant or cause pregnancy. Initiatives to stop teenage sexual activity cannot come from sex education. Adolescents need to be influenced by their families, peers, and other institutions within their social networks that

promote pro-social behavior. The decision to stop engaging in sexual activity comes from other reasons than just knowing the negative consequences associated with it. Positive role models need to show them the correct ways to behave.

### **Child Support Enforcement**

Although most aspects concerning illegitimacy reduction were focused on economic-based disincentives, PRWORA encouraged the enforcement of child support orders, which some argued could be an incentive for non-marital births. This argument is more relevant for adult women since these fathers would be beyond school age and more likely to have a paid job. However, if child support enforcement did not seem to affect either age group's probability of having out-of-wedlock children, economic incentive/disincentive arguments would seem even more invalid. This is exactly what the research has shown (Kelly et al, 2007).

For males on the other hand, no data was available on whether increased child support affected the decision for boys and men to father children with teenage girls. However, Lynam, Capsi, Moffitt, Wikstrom, Loeber, and Novack (2000) found that adolescent boys do not take negative consequences into account for other risky behaviors. The researchers found neighborhoods to be an important moderator of the relation between impulsivity and juvenile offending, and it seems logical to assume that males from low income neighborhoods would not be taking child support into account during sexual activity either.

### **Powerful Influences Of Neighborhoods**

Young African American women have a much higher risk than white women of having children out-of-wedlock. Since there are more African American women on

welfare, some have argued that welfare benefits give these women an economic incentive to have children. However, the majority of the differences between the two races persist even when controlling for socioeconomic background and demographic status (South and Baumer, 2000). For example, Hogan and Kitagawa (1985) found that there were no significant differences in teen pregnancy rates between those in very affluent neighborhoods and middle-class neighborhoods. However, they did find that those living in low-SES neighborhoods were three times more likely to become pregnant, and half as likely to use a contraceptive when they first had sex. Such evidence suggests the strong influence one's neighborhood can have on behavior. The presence of impoverished neighborhoods, or lack of affluent neighborhoods, significantly increases the chances that adolescents will become teenage mothers, even when controlling for the SES of their families. South et al. (2000) found that black women live in neighborhoods that are considerably more disadvantaged than other racial groups. The average black woman within their study lived in a neighborhood where 33.4% of families were headed by females, with a non-elderly poverty rate of 27.4%. These women were almost four and half times more likely to have a teenage premarital birth than white women and the researchers found that the neighborhood socioeconomic status was significantly correlated to this risk (South et al., 2000). The SES of one's entire neighborhood seems just as, if not more relevant, than the SES of individuals and their families when investigating the causes of teen pregnancy. Clearly, impoverished neighborhoods affect African American birthrates.

To examine why high-poverty neighborhoods affect teenage pregnancy, Moore and Chase-Lansdale (2001) used data from three high-poverty neighborhoods on the

south side of Chicago. They found that girls who had experienced a pregnancy reported less social support from neighbors and fewer positive peer influences. The researchers also conclude that the presence of nonworking adults within the teenager's social network increases the risk of pregnancy. Adolescents within low-quality neighborhoods are much more likely themselves to grow up in single-mother families, another contributor to teenage pregnancy. Increasing successful role models in the neighborhood can have positive effects on adolescents. Neighborhoods can affect family structure as well. For example, Moore et al. (2001) found evidence to indicate that teenagers living in a married versus single-mother household had a 62% lower chance of engaging in sexual activity, yet had a 51% greater chance of engaging in such behavior in cohabitating versus single-mother households. These findings support the idea of collective socialization, a theory first introduced by William Julius Wilson (1987). Wilson, an accomplished sociologist, argues that the positive impact of successful neighborhood role models and the importance of parental supervision greatly impact adolescent behavior. Single-mothers do not have as much time to monitor their children's behaviors as two-parent households do. This in turn can lead to a cycle of single-parent motherhood. If the mother cannot supervise the child's behavior due to the lack of co-parenting, the child is more likely to become sexually active, increasing the chances of teenage pregnancy. Moore et al.'s (2001) findings on cohabitation also imply the effects parents have on modeling behavior, since cohabitation represent a model of non-marital sexual behavior. Since PRWORA clearly failed to promote marriage among low-income families, the focus needs to be turned to neighborhood and family role modeling to change adolescents' behavior.

