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Teen Mothers and Welfare Reform: Challenging the Boundaries of Risk

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Foreword

Although much of the debate about the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) focused on tenets of welfare to work, the legislation also argued for policies encouraging marriage while discouraging nonmarital births. Teen mothers were of particular concern as policy makers perceived a link between teenage childbearing to welfare receipt. The discussion is ongoing as Congress prepares for the reauthorization of welfare reform. This report seeks to reframe the concept of “at-risk” teen mothers by looking to the socially construction of boundaries – an imagery that brings to the forefront the complex relations between young mothers and welfare reform policies. From this standpoint, we briefly discuss how welfare reform might address the multiple issues facing teen mothers including housing, education and training, child care, transportation, health, healthy relationships and parenting skills. We suggest that if policy makers understood how all of these issues impact teen parents, we would see policies and programming that truly supports young mothers as they move between the boundaries of social policy, community, and their personal lives.

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People think of them [urban girls] as a girl who gets pregnant easy. And who doesn't care or anything, who's just a loser, so they say. But then there's one thing they have to watch is not to let people think they're like that... It depends on how you present yourself. If you present yourself like what people think of you, well then they're not going to know who you are.

Pilar, a Hispanic urban adolescent girl
(Taylor, 1996, p. 123)

For decades, policymakers have been concerned about teenage childbearing and the perceived link to welfare receipt. The belief that access to welfare benefits encouraged young women to have children out of wedlock was reflected in provisions of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) that were designed to reduce teen and nonmarital births. Mandated policy initiatives included restrictions of benefits to unwed teen parents under age 18 who were not residing with a parent/guardian and were not attending school, a federally funded abstinence education program (focusing on abstinence from sex, not birth control or family planning), and bonuses to the five states that ranked highest in reducing nonmarital births while also decreasing abortion rates. States were required to outline how they intended to reduce out-of-wedlock pregnancies, specifically teen pregnancies, while also educating state and local criminal law enforcement officials on the prevention and prosecution of statutory rape. Similar initiatives are again central to the discussion surrounding the 2002 reauthorization of the welfare legislation. President George Bush has already announced that substantial funds will be set aside for programs that encourage marriage as well as reduced nonmarital births by welfare recipients, including younger mothers.

These policies are partially in response to statistics reporting that nearly half of all teen mothers apply for welfare benefits within five years after becoming a parent. Prior to enactment of the 1996 legislation, the majority of young mothers who went on welfare stayed on the rolls for at least two years with many remaining much longer (Gleason, Rangarajun, & Schochet, 1998). Although teen parents comprised only a small proportion of welfare recipients at any given time, 55 percent of all welfare recipients were single women who had given birth as teenagers (Wertheimer & Moore, 1998). While the majority of these young women cycled on and off welfare more than once, they did spend an average of 8 to 10 years on welfare rolls over their lifetimes (Ellwood, 1988).

In recent years there have been significant declines in both teen pregnancies and birth rates resulting in the lowest levels since such statistics were collected. The rate of teen childbearing in the United States has declined from the late 1950s from an all time high rate of 96 births per 1,000 young women

aged 15 to 19 in 1957 to a recorded all time low of 49 in 2000. Birthrates fell steadily throughout the 1960s and 1970s, were fairly steady in the early 1980s and then rose sharply between 1988 and 1991 before declining throughout the 1990s. Yet, there are still many young women becoming parents – approximately 500,000 per year and there are still over 100,000 second or higher order repeat births to teen mothers (Ventura et al., 2000a, 2000b). Although teen childbearing overall has declined steeply, the proportion of all nonmarital teen births has increased equally dramatically, from 13 percent in 1950 to 79 percent in 2000 (Boonstra, 2000).

