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ABSTRACT

This report documents a history of unintended pregnancy, premature motherhood, and failure to plan for the future. Research indicates that most homeless young women are aware of birth control, but few of those who became pregnant were able to translate this knowledge into practice. The failure of homeless mothers to engage in family planning is strongly associated with their low levels of education; 65% did not complete high school. Sixty-five percent of homeless women do not use birth control, and 56 percent have had an abortion. Current efforts to deter teenage motherhood have consistently failed, as have efforts to reduce welfare dependency. Proposed welfare reforms, which include severe funding cuts to public assistance and other subsidies, will only destroy the remaining safety net, and will surely stimulate poverty and homelessness. Homeless women may feel that abortion is the only route open to them. Policy makers must begin to experiment with alternate initiatives to current efforts to prevent teen pregnancy. Assistance must be linked to educational opportunities, and young mothers must return to school in order to receive welfare. Broad residential-based educational initiatives will help instill traditional family values of responsibility and independence and put young families on the track to self-sufficiency and self-determination. (Contains four figures.) (SLD)

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A report of Homes for the Homeless

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Homes for the Homeless

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# The Age of Confusion

*Why so many teens are getting pregnant, turning to welfare and ending up homeless.*

*In one year alone, the government spent over \$21 billion for social, health and welfare services to families begun by teenage mothers.<sup>1</sup>*

The ongoing debate over the flaws in the nation's welfare system centers primarily on two highly charged social ills: *teen-age pregnancy* and *long-term dependence on public assistance*. For the poorest and fastest growing segment of the welfare population—homeless mothers—these problems are both severe and inextricably linked. At an alarmingly young age, these women are becoming trapped in a chaotic cycle that offers little structure and few alternatives.

The following report documents a history of unintended pregnancy, premature motherhood and failure to plan for the future. What becomes evident is that, for many young women, these factors are a clear formula for long-term welfare dependence and homelessness. Furthermore, there is considerable risk that these women may *never* acquire the foundation necessary to achieve self-determination and self-sufficiency—placing yet another generation, *their children*, at risk of teenage parenthood, public assistance and homelessness.

## Birth Control: A Discarded Precaution

Although *eight in ten* homeless mothers in this study state that they plan to use contraception to prevent future pregnancies, nothing in their past or current practice supports such claims (See Figures 1a & 1b).<sup>2</sup> Rather, preliminary findings reveal that these mothers, many of whom have at least two children already, will likely continue giving birth to children they have not planned for and cannot support. This is most clearly evidenced by the following facts:

- Nearly half of these women have been pregnant in the last 12 months alone;
- Three in four were teenagers the first time they got pregnant;
- Only 39 percent used contraception the first time they had intercourse;

- Over three quarters did not plan the birth of their first child—40 percent failed to plan for their second; and
- An astonishing 64 percent did not realize they were pregnant until their third month or later.

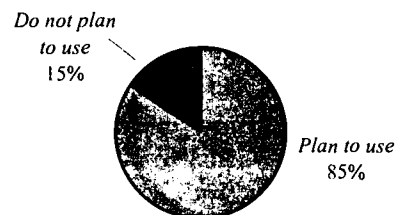
Despite all of this, they were *not* unaware of family planning practices. In fact:

- 75 percent *knew* about birth control when they first became sexually active;
- 73 percent knew where to get contraceptives;
- 68 percent knew how to use them; and
- 60 percent felt their use was important;

... yet very few mothers were able to translate this information into practice.