Teenage childbearing is not an individual-based problem. By examining the neighborhood effects, Crane (1990) determined that many social problems within extremely poor neighborhoods spread almost like epidemics. He found that when a social problem, like dropping out of school or teenage pregnancy, reaches a certain point, it explodes within the community. These explosions are common occurrences within ghetto neighborhoods. Social problems increase as the neighborhood declines, but not at a constant rate. The prevalence of a problem is amplified for neighborhoods of the poorest quality. Crane found that there were sharp jumps in drop out rates and teenage pregnancies for both blacks and whites in the worst neighborhoods that he sampled (1990). In particular, the jumps occurred at the same point in all of the neighborhoods he examined, where approximately only 4% of workers held high status jobs (professional or managerial). Crane's (1990) results indicate that teenage pregnancy can spread through poor neighborhood and family role models. Adolescents who do not see neighborhood adults obtaining success are significantly more likely to become pregnant. These adolescents are unable to achieve an identity of mastery and self-efficacy when they have no positive role models to guide them through the process.

Individuals trying to combat teen pregnancy through cash support, food stamps, and job training will not address the current social problems that undermine adolescents' self-efficacy. Family modeling is not possible without neighborhood change either. If neighborhood institutions do not function, individually focused programs will not affect behavior. Neighborhood effects clearly need to be addressed when finding interventions in reducing teenage pregnancy. Efforts should not start after adolescents have already dropped out of school either. Programs are needed that "address problems of

peer pressure and lack of family control” (Blank, 1997, p. 283). Large areas of teenage life revolve around social and family factors. Public policy cannot affect these realms in ways that are currently being implemented.

Children look within their social networks for role models and their behavior is subsequently affected. Clearly, social capital and community participation are important in combating teen pregnancy. Teen pregnancy should not be examined on the micro-individual level but needs to be investigated through the various connections adolescents have to neighborhood institutions and groups. Attachment to these establishments regulates behavior in positive ways. Yip, Subramanian, Mitchell, Lee, Wang, & Kawachi (2006) conceptualize social ties at both individual and community levels, and emphasize social support and social cohesion. These bonds can be measured through structural dimensions, like membership in organizations and civic engagement, as well as cognitive dimensions, including trust and reciprocity between individuals. Increased social capital is associated with lower rates of mortality, self-reported poor health, violence, and increased mental health status (Yip et al., 2006). Many researchers argue that the social integration theory explains these phenomena. Rooted in Durkheim’s examination of suicide in the late 1800’s, the social integration theory emphasizes social contacts, and suggests that those who are socially isolated are at greater risks for mental disorders and participating in negative behavior (Cohen, Brissette, Skoner, & Doyle, 1996). As individuals integrate into society, they are more often subjected to social controls that promote healthy behaviors as well as reduce negative behavior like teen pregnancy.

Adolescents in ghetto neighborhoods are isolated, lack social controls and membership in positive organizations. They need to engage in trusting relationships

among peers and adults who can provide them with a sense of a healthy identity and strong bond. This can occur in an array of settings, including work, political activities, community activism, and friendship. Positive social interaction is associated with increased exploration of identity and leads to the most advanced form of identity development, identity achievement (McLean & Pratt, 2006). Researchers have found positive correlations between increased involvement in society with self-esteem, ability to form intimate relationships, make meaning of one's life, as well as negative associations with anxiety (McLean et al., 2006). If adolescents became more involved with positive group memberships, they would be more likely to abide by socially accepted norms and thus less likely to become a teenage mother. Unfortunately, males have been left out of the discussion all together. Because delinquency has also been linked to neighborhood causes, community strengthening activities would almost certainly have the same positive affects on boys' likelihood to engage in sexual activity as well. More research is clearly needed to examine the other underlying factors to male sexual activity as well as the benefits of community-based youth activism as a whole.