Birthrates rise and fall as a result of changes in the rate at which women become pregnant, resolve their pregnancies in abortion, or a combination of both. It should be noted, however, that declining teen birthrates, at least in recent years, are not the result of an increased abortion rate. After rising through the 1970s and holding fairly constant during the 1980s, teen abortion rates began a steady decline. By 1997, the rate was 28 abortions per 1,000 women age 15 to 19 years or 33 percent lower than the rate a decade earlier. Recent declines in teen birthrates are attributable to reductions in pregnancy rates that can be attributed to an improved contraceptive use among teens that are sexually active as opposed to relying on abortion as a measure of birth control (Boonstra, 2000).

Teen childbearing is important because it affects not only a mother's life but also her child's. The majority of teen parents do not have the economic or social resources to provide for themselves or their children. As many as 60 percent of teen mothers are living below the poverty level and upwards of 80 percent will turn to welfare for support for at least some portion of the time following the birth of their child (Maynard, 1993). Children of young parents may be in poor health, experience less stimulating and supportive home environments, be abused or neglected, have difficulty in school, become teenage parents themselves, and be incarcerated during young adulthood, when compared with children of older parents (Boyer & Fine, 1990; Maynard, 1996).

While recognizing that teen mothers face many barriers as they raise their children, we suggest that future welfare reform initiatives directed toward young mothers and welfare need to be set in a different context than the current policy debate that is framed by the concept of "at-risk." We are concerned that the risk discourse is dangerous because the uncertainties and the contingencies of human behaviors and dispositions and interactions in complex settings tend to be objectively, scientifically and critically identified. Various programs and interventions are then proposed to address the problems noted by the analysis. The question often becomes one of how to regulate, police, house, educate, or employ teen mothers, or prevent them from becoming involved in any number of risky practices, sexual in the case of welfare receipt (Kelly, 2000). Concern arises when teen mothers are categorized first, by these at-risk behaviors and second, by their success or failure based on their response to the offered interventions. The focus is then on the young mother, not on the context of their lives or the reform initiatives developed and implemented.

Thus, rather than focus on a deficit model of behavior, this paper seeks to reframe the concept of "at-risk" teen mothers by looking to the socially construction of boundaries – an imagery that brings to the forefront the complex relations between young mothers and welfare reform policy. We have argued elsewhere (Miranne & Young, 2000) that boundaries are complex structures that establish differences and commonalities between individuals and groups. Questions to ask include: under what conditions are the boundaries or welfare policy visible or invisible? What does it mean to be "bounded"? How might teen mothers they resist, (re)configure, and (re)construct the boundaries they encounter? What occurs at the intersection(s) among multiple boundaries? We are interested in how teen mothers might negotiate the boundaries established by welfare reform. We then discuss how rethinking welfare policy

from the standpoint of boundaries has implications for welfare reform reauthorization efforts.

Constructing Teen Mothers At-Risk

There is a vast literature on children, youth and families at-risk. Kelly (2000) identifies two major streams of concern appearing in this at-risk discourse; the first focusing on interventions grounded in concerns about harm, danger, care, and support for those who might be considered at-risk. The second approach argues that there is an economic cost to at-risk behavior and by identifying risk factors and populations at-risk, certain interventions can be mobilized to assess and mitigate the costs to communities and the nation as a whole. Discussions on welfare reform by policymakers point to both perspectives by outlining risky behaviors that are thought to lead to teenage childbearing such as early sexual activity, multiple sexual partners, lack of contraceptive use, and alcohol/drug use. Interventions/programs (often framed by sanction and negative reinforcement) are directed toward changing behavior. There is also concern by many about the actual costs of welfare receipt supported by public dollars. It is this reduction in costs that legislators hail as the benchmark of success of welfare reform. For this reason alone, it is doubtful that policymakers will be swayed from their emphasis on discouraging teenage child bearing and potential welfare long-term dependency.

