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Stephanie Jimenez
Scripps College

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**SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF TEEN PREGNANCY:
IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PREVENTION EFFORTS**

by

STEPHANIE JIMENEZ

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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PROFESSOR BENSONSMITH

PROFESSOR MEHTA

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CHAPTER 1: AN INTRODUCTION TO EARLY CHILDBEARING

It was a typical Tuesday night in the college library's café. Surrounded by a number of college students typing away on their laptops, I paused to consider how I would structure my paragraph's next sentence. We had all been focused on our individual class assignments when Amanda, a fellow Scripps student, suddenly broke the silence with a shriek: "Sam, look, Jessica Cabezas had a baby!" Immediately, Sam rose to look at Amanda's computer screen, and the two women who had attended high school together browsed Facebook pictures with their mouths open in shock. Jessica Cabezas, a sophomore at the time that Sam and Amanda graduated, had apparently given birth to a baby girl recently. Sam and Amanda were learning this now as they clicked through photos of a young mother embracing a plump baby swaddled in layers of pink.

Not stopping to pay mind to their conversation, I continued to type the last of my essay. I don't consider myself to be easily entertained by gossip and besides, I've known high school acquaintances that have become pregnant, or at least have been rumored to. However, as much as I tried to ignore Amanda and Sam, I couldn't help but notice bits and pieces of what they began to say. As the two browsed through the virtual profiles of more people they used to know, comments such as "she had a baby junior year" and "oh yeah, she had a baby too" were exchanged casually between them. Unable to conceal my disbelief that Sam and Amanda knew so many girls that had given birth in high school, I looked up and laughed. Their comments, said with so much passivity, somehow seemed outlandish as I sat comfortably typing amidst the murmur of the library's cozy café.

"Are you serious?" I giggled. "How many people from your high school have kids right now?" Sam and Amanda paused. Not attempting to answer my question, or at least not in the way I had hoped, Amanda pondered aloud: "It's sort of crazy, huh?"

If one looks at the statistics on adolescent pregnancy in the United States, it doesn't seem too “crazy” at all that Sam, Amanda, and I, as not just young women, but young Latina women from predominantly Latino communities, can name a number of friends or acquaintances who became pregnant in their early to late teens. In fact, given that 52 percent of Latinas become pregnant before they reach the age of twenty, it'd seem more surprising if we hadn't known girls from our hometowns that became pregnant as teenagers¹. Despite a substantial decline in adolescent pregnancy rates over the past couple of decades, the United States retains one of the highest adolescent pregnancy rates of most industrialized countries, especially amongst its low-income populations of color. Indeed, less affluent and less technologically advanced countries have not only achieved lower rates of adolescent pregnancy, but have also boasted lower rates of unintended pregnancy, abortion, and STD contraction alike.² In the United States, Latina and Black girls as most commonly members of low-income groups, are at the highest risk of bearing children in their adolescence.

In order to understand why this is so, I have decided to explore how social constructions of teen pregnancy have informed and reproduced policy and approaches that are both ineffective in reducing teen pregnancy rates and are often stigmatizing to women from low-income communities, particularly women of color. Using Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram's theories on public policy and social constructions, I argue that negative constructions of teen pregnancy have resulted in stringent and punishment-oriented policies that deal with teen pregnancy and

¹ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, “Likelihood of Latinas Getting Pregnant by Age 20,” [http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/FastFacts_Latino_3in10 .pdf](http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/FastFacts_Latino_3in10.pdf) (accessed Oct. 18 2011).

² Ilsa L. Lottes, “Sexual Health Policies in Other Industrialized Countries: Are There Lessons for the United States?” *The Journal of Sex Research*. (Feb. 2002): 81.

motherhood.³ The divergence of funds from reproductive health services to abstinence-only curriculum, the implementation of stringent welfare laws beginning in 1996, and the disproportionate amount of funding allocated to prevention programs rather than parenting-support programs are all but a few examples of the ways in which negative conceptions of teen pregnancy have influenced policy today. Furthermore, given my understanding of teen pregnancy as a result of structural inequality, these policies do nothing to address the underlying causes of teen pregnancy. Thus, even as stringent welfare policies may be better substituted by efforts to provide educational opportunity and job prospects to low-income teens, negative constructions of teen pregnancy ensure that policies that respond to teen pregnancy remain punitive and penalizing, rather than supportive. Even as these policies may be found to be wholly ineffective or oversubscribed, mainstream negative constructions of teen pregnancy serve to keep them in place.

Over the past few decades, teen pregnancy has been framed as one of society's most pressing ills. It has been understood as a "crisis" by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy and a number of other cultural, religious, and governmental institutions. In this thesis, I analyze three constructions of teen pregnancy: 1) the construction of teen mothers as social "burdens" 2) the construction of teens as "unfit" to be parents 3) the construction of teen mothers as collectively "rational" actors reacting to contexts of structural inequality. While the first and second constructions draw upon the conception of teen pregnancy as a costly, national epidemic often reproduced by the irresponsible and "deviant" behavior of teens, the last construction rejects this discourse, and posits adolescents as "rational" actors that make "rational" decisions given a context of structurally-produced inequality. In that early

³ Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram, "Social Construction of Target Populations: Implications for Politics and Policy," *The American Political Science Review* 87, no. 2 (Jun. 1993): 334-347.

childbearing may serve as a “collective adaptive” strategy in contexts of poverty, this construction of teen pregnancy has attempted to deconstruct the notion that teens become pregnant due to their “irrationality,” or their inability or unwillingness to recognize the harsh repercussions of early childbearing.⁴ In that this third construction favors “empowerment” policies that provide women with the “knowledge and means to exercise reproductive freedom,” it does not narrowly promote prevention policy as a single approach to teen pregnancy, and escapes the promotion of punitive approaches that seek to scare and discipline teens into abstaining from non-marital sex.

When I reflect on my initial reaction to Sam and Amanda’s conversation, I am able to see how much my position as an undergraduate student at a top liberal arts college has influenced my ideas about what is an appropriate age for reproduction. For any college-bound high school teen, having a child at an early age simply does not fit into one’s life plans. For girls like Jessica Cabezas, did early childbearing carry the same implications that it would for her middle and upper class counterparts? Furthermore, if acquiring a college degree to pursue future employment could deter a Scripps undergraduate from early childbearing, could it not do the same for any other teenager who has access to the same opportunity? Ultimately, this thesis argues that teen pregnancy has vastly different social and economic implications for different groups of adolescents. The construction of teen pregnancy as both a social crisis and an individual crisis-event obscures many of the realities of early childbearing, particularly as it results from a larger context of structural inequality rather than individual deficiency and failure. In order to reduce teen pregnancy rates, we must strive to improve the economic and educational opportunities available to America’s low-income youth of color. However, given the prevalence

⁴ Arline T. Geronimus, “Teenage Childbearing and Social Disadvantage: Unprotected Discourse,” *Family Relations* (April 1992): 245.

of negative constructions of teen pregnancy, policy approaches are likely to remain punitive and punishment-oriented in nature.

GENESIS OF THE “TEEN PREGNANCY CRISIS”

In order to understand mainstream constructions of teen mothers, we must first understand the emergence of teen pregnancy as an urgent social issue. In this section I provide an overview of the “teen pregnancy crisis” as it has emerged largely in response to misinformation, moral panic, and the demonization of the poor. Though teen pregnancy rates are disproportionately high for Black and Latina adolescents in comparison to their white peers, the current “crisis” discourse fails to recognize these childbearing patterns as responses to poverty and limited opportunity. Instead, it attributes teen pregnancy to flaws in individual behavior, informs constructions of teens as social “burdens” and “unfit” to parent, and results in the creation of ineffective welfare and educational policy that neglect the structural causes for early childbearing, and unfairly stigmatizes low-income, Black and Latina girls.

Beginning in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, social scientists and politicians alike began to take note of what would soon become a “public obsession” with adolescent childbearing.⁵ By the early 1970’s, there was a rapidly growing industry dedicated to collecting and disseminating information regarding teen pregnancy rates, as well as offering solutions to what became, virtually overnight, one of America’s most “serious social problems” to quote former president Bill Clinton. While teen pregnancy only emerged as a public issue at this time, adolescent childbearing was relatively commonplace throughout American history. Early family formation characterized much of America’s agricultural history, and it was neither uncommon nor

⁵ Frank F. Furstenberg, *Destinies of the Disadvantaged* (New York: Russell Sage, 2007), 1-2.

stigmatized to be a mother and wife in one's teens⁶. Furthermore, during the 1950's, both teenagers and older women alike began to produce more children in correspondence with the nation's sudden economic growth and strong cultural focus on the home and traditional family unit. It was during these years that adolescent childbearing was at the highest level in the country's history—indeed, the baby boom of the 1950's can in part be attributed to the high reproduction rates of adolescent mothers.⁷ Contrary to the sensationalized reports that touted teen pregnancy as one of the nation's most urgent public issues, teen pregnancy was actually declining from the end of the 1950's onward. Ironically, it was during this period of high childbearing rates that teen pregnancy was completely absent from public discourse. How then can we explain the sudden emergence of teen pregnancy in the 1960's as one of the nation's most urgent health crises?

At the same time that adolescent childbearing rates were declining, rates of non-marital childbearing were steadily on the rise. Prior to the 1960's, "shot-gun marriages" offered young parents a satisfactory means by which to deal with unintended pregnancy. These marriages served two main purposes: 1) they acted as a means by which to avoid the shame associated with non-marital sex 2) they secured kinship ties during a time in which higher education was not necessary to economic mobility. However, as the 1950's came to a close, "shot-gun marriages" became less and less attractive to pregnant teens, especially for African Americans and other populations of color. In part, this was a result of a changing economic landscape, in which economic opportunities for young, unskilled laborers became more and more limited: "The surge of manufacturing jobs in the postwar era was coming to an end, and the premium on postsecondary education was growing. Minorities were also being affected by the flight of jobs

⁶ Furstenberg, *Destinies of the Disadvantaged*, 16.

⁷ Furstenberg, *Destinies of the Disadvantaged*, 1.

from urban areas to the burgeoning lily-white suburbs as the postwar boom in housing altered the location of jobs (Wilson 1987, 1996).”⁸ In the face of less economic opportunity, marriage no longer offered the economic security that it did in earlier eras. In the 1960’s onward, marriage as a solution to unintended pregnancy began to fall out of popularity.

While the economic viability of “shot-gun marriages” declined, so did the moral appeal associated with such marriages. Indeed, the 1960’s brought a profound shift in attitudes about non-marital sex, leading to new behaviors and trends in reproductive behavior. No longer did adolescents and older women seek to avoid the shame associated with non-marital sex by hastily entering marriage.⁹ The lack of economic viability in shot-gun marriages paired with relaxed attitudes regarding non-marital sex led to a decrease in early marriage. What changed from the 1950’s to the 1960’s was not an increase in adolescent childbearing, but a decrease in rates at which such births occurred within marriage. Teenagers were not becoming pregnant at higher rates; they simply no longer sought out marriage as a solution to unintended pregnancy.

As the rates of non-marital childbearing increased among teenagers, so did growing public concern about teen pregnancy as an urgent public issue. A number of reports inaccurately depicted teen pregnancy as a rapidly growing phenomenon. Indeed, with The Guttmacher Institute’s report on teen pregnancy in 1976, teen pregnancy soon became understood as an epidemic. In a pamphlet entitled *Eleven Million Teenagers*, the Institute drew upon statistics that proved that a million teenagers become pregnant each year. However, the report clumped married 19 year olds with unmarried, younger girls and thus obscured a number of discrepancies in incidences of adolescent childbearing, discrepancies that imply drastic differences in childbearing outcomes. For example, studies have found that pregnancies among older teens are

⁸ Furstenberg, *Destinies of the Disadvantaged*, 11.

⁹ Furstenberg, *Destinies of the Disadvantaged*, 12.

less likely to result in the adverse consequences commonly associated with younger pregnancies, particularly in regard to health.¹⁰ Given that “almost two-thirds of the “million pregnant teenagers” were eighteen-and nineteen-year olds; about 40 percent of them were married, and about two-thirds of the married women were married prior to the pregnancy,”¹¹ the Institute’s report not only obscured the actual demographic realities of “teen pregnancy”, it revealed little about the social consequences of early childbearing.

Furthermore, the emergence of teen pregnancy as a social issue was understood as an issue particular to urban ghettos. Indeed, controversial reports such as those released in 1965 by sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*, not only exaggerated the incidence of teen pregnancy, but framed it as an issue particular to young Black women. Furthermore, it reflected eugenics-inspired fears of the growth of an unemployed Black “underclass”, and thus constructed Black mothers as “unfit” and undesirable parents. The focus on teenage pregnancy as an issue particular to young Black women not only perpetuated this notion of “unfit” Black parenthood, it also ignored a trend in non-marital childbearing that would become widespread among women of all races and ages: “By the end of the twentieth century, it was evident that Black women were only at the vanguard of a new pattern of family formation that was being rapidly adopted by all teens and eventually by older couples”.¹² The rate of “illegitimate” births would steadily climb for older, white women in the 1970’s and 1980’s, as more and more of these women gave birth outside of marriage. Though Moynihan singled out Black communities in what he called the “deterioration of the Negro family,” the behavior of Black teens would actually predict childbearing patterns that would later become commonplace

¹⁰ Gordon C.S. Smith, “Teenage pregnancy and risk of adverse perinatal outcomes associated with first and second births: population based retrospective cohort study,” *BMJ* (Sept. 2001): 476.

¹¹ Kristin Luker, *Dubious Conceptions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996) 6.

¹² Furstenberg, *Destinies of the Disadvantaged*, #.

amongst all age groups and races.¹³

The emergence of teen pregnancy as a public health and social crisis has therefore been misinformed from its inception. Teen pregnancy rates were not rapidly increasing at the start of the 1960's as many would be led to believe; in fact, they were actually declining. What had changed was the rate at which teenagers were marrying—by the 1970's, teenagers were accountable for over half of non-marital births.¹⁴ Though less than one third of non-marital births are results of teen pregnancy today, “out-of-wedlock births represent a much larger percentage of births to teens than of births to older women.”¹⁵ The high percentage of non-marital births among teens compared to older women may account for the reasons why “teenage parenthood became synonymous with single parenthood” and has resulted in the distorted perception that teen pregnancy is on the rise.¹⁶ Since single parenthood, particularly single motherhood, connotes the absence of a male provider and the likelihood to need welfare assistance, the conception of teen pregnancy as a problem may derive from its association with its “social cost” to the state. Furthermore, as Chris Bonnell points out, the emergence of “teen pregnancy” as a social crisis may result from the “decreasing political acceptability of explicitly problematizing unmarried mothers”.¹⁷ Thus, the construction of teen parents as social “burdens” may reinforce the stringent welfare policy measures that deny assistance not only to adolescents, but to all poor and unmarried Black and Latina mothers. In that the teen pregnancy “crisis” gained momentum at the same time that images of the lazy and promiscuous “welfare mother” emerged in the 1970's, the government's subsequent cuts in social services could be viewed in tandem with the

¹³ Furstenberg, *Destinies of the Disadvantaged*, #.

¹⁴ “Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States, 1940-1999.” Center for Disease Control, Oct. 2000, 19 Oct. 2011 <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr48/nvs48_16.pdf>.

¹⁵ Luker, *Dubious Conceptions*, #.

¹⁶ Furstenberg, *Destinies of the Disadvantaged*, #.

¹⁷ Chris Bonnell, “Why Is Teenage Pregnancy Conceptualized as a Social Problem? A Review of Quantitative Research from the USA and UK,” *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, Vol. 6, No. 3, (May 2004): 256.

negative construction of all low-income mothers as it rendered them “undeserving”.