Adolescents, and especially ones from impoverished areas, are susceptible to identity crisis. When adolescents are not provided with positive role models, strong community institutions, or positive peer influence, they are unable to develop a strong successful identity. Blank summarizes the failure of government policy when she states,

It is important to recognize up front that there are only very limited ways by which government programs can affect teenagers. Our schools are clearly the primary public institution where public policy directly influences children and adolescents. But all of the scholarly research on teenage behavior indicates that it



is the family and peer environment that matters most. In this sense, government policy will always play a more distant and less effective role in influencing teenage behavior than it might for older adults. (Blank, 1997, p. 280)

Most neighborhood development efforts that achieve real changes are not created through government programs but initiated through local community organizations and institutions. Putting massive amounts of funds into one kind of sex education will not change teenage pregnancy rates. Believing that the problem stems solely from lack of knowledge is ignorant. However, government support for organizations that promote social engagement would be extremely beneficial. Various factors have to be dealt with all at once instead of focusing all attention on one source of the problem. Local school initiatives would be unproductive if adolescents are still isolated while outside of school. Although the emphasis on staying in school is extremely important, emphasis on prospective job opportunities might not provide teenagers with the tenacity to stop engaging in sexual activity. However, increasing the number of prospective jobs, especially high status jobs, for adults within their communities could be beneficial in creating better role models.

### **A Call for New Programs**

Adolescents from low-quality neighborhoods often believe that they are making a rational decision to have a child in relation to the opportunities they perceive. They believe childbirth will be a life-altering experience, and the most rewarding opportunity (Edin et al. 2005). When young females are unable to master skills and take pride in achievement, resulting in an identity crisis, they see motherhood as a way to make up for such inadequacies (Erikson, 1950). The most effective teen pregnancy programs

seemingly have little to do with adolescent sexual behavior directly. The private sphere of family and peer influences are much more important in changing teenage behavior than policies directed toward individual behavior.

Schools, family, communities, and meaningful bonds with others affect teen pregnancy. Creating a sense of community for impoverished teenagers might be one of the best solutions in increasing identity achievement and self-efficacy, thus resulting in more pro-social behavior. The following three sections outline specific proposals for action in reducing teen pregnancy. The first recognizes the importance of identifying with the institution of school, including parent and community involvement. Second, volunteer programs are recommended to increase self-efficacy and positive interactions with others. Lastly, mentoring programs are emphasized for their interpersonal nature, which is different from the school-identity initiatives and after school volunteer programs.

#### *Changing schools into communities*

As shown earlier, educational programs devoted to informing adolescents about the consequences of sexual activity are not very successful. However, the institute of school itself is extremely valuable in reducing teenage pregnancy. School is not just important for learning academic information. While in school, children develop a sense of identity, self-worth, bonds with peers, and even ties to the institution. Schools are a part of the child's community network that help shape who they will become. Research has shown that girls who believe education is important, and who have a sense of future opportunities are least likely to become teenage mothers (Blank, 1997). It is not what she learns in school, but that she feels positive towards the institution.

As adolescents develop, they become increasingly influenced by peers and less by parents. To steer adolescents away from the negative message that school is useless, something must be done to convince children that school is important. However, this cannot come from economic incentives geared toward focusing on future jobs. School-to-work programs, partnerships with private businesses for summer employment and mentoring opportunities, and curriculum linked to real-world situations are all intended to create an effective learning environment that makes teenagers want to stay in school (Blank, 1997). However, adolescents do not base their decisions on economic incentives, such as future careers, that are so far away from their current experience. This is particularly true when the adults within their social networks are not successful, productive workers either. Having a strong bond to the school and education in general are far more important to keeping teenagers in school than trying to convince them of the economic benefits of education.