Although it is important to recognize the multitude of factors that impact teen mothers and their children, we caution that placing them into a category separate from other adolescents leads to labels such as deviant, delinquent and deficit. Adolescence is a difficult time for most girls, even those who have a strong safety net of family and friends. The physical changes of puberty coincide with enormous emotional and psychological changes. During this time, teen girls begin to pull away from their families, identify more with their peers, redefine their relationships with the adults in their world, explore their sexuality, develop their own moral and ethical sense, and begin preparing for the responsibilities and challenges of adulthood (Brooks-Gunn & Reiter, 1990).

The continual focus on teen mothers and their sexuality by policymakers again ignores the behavior of all adolescent women. The initiation of sexual intercourse during the teenage years has become the norm in our society; more than 8 in 10 adolescents have had intercourse by the time they are 20. Since marriage in the teenage years is now rare, most adolescent sexual activity occurs outside marriage. As sex has become more common at younger ages, differences in sexual activity among teenagers of different income levels have narrowed considerably. For example, while 60 percent of poor women aged 15-19 are sexually experienced, so are 53 percent of low-income adolescents and 50 percent of higher income teenagers.¹ In addition, approximately 60 percent of low-income female adolescents and about 75 percent of higher income teenage girls use some method of contraception on an ongoing basis. Pregnancy is more common among lower income teenagers because they are somewhat more likely than higher income adolescents to be sexually active and somewhat less likely to use contraceptives or to use them successfully. Poor and low-income adolescents account for 73 percent of women aged 15-19 who become pregnant, even though they comprise only 38 percent of all women in that age group (Guttmacher Institute, <http://www.aji-usa.org>).

Policymakers thus know much about adolescents' rates of sexual activities, contraceptive use, and pregnancies. The problem is that these behaviors are collapsed into a category of sexual deviancy and not understood to be a stage in the psychological process of adolescent development (Leadbetter & Way, 1996). In other words, "adolescent sexuality is defined as an initiation of sexual intercourse rather than in terms of the meanings various aspects of sexuality have for adolescents (Tolman, 1996, p. 257).

Along with others, we argue for further research that addresses the psychological health and development of adolescent girls, reflects a different portrayal of girls when compared to boys, and recognizes how conventional research methods often marginalize the voices of girls (Gilligan, 1982; Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990; Sherif, 1992). Evaluating risk in the context of the actual life experiences of girls would move the debate away from current stereotypes and risk statistics.

We also argue that the current welfare system isolates teen mothers who receive welfare benefits. They are set apart from other welfare recipients by virtue of the responsibilities required of them by the system and because their behavior is to be tightly controlled by the state. Starting from a point of disadvantage, they are painted in a negative light as the reason for them requesting assistance in the first place is due to promiscuity that led to child birth. Labeled as being at-risk shapes the language used by the state to even address the interventions mandated by welfare reform. This is perhaps because the model for policy and programming is modeled on the field of medicine, a discipline that has been concerned with the identification of factors that accentuate or inhibit disease and deficiency status, along with the processes that underlie them. Risk factors are those that an individual may be exposed to (vulnerability) or are those that can be overcome and lead to positive adaptive behaviors (resiliency). The danger in the discussion of vulnerability is that it makes the individual a potential victim and failure to accomplish goals of resiliency reflect back to the individual, not the system.

Sexual deviancy and at-risk behavior is also associated with a specific geography, notably poor, urban communities. The 1996 welfare reform legislation accepted an explanation of poverty based on gender, race, unemployment, and the urban environment. Additional support for this basis comes from the classification of minority populations (predominantly African Americans) residing in inner-city neighborhoods into the category “urban underclass.”² Certainly, young girls growing up in impoverished communities confront multiple barriers: family and neighborhood intense and chronic poverty, crime and violence, inadequate educational resources, few community institutions that can contribute to cultural or personal growth, and peers who may be in gangs or who themselves are young mothers. What we are concerned about is the assumption that any adolescent female from these communities must automatically be at-risk. The impulse is then to construct and calculate risk scenarios that circle back to become the underpinnings of policy and program response. What we are seeing is a projection of negative future events based upon presumed association to demographics and space.