Thus, teen pregnancy’s emergence as a social issue has had real effects on reproductive politics and policy formation in the United States.¹⁸ From the advent of a number of reproductive health services for teens to the implementation of a number of laws and policies that hyper scrutinize teen sexual behavior, the emergence of teen pregnancy as a social “crisis” has sparked a number of initiatives designed to prevent the incidence of teen pregnancy. Many of today’s discussions surrounding teen pregnancy mirror the public concerns over morality that informed much of the literature concerning teen pregnancy published in the 1960’s. Singling out the increased willingness to engage in non-marital sex as the predominant cause of teen pregnancy, this literature set a precedent of regarding teen pregnancy as a result of moral misconduct. Thus, even when teenagers have gained access to birth control, abortion, and other reproductive services, there has been backlash to limit the extent to which teenagers can exercise their reproductive rights. The emergence of “parental notification laws” succinctly point to how policy makers continue to monitor teen sexual behavior: “As teenage girls became threatening emblems of sexual and reproductive insubordination, politicians and others devoted national and community resources to reestablishing parental authority... they devised new parental consent laws that gained Supreme Court approval, new welfare rules mandating that poor young mothers live with their parents, and abstinence-only sex education programs that aimed to reestablish stigmas associated with unwed sex and childbearing”.¹⁹

Hence, mainstream constructions of teen parents as social “burdens” or “unfit” to parent are informed by the moral panic induced by shifting patterns of childbearing, the hostility directed towards the poor with the decline of the welfare state, and the devaluation of the fertility

¹⁸ Rickie Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproductive Politics in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 237.

¹⁹ Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power*, 238.

of women of color, particularly Black and Latina women. Furthermore, teen pregnancy remains one of America's most "urgent" social problems, serving to direct attention away from the circumstances and conditions that lead to teen pregnancy, and distorting the lived experiences of those who are affected by it. The resulting policies have narrowly focused on pregnancy prevention, as manifested through stringent welfare restrictions and requirements, the implementation of abstinence-only programs in schools, and drawing from more liberal approaches, the establishment of clinics that provide contraceptive services to teens.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the following section, I outline three major constructions of teen pregnancy and how they have been employed in existing literature. In order to analyze these constructions, I draw on Ingram and Schneider as their work on social constructions and policy formation provides a useful tool by which the concept of the social construction, as often employed in sociology, can be applied in political theory. Understood to be "stereotypes that have been created by politics, culture, socialization, history, the media, literature, religion, and the like," Schneider and Ingram assert that the social construction of target populations have a "powerful influence on public officials and shapes both the policy agenda and the actual design of policy."²⁰ I apply their theory to my analysis of three constructions of teen pregnancy as they influence current policy approaches.

The first construction of teen mothers as "burdens" to the state draws primarily from the work of sociologists' deviance theories in which "deviant" behavior is viewed not only as different from normative behavior, but somehow "wrong" or "bad". Howard S. Becker describes deviance as "not a quality that lies in behavior itself, but in the interaction between the person

²⁰ Schneider and Ingram, "Social Construction of Target Populations", 335.

who commits an act and those who respond to it”.²¹ Thus, the construction of “bad” or “deviant” behavior is premised on society’s ability to label an individual “deviant”. Most commonly used to label criminals, drug-addicts, and other low-income populations that yield little political power, the construction of deviance usually embodies a host of negative characteristics. Thus, “images such as “undeserving”, “stupid”, “dishonest”, and “selfish” characterize the “deviant” and are used by policy makers to enact punitive and punishment-oriented policy.²² In that policy makers “need fear no electoral retaliation from the group itself and the general public approves of punishment for groups that it has constructed negatively,” target populations that are labeled “deviant” receive little beneficial policy.²³ Indeed, in contrast to positively constructed, powerful populations (i.e. business owners, large corporations) to whom beneficial policy is oversubscribed, “negatively constructed powerless groups will usually be proximate targets of punishment policy, and the extent of burdens will be greater than is needed to achieve effective results”.²⁴

This construction of deviance has been directly applied to teen mothers by prominent conservative political figures including Charles Murray, Edward Banfield, and George Gilder.²⁵ Arguing that teen motherhood is responsible for a variety of social and economic problems (i.e. poverty, juvenile delinquency, low rates of high school completion, and welfare dependency), poverty is viewed as a result of the “deviant” behavior of teen mothers, who must thus be punished and controlled. In that their “promiscuity” and “irresponsibility” is held responsible for the social problems that persist in their communities, the construction of “deviant” teen mothers

²¹ Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: The Free Press, 1963), 14.

²² Schneider and Ingram, “Social Construction of Target Populations,” 335.

²³ Schneider and Ingram, “Social Construction of Target Populations,” 336.

²⁴ Schneider and Ingram, “Social Construction of Target Populations,” 337.

²⁵ John C. Goodman, Gerald W. Reed, and Peter S. Ferrara, “Why Not Abolish Welfare?” NCPA, <http://www.ncpa.org/pdfs/st187.pdf> (accessed December 2, 2011).

focuses on the pathological deficiencies of low-income girls in order to cast them as an “undeserving” population.²⁶ Consistent with Schneider and Ingram’s arguments about the effects of negative constructions on policy formation, the construction of teen mothers as “engines of national malaise” have manifested in punitive welfare policy that has not only taken away many of the benefits once allotted to teen mothers, but has rendered them social “burdens.” The construction of teen mothers as “burdens”, as it implies that they are “lazy persons who are benefitting from other peoples’ hard work”, ensures that the general public approves of these punishment-oriented welfare policies, thus keeping them largely in place.²⁷

While the construction of teen parents as social “burdens” is informed only by the negative construction of deviance, the construction of parental fitness is used by two competing camps. Proponents of the first camp, as they adhere to the deviance model that castigates teenagers for their “immoral” and “pleasure-seeking” sexual behavior, often consist of the very same people who view teen mothers as social “burdens”. For example, the abstinence-only “family-planning” programs introduced by Newt Gingrich’s 1994 “Contract with America” were designed to reduce “illegitimate” births among low-income women and would later be adopted with stringent welfare reform in 1996.²⁸ Thus, in that these programs were designed to curb the childbearing patterns of low-income women, the construction of teen mothers as “unfit” to parent reflects eugenics-inspired devaluation of Black and Latina fertility. Furthermore, in that this view of teen parents identifies them as “children having children,” the negative construction of teens as “unfit” has moralistic roots whereby adolescents are perceived as “unfit” not only to parent,

²⁶ Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power*, 8.

²⁷ Schneider and Ingram, “Social Construction of Target Populations,” 338.

²⁸ Julie Jones, “Money, Sex and the Religious Right: A Constitutional Analysis of Federally Funded Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Sexuality Education,” *Religion and the Law* 35, http://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/creigh35&div=39&g_sent=1&collection=journals (accessed December 12, 2011).

but to engage in sexual behavior. The negative construction of the “unfit” teen parent, as it follows from the deviance model, results not only in a narrow and paternalistic focus on prevention policy, but actively seeks to deny teen girls contraceptive services and access to reproductive health care (e.g. legislation that requires teens to receive prescriptions for Plan B, implementation of parental notification laws, and restrictions of Medicaid funding for abortion). Thus, even as public officials “purs[ue] widely held public interest goals” such as the prevention of teen and unintended pregnancy, the construction of “unfit” “deviant” subjects results in policy formation that provide burdens rather than benefits.²⁹

In contrast to this approach of “unfit” teen parents as “deviant”, other proponents of teen prevention policy, including reproductive rights advocates and feminist groups (the most notable Planned Parenthood) advocate for a less hostile construction of teen parents. While they nevertheless share a view of teens as “unfit” to parent and thus avidly promote teen pregnancy prevention, they support their view by attesting to the “adverse” consequences of early childbearing, particularly as they are health-related and result in detrimental outcomes for both mother and child. Furthermore, they often position their argument in a reproductive rights framework whereby teen pregnancy is indicative of the state’s failure to provide adequate reproductive health services, particularly access to contraceptives. Often flouting the opposing camp’s concern with the morality of non-marital sexual behavior, this construction of unfit parenthood does not posit teen mothers as “deviant”. Rather, teen mothers are “positively” constructed as “dependents” to whom beneficial policy nevertheless remains undersubscribed: “For the dependent groups, such as children or mothers, officials want to appear to be aligned with their interests; but their lack of political power makes it difficult to direct resources toward

²⁹ Schnedier and Ingram, “Social Construction of Target Populations,” 340.

them”.³⁰ Thus, “symbolic and hortatory tools will commonly be used for dependent groups even when the pervasiveness of the problem would suggest that more direct intervention is needed.”³¹ Even as some politicians and policy makers have embraced the teen mother as a “dependent” rather than a “deviant”, the resulting beneficial policy formation has thus remained limited in its approach. For example, in that free health clinics still “require clients to present themselves to the agency in order to receive benefits,” the policies advocated by reproductive rights proponents only reach a handful of the target population. Furthermore, though “dependents” are not explicitly demonized as are “deviants”, the policy that addresses them “involve labeling and stigmatizing” and often remind them that they are “powerless, helpless, and needy”.³² In that namely white feminists have rallied for the “reproductive rights” of low-income women, even the “positive” construction of teens as “unfit” to parent implies that they are dependent on the generosity of the more powerful to not only know what’s in their best interest (delaying early childbearing), but to solve their problems on their behalf (the ability to avoid “unintended” pregnancy).

The third construction of teenagers engages with a body of literature that has positioned teen mothers as “rational” according to neoclassical economic theories. Popularized by social scientist George Homans and expanded upon later by Peter Blauman among others, rational-actor theories have typically suggested that individuals are “profit-seekers” who “calculate the likely costs and benefits of any action before deciding what to do”.³³ The conception of teen mothers as “rational actors” has typically resulted in sinister and conservative interpretations of teens that render their childbearing patterns as calculated efforts to extract financial resources

³⁰ Schneider and Ingram, “Social Construction of Target Populations,” 339.

³¹ Schneider and Ingram, “Social Construction of Target Populations,” 339.

³² Schneider and Ingram, “Social Construction of Target Populations,” 342.

³³ John Scott “Rational Choice Theory,” in *Understanding Contemporary Society: Theories of The Present*, ed. G. Browning, A. Halcli, and F. Webster, (Sage Publications, 2000).

from the state. Thus, the teen mother becomes the “calculating, knowing “rational actor” of neoclassical economics [who] coolly assesses the costs of having a baby, analyzes the benefits of welfare, and “invests” in a course of action that will get her what she wants”.³⁴ This conception of teen mothers echoes the “deviant” constructions employed by conservative pundits like Charles Murray and Edward Banfield, and have further justified policy initiatives that promote the abolition of welfare as a means to reduce teen pregnancy rates. Literature that has sought to understand teen pregnancy from a less conservative approach have thus altogether rejected this notion of the teen mother as a “rational” actor and have posited her as “irrational” instead, often drawing on cultural, social, and pathological factors to explain her childbearing patterns. For example, studies have cited “Latino cultural values” such as “familism” and “machismo” to explain the prevalence of Latina adolescent childbearing patterns despite its negative economic consequences.³⁵ Other authors have contended that pathological deficiencies, like low-self esteem, lead teens to act irrationally, citing childbirth as “one of the few avenues available to satisfy needs to love and be loved.”³⁶ In that these theories still posit the behavior of teen mothers as non-normative, they often align with deviance theories, and narrowly seek one-dimensional prevention policies to address teen pregnancy.

However, if we understand “rational” not according to the traditional rational-actor theory, but in the context of “collective” or “cultural rationality,” the construction of teen mothers’ rationality is neither a punitive nor sinister reading of teen mothers, but one that allows them to be understood as individuals reacting within a “complex interaction of socioeconomic,

³⁴ Luker, *Dubious Conceptions*, 4.

³⁵ First talk maiden castro annitto

³⁶ Annette Lawson and Deborah L. Rhode, *The Politics of Pregnancy: Adolescent Sexuality and Public Policy*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 7.

ideological, and family influences”.³⁷ Employed by Arline Geronimus, Kristen Luker, Linda Burton, Carol Stack, Annette Lawson, Sara Ruddick, and Pamela L. Erickson, this understanding of teen motherhood assumes that childbearing may be “selectively rational in a sense that prevailing commentary often fails to acknowledge”.³⁸ For example, Geronimus contends that early childbearing amongst low-income women may be an “adaptive strategy” in that it may act as a “solution to the difficulty of bearing and rearing healthy children in poverty”.³⁹ In that early childbearing may minimize maternal health complications and optimize the chances that children are well-cared for, early childbearing in contexts of poverty may be understood as a “rational” decision. Furthermore, in that numerous studies have shown that levels of educational attainment and employment of low-income girls are little likely to be altered by age of childbearing, it cannot be assumed that teen mothers “suffer distinct disadvantage solely because of age.”⁴⁰ Thus, in that many teen mothers face considerable economic and educational disadvantage prior to pregnancy, these theorists suggest that we look to other existing structures to explain the likelihood for poverty and low levels of education among these adolescents. By moving away from pathological explanations of teen pregnancy, this frequently under-acknowledged construction of teen mothers as “rational” effectively points out how larger structural inequality contribute to early childbearing patterns among low-income youth.

Even as scholars may contend that early childbearing may be “beneficial” to some teen mothers, they do not advocate for teen childbearing among the poor nor do they regard prevention efforts to be futile. Instead, in believing that women will act rationally within their given structural contexts, they advocate for policy that provides low-income women with the

³⁷ Lawson and Rhode, 7.

³⁸ Lawson and Rhode, 7.

³⁹ Geronimus, “Teenage Childbearing and Social Disadvantage”, #.

⁴⁰ Lawson and Rhode, 129.

means to do what is in their best interest. As Geronimus states, “In terms of practice, such observations suggest the importance of providing poor women with the knowledge and means to exercise reproductive freedom. The core of this hypothesis is that communities maintain their own collective wisdom (or “common sense”) about how best to provide for themselves and their children. Policies seeking to empower poor women are more consistent with this perspective than those seeking to legislate their behavior.”⁴¹ Thus, the government's role is to support and enact “woman-centered” policies that help poor adolescents take control and have agency over their sexual behavior as it best accommodates their personal well-being. Rather than punish or indoctrinate teens, policy should aim to reduce the issues associated with teen pregnancy, i.e. health complications, low wages, high retention rates/low graduation rates. Furthermore, this approach contends that the government has a responsibility in ensuring that teen mothers are able to raise their children with “the dignity and authority now denied them.”⁴² However, in that low-income mothers yield too little political power to derive significant benefits from the state, this third construction, even as it is positive and refutes conceptions of low-income teens as helpless, will not redirect resources towards teen pregnancy as long as low-income teen mothers are not politically influential. Thus, even as the construction of the “rational” teen mother advocates far-reaching structural policy reform, in practice the low-income teen mother at worst remains treated as a “deviant”, and at best a “dependent” of the state. Constructed as either, she retains little control over the design of policies that affect her, and beneficial policy remains undersubscribed to her.⁴³

While the “rational” construction of teen motherhood may not gain momentum in public discourse, it nevertheless promotes a useful framework in examining the structural causes of

⁴¹ Geronimus, “Teenage Childbearing and Social Disadvantage”, #.

⁴² Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power*, 241.

⁴³ Schneider and Ingram, “Social Construction of Target Populations,” 338.

early childbearing. Drawing on this construction of teen mothers as “rational” actors that respond to context of poverty, I take an approach to teen pregnancy that stresses the structural influence on patterns of early childbearing. Implicit in my argument is the belief that having access to economic and educational opportunity decreases one’s likelihood to become pregnant and carry a child to term as an adolescent. Because low-income girls are less likely than their high-income peers to have access to such opportunity, they are also more likely to bear children during adolescence. Thus, I argue that high pregnancy rates among low-income teens occur as a response to socioeconomic inequality, an inequality that is actively reproduced by state policy and institutional arrangements. As constructionist theorists Suzanne Mettler and Joe Soss point out: “Mass opinion and behavior [are] politically constructed outcomes—that is, outcomes that arise through the interaction of political institutions, organizations, policies, and actors.”⁴⁴ Early childbearing can thus be situated in a context whereby unequal housing, tax, and educational policies influence individual opinions and decision-making. In that Black and Latina low-income girls are more likely to live in impoverished neighborhoods, attend underperforming and underfunded schools, and have little access to employment regardless of earning a high school diploma, structural inequality renders early-childbearing less economically and socially harmful to these teens than to their white, high-income peers. These disparities in early-childbearing’s effects contribute to high rates of pregnancy among low-income teens; having less to lose than their high-income peers, low-income teens will not prevent early-childbearing as ardently. In that these contexts of poverty are created and maintained by the state, these patterns can be viewed as a result of structural inequality. It is only until policy addresses these issues of structural inequality that teen pregnancy and its correlated disadvantages can be meaningfully reduced.