### GOOD INTENTIONS . . . GRIM REALITY

**Figure 1a:** Number of Homeless Women Who Plan to Use Birth Control Regularly



**Figure 1b:** Number of Homeless Women Who Regularly Use Birth Control



Source: Institute for Children & Poverty

*While the majority of mothers say they plan to use birth control in the future, their current failure to do so reveals a gap between intention and reality.*

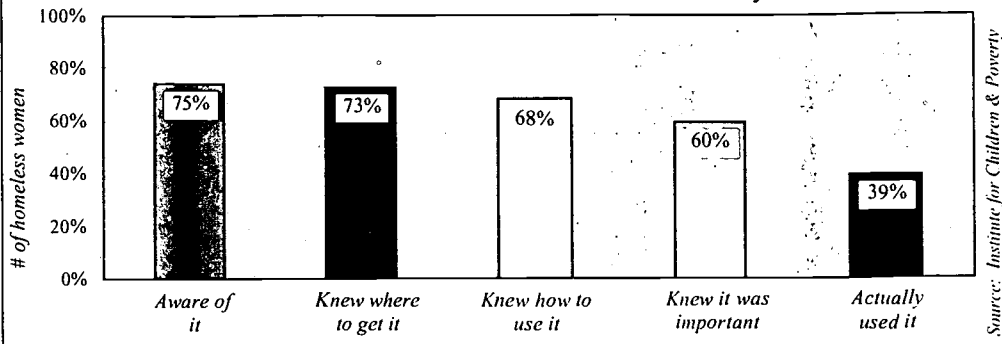
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*While most homeless mothers knew a great deal about birth control at the time they became sexually active, when it came to practicing it—less than half of them followed through.*

**FROM KNOWLEDGE TO IMPLEMENTATION . . . A FAILED CONNECTION**

**Figure 2: Homeless Women's Awareness and Attitude Toward Birth Control at Onset of Sexual Activity**



In short, while still remarkably young, these women have already established patterns of failure. Despite awareness and previous experience having unplanned children, nearly seven out of every ten mothers report that they still are not practicing birth control. Already dependent on public assistance to support the children they have, it is likely they will have more. Consequently, because of their inability to translate family planning knowledge into action, their chances of becoming self-determined and autonomous are seriously undermined.

Clearly, becoming educated—acquiring the reasoning skills and pragmatic abilities to transform knowledge into achievable goals and action—is crucial for this group. Unless they return to complete their schooling, these young women—with larger families and limited abilities—face the nearly impossible task of becoming independent.

*The fastest growing subset of the homeless are families headed by young mothers who dropped out of school and became pregnant in their teens.*

Yet what is perhaps most significant is that homeless mothers' failure to actively engage in family planning is strongly associated with their low levels of education; 65 percent did not complete high school. And it is this group who:

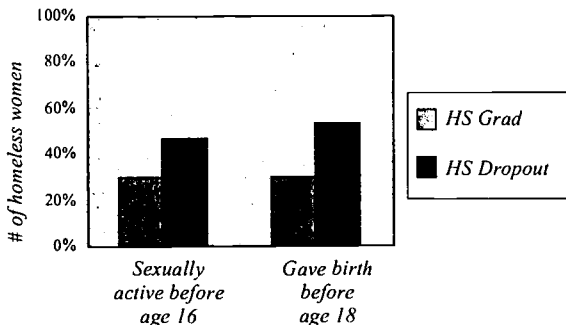
- became mothers at a younger age;
- were less likely to have used birth control the first time they had intercourse; and
- are less likely to use it now (see Figures 3a & 3b).

**The Catastrophic Cycle**

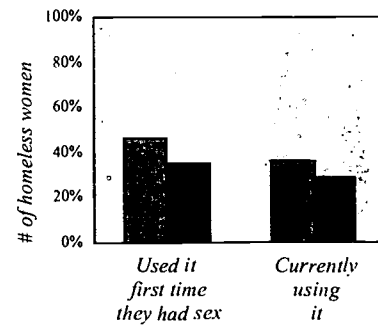
Ultimately however, it is their children who suffer the most. Due primarily to the effects of single parenthood, low maternal education, and larger family size, children of teenage mothers are at risk of lower intellectual, social and academic achievement. In fact, the daughters of

**THE DIFFERENCE A DEGREE MAKES: HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES VS. DROPOUTS**

**Figure 3a: Early Onset of Sexual Activity and Childbearing Among Homeless Women**



**Figure 3b: Likelihood of Birth Control Use Among Homeless Women**



*Young mothers who complete high school tend to be more careful and more consistent when it comes to family planning.*

teenage mothers are more likely to become teenage parents.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, if they do follow the route of their mothers they *too* may end up on welfare and in shelters. With over one million teenage women becoming pregnant—and 500,000 giving birth—each year, it has never been more imperative that we implement aggressive strategies to stem this tide.<sup>4</sup>