Rather than focus on teenage childbearing as the primary cause of problems faced by young mothers and their children, we should look to the disadvantages that teen mothers often bring with them as these also contribute to poorer economic and social outcomes. Simply changing a woman’s age at first birth does not necessarily change these other conditions (Hoffman 1998). Beyond an academic debate of causality or correlation, this premise has policy implications. If welfare reform initiatives are to make a difference in the lives and futures of teen mothers, we need to know where, when, and how interventions should be introduced. The difficulty lies in how we translate these experiences into knowledge that is accessed and accepted by policy makers. If successful, the picture painted of teen mothers would be considerably different than what is presented today.

Crossing Boundaries

The concept of boundary is one that allows us to look conceptually and methodologically at the socially constructed relations between teen mothers and the welfare state and between teen mothers and community. The policies of welfare reform use rules and regulations that must be rigidly followed if cash benefits and support services are to be received. In this way, teen mothers are kept inside the

boundaries of policy. Policy makers may actually see this as being positive because this offers an opportunity for interventions that might modify behavior of teen mothers, specifically if “being bounded” reduces repeat teen pregnancies. On the other hand, young mothers may see this as restrictive and look for ways to maneuver around and through these boundaries.

Boundaries are multiple and intersecting, provisional and shifting while also enabling – a process that creates enclaves of similarity and support (see Miranne & Young, 2000, pp. 1-16). The construction of welfare reform boundaries also allows for the sharing of individual or collective survival strategies. For example, young mothers attending a high school for parenting teens (thus meeting the requirement that they be in school) may gain support for completing their studies from classmates who are in similar circumstances. Or, they may find having child care on-site allows them to visit their children during the day and to participate in parenting classes or other parenting activities. In this way, the boundaries of welfare reform are nurturing and supportive.

Boundaries can also be intersections or points where teen mothers are poised to enter a new territory. Policy makers want to see young mothers complete their high school education and enter the job market (and leave the welfare rolls). Many young women may prefer to leave welfare and enter the different “world” of work. Others, however, may want to pursue other options such as higher education or specialized job training. For them, manipulating the boundaries of welfare rules will allow them to use cash benefits and support services in conjunction with other resources including part-time earnings, help from family, etc. Still other teen mothers will continue to hover along the boundaries of welfare because they have not completed school, found a full time position, or may be pregnant again.

Borders in place and space are inseparable from social boundaries – boundaries that we define to be the formations of identity and the production of difference (Miranne & Young, 2000, p. 7). The majority of these young mothers reside in neighborhoods that have reduced resources within limited locales. Even though the communities may be poor in assets, they are often rich in the resources of family, friends, and institutions such as the church. Here is where teens are mentored as young parents and as young adults. Here is where they also develop networks that can be action-oriented, connecting to child care providers for example. Where policy makers may see constraints (poverty, lack of jobs, behaviors they do not want young mothers to emulate), young mothers and their children can find the spatial boundaries of their lives to be enabling precisely because of the “rootedness” of their communities (Gilbert, 2000).

Finally, the providers of welfare services rarely cross over boundaries to meet young women on their own ground. Adults usually approach teen mothers with the intention of saving or controlling them. Language from legislation is couched in these terms. Teen mothers, however, do not need to be passive agents – even at their young age they recognize the power relations between women and the state. The challenge for them is how to move within the margins, between categories, and how to build connections (Miranne, 2000). The very existence of these networks is a tribute to an ability to create opportunities (see Stack, 1974).

Implications for Supportive Programming and Services

As already noted, the legislative debate on the reauthorization of the 1996 welfare reform legislation is already focusing on teenage and nonmarital childbearing, marriage and the link to welfare receipt. Social conservatives support programs and policies promoting marriage and encouraging abstinence

from sexual intercourse outside of marriage for people of all ages. Others suggest that it would be more appropriate and more effective to concentrate on finding ways to sustain recent declines in teenage pregnancy and childbearing, since half of first nonmarital births are to teens and almost eight in 10 teen pregnancies are unintended (Boonstra, 2002). Whichever viewpoint is eventually adopted will have a major impact on the annual appropriation process and the trickle-down of responsibilities to the states.

