



How Focusing on Teen Pregnancy as a Personal Moral Failing Deepens Social Inequality

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In the 1980s and 1990s, concerns about teen pregnancy voiced by policymakers and pundits helped garner support for welfare reform – as the public reached a consensus that teen pregnancy contributes to poverty and was encouraged by overly lenient welfare programs. Resulting welfare changes in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 imposed strict lifetime limits on the number of months a poor family can receive assistance while making it harder for impoverished families to qualify and remain eligible for aid. This policy was supposed to reduce welfare dependency by promoting work, reducing out-of-wedlock and adolescent pregnancies, and promoting marriage.

However, studies show that the age at which a person gives birth is not causally related to poverty or negative health outcomes for the parent or child. Teen pregnancy is a symptom of poverty, rather than its cause. While the 1996 law is credited with reducing the welfare rolls, experts argue that it has also increased the number of Americans living in at the deepest level of poverty. Declines in adolescent pregnancy cannot be attributed to that policy shift. If anything, welfare reform may have increased the rate of adolescent pregnancies among welfare recipients.

Welfare Reform and Shifting Perspectives on Teen Pregnancy

After the 1996 passage of welfare reform, conversations about teen pregnancy that had previously included attention to urban conditions, unemployment, inadequate health care, and the shortcomings of public education turned to an almost-exclusive focus on adolescent sex and the personal and moral failings it supposedly represents. My research examines political discourse, popular culture, and national and local efforts to prevent teen pregnancies to better understand why teen sex and childbearing remain central to popular culture and policy debates, despite research showing that teen pregnancy is a symptom of poverty and not a cause. I further examine why there has not been a reevaluation of welfare policy despite the documented shortfalls of earlier reforms. And I also probe how these two phenomena may be related.

Moral arguments have featured prominently in debate about adolescent sex since the 1970s, when teen pregnancy was first named as a special problem. Before the 1996 welfare legislation, however, the moral aspect was one of many. Only since then have the personal moral responsibilities of teen parents become the *only lens* through which responses are discussed.

Who Shapes Images of Teen Pregnancy and Why?

Some of the same voices that narrowed the discussion of welfare reform in the 1990s still shape discussions today. In 1996, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (recently renamed Power to Decide) was

founded as a counterpart to welfare reform. Power to Decide remains influential and is guided by leaders who helped popularize the overly-narrow view that teen pregnancy is largely a moral issue. In addition to helping enact welfare reform, these politicians and social scientists changed the debate about teen pregnancy. But to what end?

By studying shifts in public portrayals of teen pregnancy as a problem in national debates and in the activities, social media output, and television contributions of Power to Decide, I discovered that the moralized focus has specific effects:

- ***It removes teen pregnancy from the context of welfare.*** Whereas the issue was almost exclusively part of political debates about the welfare system in the 1980s and 1990s, in subsequent decades it is discussed primarily within debates about sex education and abortion.
- ***It paints the issue as an equal-opportunity problem.*** No longer is teen pregnancy represented as primarily plaguing Black and Latina communities. In shows like *16 and Pregnant*, which has a mostly white cast, as well as in online games with multicultural characters and public service announcements with high-profile celebrities such as Bristol Palin, teen pregnancy is now publicly portrayed as equally affecting all races and classes.
- ***It depicts burdens of teen pregnancy as primarily physical and emotional.*** Stress on the pains of childbirth and the strains of parenthood for young relationships displaces earlier discussions of the potential impacts of teen pregnancy on a young person's economic self-sufficiency and educational attainment.

Such shifts in public discussion fail to account for race, class, and the importance of social institutions in shaping the rate and experience of adolescent pregnancy. If U.S. systems of education, welfare, taxation, criminal justice, and health care are not portrayed as contributing to this problem, they will be left out of proposed solutions. The current focus on personal morality avoids addressing any societal roots or remedies. Instead, politicians and advocates informed by the rhetoric of the 1996 welfare reform offer attractively packaged information about sex and morality – often safely conveyed on the Internet – as their response to teen pregnancy. Questions of racism, inequality, and the inadequacies of the social safety net do not arise. In effect, public framings of teen pregnancy as a personal and moral problem blink at systematic racial disparities and leave low-income Americans vulnerable as inequalities widen.

Better Approaches

Focusing on teen pregnancy as a moral failing distracts citizens, policymakers, and advocates from addressing the real problems in young people's lives. Instead, the priorities should be:

- ***Reducing discrimination*** against pregnant young women and young parents in schools.
- ***Providing comprehensive sex education and reproductive health care*** to all young people, not in the name of stigmatizing certain pregnancies but to equip adolescents with the knowledge and tools to make informed choices about sex and reproduction.
- ***Replacing earlier failed welfare programs*** with economically redistributive measures to help people in difficult life circumstances – and boost the resources of marginalized communities.

Read more in Clare Daniel, *Mediating Morality: The Politics of Teen Pregnancy in the Post-Welfare Era* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2017).