Strong bonds to school serve as a protective factor against behaviors that violate socially accepted standards. The social development model hypothesizes that when social groups exhibit strong bonds of attachment and commitment, clear standards for behavior are promoted and members are less likely to violate them (Hawkins, Catalano, Kosterman, Abbott, & Hill, 1999). Specific factors are more likely to increase the development of a student's bond to school, such as increasing the availability for the whole family to establish a relationship with the school, giving children the skills they need to participate in positive social groups, and offering positive reinforcements to children in response to their behavior in these groups (Hawkins et al., 1999). In the longitudinal study, Hawkins et al. (1999) implemented intervention programs by training

teachers to promote bonding to school, teaching parents to promote bonding of family to the school, and gave children training in skills for social interaction that should increase the child's positive attitude toward school. Their results indicate that the control group had engaged in more sexual intercourse, had an increased pregnancy rate, had higher rates of violence, and frequent drinking. The full intervention group reported more commitment to the school, less school misbehavior, and better academic achievement (Hawkins et al. 1999). Undoubtedly, creating an atmosphere that establishes a relationship between the family and school, as well as promoting a child's social interactions while there, reduce teen pregnancy.

Disadvantaged adolescents feel less social support and less positive peer influence. Neighborhoods only exacerbate the problem. Children without ties to positive social groups have no deterrents to behave negatively. Schools are important in adolescents' lives and can develop identity and pro-social behavior when other aspects of their social networks are lacking. Bonds promote healthy behavior. When adolescents are linked to an institution, impoverished individuals develop a sense of identity that often goes undeveloped. Strong ties to schools exhibit promising results.

Knowledge is Power Programs, also known as KIPP Schools, are a promising start. KIPP schools are committed to helping low-income children. More than 80% of KIPP students are eligible for the free and reduced-price meal program, and there is an 80% college matriculation rate for students who complete the 8<sup>th</sup> grade at KIPP (KIPP, 2008). First, the program has high expectations. Students, parents, and teachers must all sign commitment to excellence contracts that ensure the creation of meaningful bonds to the institution. For example, family members must agree with the statement,

We will always make ourselves available to our children and the school, and address any concerns they might have. This also means that if our child is going to miss school, we will notify the teacher as soon as possible, and we will carefully read any and all papers that the school sends home to us (KIPP, 2008). This type of program makes sure that families stay involved in their children's education. Students spend 60% more time at school than the average public school student, yet because students and families *choose* to participate, they have a daily attendance rate of 96%. In the 2005-2006 school year, 100% of KIPP 8<sup>th</sup> graders outperformed their district in mathematics and reading. This type of school should be modeled after. Students are committed to the institution, develop social and academic skills to succeed, and gain self-efficacy. Although KIPP has not been linked to reduction in teenage pregnancy, future research should be conducted to discover the relationship between KIPP and reduction of negative behavior.

When committed to their education, adolescents are more likely to engage in pro-social behavior, and they are more likely to stay in school. Although KIPP schools are ways to strengthen these ties, schools will not be able to provide children with everything they need to succeed without changing adolescents' environments outside of school as well. Community-based programs are needed as well.

### *Volunteering*

Volunteerism is another avenue individuals can take to integrate into society while also increasing one's social capital and self-efficacy. Volunteering enables individuals to join organizations that not only need their help, but also provide social support, trust, and reciprocity, which are all qualities that strengthen bonds towards

organizations as well as to the individuals involved. Research has shown that volunteering for community-based programs can produce positive long-term outcomes, such as reduced morbidity and mortality (Dutta-Bergman, 2004). Volunteering can enhance various aspects of one's life as well: happiness, life-satisfaction, self-esteem, sense of control over life, physical health, and decreased depression and alienation (Thoits and Hewitt, 2001). Adolescents can develop trust, self-esteem, and bonds towards organizations its members that will deter teens from becoming pregnant.