If the past is any indication, reauthorization legislation will recommend that some framework of supportive services remain in place. Policy makers do understand that the transition from “dependency to self-sufficiency” requires assistance along the way. Young women often lack the social and psychological resources needed to manage parenting, employment, school, child care, and home life. Social welfare policy in this country emphasizes personal responsibility and so we expect teen mothers to take the lead in pursuing the opportunities that will help them “successfully transition” to adulthood. Access to support services is important but only if such interventions are flexible, adaptable and developed from an understanding that comes from the standpoint of teen mothers.

What follows is a brief discussion outlining various supports that would go a long way in supporting the efforts of teen mothers. Although each of these issues is addressed individually, they should all be linked together to provide a comprehensive and cohesive safety net for teen mothers and their children.

Adult Supervised Settings

The 1996 welfare reform legislation stated that in order to receive assistance, minor teen mothers and their children must live in the home of a parent, adult relative or guardian and must pursue a high school diploma or GED. Yet, it may not always be appropriate for a teen mother and her child(ren) to remain at home with her parents because there may be circumstances of abuse and neglect, overcrowding, or financial problems. They may not have other family, friends or other resources in place to help them meet the basic needs of shelter. Homeless shelters, battered women shelters, and transitional living programs do not always accept teens under the age of 17 nor do they often accept young children. Even placement in foster care does not guarantee that a mother and her child will remain together — placement is contingent on the availability of a trained foster care provider or group home that is willing to take both the teen and her child. Young mothers who are homeless come up against many of the same hurdles as young mothers in foster care, including poverty, barriers to education and other supports. Once homeless, 80 percent of homeless young mothers are unable to find long-term stable living arrangements (Levin-Epstein, 1999).³

Stable housing situations are thus critical if young mothers are going to be successful in pursuing the school and/or job training activities mandated by welfare rules. If they are worried every day about where to sleep, are concerned about their personal safety and that of their children, or are living in substandard housing they will most likely fail to thrive in other aspects of their lives. Never considered a responsibility of welfare provision, housing services should be added to the welfare equation for teen mothers and their children. Teen mothers need to have a variety of options available to them, including remaining in their own communities but with supports in place.

There are models of housing provision already in place. For example, Congress has responded to this concern by endorsing the concept of “Second Chance Homes.” Originally thought to be too expensive at the onset of welfare reform, this housing service is gaining renewed interest, especially as welfare

loads decrease and states are paying more attention to young women still in the system and second, states have welfare surpluses and are reviewing various options. What is unique about Second Chance Homes is that the facilities are designed to address the realities of teen mothers at the point that they enter the facility. While each home may differ in structure, they have three common elements: socialization, structure and discipline, and nurturing and support. Girls enter into a social contract and in doing so, they agree to stay in school or attend GED classes, help with household chores, stay drug free, and abide by curfews. Programs and classes help them learn anger/conflict management skills, how to manage money and how to parenting. In return, they live in a safe and protected place away from violence, including abusive boyfriends, receive help with child care and health care, and tutoring for school.

Unfortunately, Second Chance Homes are not in every community and even if they were, may not have enough spaces for all the teen mothers and their children in need or may not provide ready access. The program is new enough that evaluations are now just beginning but preliminary results are promising. This kind of thinking, based on the needs of young mothers themselves and that focuses on strength-building as opposed to sanction and negative reinforcement, is but one example of how welfare reform monies can be utilized to support the main tenets of reform for teen mothers – education and job training.

