

## Teen Parent Program Evaluations Yield No Simple Answers

by Ellen C. Berrey and Mary Clare Lennon

*This issue of **the forum** emanates from a November 1997 conference which synthesized the findings of three teen parent program evaluations. The conference was co-sponsored by the Research Forum and the National Center for Children in Poverty, along with the Joint Center for Poverty Research, Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, and Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. The conference proceedings, to be published in 1999, include a new chapter authored by Mary Clare Lennon, J. Lawrence Aber, and Barbara B. Blum. This article draws from both the chapter and the Research Forum's database ([www.researchforum.org](http://www.researchforum.org)).*

Since the late 1950s, birth rates for teen women in the U.S. have declined by 41 percent, mirroring national trends.<sup>1</sup> Teenage mothers are also a relatively small proportion of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) caseload—201,000 out of 11.2 million recipients in 1997.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, when teenage girls have children, they are more likely to drop out of school and receive welfare benefits. Although most people use welfare for only short-term support, teen mothers tend to receive assistance for longer periods of time. Additionally, the proportion of births to unmarried teen mothers, who are among the poorest welfare recipients, has increased from 14 percent of all teen births in 1957 to 78 percent in 1995.<sup>3</sup>

Teenage mothers face numerous challenges, such as poverty and domestic violence, which significantly affect their ability to find employment and leave welfare.<sup>4</sup> Their

children are at greater risk for low birthweight, low cognitive scores, and school failure, in addition to having a greater chance of becoming teenage parents themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Findings from experimental evaluations of three programs—New Chance Demonstration; Ohio's Learning, Earning, and Parenting (LEAP) Program; and Teenage Parent Demonstration (TPD)—illustrate some of the barriers to improving life prospects for teen mothers and their children. The programs focused primarily on disadvantaged teenage mothers in the previous welfare program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), but each had contrasting goals, target populations, and program components and interventions which influenced the observed outcomes (see chart on p. 3).

Overall, the long-term impacts of each program were minimal or non-existent. For example, each of the three experiments obtained early gains in employment and educational outcomes, but these gains waned once the programs ended. Because each intervention was limited by implementation problems, the impacts may not thoroughly reflect their potential efficacy. Despite these results, researchers identified important findings for a variety of outcomes. This article describes some of the key findings and their implications for teen parent programs.

### Benefits of the GED Questioned

LEAP, New Chance, and TPD had varying, but generally poor, educational outcomes. All three improved school attendance, although none resulted in higher rates of high school graduation. While New Chance significantly increased receipt of a Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED), most teens who obtained GEDs did not have better employment rates or greater earnings as a result. Participants in New Chance and TPD who received a GED also did not increase their reading scores. In fact, the New Chance experimental group was significantly less likely than the control group to receive a high school degree or college credits.

These results and recent research suggest that support for high school equivalency training may be misplaced. Whether employers discriminate against holders of the

### Note from the Director—Barbara B. Blum

For more than three decades, steady increases in pregnancy rates for unmarried teens were the subject of profound concern among policymakers and practitioners. Findings described in this publication document how resistant to change the problems created by early parenting can be. Given these results, maintaining and accelerating current decreases in teen pregnancy rates become even more important.

GED or GED training does not improve outcomes, it appears to be an inadequate substitute for high school completion. However, the GED increasingly substitutes for high school graduation.<sup>6</sup> Careful consideration also must be given to the value of high school completion as a final educational goal. The real wages of female high school graduates were stagnant between 1980 and 1990 and are now declining.<sup>7</sup> Because better paying jobs require greater skill levels than are obtained in most high schools, teen parent programs should consider providing incentives to encourage post-secondary education, as well.

### Focus on Mothers' Mental Health, Education

The three experiments found subgroup differences that provide important clues about how programs can better serve certain groups of teenage mothers.

- ▶ **Depression.** High rates of depression can substantially affect teen mothers' ability to participate and progress in a program. Both New Chance and TPD found overall high rates of depressive symptomatology. For example, more than half of all women in New Chance had high levels of depression according to the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression (CES-D) Scale.

Maternal depression has serious implications for parenting and child outcomes. New Chance mothers with high levels of depressive symptoms reported greater parental stress, and more behavior problems and fewer positive behaviors in their children. In contrast, researchers found positive effects on the child's home environment among program mothers with low levels of these symptoms. Other studies provide substantiating evidence. One 10-year study found that children of depressed parents are three times more likely to develop major depression themselves and five times as likely to develop panic disorder and alcohol dependence.<sup>8</sup> These findings point to the importance of programs that incorporate initial screenings and appropriate treatments for mental health status.

- ▶ **School enrollment.** Participants' school enrollment when they entered the program was another important contributor to program success. In LEAP, for instance, adolescents already in school or in a GED program were more likely to obtain a GED and, in Cleveland, more likely to graduate from high school. These teens also spent more time in employment and tended to earn more, especially in the first two years of the program. Comparable results were found in New Chance.

In light of these findings, teen parent programs should be designed to include initial assessments of educational skills and to address diversity in education and skill attainment. Students who dropped out of school and those with poor reading skills may require intensive remediation prior to school (re)enrollment.

These demonstrations provide evidence that depressed, extremely educationally disadvantaged, and out-of-school teen parents do not respond positively to the current "one-size-fits-all" program strategies. Yet completely individualized programs present numerous administrative and implementation difficulties. A middle ground approach would be to identify a small number of the most important risk factors and devise program variations to address the unique challenges faced by the highest risk subgroups of teen parents. New subgroup-targeted interventions should be evaluated for both their effectiveness and cost-benefits.