⁴⁴ Suzanne Mettler and Joe Soss, “The Consequences of Public Policy for Democratic Citizenship: Bridging Policy Studies and Mass Politics,” *Perspectives on Politics* 2 (2004): 55-73.

MY FRAMEWORK

“As long as people don’t have a vision of the future which having a baby at a very early age will jeopardize, they won’t go to all the lengths necessary to prevent pregnancy.”⁴⁵

From the mountains of literature that cite teen pregnancy as one of our country's most pressing issues surfaces one crucial, often unaddressed question: Why do low-income girls become pregnant at phenomenally higher rates than their middle and high-income counterparts?

If we look at childbearing statistics in the United States, we can note that adolescent pregnancy has steadily declined over the past few decades. However, what hasn't changed is the correlation between incidence of teen pregnancy and socioeconomic level. Despite a general decline, teen pregnancy remains heavily concentrated amongst low-income teens, particularly amongst Latina and Black youth. According to a study conducted in 2006, "the birth rate among 15- to 17-year-old non-Hispanic Blacks [36.1 per 1000] was more than three times as high, and the birth rate among Hispanics [47.9 per 1000] was more than four times as high as the birth rate among non-Hispanic Whites [11.8 per 1000]".⁴⁶ Indeed, if we look at the reported rates at which girls from low-income communities bear children compared to those of girls from middle and high-income communities, we would be led to believe that pregnancy is a phenomenon particular to poor, minority women. With policies in place that have not only increased teen access to contraceptives and reproductive services, but have also established health clinics in low-income communities, it is puzzling to see that pregnancy rates amongst low-income teens remains disproportionately high. In this thesis, I argue that middle and high-income teens have one crucial resource that serves as a deterrent from becoming pregnant. This resource is their socioeconomic privilege.

⁴⁵ Luker, *Dubious Conceptions*, #.

⁴⁶ Charles E. Basch, "Teen Pregnancy and the Achievement Gap Among Urban Minority Youth," *Journal of School Health* 81, no. 10 (Oct. 2011): 614.

Unlike girls from low-income communities, girls from middle and high-income communities are more likely to have access to educational opportunity, a variety of fulfilling career and job prospects, and most importantly, economic mobility. When high-income girls become pregnant (which can occur to as little as 17 per 1,000 women compared to the national average of 52 per 1,000⁴⁷), they are overwhelmingly more likely to end their pregnancies through abortion than their low-income counterparts.⁴⁸ This tendency can be explained by the normative life trajectory of middle-class, white teens as they are expected to earn four year degrees from college, establish their careers, and marry before bearing children. Early childbearing, as it has been understood from this white, middle-class perspective as a threat to one's life trajectory, has traditionally and continues to be conceived as something that all women would logically take great strides to prevent. Hence, research and policy that attempt to address high rates of pregnancy among low-income youth often fail to take into account how early childbearing may have different implications and significance among different social classes. If teen pregnancy is to be framed as a problem, we must acknowledge who perceives it as such in order to understand why certain groups are more likely to experience early childbearing while others are not.

Contrary to the notion that early childbearing is a disastrous event for young women, the majority of teen mothers never experience the catastrophic consequences so often associated with early childbearing. In Chapter 4, I detail how early childbearing does little to alter the life circumstances and long-term material gains of low-income teens, thus complicating the view of adolescent childbearing as a crisis that promotes poverty, low educational attainment, and other societal ills. At the same time, I note that denying welfare and other income assistance programs

⁴⁷ Rebecca Wind, "Disparities in Unintended Pregnancy Grow, Even as National Rate Stagnates," *Guttmacher.org*, August 24, 2011, "<http://www.guttmacher.org/media/nr/2011/08/24/index.html>Guttmacher Institute 24 Aug. 2011.

⁴⁸ Tanf, back of notebook

to low-income mothers have had, contrary to common perceptions, little to no impact on the rates at which teenagers bear children or at the rates they drop out of school.⁴⁹ This point is crucial as it is often ignored in public policymaking, allowing anti-poverty efforts to wrongly center on eliminating what they regard as financial incentives for low-income youth to bear children. Because welfare aid only provides a minimal amount of income and because it has become less and less accessible to many mothers due to harsh eligibility requirements enacted with the passage of 1996 reforms, low-income teen mothers generally do not benefit substantially from welfare aid, or what is cynically referred to as “government hand outs”. Thus, the conception of the low-income teenager as having children in order to “take advantage” of welfare provisions is ill-informed.

Instead of the meager government subsidies currently provided through welfare, teens are more likely to benefit economically through close networks and familial structures. These networks become crucial to teen mothers in helping them balance their parental obligations. For example, as I mention earlier, researcher Arline Geronimus has found substantial evidence that teen childbearing can be “well calibrated to support and draw support from local family economies and caretaking systems.”⁵⁰ Teen childbearing thus may not be as ill-timed as policy-makers believe; in some cases, young mothers may find themselves to be best positioned to bear children in their teens. Indeed, while it is acknowledged that most instances of adolescent pregnancy are accidental, there are certainly a substantial number of teen pregnancies that are, if not wholly, somewhat intended. According to a study that surveyed 455 low-income adolescent girls in Alabama, “nearly a quarter (23.6%) expressed some desire to become pregnant in the

⁴⁹ Lingxin Hao and Andrew J. Cherlin, “Welfare Reform and Teenage Pregnancy, Childbirth and School Dropout,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66, no. 1 (Feb. 2004): 179.

⁵⁰ Arline T. Geronimus, “Teen Childbearing as a Cultural Prism,” *British Medical Bulletin* 69 (2004): 159.

near future."⁵¹ This “desire” to become pregnant in the near future need not be read as “pathological deficiencies” on the part of low-income teens. Instead, childbearing at an early age may be beneficial in contexts of poverty and may thus be interpreted as “rational” decisions in low-income contexts. In that the number of people who live in “extreme poverty neighborhoods” has grown by over one third in the past decade, the state’s ineffectiveness in addressing issues of structural inequality and poverty alleviation is at the heart of the “teen pregnancy crisis”.⁵²

Thus, if we are to understand patterns of early childbearing, we must ask ourselves if our conceptions of and approaches towards teen pregnancy align with the lived experiences of low-income teenage mothers. Is the failure to curb teen pregnancy in low-income communities the result of a disconnection between policy makers and those most affected by the policies they make? When researchers suggest that pregnancy prevention must “include education to help teenagers understand the realities of motherhood,” what assumptions are made about childbearing’s effects on low-income groups, and are these assumptions founded?⁵³ I contend that early childbearing has differing levels of social and economic consequences for different socioeconomic groups—thus, we must analyze how teen pregnancy has been traditionally constructed as a “problem” or “crisis” in contemporary discourse, for what reasons, from whose perspective, and how this has affected policy formation.

By recognizing that early childbearing carries different implications for different socioeconomic groups, I do not mean to say that early childbearing has no negative side effects for low-income teen mothers or to advocate for early childbearing among low-income teens.

⁵¹ “Teen Pregnancies Not All Accidents,” *Wesh.com*, July 23 2004, <http://www.wesh.com/r/3568892/detail.html> (accessed October 5, 2011).

⁵² Lisa Lambert, “Pockets of Poverty Grow in the United States,” *Reuters.com*, November 3 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/11/03/us-usa-cities-poverty-newspro-idUSTRE7A23NU20111103> (accessed March 4 2012).

⁵³ “Teen Pregnancies Not All Accidents,” *Wesh.com*

Instead, I argue the opposite—I believe childbearing often does have negative consequences for low-income girls. From being unable to access affordable health and childcare to enduring bureaucratic pressure to leave their schools, teen mothers experience a host of negative consequences for becoming pregnant. However, the hardships that low-income mothers encounter do not result so much from the age at which they give birth than from their pre-existing socioeconomic status. Regardless of whether they delay childbearing until later years, low-income women always face hardship in attaining meaningful education and adequate employment. By blaming poverty on the “bad” behavior of low-income teens, negative constructions of teen mothers as “burdens” and “unfit” to parent obscure how socioeconomic inequality is a pre-existing facet of their everyday lives. Furthermore, these constructions posit poverty as a result of individual failure, ignoring how inequality is systematically reproduced through current institutional arrangements. Thus, resulting policy has not only systematically failed to address poverty, but has perpetuated socioeconomic inequality on the illusory tenets of economic mobility and self-help. By recognizing the state’s failure to address inequalities in class, race, and gender, we are able to see how constructions of teen pregnancy have inappropriately rendered teen mothers as responsible for many of society’s ills to the effect that it has ignored the state’s role in providing socioeconomic opportunity for its neediest populations.

Furthermore, acknowledging low-income mothers as “rational” actors does not mean that prevention efforts are futile. On the contrary, I believe teen pregnancy rates can be drastically cut simply by meaningfully improving educational and economic opportunity for low-income communities. In a country where more than three times as many Black men live in prison cells than college dorms, it should not be surprising that there are a large group of teenagers who become disillusioned with the states’ educational institutions.⁵⁴ Indeed, in that “policy designs

⁵⁴ http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21001543/ns/us_news-life/t/more-Blacks-latinos-jail-college-

shape citizens' personal experiences with government and hence influence processes of political learning and patterns of political belief," low levels of educational attainment among low-income youth can be understood as a result of racialized educational policy that disproportionately targets and demonizes Black and Latino youth.⁵⁵ As sociologist Erica Meiners points out, policies such as the Gun-Free School Act of 1994 have paved the way for the implementation of other harsh zero-tolerance policies and the establishment of metal detectors and police officers in urban, public schools. These policies have resulted in the increased likelihood for Black and Latino youth to be suspended, expelled, and placed in special education programs, thus contributing to feelings of isolation from school. Meiners contends that educational policy, in that it criminalizes and punishes low-income youth, can thus be held responsible for rendering imprisonment, rather than high school completion or college attendance, as a normative "life stage" for Black youth.⁵⁶

When we view the actions of teen mothers as "deviant" and stigmatize them for dropping out of high school or otherwise defying non-normative middle class behavior, we risk ignoring how current policy has systematically rendered the American dream a reality for some, and a lingering dream for many others. Informed by constructions of the poor as "undeserving" or "criminal", policy has not only kept low-income youth at a social and economic disadvantage, but has belittled their belief in the fairness of democracy and government responsiveness to people like them. Thus, in order to curb teen pregnancy, policy needs to provide low-income teens with the same life prospects that teens from higher income backgrounds enjoy. Low-income teens must be able to envision themselves in institutions of higher education, as

[dorms/#.T4n_9KtSSSo](#)

⁵⁵ Mettler and Soss, "The Consequences of Public Policy for Democratic Citizenship," 62.

⁵⁶ Erica Meiners, *Right to be Hostile: Schools, Prisons, and the Making of Public Enemies*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 32.

professionals, and as financially secure, and policy must provide them with the means to do so. As a country, we've come a long way to ensure that teenagers have more access than ever to reproductive health services and comprehensive sex education. While pregnancy prevention policy may be beneficial, it will not eliminate the circumstances of inequality that frame the lives of low-income girls. Low-income teenagers do not need any more condoms; they need the same opportunities for economic success granted to their high-income peers.

According to Deborah Rhode, a Stanford law professor who has extensively researched teen pregnancy, low-income teens are not necessarily at an economic disadvantage as a result of early childbearing. Instead, Rhode argues that "the economic opportunities sacrificed through early parenting d[o] not appear sufficiently great to justify deferring childbirth."⁵⁷ While early childbearing may have harsh economic repercussions for middle and high-income groups, it has been continually found to have mild or no economic consequences for low-income youth. Rhode thus concludes that reducing early childbearing among low-income youth can only take place through "fundamental social changes" that change the existing "opportunity structure."⁵⁸ In believing that teen mothers are "rational" actors responding to a context of little opportunity and economic mobility structurally reproduced by the state, I argue that these "fundamental" institutional changes may be the only effective means by which to further decrease teen pregnancy rates and improve the lives of all low-income girls.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology I employ consists of research and data collection from primary sources. These sources include but are not limited to: websites, news articles, academic reports, national statistics, articles from databases, books, encyclopedias, documentaries, ethnographies, magazine

⁵⁷ <http://news.stanford.edu/pr/93/931020Arc3093.html>

⁵⁸ <http://news.stanford.edu/pr/93/931020Arc3093.html>

articles, streaming videos, and other forms of popular media. My aim is to analyze how the three constructions of teen mothers as (1) social “burden”s (2) “unfit” to parent (3) “rational” actors have surfaced in discourse and interacted with politics and policy formation. I look at competing approaches to teen pregnancy (e.g. abstinence only v. comprehensive education, allocation of social services v. stringent welfare reform) and how constructions of teen pregnancy influence which approaches become implemented through policy. As Ingram and Schneider point out, “elected officials are able to construct several different policy logics for almost any problem they wish to solve.”⁵⁹ Though these different policy logics could all be justified to achieve the same aim, “they have very different implications for target populations.”⁶⁰ Thus, understanding how the state has interacted with teen pregnancy requires an analysis of the ways in which constructions of teen parents have influenced the policies produced to address them, and whether such policies have proven beneficial or burdensome to low-income teens.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

In Chapter 1: AN INTRODUCTION TO EARLY CHILDBEARING, I familiarize the reader with the advent of teen pregnancy as it is has historically emerged as a social issue along the lines of race, gender, and class. I introduce the three constructions of teen pregnancy I will analyze throughout this thesis (1) social “burdens (2) “unfit” to parent (3) “rational” actors given a context of limited opportunity. I also introduce my reader to the argument that teen pregnancy would be better combated by improvements in the educational, economic, and social development of low-income youth than by current policies that currently stigmatize teen mothers and seek to control teen “deviant” behavior.

In Chapter 2: BURDENS TO THE STATE: HOW PUNISHING THE POOR BECAME

⁵⁹ Schneider and Ingram, “Social Construction of Target Populations,” 336.

⁶⁰ Schneider and Ingram, “Social Construction of Target Populations,” 336.

PREGNANCY PREVENTION POLICY, I analyze the construction of teen pregnancy as a “crisis” that perpetuates a host of social ills, including poverty, crime, and low educational attainment. I analyze how the construction of teens as social “burdens” results in the reproduction of punitive and punishment-oriented policies that prove especially burdensome to low-income Black and Latina mothers. These punitive policies have manifested primarily through stringent welfare policy, along with its accompanying abstinence-only focus via family-planning programs.

In Chapter 3: UNFIT PARENTS: CONTROLLING TEEN SEXUAL BEHAVIOR, I analyze the construction of teenagers as “unfit” parents. As it reflects a moral panic in which out-of-wedlock childbearing defies a number of traditional social norms, this construction is understood by conservative camps as not only “unfit” to parent, but “unfit” to engage in sexual behavior, leading to abstinence-only policy and the reluctance to grant teens access to reproductive healthcare services. Understood by liberal camps, teens are “unfit parents” because of the adverse effects that are often associated with early childbearing (i.e. infant mortality rates, poverty, low educational outcomes). This camp advocates access to comprehensive sex education, employing a reproductive rights framework to emphasize women’s “choice”. This chapter discusses how competing ideas about sexuality and gender roles contribute to the construction of teens as “unfit” to parent, narrowly producing prevention policy that attempt to monitor and control teen sexual behavior and that are inadequate in addressing the underlying factors that contribute to teen pregnancy.