Education

Seven out of 10 teen parents drop out of school (Kaplan, 1997). In the past, sanctions and bonuses have been used to encourage school attendance with little success. Many young parents know education and skills training are important to their economic well-being. Yet, if we expect young parents to return to school, alternative programs must be in place to meet the needs of parenting teens, many of who had problems with traditional schooling even before they became pregnant. This would include a variety of options such as GED preparation programs and high schools for pregnant/parenting teens that provide onsite child care services. The latter service is important because present welfare policy requires teen parents to return to school within three months of giving birth. Having child care readily available (and perhaps with associated parenting classes) could be an important factor in encouraging teen mothers to return to school.

At the same time, we must not assume that staying in school will be the only factor guaranteeing that young mothers are able to enter the work force without difficulty. Remaining in school has been shown to be associated with lower first-birth rates to teens, and both staying in school and living with parents have been shown to be associated with lower second-birth rates to teens. Research has not yet established whether either staying in school or living at home causes the rate of first or repeat teen births to be lower. In addition, welfare reform interventions that target school attendance and employment do not necessarily maximize the likelihood of well-being, an important social goal for teen mothers and their children.

On another level, we suggest that the idea of what comprises education for young mothers needs to be reevaluated. Teen mothers do need to learn basic educational concepts so that they can function in today's society. But if we truly want young women to understand how to seek the best options and alternatives available, we need to look to the issue of literacy. Subban and Young (2000) see literacy as a significant way in which individuals can make meaning of their daily experiences and of the events in the world(s) around them. They define literacy as a process that is grounded in the cultural and concrete reality of a community, that seeks to develop the human resources and competencies of a community, and reconstitutes and/or enhances feelings of self-worth, empowerment and self-acceptance

among community members (p. 93). The impediment of low literacy levels can keep teen mothers from obtaining good-paying jobs, nurturing their children, and establishing relationships. There are programs nationwide (such as the Toyota Families For Learning program) that have proven to be successful in helping young mothers become more literate while expanding their vision of how they can be good providers, good mothers, and active members in their community. Accepting participation in programs such as in lieu of traditional education would require policy makers to understand that being at-risk has a much broader definition than lacking a high school degree. Focusing on literacy versus education is a strength-based model that incorporates skills that young women need to become strong adults.

Child Care

Access to adequate, dependable, and affordable child care must be in place in order for teen mothers to attend school, job training, or to go to work. Beyond accessing care services, teen mothers need to be given assistance in evaluating developmentally sound and consistent child care. Almost one million additional toddlers and preschoolers are in child care setting due to their mothers leaving welfare and entering the labor market (Lewin, 2000). Finding child care for infants is a challenge for mothers of all ages, and the majority of teen mothers will be seeking care for the youngest of children. Thus child care services should be linked to schools and other educational settings to help address the issues of quality and accessibility.

Preliminary statements about reauthorization suggest that additional subsidized child care funds will remain at the same levels as before even as work requirements increase to 40 hours per week. If this is the case, the competition for subsidized slots will increase and poor women will be competing among themselves for services. States need to streamline the payment process so that child care providers that accept the subsidy can be assured that they will be paid in a timely manner. Otherwise, we may find supply even more constricted as providers opt not to accept subsidies.

Transportation

Transportation is an issue for many poor women, and teen parents are no different. Most teen parents do not own cars (some are too young to drive) and so depend on others to help them get to school, job training, work, doctor's offices, to shopping areas, etc. Public transportation may not be available or be difficult and time-consuming to use. Possible responses include arranging van or carpool services, using other government-funded transportation services or allowing teen mothers and their children to use school district funded busses (Kaplan, 1997). Providing transportation may be a way to guarantee that teen mothers actually do attend school, etc. on a regular basis.

Adolescent Health

Every year approximately 3 million teenagers contract a sexually transmitted disease (STD). The risk factors include HIV (1 percent), genital herpes (30 percent) and gonorrhea (50 percent). Other diseases include chlamydia and human papillomavirus (Guttmacher Institute, 1999). Young mothers need to be informed of all health issues that impact them as women including basic preventative care. Understanding of their own health care needs will lead to a better understanding of the basic preventative health services that their children need.