### Findings on Child Outcomes Troubling

While LEAP was not designed to have a direct impact on children, New Chance and, to a lesser extent, TPD were. New Chance offered a broad range of comprehensive services for parents and children, while TPD provided services to parents in hopes that they would have indirect, "trickle-down" effects on their young children. Despite the programs' intentions, New Chance and the Newark site of TPD appeared to have negative effects on child well-being, although the magnitude of the effects was small. Researchers offer one possible explanation: activities that remove mothers from home when their children are very young may be detrimental to the children.

Of more pressing concern, though, is the overall picture of poor child outcomes. Children of experimental and control group members in both New Chance and TPD had poor child outcomes, scoring low on many indicators of development such as school readiness. Children in low-income working families have comparable outcomes.

The results of the three evaluations, coupled with the recently released results from Abt Associates, Inc.'s Comprehensive Child Development Program, raise concerns that adult-focused and comprehensive programs are either wrong in theory or too difficult to implement in practice to have positive impacts on young parents and their young children. Intensive—rather than comprehensive—two-generation interventions may be a better alternative. High quality center-based care and nurse home visiting programs, for example, are designed to affect children directly and have shown impressive impacts on child cognitive and emotional development and maternal educational and employment outcomes.<sup>9</sup> Further research on targeted two-generation programs should be pursued.

### Delaying Motherhood is Best

While it is possible to identify interventions to assist teen mothers, a strategy to delay teen childbearing might have better overall outcomes. Such a strategy would involve many of the same elements as those aimed at teen parents—early assessments, education and training, and supportive services—delivered in the context of a long-term relationship that assists both parent and child. It must

## Database Research Projects with Findings on Teen Parent Programs

### NEW CHANCE DEMONSTRATION

<b>Evaluator</b>	Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC)
<b>Research duration</b>	August 1989 – July 1997
<b>Sites studied</b>	16 sites in California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Oregon, and Pennsylvania
<b>Populations studied</b>	Voluntary “two-generation” program for young women ages 16–22 who had their first child as a teen and had dropped out of school or had a reading level below 9th grade
<b>Program goals</b>	Increase participants’ long-term self-sufficiency; postpone additional child bearing; improve the well-being of the participants and their children
<b>Primary program components</b>	Comprehensive educational, employment, and support services, including free child care
<b>Recent publications</b>	<i>Promises to Keep: Assessing Affective and Behavioral Qualities of Mother-Child Relationships in the New Chance Observational Study</i> (June 1998); <i>Final Report</i> (July 1997)

### OHIO’S LEARNING, EARNING, AND PARENTING (LEAP) PROGRAM

<b>Evaluator</b>	Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC)
<b>Research duration</b>	July 1987 – June 1997
<b>Sites studied</b>	12 Ohio counties
<b>Populations studied</b>	Mandatory program for pregnant or parenting teens who received AFDC and lacked a high school diploma or GED
<b>Program goals</b>	Increase the proportion of teens who graduate from high school or obtain a GED, find jobs, and ultimately achieve self-sufficiency
<b>Primary program components</b>	Required school attendance; financial incentives and sanctions to encourage school attendance (e.g. \$62 increase or decrease in monthly benefits); case management; support services
<b>Recent publications</b>	<i>Final Report</i> (August 1997)

### TEENAGE PARENT DEMONSTRATION (TPD)

<b>Evaluator</b>	Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.
<b>Research duration</b>	October 1986 – February 1998
<b>Sites Studied</b>	Chicago, Illinois; Camden and Newark, New Jersey
<b>Populations studied</b>	Mandatory program for pregnant or parenting teens who received AFDC and were in school, had a diploma or GED, or had dropped out of school
<b>Program goal</b>	Prevent teenage pregnancies; improve participants’ self-sufficiency and life chances
<b>Primary program components</b>	Required participation in either education, job training, or employment; financial sanctions for non-participation (\$160 or \$166 reduction in monthly benefits); case management
<b>Recent publications</b>	<i>Moving Into Adulthood: Were the Impacts of Mandatory Programs for Welfare-Dependent Teenage Parents Sustained After the Programs Ended?</i> (February 1998)

account for many teens’ perceptions that early child-bearing will improve their lives.<sup>10</sup> Any understanding of teen parenting also needs to incorporate males, particularly their economic and educational status.

Programs targeting middle school children, such as the Teen Outreach Program, can be effective in preventing both school dropout and teen pregnancy.<sup>11</sup> Results from Mathematica’s evaluation of the abstinence education programs funded through the 1996 welfare law should produce initial results in August 2000, although research to date has found that abstinence programs do not delay the onset of sexual intercourse or reduce other measures of sexual activity.<sup>12</sup>

The difficulty of reducing teenage child bearing should not be underestimated. Even if these births could be prevented, poor young women still face multiple disadvantages that predate sexual activity or child birth, including poverty, low cognitive skills, and mental health problems. Nevertheless, the findings from the New Chance, LEAP, and TPD evaluations point to interventions that work for particular subgroups, and they should foster a renewed commitment to developing initiatives for the most vulnerable teenage parents and their children.

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The Research Forum, an initiative of the National Center for Children in Poverty, hosted at the Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University, encourages collaborative research and informed policy on welfare reform and vulnerable populations. The Forum's ultimate goal is to identify and promote strategies that protect and enhance the well-being of poor children and their families.

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