In Chapter 4: RATIONAL ACTORS: TEEN PREGNANCY AS A PRODUCT OF STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY, I analyze the construction of teen mothers as employed by many scholars who seek to dispel the mainstream narratives used to discuss teen pregnancy.

Positioned as “rational” actors, I draw upon ethnographic accounts of teen mothers in order to analyze their behavior as influenced by contexts of limited opportunity. Using this conception of teens as “rational” actors, I assert that the American opportunity structure that drastically limits the educational and economic mobility for low-income youth is also responsible for the high incidence of early childbearing among Black and Latina adolescents. Thus, neither punishing teen mothers through the creation of welfare “disincentives” nor increasing access to reproductive health services necessarily entails the appropriate policy response to early childbearing among low-income youth. Furthermore, I provide an analysis of the stigmatization that teen mothers routinely face in their interaction with the school and other state apparatuses.

In my concluding chapter, Chapter 5: WHAT POLICY IS NOT DOING: SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE I conclude that teen pregnancy must be understood not as a “crisis” itself but as a measurement of growing socioeconomic inequality in the United States. I argue that the primary way by which to reduce early childbearing is to improve the life opportunities of America’s poor. Long-term strategies to preventing teen pregnancy therefore include: closing the income gap through meaningful tax reform, improving schools, and furthering the educational/economic opportunities of America’s working and working-poor populations. Short-term strategies include: implementing programs and policies that treat teen pregnancy as more than an “isolated” event that occurs out of failures in individual decision-making. This would include programs that address the larger structural factors that lead to early childbearing, stress youth development and improve access to economic and educational opportunity, and empower low-income women to exercise “reproductive freedom”.

CHAPTER 2: BURDENS TO THE STATE: HOW PUNISHING THE POOR BECAME PREGNANCY PREVENTION POLICY

Despite its general decline, teen pregnancy remains a political hot topic as it is conceived to be a leading cause of a variety of social ills. This construction, as it is premised on the “deviant” behavior of pregnant adolescents, has served to stigmatize low-income, minority teen mothers, and has had deep implications for the ways in which government and civil society alike have reacted to early childbearing among this population. In this chapter, I assert that mainstream approaches to teenage pregnancy have effectively rendered the teenage mother a social “burden” to the state. This hostile construction has been revealed through the numerous efforts and policies that seek to effectively deny her the social services she may well often need.

On The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy’s “why [teen pregnancy] matters” webpage, teen pregnancy is immediately linked to its negative impact on society: “Teen pregnancy is closely linked to a host of other critical social issues — poverty and income, overall child well-being, out-of-wedlock births, responsible fatherhood, health issues, education, child welfare, and other risky behavior.”⁶¹ By linking teen pregnancy to the absence of “responsible” fathers, and “poverty and income”, The National Campaign reveals a dominant discourse surrounding early childbearing that first emerged in the 1960’s, and has positioned teen pregnancy, as it implies the non-marital sexual behavior of Black and Latina women, as responsible for the issues prevalent among low-income groups. Further solidifying this point, the text reads, “Simply put, if more children in this country were born to parents who are ready and able to care for them, we would see a significant reduction in a host of social problems afflicting children in the United States, from school failure and crime to child abuse and neglect.”⁶²

Within this discourse, teen pregnancy is not a reproductive health problem; rather, it is a social problem in that it fosters poverty and the problems traditionally correlated with Black and

⁶¹ National Campaign to Prevent Teen Preg

⁶² National campaign

Latino populations, such as juvenile delinquency, low education rates, and high levels of unemployment. Underlying this construction is the implication that taxpayers will have to bear the heavy social “costs” incurred by teen pregnancy: “[T]een childbearing is costly to the public sector—federal, state, and local governments and the taxpayers who support them. Teen childbearing costs taxpayers at least \$9 billion each year, including public sector health care costs, increased child welfare costs, increased prison costs, and lost tax revenue.”⁶³ Thus, as the National Campaign explains, the reason for which teen pregnancy has been fought against to the extent that it is often referred to as a social “battle,” and in some instances, “war,” become clear. Teen mothers, as conceptualized as low-income, unwed, and likely to be on welfare, are not only to blame for poverty and poverty’s host of related social ills, but will cost the “taxpayers who support them” a fortune.

The view that renders teen mothers as causes for poverty and as burdens to taxpayers has often intersected with negative stereotypes of “welfare mothers” that have traditionally reflected an attitude of disdain and hostility towards low-income populations. Dionne Bensonsmith argues that after the 1960’s, the “welfare state became explicitly defined around stereotypes of African-American women” in which the “promiscuous and lazy Black women” became the dominant stereotype of the average welfare recipient.⁶⁴ While the discourse has historically focused on Black teen mothers, it has expanded to include Latina mothers as the presence of a low-income Latino population has steadily increased in the states. The result has been that policies and approaches towards teen mothers have often reflected “eugenics-influenced fears” in which the childbearing patterns of Black and Latina women are held accountable for the growth of a poor

⁶³ National Campaign to Prevent Teen Preg why it matters <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/why-it-matters/pdf/introduction.pdf>

⁶⁴ Dionne Bensonsmith

and unemployed underclass.⁶⁵ Black and Latina women have therefore come under particular scrutiny as “cycles of poverty” and welfare dependency are seen to be perpetuated by their “deviant” sexual behaviors. The implications of this scrutiny have been far-reaching; from discourse that hyper-sexualizes minority women to policy that assumes minority populations to be inherently lazy or stupid, teen pregnancy has historically been conceptualized as an issue that arises out of the inferior nature of Blacks or Latinos. The “deviant” sexual behavior of these women thus becomes the ideological justification for denying welfare to low-income mothers.

Indeed, the image of the “promiscuous” welfare mother informs the discussions that construct teen mothers in terms of their large cost to the state. Though only five percent of mothers on welfare are teenagers, teenagers continue to be targeted for what is perceived to be their costly, sexual behavior, as demonstrated by the following sentiment relayed over a radio talk show: “I don’t mind paying to help people in need but I don’t want my tax dollars to pay for the sexual pleasure of adolescents who won’t use birth control.”⁶⁶ The majority of today’s politicians and leading experts alike use language that reflect this understanding in order to advocate for policy that not only stigmatizes teen mothers, but denies them access to the education and social services that they often need. For example, in justifying his plan for welfare reform that would not only cut teen mothers from eligibility, but deny eligibility to mothers who cannot identify the paternity of their children, Rick Santorum blames low-income mothers for the “ruination” of the country: “We are seeing the fabric of this country fall apart, and it’s falling apart because of single moms.”⁶⁷ Drawing from the construction of Black and Latina promiscuity that has historically dominated welfare debates, Santorum poses: “If Mom knows that she isn't gonna receive welfare if she doesn't tell us who Dad is, y'know maybe she'll be a

⁶⁵ Bonnell <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4005371>

⁶⁶ Prospect.org

⁶⁷ <http://feministing.com/2012/03/07/rick-santorum-single-mothers-breed-criminals/>

little more careful, maybe”.⁶⁸ Thus, constructed in terms of her “bad” behavior and posited as an actor in perpetuating the “nation’s” ills, teen mothers garner little public support for the social services and government support programs that they are often in need of. Despised for her lack of moral character, the teen mother is a social burden to whom society begrudgingly supports through their hard-earned tax dollars. As I later detail, this discourse has not only led to numerous slashes in funding for welfare and other social services designed to support young low-income mothers, it has contributed to an existing discourse that regards low-income women with hostility and paternalism, and readily attacks social service provisions.

Thus, the teen mother is a “deviant” in that her behavior strays from the behavior of “normal” teenage girls who not only wait until they are older and married before having children, but before engaging in non-marital sex.⁶⁹ This construction has traditionally posited teenage mothers not only as unusual but “wrong” in that they are responsible for making poor decisions regarding their sexual and reproductive health.⁷⁰ Analyzed by Wendy Luttrell, the result of this “wrong-girl discourse” is that teen mothers are seen as having made mistakes for which they must be punitively held accountable for. The response that this discourse evokes is frequently one that is characterized by paternalistic discipline by the state in which policy attempts to “scare” teen mothers into being more “careful,” or engaging in more appropriate, and moral, sexual behavior. However, by contrasting the “deviant” teen mother to the “normal” teenage girl who delays childbearing in order to adhere to a life trajectory of middle-class success, the “wrong-girl discourse” has effectively failed to acknowledge how this trajectory is seldom ever accessible to low-income youth.

The teen mother as a social “burden” is less influenced by her environment than she is

⁶⁸http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/08/rick-santorum-single-mothers-unwed-moms_n_1333302.html

⁶⁹Wendy Luttrell, *pregnant bodies, fertile minds* 5

⁷⁰ Luttrell, *Pregnant Bodies, Fertile Minds*, 29.

guilty of perpetuating the problems commonly associated with it through her bad, “wrong-girl” behavior. If “social constructions act as an organizing device through which we decide ‘who gets what, when, and how’”, this construction, as it renders her “undeserving”, has resulted in a number of policy measures that have treated her as such.⁷¹ In what follows, I discuss how the correlation between poverty and teen pregnancy has been largely misinformed, and how this misinformation has continued to cast the teen mother at blame for the nation’s “ruination,” contributing to the understanding of her as a burden to the state, and resulting in burdensome welfare policy.

THE CORRELATION BETWEEN POVERTY AND PREGNANCY

As I detailed in the introduction, poverty and its associated ills (i.e. juvenile delinquency, low levels of education, crime rates, welfare dependency, poor health, the growth of an unskilled labor force) have been conceived as direct results of teen pregnancy since the 1960’s onwards. The argument has followed that if we are able to lower the teen pregnancy rate, we will also be able to reduce a host of other social ills. However, little has been conclusively proven to back this far-reaching claim. While teen pregnancy and poverty are often correlated, there has been dubious evidence at best to prove that the former is a cause of the latter. However, despite evidence that suggests that poverty is indeed linked to, but not necessarily caused by teen pregnancy, politicians and leading experts still posit poverty as a negative “outcome”. In what follows, I demonstrate how poverty, as a pre-existing factor in most instances of teen pregnancy, complicates the notion that early childbearing leads to poverty, and that low-income girls are thus to blame for the nation’s social ills.

Since low-income women are much more likely to become teen mothers than their high-

⁷¹ Bensonsmith

income counterparts, viewing poverty as a direct outcome of teen pregnancy ignores the ways in which poverty has already shaped the lives and experiences of those who bear children at an early age. Given that low-income women account for 73 percent of women aged 15-19 that become pregnant, it would seem that poverty is a crucial determinant in the incidence of early childbearing.⁷² As sociologist Kristin Luker points out, “young women from families that are poor, or rural, or from a disadvantaged minority, or headed by a single parent are more likely to be teen mothers than are their counterparts from more privileged backgrounds”.⁷³ The fact that a disproportionate number of teen mothers already come from disadvantaged backgrounds before childbearing indicate that poverty cannot simply be conceived as a result of teen pregnancy. Rather, it is a pre-existing condition characteristic of many teen pregnancies that may further be conceived as a factor that places low-income women particularly at-risk for early childbearing.

Furthermore, as low-income girls are more likely to become teen mothers than their middle and high-income counterparts, it follows that teen mothers are also more likely to experience the social and economic disadvantages particular to poverty. Because these disadvantages characterize many of the experiences of teen mothers, it is difficult to determine whether the social ills that are posited as results of teen pregnancy are not merely results of living in low-income communities. Claims such as “adolescent mothers are less likely to receive child support from biological fathers, less likely to complete their education or to work, and less likely to be able to provide for themselves and their children without outside assistance” misleadingly omit the extent to which living in a context of poverty, rather than having children at an early age, may account for the social and economic disadvantages that teen mothers face.⁷⁴ For example, while it is true that adolescent mothers are “less likely to complete their

⁷² Gwendolyn Mink and Rickie Solinger, 626.

⁷³ American prospect, <http://prospect.org/article/dubious-conceptions-controversy-over-teen-pregnancy>

⁷⁴ Bonnell <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4005371>

education”, their low levels of education may not always be attributable to childbearing.

Research shows that "most young mothers leave school before becoming pregnant, rather than the converse, and that mothers who give birth while in school are as likely to graduate as their peers".⁷⁵ These findings suggest that low education levels as well as other social ills usually attributed to teen pregnancy may very well be results of other environmental causes. In a study that measured how non-marital childbearing affected educational prospects among minority youth, teen pregnancy was found to be only one reason among many for which teenagers did not finish their education: “There are likely to be reciprocal causal relationships between environments (e.g., poverty), education, and health; therefore, some proportion of high school dropouts is attributable to causes other than non-marital teen births.”⁷⁶

In a similar study, dropout rates were found to be attributable to childbearing in only half of all instances of teen pregnancy, leaving other pre-existing disadvantages to blame for the low educational levels of adolescent mothers.⁷⁷ The study not only pointed to how existing social disadvantage may account for low education levels and other unfavorable social outcomes, but how this social disadvantage may account for teen pregnancy itself. For example, by comparing teen mothers to their peers who did not have children in their adolescence, Levine and Painter were able to find considerable correlations between social disadvantage and incidence of childbirth: “In eighth grade teen-mothers-to-be were twice as likely to be living with a single mother (27 vs. 14%), both of their parents’ education was .4 standard deviation lower than their peers’ parents, and their parents reported somewhat lower parental involvement. Their family’s

⁷⁵ Rhode, <http://news.stanford.edu/pr/93/931020Arc3093.html>

⁷⁶ Basch, teen pregnancy and the achievement gap <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2011.00635.x/pdf>

⁷⁷ Levine and Painter http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~gpainter/Costs_of_Teenage_Painter_Levine.pdf

income to needs ratios were only a third of the average”.⁷⁸ Hence, the study pointed out that not only would low education levels remain the same regardless of incidence of childbearing, but that many of the disadvantages traditionally associated with teen pregnancy are pre-existing characteristics for many young women prior to early childbearing. The view that teen pregnancy is a cause of poverty thus becomes difficult to prove given that circumstances of poverty are likely to precede most instances of early childbearing.

Despite the evidence that complicates the notion that adolescent childbearing is a leading cause of poverty and its associated ills, the mainstream still actively treats it as such. This may not be surprising: Inadequate funding in education, healthcare, and welfare programs alike point to a prevailing neo-liberal political culture whereby the poor are blamed for their poverty.⁷⁹ Furthermore, by wrongly attributing poverty and its related ills to teen pregnancy, teen mothers remain constructed as social “burdens” and the views of conservative political scientists like Charles Murray, who, calling for the “abolition of the welfare state,” deemed the 1996 welfare reform legislation not stringent enough, are able to gain public support.⁸⁰ While abolition of welfare has yet to take place, policies that have reduced welfare eligibility to low-income mothers have nevertheless flourished in past decades.

In what immediately follows, I detail how the government has responded to early childbearing, particularly how it has treated teen mothers as social “burdens” through welfare policy. Given that the image of the “welfare queen” has played a pivotal role in informing governmental attitudes towards poor, childbearing women of color, I argue that welfare policy

⁷⁸ Levine and Painter http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~gpainter/Costs_of_Teenage_Painter_Levine.pdf 14-15

⁷⁹ Bonell

⁸⁰ murray http://articles.philly.com/1994-04-02/news/25862678_1_unwed-motherhood-teen-mothers-welfare-plan

continues to reflect a persistent hostility towards teen mothers.⁸¹ The main purpose of this is to outline how the government has refused meaningful assistance to low-income mothers, and how this tradition has had profound impacts on the way that teen mothers are treated by government policy today. Furthermore, because welfare recipients are disproportionately female, welfare policy has been largely informed by existing notions of ideal family structure and appropriate sexuality. What has resulted is the construction of “fit parenthood” as it has been used to justify everything from explicitly discouraging low-income women from bearing children to inadequately providing recipients with access to safe and affordable childcare.⁸² State-implemented “family cap” laws that deny welfare mothers any additional grant money in the event of further childbearing demonstrate the state’s devaluation of women of color’s fertility. Historically, poor, minority women have been discouraged from childbearing and sterilization has been used to prevent what was seen as a rising of the undesirable classes. Though I speak about this more in the next chapter, it is important to note the extent to which the construction of teen mothers’ “deviant” sexual behavior has influenced how welfare policy has been shaped.