The ability to make decisions about whether and when to have a child is an essential prerequisite to

taking charge of one's life. It is important that poor teenagers have easy access to comprehensive family planning and abortion services that would enable them to avoid unintended pregnancies and unwanted births. There should also be a special focus on post-natal care with an emphasis on the impact of subsequent births (Kaplan, 1997). While abstinence is completely effective in preventing pregnancy, there has been little rigorous research on the effectiveness of abstinence-only programs. Consequently, the jury is still out on whether abstinence programs can significantly reduce teen childbearing. For this reason alone, it is important to conduct rigorous evaluations of initiatives implemented with funds provided by the 2002 welfare reform reauthorization legislation. Again, preliminary remarks by the presidential administration suggest that substantial resources will be set aside for abstinence programs as opposed to family planning initiatives that would present options such as abortion and contraception. We need to develop an alternative framework that enhances teen parents' capacity for informed decisions while expanding the options and alternatives available to them. All too often, teens become parents as an "ill-considered means to other ends: a way to insert independence, to punish parents, to gain prestige or to win approval from their child's father" (Rhode, 1993-1994, p. 666).

Healthy Relationships

A significant proportion of teen mothers have been sexually abused – 66 percent – and 55 percent have been sexually molested, with over half of these cases attributed to family members (Kaplan, 1997). Young women must receive supportive counseling that will enable them to understand what happened to them while helping them recover from the trauma of abuse. Young parents also need support in developing self-identity and self-esteem while working toward the self-sufficiency demanded by policy makers. Other skills that need to be enhanced include decision-making, personal development and interpersonal development.

The mandates in the 1996 welfare reform legislation dictating that states begin educating and state and local criminal law enforcement officials on the prevention and prosecution of statutory rape is a recognition that many young girls have children by older men who often abandon them once they are pregnant. Sixty-four percent of sexually active 15 – 17 year old women have partners who are within two years of their age, but 29 percent have sexual partners who are 3 to 5 years older, and 7 percent have partners who are six or more years older (Darroch, Landry, & Oslak, 1999; Lindbergh et al., 1997). Counseling and supportive program for young women should accompany the efforts of the police and courts. Initiatives to increase enforcement of statutory rape laws are likely to have only a modest impact on teen fertility. Although there is substantial variation in statutory rape laws across the states, an age difference of about five years is usually required for sex between a girl age 15 to 17 and an older man to be considered a felony. Nevertheless, unwanted and nonvoluntary sex is an important problem when it occurs, and it is particularly common among younger adolescents (Moore et al., 1998).

There is also evidence of a prevalence of domestic violence among teen mothers on welfare with young women experiencing sabotage of birth control, education, training and work. A report released by Taylor Institute found that of 478 teen mothers surveyed, 55 percent of them had experienced some level of domestic violence at the hands of their boyfriends during the previous 12 months. Fifty-one percent of the girls reported some form of birth control sabotage. Of those reporting domestic violence at the hands of their boyfriends, 66 percent experienced some form of birth control sabotage and as violence escalated, so did the severity of both verbal and behavioral sabotage. Girls (21 percent) also reported some form of work or school-related sabotage from their boyfriends. Again, as the severity of the domestic violence increased, so did the amount of sabotage (Raphael, 1996).

Parenting Education

Many teen mothers are still children themselves. They often do not understand their own development let alone that of their children. These mothers will need to be taught age-appropriate parenting skills that focus on the physical, emotional and mental development, nutrition, health needs (regular check-ups, immunizations, etc) and appropriate methods of discipline. Parenting skills training can accompany schooling in a more traditional setting or can be part of the supportive services offered to young mothers. This requires an investment on the part of legislators, however, to understand the importance of supporting these programs with appropriate levels of funding.