**Pro-Planning, Pro-Family, Pro-Active**

Current efforts to deter teenage motherhood—making birth control widely available and promoting awareness in schools and youth programs—have consistently failed. As Figure 4 demonstrates, each year increasing numbers of young women are embarking on the path of single motherhood. At the same time, efforts to reduce welfare dependence, such as state-initiated “family caps” and increasingly stringent eligibility standards, have also met with little success. Recent evaluations of New Jersey’s “family cap,” for example, have found no reduction in the birth rate to welfare mothers attributed to the state’s policy.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, today’s proposed welfare reforms, which include severe funding cuts to public assistance, food stamps, housing subsidies and health care, will only destroy the remaining safety net and will surely stimulate poverty and homelessness. With fewer resources to raise their children, more women who become pregnant may be compelled to either have abortions or relinquish those children to a burgeoning foster care system. Indeed, these trends are already emerging. The number of children in foster care has increased by a staggering 64 percent in only ten years. At the same time, homelessness among young, single, female-headed households has increased five-fold. And while abortions appear to have declined, with less options for supporting their children in the coming years, mothers may soon choose to terminate pregnancies more frequently (See Figure 4).

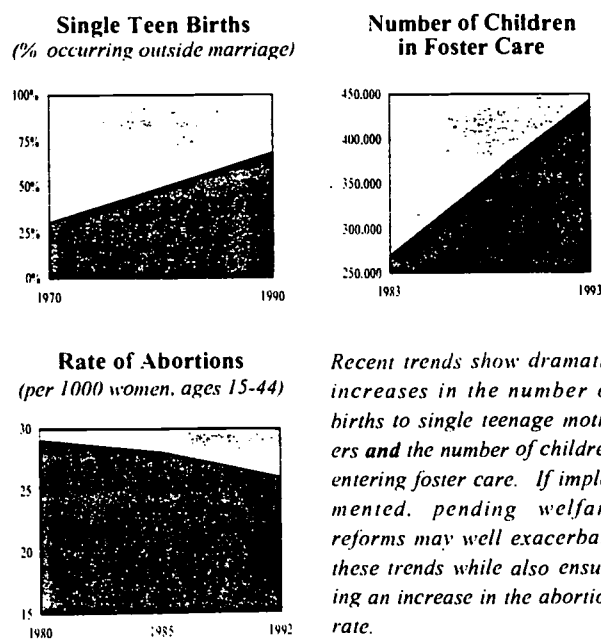
*Four in ten teenage pregnancies end in abortion.<sup>6</sup>*

As this report’s preliminary findings illustrate, for the poorest of the poor—homeless mothers—efforts to reduce teenage motherhood have had little success. Punitive policies or those of “just say no” are having little, if any, impact—providing only negative incentives and unrealistic answers.

Instead, policy-makers *must* begin to experiment with alternate initiatives in a positive manner—not simply eliminating entitlements but rather linking assistance to desperately needed educational opportunities. In short, to receive welfare, young homeless mothers must return to school. With mandated education, mothers will acquire the foundation necessary to make decisions responsibly, modify their current behavior and forge new directions.

This can be accomplished with broad, *residential-based* educational initiatives—emphasizing pro-active decision making, practical skills and tangible alternatives—which instill in young mothers traditional family values of responsibility and independence. Today’s homeless mothers are younger, poorer, less educated and more numerous than a generation ago. As a result, there is a growing population in critical need of stability and direction. Education can focus them on the future, providing

**Figure 4: The Reality of Teenage Motherhood, Foster Care and Abortions<sup>7</sup>**



the conviction and confidence necessary to translate knowledge of birth control into active family planning and acquired skills into independence and autonomy.