WELFARE POLICY: FORMALIZED STIGMATIZATION OF LOW-INCOME MINORITY WOMEN

In order to understand how welfare policies have taken form today, we must first understand welfare’s history in America as it first came about in the early twentieth century. Though there had always existed various relief and charity programs designed to aid those unable to make a living off of their wages, welfare was distinct in that it focused on poor, white, widowed mothers and their children.⁸³ Furthermore, its initial purpose in the early 1900’s was not to sustain mothers until they were able to enter the labor market; rather, it was designed to

⁸¹ Race Criminals 18.

⁸² Mink and Solinger 648; 636

⁸³ Mink and Solinger 1.

keep mothers out of the workforce under the assumption that they should stay home to take care of their children. Though this early form of welfare did not yet conceive of recipients as sinisterly as it does today, aid to mothers was nevertheless discriminatory. Pensions were only given to mothers who were deemed deserving of them: “Pensions provided economic support only to the “best” mothers, even so regulating their dietary, kinship, and other cultural conditions to ensure their continued worthiness as mothers.”⁸⁴ In determining who the “best” mothers were, the state drew clear distinctions primarily based on race and morality, and systematically excluded Black women and women who bore children out-of-wedlock from government aid. The legacy of this inception of welfare has continued to inform welfare policy in two ways: 1) Though women’s work in the home is valued, it is not valued equally among all races, cultures, and moralities 2) Welfare eligibility is contingent upon a mother’s willingness to submit to the state’s social controls.⁸⁵

After the Great Depression, the early form of welfare that provided pensions to widowed, white mothers became nationalized through the Aid to Dependent Children Act (ADC), later to become the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Though the state continued to interfere in the lives and affairs of welfare recipients as well as exclude many who were in need of assistance, the notion that welfare recipients *deserved* aid still prevailed. That welfare was the state’s obligation to the needy was the guiding rhetoric behind welfare implementation. It wasn’t until welfare became a program increasingly for mothers who fell out of the paradigm of the “deserving” mother that recipients of welfare became stigmatized. The “deserving” mother, as a white widow of men who had been socially insured, began to disappear from the numbers of welfare recipients as changes to welfare programs began to include mothers who had never been

⁸⁴ Mink and Solinger 2.

⁸⁵ Mink and Solinger 2.

married, who were divorced, and who were increasingly of color. Though many states resisted policies that would add unmarried and Black women to their welfare rolls, by the late 1940's, the federal government had successfully pressured states into opening their welfare programs up to these women.

As more and more women of color became added to welfare rolls, welfare policy became increasingly under attack. Debates in the political sphere pointed to “recipients’ bad behavior and welfare fraud” in order to advocate for more stringent allocation of aid. Increasing concerns over fraud led many politicians to suggest publicizing the names of welfare recipients under the pretense that “shame might keep... able-bodied but lazy characters’ from requesting aid.”⁸⁶ Often drawing upon racialized images of Cadillac-driving welfare recipients and mothers who lined up for free medical assistance in mink fur coats, politicians revealed their frustration towards public assistance as a program for a morally void Black population. Furthermore, the growing hostility towards welfare was heavily informed by the idea that families headed by single Black women did not embody the values of a “suitable home”.⁸⁷ Following from this concept of the suitable home, the living arrangements and behaviors of welfare mothers became all the more scrutinized. In many states, the birth of an illegitimate child or the co-habitation with a non-spousal male could lead to the extermination of a mother’s aid.⁸⁸ Welfare caseworkers went to great lengths to enforce these restrictions, even conducting surprise middle-of-the night raids in which finding a man’s hat could jeopardize a mother’s ADC eligibility.⁸⁹ The general disdain that characterized sentiment towards welfare policy was succinctly encapsulated by one congressman’s depiction of the state of welfare at the time: “Behind an iron curtain of secrecy

⁸⁶ Mink and Solinger 155.

⁸⁷ Kenneth J. Neubeck and Noel A. Cazenave, *Welfare Racism: Playing the Race Card Against America’s Poor*, (New York, Routledge, 2001) 60.

⁸⁸ Solinger and Mink 146.

⁸⁹ Neubeck and Cazenave, *Welfare Racism*, 61.

and concealment we have today a miniature welfare state in actual operation, a welfare state that spends public money for luxuries for the undeserving and for the financing and encouragement of improvidence and illegitimacy.”⁹⁰The “undeserving”, as it represented the “lazy, immoral African-American welfare mother”, stood in stark contrast to the deserving white, widowed mother of earlier periods.⁹¹

As I have detailed earlier, hostility towards the welfare mother became solidified in tandem with the publication of the Moynihan Report which linked increasing welfare expenditure with the poor socialization and moral practices of Black families, politicians increasingly blamed welfare recipients for their poverty.⁹² Furthermore, the morality of Black women came under harsher scrutiny as out-of-wedlock childbearing was seen to be a method by which mothers “ma[de] a business” out of having illegitimate children on welfare.⁹³ This “blame the victim” approach marked a shift in the ideology that prompted welfare’s inception in the 1930’s: “Politicians and the public no longer saw AFDC as a program for the destitute who had befallen an unfortunate fate. Instead, it appeared to have become a program of dependence that single mothers used to avoid working to support themselves and particularly their children.”⁹⁴ As wariness with welfare policy grew and welfare recipients became all the more stigmatized, the 70’s and 80’s were characterized by the passage of harsher and more punitive welfare legislation. The idea that “single mothers need to rely on employment, and not the government” culminated in the extensive welfare reform program headed by Bill Clinton in the

⁹⁰ Solinger and Mink 153.

⁹¹ Neubeck and Cazenave, *Welfare Racism*, 64.

⁹² Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action”, *United States Department of Labor*, Mar. 1965, <http://www.dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm> (accessed Nov. 19 2011).

⁹³ Neubeck and Cazenave, *Welfare Racism*, 73.

⁹⁴ Kelly J. Gastley, “Why Family Cap Laws Just Aren’t Getting It Done”, *William and Mary Law Review*, (2004): 381.

1990's in which welfare took its most stringent and restrictive form known today.⁹⁵

Following from a history of welfare policy that has devalued and stigmatized minority women's roles as mothers, the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) entailed a number of reforms designed to 1) promote employment and self-sufficiency and 2) reduce the rate of out-of-wedlock and teen births among recipients, effectively strengthening "marriage" and "family values".⁹⁶ It is with this passage of legislation that welfare was transformed into workfare, and welfare recipients could only receive cash assistance if they entered the workforce within a certain time frame. Furthermore, the reforms gave the state the ability to enact policies that placed limits on the number of children supported by welfare assistance. These "family cap" legislations pointed not only to the state's increasing control over the fertility and familial structures of low-income women, it also underlined the commonly-held idea that welfare recipients that should not remain on the rolls indefinitely. In accordance with the idea that "Americans must learn to view public assistance as 'temporary,'" ADFC was replaced with the more stringent Temporary Aid for Needy Families (TANF)⁹⁷. The belief was that providing stringent and time-limited cash assistance would force the lazy, poorly socialized low-income woman off of her dependency on welfare. Inherent to this policy was the notion that low-income mothers received and remained on welfare in order to take advantage of the state. Welfare policy therefore viewed the low-income mother with hostility and disdain; by cutting cash assistance and imposing a host of new restrictions and regulations, the government revealed its belief that low-income mothers were not only at blame for their poverty, but that the government was not necessarily responsible for alleviating it.

⁹⁵ Gastley, "Why Family Cap Laws Just Aren't Getting it Done," 381.

⁹⁶ Richard P. Nathan, Paola Gentry, and Catherine Lawrence, "Is there a link between Welfare Reform and Teen Pregnancy?", *University of Maryland School of Public Policy*, http://www.welfareacademy.org/conf/papers/nathan_p.shtml (accessed Nov. 19 2011).

⁹⁷ Gastley, "Why Family Cap Laws Just Aren't Getting it Done," 384.

It is within this context that teen mothers, along with other welfare recipients, find themselves increasingly stigmatized and disadvantaged by welfare policy today. With PRWORA's focus on strengthening family values and promoting "a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage [as] the expected standard of human sexual activity," adolescent mothers have come under increased scrutiny by the state, and have been effectively denied many of the freedoms they had prior to PRWORA⁹⁸. Furthermore, the mandates that aim to promote employment, education, and supervised living arrangements for teen mothers have often resulted not only in the exclusion of many potential welfare recipients, but the oversanctioning of young mothers who do receive assistance. By imposing harsher welfare restrictions and eligibility guidelines, politicians revealed their belief that denying government assistance to low-income mothers would effectively "scare young women into using contraceptives, abstaining from sex, or marrying their partners."⁹⁹ Hence, the discourse that posits teen mothers as "deviants" that need to be "scared" or disciplined into practicing the normative sexual and social behavior of the white, middle class became formalized into welfare policy through PRWORA.

For example, this paternalistic approach to teen mothers informs the PRWORA provisions that eliminate cash benefits to mothers under 18 who do not live with adult guardians. In justifying this provision, Bruce Reed, Bill Clinton's domestic policy advisor, calls teen mothers "children" and alludes to their punishment as one would an unruly daughter: "We'll require unwed teen mothers to live at home with their parents, and forbid them from moving out of the household and collecting welfare as a separate check... We think it doesn't make sense for

⁹⁸ Ellen Reese, *Backlash Against Welfare Mothers*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 119.

⁹⁹ Reese, *Backlash Against Welfare Mothers*, 158.

children who have children to set up house on their own when they still need to be parented."¹⁰⁰ Though the intended effect of this paternalistic measure was to discourage pregnancy as a means through which teenagers could leave home and begin their own households, it remains unclear whether this policy has affected early childbearing at all. As Kalil and Danziger point out in their study of teen welfare recipients, "close to 40% of the teens reported not knowing about either the school mandate or the co-residence mandate prior to having their baby."¹⁰¹ The idea that teenagers would be discouraged from childbearing by more restrictive welfare policies assumes that these teenagers have both the desire to become welfare recipients at some point in time and existing knowledge about how current welfare policy would affect their choice to bear children. However, if nearly half of adolescent mothers have no pre-existing knowledge about how welfare policy applies to them, it would follow that restrictive welfare policy is a poor means by which to "scare" teens out of having babies. Unlike the common construction of teen mothers as lazy "welfare queens" eager to take advantage of government hand-outs, research has found that teen mothers "do not perceive themselves as citizens with rights and obligations," often lack experience with government agencies, and only have a vague understanding of how welfare cutbacks affect may affect them.¹⁰² It is thus unlikely that increasing welfare restrictions, as it is premised on stopping teen girls from "hav[ing] babies to get on welfare," would serve as a disincentive to childbearing.¹⁰³

Instead of reducing teen pregnancy and out-of-wedlock childbearing, the legislation that

¹⁰⁰ Gregory Spears, "Unwed Teen Motherhood Is A Target Of Clinton's Welfare Plan," *Philly.com*, April 2 1994, http://articles.philly.com/1994-04-02/news/25862678_1_unwed-motherhood-teen-mothers-welfare-plan (accessed April 16 2012).

¹⁰¹ Ariel Kalil and Sandra K. Danziger, "How Teen Mothers are Faring Under Welfare Reform", *Journal of Social Issues*, (Dec. 2000): 785-786.

¹⁰² Michelle Plott and Lauri Umansky, *Making Sense of Women's Lives: An Introduction to Women's Studies*, (Oxford: Collegiate Press, 2000), 45.

¹⁰³ Plott and Umansky, *Making Sense of Women's Lives*, 45.

requires teen mothers to live with their parents may lead teenagers to give up custody of their children rather than abandon independent living. The “growth in ‘child only’ welfare recipients (i.e., those not living with parents)” indicate that rather than promoting co-residence of parents and minor teen mothers, new welfare policy may effectively be separating these minors from their children.¹⁰⁴ We may understand the reluctance to adhere to the state’s living arrangement policies as a response to TANF policies that inadequately provide teen mothers with suitable homes. Indeed, in a report that measured welfare’s current impact on teen parents, 20 state respondents identified “(1) a lack of alternative housing for teen parents and (2) the need for additional options for teens who need more supervision” as two main implementation challenges of PRWORA¹⁰⁵. For example, while TANF requires that states only give public assistance to mothers who live under adult supervision, “it does not provide funds for “second chance” homes for those situations in which a teen parent has no appropriate supervised living arrangement.”¹⁰⁶ Hence, the existence of “second chance” homes in which teens are provided a number of social services vary greatly from state to state, and are often funded by non-profit and community organizations rather than the state¹⁰⁷. Teen parents who therefore do not reside with their legal guardians due to instances of abuse are effectively excluded from welfare assistance, or worse, are forced to tolerate these living situations in order to receive government aid. Teen mothers who give up custody of their children may be responding to a situation in which receiving the necessary welfare assistance to support their child would require moving into stressful or undesirable living arrangements. Hence, the paternalistic policy that requires teen mothers to

¹⁰⁴ Daniel T. Lichter and Rukamalie Jayakody, “Welfare Reform: How do we Measure Success?”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, (2002): 124.

¹⁰⁵ Janellen Duffy and Jodie Levin-Epstein, “Add it up: Teen Parents and Welfare... Undercounted, Oversanctioned, Undeserved,” *Center for Law and Social Policy*, (Apr. 2002): 18.

¹⁰⁶ Duffy and Levin-Epstein, “Add it up: Teen Parents and Welfare,” 18.

¹⁰⁷ Duffy and Levin-Epstein, “Add it up: Teen Parents and Welfare,” 19.

“stay at home” may only exacerbate the hardships that low-income teen mothers may face in raising children¹⁰⁸.

One of the landmark changes that the PRWORA brought to welfare policy was what was regarded as a shift from welfare to workfare. The PRWORA required that in order for teen parents to receive TANF assistance, they must be enrolled in education or job training programs. However, many states have taken a “work first” approach to this requirement in which immediate employment is preferred to education, job training, and supportive services¹⁰⁹. Teen parents have thus been discouraged from vocational training programs in order to take unskilled, minimum wage jobs. Pushed into menial and often temporary jobs in factory work, cashiering, and the service industry, welfare recipients often remain unskilled, and are unable to achieve long-term economic mobility. This is demonstrated most succinctly by the high rates at which poverty persists among those who leave welfare: “A study of long-term employment outcomes among “welfare leavers” found that five years after they left the welfare rolls, only 25 percent were consistently employed in a full-time job, and 33 percent were not working. The remaining 42 percent... had incomes below the poverty line five years after leaving welfare”.¹¹⁰ Hence, the work first approach that characterizes welfare policy today has denied recipients the opportunity to meaningfully improve their lives. Through the stringent policies that often push welfare mothers into low-wage work, TANF has failed to provide welfare recipients with the job training necessary to lift themselves out of poverty and into careers.

Furthermore, the work first approach that prioritizes paid employment to job training programs has also severely limited welfare recipients’ access to education. For example, welfare-to-workfare programs often require that recipients attain a degree within 18 months, thus

¹⁰⁸ Reese, *Backlash Against Welfare Mothers*, 159.

¹⁰⁹ Reese, *Backlash Against Welfare Mothers*, 6.