Erikson's developmental theory (1963), described earlier, depicts adolescence as the phase of identity formation, and Erikson argues that late adolescence and early adulthood are key periods for the crystallization of critical psychological dimensions that usually remain stable through adulthood. Thus, it is during adolescence where personality traits and particular behaviors form that can stay with them for a lifetime. Volunteering should not be seen as something one does during retirement. It has long lasting effects which can be even more pronounced during an adolescent's identity development. Research concerning youth volunteerism has increased enormously over the years, and many researchers have hypothesized that volunteering during this time in one's life might increase the likelihood that one would volunteer later in life as well (Johnson et al., 1998). Current literature is consistent with the hypotheses that youth volunteerism is likely to increase investment in one's communities as an adolescent as well as in adulthood. With literature like this in mind, the National Community Service Trust Act delegated \$30 million to fund community service programs for school-age youth (Johnson et al., 1998).

Historically, volunteers without disadvantages have been recruited to assist in services for those from impoverished backgrounds. There has been relatively no research exploring the effects volunteering has on individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, thus there is relatively little evidence that volunteering reduces teenage pregnancy.

However, Miller, Schleien, Brooke, Frisoli, & Brooks (2005) examined the implications of volunteering as a therapeutic tool and asked,

If we enjoy volunteering in our free time, as millions of Americans do, why as therapeutic recreation practitioners are more of us not supporting and facilitating volunteerism for those we work with in the same manner as we do arts and crafts, sports, and outdoor recreation activities? (Miller et al., 2005, p. 19)

Miller et al. (2005) found that volunteers with disabilities showed increased social interactions, belief in self, sense of responsibility, and sense of empowerment.

Ramirez-Valles, Fergus, Reisen, Poppen, and Zea (2005) found that community involvement was negatively associated with loneliness of HIV-positive gay men, and assert that involvement may offset the negative effects of depression as well. If community service can positively affect other at-risk populations, impoverished teens should be able to gain the same benefits that act as protective factors against teen pregnancy. Other researchers have asked similar questions and believe participation in social service and community organizations buffers the negative effects of poverty, homophobia, and racism (Hall, 2003).

Although legislatures have begun to realize the positive effects volunteering can have for adolescents, there is not any literature that links civic engagement to disadvantaged youth, and teenage pregnancy reduction has not been considered either.

However, volunteerism is a very valuable tool when providing therapeutic services to individuals in need. All of the positive effects that have been associated with volunteering, such as social support, identity achievement, sense of control over one's life, and links to the larger society, all reduce teenage pregnancy. Volunteering has also been found to strengthen intrinsic work values, importance of community involvement, senior-year educational plans, and academic self-esteem, factors that have all been linked to teenage pregnancy as well (Johnson et al., 1998). As the previous literature has indicated, impoverished females have less social support, less positive peer influence, more nonworking adults in their social network, and less likely to be living in a married household. Volunteering could be an avenue for both males and females to buffer these negative effects. Thus, there is a dire need for more research to identify the links between volunteering and teenage pregnancy. Once there is enough literature to support these claims, there will be greater opportunity for communities to enhance adolescents' bonds with positive organizations and role models.

Johnson et al. (1998) are certain that at the very least, volunteering encourages youth to become invested in their communities, and it gives them an opportunity to “foster relationships with civic-minded adults and peers, and promote pro-social norms” (p. 326). Volunteering can reduce the feelings of alienation and isolation within at-risk youth, feelings that have been proven to increase negative behaviors. Teenagers who are struggling at home and at school are more likely to become pregnant. Volunteering can become an avenue that others view as worthwhile and impressive. Disadvantaged youth would benefit the most from such community service since they are often lack ways of connecting and feeling like a productive and valued member of society (Allen, Seitz, &



Appel, 2002). Adolescents and young adults should be encouraged to participate together in ways that promote connections with others. Community service can enhance healthy behavior for successful achievement in school and the ability to attain life-long goals. Teens can take on new roles, and gain responsibility to develop self-efficacy so that they no longer shy away from challenging tasks. Once adolescent girls realize their own potential, they will no longer see early motherhood as their only available option. It also takes adolescents into an environment where they can be monitored so that they are not left alone when their parents are unable to supervise.