This approach is already successfully underway for homeless mothers in shelters around the nation and must be further tested for the larger welfare population in settings such as "second-chance" family homes and community-based learning centers.<sup>8</sup> Failure to apply proven, workable solutions such as these will surely result in increased abortions and foster care—forcing young women with no other resources toward options that are both socially undesirable and politically unfeasible.

With America's current momentum for change and a welfare population still young enough to be redirected, there has never been a greater opportunity to put poor families on track to self-sufficiency and self-determination. Before another generation is prematurely derailed, policy makers must experiment with mandated education-based options that will stop the catastrophic cycle of failed planning, early motherhood and lost opportunities. *Only by exploring the boldest of such strategies will we move from an age of confusion to one of responsibility—and end the cycle of children having children.*

### The Abortion Option . . .

A recent Homes for the Homeless study has identified correlations between rates of birth control use, abortion, early motherhood and absent fathers.<sup>9</sup> Specifically:

- 65 percent of homeless women do not use birth control;
- 56 percent have had an abortion—more than half that number have had more than one;
- 30 percent had an abortion before age 16;
- 72 percent were teenage mothers;
- 75 percent receive no financial support for their children from the fathers; and
- all depend on public assistance.

The current political climate, with its penchant for massive reductions in welfare, will leave mothers with even fewer alternatives than they have now. As a result, these numbers will undoubtedly worsen. With family planning virtually nonexistent now and a reduction in public assistance on the way, the *abortion option* may soon be all that mothers believe they have left.

### . . . The Foster Care Route

A recent study reveals an intergenerational relationship between teenage motherhood, homelessness and foster care.<sup>10</sup> By an average age of 20, at least *one in five* homeless mothers already have children in foster care and more than *one in three* are on their way with open cases for abuse or neglect with the Child Welfare Administration. Yet most are simply continuing a cycle of abuse—more than *one in five* themselves grew up in foster care, and they are much more likely to have histories of substance abuse, mental illness and domestic violence than other mothers.

With nearly seven in ten mothers opting not to practice birth control, the likelihood of more children, greater poverty and increasing reliance on the *foster care route* is virtually assured.

### Notes

1. The Alan Guttmacher Institute, *Facts in Brief: Teenage Sexual and Reproductive Behavior* (New York: The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1993).
2. This report is based on a 1995 survey of 189 women living in Tier II family shelters operated by Homes for the Homeless (HFH) in New York City. It was conducted by the Institute for Children and Poverty, the research division of HFH. Unless otherwise noted, all data presented is based on this survey.
3. The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1993.
4. The Alan Guttmacher Institute, *Facts in Brief: Teenage Reproductive Health in the United States* (New York: The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1994).
5. Michael C. Laracy, *If It Seems Too Good To Be True, It Probably Is* (Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation, June 1995).
6. The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1994.
7. Sources of data: Births (*Child Trends, Inc., 1995*); Foster care (*U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services; U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways & Means, 1994*); Abortions (*The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1994*).
8. For further discussion of shelter-based solutions, see "When a Shelter is Not a Shelter: The American Family Inn" in *The New Poverty* by Ralph Nunez (New York: Insight Books, 1996). For second-chance homes, see *Second-Chance Homes: Breaking the Cycle of Teen Pregnancy* by Kathy Sylvester (Washington, DC: Progressive Policy Institute, June 1995).
9. Ralph Nunez, *An American Family Myth: Every Child at Risk* (New York: Institute for Children and Poverty, January 1995).
10. Ralph Nunez, *Homelessness: The Foster Care Connection* (New York: Institute for Children and Poverty, May 1993).

Homes for the Homeless (HFH) is the largest operator of *American Family Inns*—residential educational/employment training centers—for homeless families in New York City. The Institute for Children and Poverty is HFH's research and training division. Homes for the Homeless' facilities include:

Clinton Family Inn (New York, NY) Prospect Family Inn (Bronx, NY)  
Island Family Inn (Staten Island, NY) Saratoga Family Inn (Queens, NY)

Clinton Family Crisis Nursery (New York, NY)  
Prospect Family Crisis Nursery (Bronx, NY)  
Camps Kiwago & Lanowa (Harriman State Park, NY)

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