¹¹⁰ Reese, *Backlash Against Welfare Mothers*, 10.

effectively preventing welfare mothers from completing lengthier vocational training programs or earning a four year degree.¹¹¹ Furthermore, while studies have found that 25-40 percent of TANF recipients have learning disabilities, there is a dearth in the number of state-led education programs that accommodate these needs.¹¹² As TANF recipients may require special services to return and succeed in school, the lack of services that address these needs limit teen parents from achieving both secondary and higher education. Additionally, teen parents who have dropped out of school are often met with hostility in any future attempts to re-enroll. As detailed by a state TANF administrator, “the single biggest challenge in implementing the [school/training] requirement is an educational system that doesn’t accommodate teenage dropouts. Often their school of origin will not re-admit them, stating that they are too old and/or have too few credits”¹¹³. These tactics of exclusion follow from a long history of marginalization of teen mothers in public schools, as demonstrated by the years in which pregnancy could warrant expulsion prior to the passage of Title IX legislation. While Title IX has made this practice illegal, schools continue to pressure teen mothers from leaving school in both subtle and forthright ways, and the policy of “when you show, you go” is still largely in practice.¹¹⁴ Though I speak further on how educational policy has inadequately provided and stigmatized teen mothers in Chapter 4, it is important to note that welfare policy has followed from this tradition to effectively deny teen parents the opportunity to secure an education.

Welfare requirements as stated by TANF have been proven difficult to meet for all recipients. For reasons that include inadequate access to childcare and inability to find permanent

¹¹¹ Reese, *Backlash Against Welfare Mothers*, 6.

¹¹² Duffy and Levin-Epstein, “Add it up: Teen Parents and Welfare,” 14.

¹¹³ Duffy and Levin-Epstein, “Add it up: Teen Parents and Welfare,” 15.

¹¹⁴ Craig Chamberlain, “Schools Failing to Accommodate Teens who are Pregnant or New Mothers,” *News.Illinois.edu*, April 23 2004, under “Archives,” <http://news.illinois.edu/news/04/0423pregnant.html> (accessed February 26 2012).

work, welfare recipients are frequently unable to meet program requirements and are thus penalized through grant sanctions. However, teen parents are especially hard-pressed to meet TANF requirements, as studies have shown that teen parents are sanctioned at a much higher rate than other TANF recipients.¹¹⁵ These sanctions are particularly devastating for young families and cause levels of emotional distress that can affect both academic success and child development. Thus, welfare policy as manifested through the TANF is particularly detrimental to teen parents. The stringent welfare policies that emerged through the passage of PRWORA thus exacerbate the hardships endured by teen parents who require state aid.

Current welfare policies thus have only made it harder for teen parents to access the financial means necessary to raising healthy and independent families. Welfare bills not only over-sanction and under-provide for teens, they also inadequately provide basic healthcare and childcare. Furthermore, even as teen mothers only comprise 8 percent of welfare recipients and studies show that a teen mother “is no more likely to participate in government-sponsored public assistance programs than if she had delayed childbearing until adulthood,”¹¹⁶ politicians continue to regard teen mothers with hostility and condemnation, resulting in overly stringent policies that disproportionately penalize young moms.¹¹⁷ Following from the construction of welfare recipients as social “burdens” whose poverty is a result of their “bad” behavior, welfare officers have been known to discourage teen parents from applying to TANF under the view they should “get tough” with this population.¹¹⁸

The trend to punish rather than provide follows from the idea that teen mothers are “deviants” to be corrected and disciplined, and that giving them support only makes them

¹¹⁵ Duffy and Levin-Epstein, “Add it up: Teen Parents and Welfare,” 15.

¹¹⁶ William Arms, “Hotz: Teen Pregnancy has Little Impact on Welfare Costs”, *The University of Chicago Chronicle* 16, no. 8 (Jan. 1997).

¹¹⁷ (article on TANF), written in back of notebook, in that giant book on welfare

¹¹⁸ Duffy and Levin-Epstein, “Add it up: Teen Parents and Welfare,” 8.

dependent and lazy. As “wrong girls”, they must be handled as “most parents would handle them” through a “strict father morality” in which they are punished for their ill doings.¹¹⁹ The moral character of teen parents thus becomes a focal point in the debate on teen pregnancy policy, resulting in discourse that denies the ways in which poverty is systematically reproduced by the state to instead blame poverty on the moral deficiencies of low-income women. For example, in a response to Joanna Lipper’s documentary “Growing Up Fast” in which the lives of teen mothers are followed to exemplify the little economic and educational opportunity they face, one journal editor insists that teen mothers are ultimately at blame for their poverty due to their lack of “shame”:

“Millions of impoverished immigrants came to America from Europe in the early twentieth century without illegitimacy getting out of hand, thanks to strong religious traditions that stigmatized illegitimacy. What's really missing from the lives of Pittsfield's unwed mothers isn't hope; it's shame about teenage sex or out-of-wedlock pregnancy... To stay out of poverty in America, it's necessary to do three simple things: finish high school, don't have kids until you marry, and wait until you are at least 20 to marry.”¹²⁰

The attitude that attributes staying out of poverty to “three simple things” discredits the extent to which many poor mothers struggle to live on a day to day basis. In sharp contrast to the conception of welfare programs as overly generous initiatives that creates lazy and undeserving social “burdens”, many welfare mothers find themselves profoundly unsupported by the stringent policies that have only become all the more harsh in recent years. In detailing the unrealistic and punitive policies of TANF, one of the teen mothers in Lipper’s documentary points out the extent to which welfare policy stifles her ability to make any meaningful educational or economic advancement: “Welfare gives you \$500 a month. I work one day a week because I go to school

¹¹⁹ Reese, *Backlash Against Welfare Mothers*, 158.

¹²⁰ Steven Malanga, “The Myth of the Working Poor,” *City Journal* 14, no.4 (Autumn 2004), http://www.city-journal.org/html/14_4_working_poor.html (accessed December 1 2011).

full time so I can't work any other days. So welfare takes that \$34 I get from working those hours and subtracts it from the \$500 dollars, and then I'll get the remainder. If I work a couple of extra hours, they'll take those extra hours out of the \$500, so no matter what, I'm only getting \$500 a month. By the end of the month, I'm broke. I don't have any money to save. I can't work full time and go to school--it's impossible. If I could I would, I don't want to be on welfare.”¹²¹ Thus, even as welfare recipients receive benefits from the state, these benefits are often far too little to make any meaningful improvement in the lives of poor mothers.

In positing welfare mothers as socially deficient and morally defunct, we can see how the Moynihan Report's legacy continues to fuel our conceptions of low-income, racial minorities. Despite studies that show that rates of teen sexual activity have increased regardless of class and racial categories, low-income women of color continue to be berated for their hyper-sexuality and are thereby depicted as pathologically and morally inferior to their higher income, better socialized peers. Combined with a long-standing history of blaming the welfare recipient for her poverty, devaluing the fertility of Black and Latina women, and a general neo-liberal emphasis on individuality that has persisted throughout American politics, teen parents have thus faced particularly harsh policy as they are seen to be responsible for their communities' social ills.

In this chapter I sought to illuminate how the construction of teens as social “burdens” has led to a paternalistic and punitive policy response that punishes teen mothers for what is deemed their bad behavior. These negative constructions ensure that beneficial policy, such as providing second home funding, alternative education programs, and broad access to healthcare, is substituted by punishment-oriented initiatives instead. At the same time, paternalistic welfare policy is only one way in which the state has addressed teen pregnancy. In the next chapter, I

¹²¹ Social Documentary, “Growing Up Fast: Teen Parenthood,” Social Documentary, http://www.joannalipper.com/films_growingup.html (accessed April 1 2012).

detail how the state has also taken a different approach, though often no less punitive, as it is produced in policy that seeks to control and monitor teen sexual behavior.

CHAPTER 3: UNFIT PARENTS: CONTROLLING TEEN SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

As I demonstrated in the last chapter, public policy has reflected the construction of teen pregnancy as a result of the “deviant” behavior of the poor, who are thus viewed as “social” burdens begrudgingly supported by taxpayers. Policy has thus sought to “punish” adolescent mothers through stringent measures that deny them social provisions in the attempt to discourage early childbearing. In this chapter, I detail how policies that conceptualize teen pregnancy through the construction of parental “fitness” have resulted in prevention policy that focuses on controlling and monitoring teen sexual behavior.

Within this conception of teens as “unfit” parents exist two competing camps. Borrowing from the view of teen mothers as “deviant”, the first camp constructs teens as not only “unfit” to parent, but “unfit” to engage in sexual behavior as well. This has resulted in punitive, conservative policies that implement abstinence-only school curriculums as well as limit access to birth control and reproductive health services, effectively denying adolescents the services they would need to prevent or terminate unintended pregnancies. The second camp, while also working under the assumption that teens are “unfit” parents, do not conceptualize teenagers as “unfit” to engage in sexual behavior, and thus do not employ the deviance model that castigates teens for “promiscuous” or “immoral” behavior. Instead, teen mothers are constructed as “dependents” instead who experience the adverse outcomes of early childbearing as a result of being unable to have the resources to prevent unintended pregnancy. Advocating for “choice” as it has been used in reproductive rights movements to imply the right to engage in sexual conduct not intended for procreation, this camp uses a “justice-oriented” rationale in promoting

prevention policy that seeks to increase teen access to comprehensive sex education and reproductive health services. Thus, employed by conservative camps that view teen mothers as sexually “deviant”, the construction of teens as “unfit” has resulted in punitive and “punishment-oriented” policy. Employed by liberal camps that denounce teen parenthood but not teen sexual behavior, beneficial policy has been implemented, but remains undersubscribed and limited in its impact.

In what follows, I detail how the construction of “unfit” parenthood has conceptualized teens as either “deviants” or “dependents”. These ideological splits have resulted in two drastically different approaches to teen pregnancy, as one promotes policy that limits teen access to reproductive health services and the other promotes policy that increases it. Nevertheless, the construction of teens as “unfit” to parent have informed both of these competing political approaches in that they have narrowly resulted in teen pregnancy prevention policy. Furthermore, I detail how both of these competing views are historically situated in what has been the state’s enduring struggle over the reproductive rights of women, particularly those of low-income women of color as they have been conceptualized as “unfit” parents and have thus been effectively denied reproductive agency.

“DEVIANT” SEXUALITY AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

In understanding the construction of “unfit” parenthood as it is premised on teen “sexual” behavior, it may be useful to apply Michel Foucault’s theory of sexuality and deviance. Foucault contends that the state exercises control over women’s bodies in order to maintain dominant notions of appropriate sexual behavior¹²². These social controls are the “organized ways in which society responds to behavior and people it regards as “deviant”, problematic, worrying,

¹²² Foucault, Michel, *History of Sexuality*,

threatening, troublesome, or undesirable in some way or another.”¹²³ Through exercising its power over women’s bodies and reproductive choices through the implementation of policy, the state maintains and reinforces categories of sexual orthodoxy and unorthodoxy. The political control and regulation of sexuality thus becomes a crucial component to keeping societal norms and values in place while stigmatizing behavior that falls outside of these norms. In that the sexual behavior of teenagers has been scrutinized and closely regulated by public policy, teen sexual behavior as “deviant” remains a dominant cultural conception.

Foucault’s theory can be most clearly seen in the contention surrounding women’s reproductive rights as it has historically manifested in the United States. Since the nineteenth century onward, issues surrounding women’s sexuality have consistently served as a means by which politicians successfully mobilize men and women voters alike. Precisely because of their disturbance to deep-rooted societal norms of morality and sexual behavior, abortion and birth control have been met with vehement resistance on the political playing field. In the United States, as in many parts of the world, the fight for reproductive rights has taken place in a context that has traditionally conceived of non-marital sex and unwed motherhood as “deviant” or “wrong,” and has thus valued women according to their sexual behavior. Even as some advocated for abortion in the early 1900’s, they made a distinction between those “deserved” it and those who did not, effectively casting women who sought abortions outside of rape and incest as selfish and depraved¹²⁴. This ideology continued throughout the 1920’s, at which time the forced sterilization and segregation of “morally delinquent” women became a means by which the state sought to control women’s sexuality. In that sexually unorthodox women presented a threat to marriage and the home, the institutionalization and forced sterilization of

¹²³ Cohen, Stanley.

¹²⁴ Jeanne Flavin, *Our Bodies, Our Crimes: The Policing of Women's Reproduction in America*, (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 22.

women became a strategy to prevent them from corrupting mainstream society¹²⁵. An estimated 64,000 women, many of whom were prostitutes, single, working-class women, or other social “degenerates,” were sterilized as a result of the widespread state programs implemented in the early part of the century¹²⁶.

Furthermore, the resistance to reproductive rights must also be understood as it historically reflected eugenics-inspired ideas that viewed racial minorities as unfit to reproduce. As immigrant, African American, and Hispanic, and other working class women were perceived to be reproducing at higher rates than “native” middle class women in the early 1900’s, the attack on contraception and abortion rights reflected fears of what Theodore Roosevelt termed white “race suicide”.¹²⁷ The resistance to legalizing abortion and providing birth control was thus situated in the growing obsession with the fertility rates of white, middle-class, Protestant women, which were perceived to be in dangerous decline in comparison to those of minority groups. The reproduction of women of color was not only seen as undesirable, but as a contributing factor to society’s ills, many of which perceived to be heightened after the Great Depression. Within this framework, the fertility of poor, Black and Hispanic women became synonymous with the reproduction of poverty, crime, and other related ills. Thus, beginning in the 1920’s and up to the 1940’s, the movement that sought to sterilize “morally delinquent” women also succeeded in sterilizing large numbers of Black and working class women. The legacy that blames women of color today for producing society’s “underclass” of criminals, prostitutes, and the otherwise lazy and impoverished, can be traced to this early eugenics-movement.

¹²⁵ Flavin, *Our Bodies, Our Crimes*, 34

¹²⁶ Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women, A History of Birth Control Politics in America*, (University of Illinois Press, 2007), 342.

¹²⁷ Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, #.

Hence, the state's control over women's reproductive rights is situated in anxiety over women's sexuality as it takes place in a racial and class hierarchy. As the fertility of white middle class women was understood to be more valuable than that of the working class, the rising rates of single motherhood amongst white women as well as their increasing push for reproductive rights throughout the mid twentieth century was met with unbridled opposition. Furthermore, as women became more and more active in the public sphere, the movement for reproductive rights began to reflect second-wave feminist ideas in which women's autonomy became increasingly linked to sexual liberation. In a society whose "order and stability are represented by the 'family' and the mother content in her home," these developments directly challenged the norms that limited women to marriage and domesticity, weakening the traditional roles of middle-class women as wives and mothers.¹²⁸ Thus, as women rallied behind the movement for reproductive rights in the 50's and 60's, conservative opponents, infuriated to see the long-valued institution of marriage coming under attack, vehemently fought back.

Underlying the resistance to women's reproductive rights was religious sentiment, in which women's expanding rights represented the decline of conservatism and a mainstream adoption of secularism. The movement, conflated with "sexual permissiveness and subversion of tradition, the family, morality, and the word of God," thus challenged religious tradition as it began to fall out of dominant culture.¹²⁹ Religious groups, of which the Catholic Church became the frontrunner after the passage of *Roe v. Wade*, became primary opponents to reproductive rights and the chief proponents of the anti-abortion movement. However, unlike the early 1900's, in which antiabortionists berated abortion-seeking women who evaded their "maternal calling", arguments that attacked women for delaying childbearing could not find mainstream support in

¹²⁸ Paula S. Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920's*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 24.

¹²⁹ Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 297.

the liberalized context of the 1960's¹³⁰. Hence, antiabortionists shifted the discourse away from women's rights towards fetal rights instead, effectively casting abortion as a form of murder rather than a contested form of reproduction control. The results of this movement were far-reaching; though the Right to Life movement was initiated by the Catholic church, evangelical Protestants soon outnumbered Catholics, effectively making it "one of the largest social movements in the late twentieth century".¹³¹ Hence, sociologist Stanley Cohen's concept of "moral panic" adequately describes the way in which opposition to the struggle for reproductive rights manifested throughout the late twentieth century. In that reproductive rights came to represent "a threat to societal values and interests," to which a "massive, stereotyped, and morally defensive response," was evoked, access to abortion and other reproductive health services has been severely contested by politicians and the public alike¹³².