Challenges for Reauthorization

It is likely that welfare reform reauthorization will dedicate substantial effort and resources to reducing out of wedlock births. Teen mothers will continue to be the focus of much attention. We have recommended that the concept of at-risk be reconceptualized from the standpoint of adolescent development as opposed to deviancy. We caution that the language of reform should not emphasize vulnerability and resiliency. In doing so, we move from assumptions that all teen mothers are vulnerable (victims). Resiliency should mean more than success because an individual followed the rules of welfare. Rather, we recognize that all young mothers begin from different points and multiple strategies to assist them need to be in place. If they fail to succeed, we must look to those interventions before we “blame the victim.”

We are also concerned about language that links space (communities) to deviancy based on assumptions about what the residents’ behavior might be. The imagery of boundary reveals the interconnections between teen mothers, the people in their lives and the variety of settings they encounter. Interfacing with school, religious/youth groups, health programs, etc. brings them in contact with adults and peers and helps strengthen personal relationships essential for a transition to adulthood (Porter & Lindberg, 2000).

We have provided a brief description of how support services need to be included in the conversations about reauthorization. In particular, we see all of these as interrelated – transportation and child care are essential for school attendance and part-time work but so are parenting classes. Health issues need to incorporate not only basic preventative health but also how teens can develop healthy relationships with partners. The framework for accomplishing this integration across the support services spectrum is already in place within the myriad of social service providers that could be better supported with federal and state funding.

When faced with the reality of reauthorization legislation, however, there are questions that advocates for teen mothers and their children must address. These include, but are not limited to:

Do we argue for increased funding for interventions so that young women do not find themselves turning to welfare?

How do we argue that welfare is an important option for young women if they are pregnant and parenting when policy makers are determined to limit access to benefits?

How do we teach young mothers to best utilize welfare and its supports that in turn, might be construed as assisting them to manipulate the system?

Are there skills being learned by these young women that can be taught to others who have already entered the welfare system and need assistance in leaving the system

Is there knowledge about young girls and the way they operate in their worlds that can be valuable for gatekeepers of the welfare system, knowledge that they can incorporate into their case management to better serve their clients?

Finally, we have mentioned children infrequently throughout this report. This is primarily because welfare reform does not focus on the child – everything is directed toward the parent and perceived ways to bring about economic security. If the relationship between teen mother and child were more visible, we might begin to see policies and programming that truly supports young mothers as they move between the boundaries of social policy, community, and their personal lives.

Endnotes

¹ Poor refers to those whose family income is at or below the federal poverty level; low-income, to those with incomes between 100% and 199% of the poverty level; and higher income, to those with incomes of 200% of poverty and above. In 1994, the poverty level was \$7,360 for a single person and \$12,320 for a family of three.

² For further discussion on the underclass debate see Michael Katz's (1993) edited volume that brings together a wide-range of scholars to address the concept. Melissa Gilbert (2000) also presents a feminist and anti-racist critique of prevailing poverty explanations and ensuing policy reforms by examining how identity, and difference are constructed, maintained and contested through space and place. Her analysis is drawn from research of working poor women and their survival strategies.

³ Homeless may not refer to actually living on the streets. Young mothers and their children are considered homeless if they are moving from house to house without a permanent address. For example, they may spend a week with a family member, move to a friend's house, back to another family member, etc.

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MY MOM WAS A TEENAGER WHEN SHE HAD ME.....

**Percent of total
births to Detroit
teens: 18.1%**

**50 city average:
14.3%**

**Detroit's rank among
the 50 cities: 46**



**WAYNE STATE
UNIVERSITY**

COLLEGE OF URBAN, LABOR
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Mission Statement

The mission of the Skillman Center for Children is to enhance the economic and social well being of urban children and their families. We do this by informing, influencing, and facilitating the strengthening of policies, best and promising practices, and programs affecting children locally, regionally, nationally, and globally. Our efforts focus on three areas of expertise: economic security for families; family and community support; and child resiliency and competence through safe families and neighborhoods.

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