Known to date, there has been only organization that has been linked to reduction of teen pregnancy. The Teen Outreach Program, although designed to enhance adolescents' overall psychosocial development, has actually been shown to reduce teen pregnancy by 50% compared to a control group, an astounding feat (Allen et al., 2002). This organization represents the exact kinds of models that have been presented in producing positive outcomes for adolescents throughout this paper. The organization works with high school youth, linking "regular community volunteer work to classroom-based discussions of life skills and life options" (Allen et al., 2002). The staff members and youth alike do not recognize the program as teenage pregnancy prevention, but the underlying mechanism are successful in intervening before adolescents make mistakes that last a lifetime. The research also found that youth who were most at risk at the beginning of the program actually received the greatest benefits, reinforcing the importance civic engagement can have on disadvantaged youth. Allen et al. (2002) theorize that self-efficacy improvements, sense of autonomy, and connections to other

adults and students enhance their social developmental, which in turns reduces teenage pregnancy.

### *Mentoring*

There are other ways to increase positive social integration as well. For example, Big Brothers Big Sisters is a youth mentoring organization that is dedicated to developing positive relationships. Big brothers and sisters mentor children from the ages 6 to 18 in communities across the country. Although this organization focuses on one to one interactions, it could potentially have the same effects as civic engagement. For example, research done by the organization indicates that “littles” are 46% less likely to use illegal drugs, 27% less likely to use alcohol, and 52% less likely to skip school. The ties the adolescents make to their mentor is so strong that it can have remarkable outcomes (Big Brothers Big Sisters, <http://www.bbbs.org>). Such findings are extremely powerful. The organization prides itself on such findings and believe the findings are due to the fact that

what mattered to the children was not the activities, but the fact that they had a caring adult in their lives. Because they had someone to confide in and to look up to, they were, in turn, doing better in school and at home. The Littles were also avoiding violence and substance abuse at a pivotal time in their lives when even small changes in behavior, or choices made, can change the course of their future.

(Big Brothers Big Sisters, <http://www.bbbs.org>)

This belief is exactly what Yip et al. (2006) were arguing when they discussed the impact of trust and reciprocity in relation to social integration. Adolescents who lack social ties can significantly benefit from even just one person. Thus, it is not the act of volunteering that will produce such positive outcomes, but the act of creating social ties and positive

relationships with other people that will reduce teen pregnancy. Sports, clubs, band, mentor programs, as well as an array of other organizations, all promote healthy bonds to something outside of the individual which will reduce unacceptable behavior like teenage pregnancy.

### **Conclusion**

The increase in teenage sexual activity, STDs, and pregnancy are a great concern within the United States, and are rightly so. The negative consequences are astounding. Teenage mothers and their children are more likely to live in poverty and be on welfare. The children of single teenage mothers are more likely to develop cognitive and academic problems, and they are more likely to become teenage parents themselves. Everyone should be concerned with reducing the number of out-of-wedlock births. However, PRWORA clearly was not successful in doing so, and reasons for its lack of success are evident. Teenagers do not base their decisions on economic incentives/disincentive government policy or on sex education, the two main focuses of reducing illegitimacy within current government policy.

The three types of programs proposed, school-identity, after school programs that emphasize shared volunteering, and interpersonal mentoring programs, are all worth exploring. These three types of organizations are exactly the types of solutions to the negative effects neighborhoods can have on adolescents. When children feel connected to their school, community, and society at large, they are more likely to develop the skills necessary to look towards future success. Adolescents feel a sense of mastery, increased self-esteem, achieve better in school, create bonds with more positive role models, and have a stronger tie to their community. Community volunteering can make adolescents

feel like a valued member of society. Big Brothers Big Sisters is an organization that clearly provides evidence of the importance even one positive role model, and thus one strong bond, can have on adolescents. KIPP schools are making differences in many children's lives. More organizations like the Teen Outreach Program are out there, and there are strong implications that all of these organization reduces teen pregnancy. Inquiries into this speculation are needed. Linking teenage pregnancy reduction to these three types of programs is still very speculative, and hardly no attempts have been made to uncover the magnitude these programs can have on adolescent behavior. However, concentrating on programs that increase social integration and self-efficacy look very promising.

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