The moral panic that characterized the antiabortion movement of the 1960's continues to inform our current attitudes towards reproductive rights today. Our current climate towards reproductive rights is staggering—from initiatives that call for the recognition of fertilized eggs as "people" to the persisting lack of federal funding towards abortion-providers, reproductive rights continue to fuel an ideological war in the political arena today.¹³³ It is within this context of continuing moral panic over the expression of women's sexuality that we must situate the construction of teens as "unfit" as it echoes moral concerns regarding appropriate sexual behavior in relation to the decline of marriage and traditional gender roles.

Furthermore, it is important to note how the movement for reproductive rights has often been at odds with the interests of women of color and occurred at the same time that women of

¹³⁰ Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 305.

¹³¹ Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 303.

¹³² Constance A. Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage: The Social Control of Sexuality in Women's Adolescence* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 16.

¹³³ <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0412/75143.html>

color were actively constructed as “unfit” to parent. As the debate over white women’s sexuality raged and the reluctance to provide them with contraception persisted, the involuntary sterilization and population control of women of color continued until the late 1970’s. Prison inmates, welfare recipients, and poor women receiving healthcare from government institutions disproportionately underwent sterilization operations as a result of medical abuse. In June of 1973, a number of cases involving involuntary sterilizations came to light, many of which were enacted through the federally funded family planning programs that were intended to provide low-income women with adequate reproductive health services¹³⁴. These cases all involved poor, Black women and documented instances in which girls as young as twelve years old were forced into sterilization¹³⁵. Thus, the construction of teen mothers as “unfit” to parent involves a racialized subtext that devalues the fertility of all low-income, minority women.

In a context in which the state has historically performed involuntary sterilizations on Black and Latina low-income women and continues to spurn eugenics-inspired sentiment in the efforts to reduce poverty, the movement for reproductive rights, as it emphasizes “choice,” has often reflected the concerns of white, middle class women. While it is undeniably important that a woman should have the adequate means by which to delay childbearing, many women of color do not view the inability to receive an abortion as the primary obstacle in their struggle for reproductive rights. Instead, women of color have often conceptualized reproductive rights as having access to the resources necessary to raising a healthy child. With its emphasis on abortion rights, the reproductive rights movement thus “did not meet the needs of women who were poor and/or discriminated against, and had equally strong needs for contraception funding, prenatal

¹³⁴ Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage*, 56.

¹³⁵ Flavin, *Our bodies, our crimes*, 36.

care, and pediatric care.”¹³⁶ Good medical care, state-supported childcare services, and decent wages and benefits continue to be at the forefront of Black and Latina women’s concerns¹³⁷.

Consistent with Schneider and Ingram’s arguments about the powerlessness of “dependent” groups on policy design, low-income Black and Latina women have had little influence in constructing the reproductive health care policies that affects them. Instead, white, middle-class feminists and reproductive rights organizations, as they have assumed to know what’s in the best interest of low-income women and rallied around issues of “choice”, have directed reproductive health policy towards increasing access to contraceptive services.¹³⁸ This has resulted in low-income women not getting what they demand through policy (i.e. medical care, childcare, decent wages and benefits) but “what others want them to have” (i.e. access to abortion and contraception).¹³⁹ Thus, while this had led to beneficial policy that grants low-income adolescents access to birth control, it has also effectively ignored the concerns of low-income women as their reproductive health is compromised by racial and economic inequalities.

CHILDREN HAVING CHILDREN: WHY WE CARE ABOUT TEEN PREGNANCY

It is within this context of moral opposition to “deviant” sexuality that we turn to teen pregnancy as it has continuously taken center stage in the political arena. As the institution of marriage and women’s traditional roles were perceived to be weakened in the 1960’s, teen pregnancy could be “readily understood as a public problem” as it “fed on and fueled preexisting moral concerns”.¹⁴⁰ The sexual behavior of youth thus became a topic of national debate, and adolescent pregnancy emerged as a public crisis for a number of morally-informed reasons. For one, adolescent mothers are often unmarried, and thus disturb the normative notion that

¹³⁶ Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 308.

¹³⁷ Flavin, *Our bodies, Our crimes*, 19.

¹³⁸ Flavin, *Our bodies, Our crimes*, 19.

¹³⁹ Schneider and Ingram, “Social Construction of Target Populations,” 342.

¹⁴⁰ Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage*, 58.

childbearing is optimal within traditional familial arrangements. Furthermore, insofar as single motherhood signifies non-marital sex, adolescent mothers devalue the traditional, Christian view of sex, as it is deemed appropriate only in marriage. Pregnant teenagers symbolized to the conservative right that less and less of the population was adhering to the “ideal of no sex before marriage” and thus, the institution of marriage, along with its accompanying notions of male and female gender roles, was becoming increasingly weak¹⁴¹.

However, their defiance of traditional sexuality and gender roles alone is not enough to warrant the hyper scrutiny that has characterized the treatment of adolescent mothers from the 1960’s onwards. Instead, what makes teen pregnancy so incendiary is the conception of adolescents as *children*. Indeed, the conception of teen mothers as “school-age girls” or “children having children,” right-wing policy-makers and the public alike have touted abstinence as the only acceptable means by which to prevent minors from engaging in non-marital sex, which is viewed as dangerous not just for its potential to lead to pregnancy, but for its inherent immorality. Furthermore, public policy has reflected not only the idea that non-marital sex is wrong, but that parents and “families” should have the power to control and curb teenage sexual behavior. For example, even as many state-led “family planning” programs emerged in the 1960’s to address issues of reproductive health among low-income women, legislation intended to increase adolescent access to birth control was largely rejected by the federal government¹⁴². In that the “unrestricted distribution of family planning services and devices to minors... would do nothing to preserve and strengthen close family relations”, Nixon echoed the idea that teenagers were “unfit” to engage in sexual behavior, and that it was a parent’s obligation to

¹⁴¹ Kristin Luker, *When Sex Goes to School: Warring*, 26

¹⁴² Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage*, 23.

monitor and effectively prevent this “deviant” behavior from occurring.¹⁴³

However, as the sexual revolution of the 1960’s loosened sex from the confines of marriage and weakened women’s roles of domesticity, the traditional views that rendered teen sexuality “deviant” began to deteriorate. Indeed, traditional attitudes that rendered non-marital sex so shameful that many pharmacists before the 1960’s “would not sell condoms to men whom they knew or suspected were unmarried” were felt to have dissolved completely by the end of the decade¹⁴⁴. What replaced it were a set of policies and ideals that allowed women the ability to engage in sex outside of marriage and motherhood, thus giving her the same opportunity as men to establish herself outside of the home: “With legal, readily available, federally subsidized, and highly effective contraception, and with abortion available as a backup if pregnancy occurred anyway, sex for pure pleasure rather than sex necessarily tied to an ongoing and committed relationship became an option for women.”¹⁴⁵ The sexual revolution of the 1960’s was characterized by these dueling sentiments of appropriate sexual behavior, as conservative camps situated it in marriage and liberal camps advocated for its more liberal use.

In that teen sexual behavior almost always occurs outside of marriage, conservative politicians, church groups, and parents have become deeply invested in the efforts to limit teen access to reproductive health information and services, and have thus constructed teen mothers as “deviant”, and curtailed their access to reproductive health services. Liberal camps that are not opposed to teen pregnancy on moral grounds but rather for the adverse health and social outcomes they purport to be associated with it, advocate for increased access to health services, failing to address the economic and social factors that lead teens to become pregnant in the first place. Employing a dominant feminist framework whereby women’s reproductive rights is

¹⁴³ Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage*, 23.

¹⁴⁴ Luker, *When Sex Goes to School*, 71.

¹⁴⁵ Luker, *When Sex Goes to School*, 73

narrowly defined by issues of “choice”, these advocates ignore the ways in which low-income women of color remain oppressed in many other aspects. The construction of teens as “unfit” to parent have thus narrowly resulted in prevention policies. While there are marked differences in the types of policy produced (moralistic, punitive policy vs. beneficial yet limited policy), both fail to provide for low-income women adequately. Whether constructed as “deviant” or “dependent”, beneficial policy remains undersubscribed.

In that the debate surrounding sex education and access to reproductive services positions teen pregnancy as an issue of parental fitness rather than an issue of socioeconomic inequality, policy remains limited in its effects. In what follows, I detail policy implications of the construction of teens as “unfit” to engage in sexual behavior (conservative approach) and “unfit” to parent (liberal approach). I conclude by analyzing the framework of reproductive justice as an alternative to these traditional approaches to teen sexuality. This approach, as it links issues of reproductive health with social justice, may provide a better framework for understanding and addressing the needs of low-income teen mothers.

CURBING “DEVIANT” SEXUALITY: CONSERVATIVE POLICY APPROACHES

The competing ideological views concerning teen sexuality can be most saliently seen in the controversy over sex education. Though sex education has existed since the early 1900's in which "social hygienists" sought to educate youth as a means to control prostitution and prevent the spread of venereal diseases, it was only in recent decades that sex education became so incendiary in the public realm.¹⁴⁶ As the prevalence of non-marital sex and single motherhood increased in the 1960's and 70's, persisting rates of venereal disease and the epidemic of AIDS/HIV in the 1980's further pointed to the importance of sex education in schools. Sex education, and its accompanying views concerning the uses of abstinence and contraception,

¹⁴⁶ Luker, *When Sex Goes to School*, #.

soon became the primary vehicle by which the ideological wars between conservative and liberal conceptions of sexuality would be waged.

Before the passage of Title X in 1970, reproductive health services, including contraception and information, were nearly impossible for young, unmarried females to access in most states. Young girls who sought birth control from Planned Parenthood and other doctors often borrowed wedding rings or claim to be engaged in order to dodge these punitive restrictions¹⁴⁷. Furthermore, with the lack of state funding for contraception, birth control was out of reach for many poor women, and was thus only consumed by a small population of wealthy women who could rely on private doctors¹⁴⁸. However, in 1970, growing public sentiment that posited Black women's fertility as the cause of urban crime and welfare dependency led to the passage of Title X, thus marking the beginning of federally funded "family planning" services for low-income women. In that the free clinics often promoted long-term methods of birth control, such as IUDs and sterilization rather than pills, many people of color could see the how the government's initiative reflected eugenics-inspired notions of population control. Nevertheless, the clinics became an important means by which poor and unmarried women of color could secure their reproductive health, and have ensured access to free and reliable birth control.

Absent from the new federally funded Public Health Act was any discussion of adolescents. Title X's adolescent extension, which only came eleven years later, was a conservative initiative in which teens were not provided with contraceptive services, but were rather encouraged to exercise "chastity" instead, and thus furthering the notion of adolescents as

¹⁴⁷ Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 298.

¹⁴⁸ Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 289.

“unfit” to engage in sexual behavior¹⁴⁹. Contraceptive services for teens were still viewed with much contention, reflecting parental concerns that unbridled access to contraception would encourage immoral and dangerous sex among teens. In 1983, the federal government proposed legislation that required “clinics receiving Title X funds to notify, by registered mail, both parents of the legal guardians of patients under the age of eighteen within ten days of prescribing a contraceptive”.¹⁵⁰ Though this bill was overturned, states continued to implement parental consent laws, often limiting teen access to contraceptive and reproductive health services to the point of dire consequences. These consequences could be fatal; after an attempt to evade the state’s parental consent requirements for abortion, one Indiana teen in 1988 died from complications after an illegal abortion.¹⁵¹

Thus, Title XX, the Adolescent Family Life Act set up a framework by which reproductive health services have been denied or censored from teens ever since. Furthermore, in that the Act set up a number of sex education programs that emphasized moral virtue and religious dogma rather than medically accurate information, it set a precedent for conservative sex education programs to come. In 1996, with the passage of welfare reform via TANF, the federal government provided a “groundbreaking \$50 million a year to fund abstinence-only programs” in what was called Title V.¹⁵² Under this law, states receiving welfare funds have an incentive to implement abstinence-only education as doing so would qualify them for additional federal funding. With every 3 dollars spent by the state matched by 4 dollars in federal funds, 37 states received Title V funds in fiscal year 2011¹⁵³, allowing them to “launch media campaigns to influence attitudes and behavior, develop abstinence education curricula, revamp sexual

¹⁴⁹ Planned Parenthood: history and successes

¹⁵⁰ Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, 351.

¹⁵¹ Planned parenthood: history and successes

¹⁵² Advocates for youth. The history of federal abstinence only funding

¹⁵³ <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb/content/programs/tpp/sap-facts.htm>

education classes, and implement other activities focused on abstinence education.”¹⁵⁴ Perhaps most groundbreaking about the legislation was its eight-point definition of abstinence-only education, which not only required that programs have “as [their] exclusive purpose, teaching the social, psychological, and health gains to be realized by abstaining from sexual activity” but also endorsed the “mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage [as] the expected standard of human sexual activity.”¹⁵⁵ This moralistic language drew upon a construction of poor women of color as social “deviants” that can be seen to inform much of teen prevention policy. Reminiscent of Moynihan’s notion that the social problems that plague the Black population are a result of defunct “Negro family structures,” Title V’s claim that marital relations are the “expected standard of human sexual activity” cast the single, Black mother’s “deviant” sexual behavior as responsible for her poverty.¹⁵⁶ Passed at a time in which the image of the lazy and promiscuous “welfare queen” remained the dominant stereotype of welfare recipients, the eight-point definition of Title V’s abstinence program served as a commentary on what was seen as the poor social habits of minority women. By blaming poverty on the “deviant” sexual behavior of welfare mothers, the welfare reform that brought Title V into existence allowed the state an ideological justification for minimizing its support to poor, single women.

Thus, the prevention policies that have emerged from this construction of “deviant” sexual behavior have been overwhelming punitive. Title V became harsher under the Bush administration and effectively denies any program that “promotes abstinence but includes information about contraception and condoms to build young people’s knowledge, attitudes and

¹⁵⁴ Policy Archive. Reducing Teen Pregnancy: Adolescent Family Life and Abstinence Education Program Crs 4

¹⁵⁵ Policy Archive. Reducing Teen Pregnancy: Adolescent Family Life and Abstinence Education

¹⁵⁶ Moynihan

skills for when they become sexually active”.¹⁵⁷ With the passage of Community-Based Abstinence Education Program (CBAE) in 2000, Congress made abstinence-only education programs all the more common both in and outside of schools, as funding would go to private and public community-based programs that taught abstinence as the *single* means by which to prevent pregnancy: “Sex education programs that promote the use of contraceptives are *not* eligible for funding.”¹⁵⁸

Despite mounds of evidence that suggest the ineffectiveness of abstinence-only programs, these programs continue to receive a substantial amount of money in federal funding. Researchers and policy-innovators have continually pointed to abstinence-only’s lack of credibility, stating that there are “no methodologically sound studies that demonstrate the effectiveness” of abstinence-only curricula.”¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, while those who advocate for abstinence-only usually contend that such programs help teens delay sex, many studies have found that the sexual behavior of teens in abstinence-only programs are remarkably similar to those who are not enrolled in such programs.¹⁶⁰ In fact, when sexual behavior differs between the two groups, it is often in ways that are dangerous to those who have been taught abstinence as a moral standard. For example, while the government funds programs that encourage teens to take virginity pledges, teens who take such pledges have been found to be less likely to seek

¹⁵⁷ <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?vid=4&hid=113&sid=741a8f36-139c-4373-8ee9-2fbf8c1518cd%40sessionmgr113&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWlhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=aph&AN=37333238>

¹⁵⁸ Advocates for youth

¹⁵⁹ <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/tgr/01/2/gr010205.html>

¹⁶⁰ <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?sid=82a8865c-d028-4cd5-9b8d-0357213eaf01%40sessionmgr11&vid=1&hid=113&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWlhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=eft&AN=507975321>

medical attention in the event of contracting an STD than teens who do not take pledges.¹⁶¹ Since 9 out of every 10 virginity pledgers have sex before marriage, these findings are particularly alarming.

Given that abstinence-only programs are notorious for distributing medically inaccurate and morally-biased information, we may expect to find that teens who partake in such programs are more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior and suffer from reproductive health complications. Abstinence-only programs routinely disseminate medically inaccurate and highly biased information as demonstrated by a 2004 report on federally funded abstinence-only curricula in schools: “Over eighty percent of federal grants go to providing abstinence-only curricula that “contain false, misleading, or distorted information about reproductive health” (Waxman 2004). The programs include exaggerations about contraceptive failure rates, the physical and mental health risks of abortion, and the health susceptibilities of the gay population (Waxman 2004).”¹⁶² In addition to denying teens the medical knowledge they may need to use contraception correctly and thereby prevent pregnancy, abstinence-only education, with its stigmatizing stance towards non-marital sex, may foster negative emotions of shame amongst teens that are already sexually active. This has real world implications as “the more positive sexually experienced teens' attitudes about birth control, the more likely they are to use it and the less likely to become pregnant.”¹⁶³ It is thus likely that sexually active teenagers who are consistently taught that marital sex is the “expected standard” of human activity will not abstain from sex like is often argued, but will forgo contraception instead, making them all the more at

¹⁶¹ <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?vid=4&hid=113&sid=741a8f36-139c-4373-8ee9-2fbf8c1518cd%40sessionmgr113&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=aph&AN=37333238>

¹⁶² <http://hawaii.edu/PCSS/biblio/articles/2005to2009/2008-abstinence-only-sex-education.html>

¹⁶³ <http://www.gutmacher.org/media/nr/2005/01/18/index.html>

risk to pregnancy and STDs.

Thus, conservative teen pregnancy prevention policies that conceptualize teens as “unfit” to have sex have not been justified based on their effectiveness in reducing teen pregnancy rates, but on their presumed ideological validity. This has had dire results for teens, as this position has resulted not only in a heavily biased sex education system, but has led to a number of restrictions in teen access to contraceptive and reproductive health services. For example, in many states, parental notification laws remain in place for teens who seek family-planning services, which include anything from the pill to an abortion.¹⁶⁴ Furthermore, federal restrictions on Medicaid allow 32 states as of 2008 the constitutional right to deny funding for abortions that occur outside of life endangerment, incest, or rape.¹⁶⁵ The conservative stance towards not only teen sexuality, but women’s sexuality in general, has lent itself to policies that continue to strip adolescents of their reproductive rights, put them at increased risk for health complications, and do little to reduce teen pregnancy.

AN INCOMPLETE APPROACH: WHY ACCESS ISN’T EVERYTHING

Despite a history of reproductive health policies informed by moral conservatism, proponents of reproductive rights have made significant strides in guaranteeing women’s access to a range of reproductive health services. In that many who advocate for reproductive rights often advocate on the behalf of low-income women, free clinics have become commonplace all over the country, offering family-planning services to low-income adolescents and older women alike. Birth control is not only easily available and often prescribed to teens in a majority of states¹⁶⁶, it is also more affordable than ever due to the activism of high-powered women’s

¹⁶⁴ <http://www.guttmacher.org/media/nr/2005/01/18/index.html>

¹⁶⁵ <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/MedicaidLitReview.pdf>

¹⁶⁶ http://thomsonreuters.com/content/healthcare/pdf/white_papers/trends_prescriptions_oral_contraceptives

groups and organizations.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, it seems like the fight against abstinence-only education has proven fruitful: as of 2007, Title V funds have been set to expire after the program was declared a “colossal failure” almost a decade after its implementation.¹⁶⁸ Even as the conservative right continues to demonize birth control and abortion, new initiatives designed to promote comprehensive sex education and a variety of reproductive health services to teens are gaining momentum in the political sphere.¹⁶⁹ Under Obama’s administration, funding for abstinence-only education has been drastically cut¹⁷⁰ and contraceptive coverage is set to become nearly universal in August 2011 with healthcare reform.¹⁷¹

These gains are not to be overlooked. It is undeniable that low-income women and teens have more access than ever to affordable family-planning and reproductive health services, largely as a result of reproductive rights advocates, like The National Organization for Women, Planned Parenthood and other feminist efforts. However, in that advocates for reproductive rights still view teens as “unfit” to parent, they approach teen pregnancy through the narrow lens of prevention policy. This narrow focus on teen pregnancy prevention is in accordance with what Deidre M. Kelly labels the “wrong family” discourse, in which teenage mothers are not only conceptualized as unable to lead healthy families, but are assumed to be more likely to engage in child neglect and abuse. Much like the discourse that posits teen mothers as “wrong girls,” this conception of the teen mother as responsible for the creation of “wrong families” vastly limits even the beneficial policy that liberal advocates produce.¹⁷² For example, the narrow focus on preventing pregnancy does nothing to benefit teens that already are parents. Furthermore,

¹⁶⁷Planned Parenthood: Histories and successes

¹⁶⁸Planned Parenthood: Histories and successes

¹⁶⁹<http://www.siecus.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=page.viewPage&pageID=1347&nodeID=1>

¹⁷⁰http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2009-05-11-abstinence-only_N.htm

¹⁷¹<http://www.sodahead.com/united-states/obama-administration-protects-womens-rights---again/question-2407507/>

¹⁷²Deidre M. Kelly, pregnant with meaning.

prevention efforts, as they are often clinic-based and narrowly emphasize health, fail to address the existing circumstances of socioeconomic inequality that contribute to patterns of early childbearing. Lastly, clinic-based programs often fail to reach its target population: “With the risk of pregnancy high in the early months of sexual activity, and the tendency of teens not to seek medical care before a crisis occurs, this population needs more than the categorical clinical services that have often served older women successfully. Medical interventions must be combined with intensive outreach and counseling if they are to reach young people in time.”¹⁷³

Despite a decline in the past couple of decades, studies still show that America’s teen pregnancy rates are much higher than most industrialized countries.¹⁷⁴ While studies have shown that contraceptive use amongst teenagers has steadily increased from the 80’s onwards, adolescents continue to experience unintended pregnancies at high rates.¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, though comprehensive sex education has remained at the forefront in the battle over teen pregnancy, its effect on reducing pregnancy rates remains superficial at best, as teens become pregnant for a number of reasons irrelevant to access to contraception and reproductive health information. In particular, Latina+ and Black low-income girls continue to become pregnant at disproportionately high rates, even as they have access to birth control and medically accurate information regarding sexuality. In order to understand why this is so, it might be useful to evaluate the history of reproductive rights as it has traditionally drowned out the voices of women of color. As I discussed earlier, the debate on reproductive rights have traditionally revolved around issues of “choice,” and thereby have ignored other issues that impede upon womens’ reproductive health, especially low-income women. While having the choice to end one’s pregnancy and the means by which to delay childbearing is no doubt important, it must be

¹⁷³Adolescent sexual behavior and childbearing, 92

¹⁷⁴<http://www.cdc.gov/Features/dsTeenPregnancy/>

¹⁷⁵Destinies of the Disadvantaged, Furstenberg

approached in tandem with the other issues that low-income adolescents face. I want to suggest that there are other concerns and factors that are producing early birth rates among low income teens and that must be addressed if we are to make any significant progress in not only reducing teen pregnancy, but improving the lives of low-income girls.

REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE: A FRAMEWORK FOR ADDRESSING TEEN PREGNANCY

Reproductive justice, as it links issues of social and economic inequality with issues of reproductive health, may provide a better framework by which we can begin to understand the “teen pregnancy crisis”. Since the socioeconomic circumstances that characterize many Black and Latina women’s experience in the United States may provide key insights as to the particular child-bearing trends of these groups, reproductive justice may be useful in analyzing teen pregnancy. While advocates for reproductive justice often rally around the same causes that other advocates of reproductive rights do, their acknowledgment of social and economic inequality as an obstacle to reproductive health allows them to address the manifold issues that low-income women of color face. Hence, under reproductive justice, a number of issues including labor discrimination, educational inequity, environmental justice, and economic inequality are addressed as they intersect with reproductive health.¹⁷⁶ In acknowledging the various inequalities that contribute to childbearing patterns, reproductive justice allows us to look at teen pregnancy through a nuanced and holistic lens.

In the next chapter, I analyze the construction of teen mothers as “rational” actors. Unlike constructions that frame teens as social “burdens” or “unfit” parents, I approach teen mothers as “rational” in that they make choices that make sense given contexts of little opportunity. I do not posit teen mothers as “wrong girls” for engaging in bad behavior nor do I render them guilty for

¹⁷⁶CITE SOEMONE

starting “wrong families.” Instead, I approach the choices that these adolescents make as rational responses given the circumstances of disadvantage that frame their lives. I thus argue that policy that intends to address teen pregnancy must address structurally reproduced socioeconomic inequality as it impacts the life opportunities of all low-income girls.

CHAPTER 4: RATIONAL ACTORS: TEEN PREGNANCY AS A PRODUCT OF STRUCTURAL INEQUALITY

In the preceding chapters, I have sought to demonstrate how the constructions of teen mothers as social “burdens” or “unfit” parents have led to policy efforts that have done little to reduce teen pregnancy rates and improve the lives of teen mothers. In this chapter, I position teen mothers as “rational” actors in that early childbearing does not drastically alter the life trajectories of low-income women given the pre-existing circumstances that limit their economic and educational opportunities. Teen pregnancy and childbearing is thus not a result of social “deviance” or from not having access to contraceptive services. Rather, if we understand teen pregnancy as an “adaptive” strategy, we are able to see how adolescent childbearing may be a “rational” response to contexts of structurally reproduced socioeconomic inequality.

Throughout this chapter, I seek to illustrate how “hardship” frames the lives of teen mothers. I analyze how educational inequity has failed to provide meaningful economic opportunity for low-income black and Latino youth, and has thus created an environment that renders early childbearing a “rational” decision. In what immediately follows, I begin to deconstruct teen pregnancy as it has been so often linked with adverse consequences, thus opening up my argument for teen mothers as “rational” actors.

TEEN MOMS: HOW MAINSTREAM CONSTRUCTIONS DISTORT REALITY

Due to the sudden surge in reality television in the early 2000’s, images of “real” teen mothers have infiltrated mainstream media in recent years. Blockbuster movie “Juno,” in which

a free-spirited teen decides to carry her child to term after learning she is pregnant, would inspire the proliferation of images of white, middle class teen mothers as they would become increasingly commonplace. With its debut in early 2009, MTV's long-spanning reality hit TV show *16 and Pregnant* became an overnight sensation, reeling in 2.1 million viewers by the end of its first season. MTV then promptly launched follow-up series *Teen Mom* by the end of the same year, and in 2011 launched *Teen Mom 2*. Images of teen mothers have henceforth taken center stage in mainstream media, inciting much public fascination and debate regarding the "teen pregnancy" phenomenon. Indeed, some have vehemently criticized the shows for "glamorizing" teen pregnancy and normalizing and encouraging non-marital sex.¹⁷⁷

While the impact that shows like *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* have over the childbearing patterns of adolescents remains questionable, if not totally negligible, these shows have real-world effects regardless. By dramatizing the trials and tribulations that adolescents face as a result of becoming pregnant, *Teen Mom* and *Sixteen and Pregnant* reflect and further the construction of teen pregnancy as a "crisis" event. Furthermore, in that the women featured in the programs are often suburban, middle income, and white, the images of teen mothers espoused by MTV are vastly misrepresentative of the majority of teen mothers in the United States. According to the Center for Disease Control, "although they represent only 35% of the total population of 15–19 year old females," Black and Hispanic women have drastically higher rates of teen pregnancy than their white counterparts, comprising nearly 60 percent of teen births in 2009.¹⁷⁸ The vast majority of these women are low-income, making race and class imperative to the understanding of early childbearing patterns. Though statistics show that Black, Hispanic, and "socioeconomically disadvantaged youth of any race or ethnicity," MTV's teen mothers

¹⁷⁷ <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2081928,00.html>

¹⁷⁸ <http://www.cdc.gov/teenpregnancy/AboutTeenPreg.htm>

rarely fit this demographic. Issues of racial and socioeconomic inequality as they are intimately connected with early childbearing are vastly omitted in mainstream images of teenage mothers.

By portraying relatively well-off adolescent girls whose educational and economic prospects are, if not robust, not bleak by any measure, MTV's *Teen Mom* and *16 and Pregnant* viewers are led to believe that adolescents embark on a "negative trajectory" after becoming pregnant.¹⁷⁹ Early childbearing is understood to have long-lasting negative implications for teen mothers, implications that will endure for the remainder of their lives. Indeed, so negative is the image of teen pregnancy perpetuated on MTV that sex educators across the country have begun to use the show as "cautionary tales" to effectively warn teenage girls of the perils of non-marital sex and early childbearing.¹⁸⁰ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy provides DVD's and "episode discussion guides" to numerous educators, community leaders, and various organizations, with 3,000 of these materials distributed to Boys and Girls Clubs of America chapters alone.¹⁸¹ In that the biggest take-away from these discussions is that adolescents learn to "not want to be like the girl on MTV," our conception of teen pregnancy, as it has the potential to set girls on a negative trajectory, is largely reinforced by the sensational reality shows.

In contrast to the harrowing depictions of early childbearing that both the media and sex educators purport, childbearing is hardly ever an irreversibly damaging, catastrophic event for the majority of the country's teen mothers. This is because, unlike the stars in the MTV shows, many teen mothers live vastly unstable lives *prior* to becoming pregnant. Teen pregnancy does not occur equally amongst all teens; rather, it disproportionately affects those teens that already live in contexts of little opportunity. Early pregnancy thus becomes one hardship amongst many

¹⁷⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/10/fashion/10TEEN.html?pagewanted=all>

¹⁸⁰ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/10/fashion/10TEEN.html?pagewanted=all>

¹⁸¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/10/fashion/10TEEN.html?pagewanted=all>

others, and is often a result of these hardships rather than a precedent to them. For example, many teen mothers who drop out of school do so before ever becoming pregnant, thus dispelling the myth that teen pregnancy precludes educational attainment.¹⁸² In commenting on MTV's *Teen Mom* and *16 and Pregnant*, the director of an educational nonprofit aimed at supporting young parents in St. Louis points out the disparity between MTV's teen moms and the moms she encounters in her community: "It's fake to them. It's not reality because the things that they struggle with, for instance, include not having a place to stay day to day, or worrying about what they're going to eat day to day."¹⁸³ Thus, in that the lives of MTV's mothers are often shielded by privilege, the show portrays a "very middle class look" at teen pregnancy and its imagined, perilous consequences. Given that the majority of teenagers that become pregnant already struggle with a host of poverty-related problems, teen pregnancy, as it is cited for its potential to set an adolescent on a negative life trajectory, is revealed to be a myth.

The notion that teen pregnancy may not have the adverse outcomes so commonly associated with it has been reinforced by numerous scholars. Frank Furstenburg's longitudinal study of teen mothers in Baltimore showed that after thirty years, adolescent mothers found themselves in similar economic and social circumstances as many of their peers who had put off childbearing till later in life.¹⁸⁴ In fact, some of these mothers fare slightly better than their peers, attributing their relatively high level of economic success to their motivation to succeed despite the hardships they faced in bearing children as teens. In that Wanda S. Pillow's analysis of teen mothers and educational policy also discovered this pattern of increased motivation and dedication to school, early childbearing may actually have positive effects on the educational and

¹⁸² Stevens-Simon, C., and R. Lowy. 1995. "Teenage Childbearing: An Adaptive Strategy for the Socioeconomically Disadvantaged or a Strategy for Adapting to Socioeconomic Disadvantage?" *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*. (149): 912-915

¹⁸³ <http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,2083168,00.html>

¹⁸⁴ Furstenburg *Destinies of the Disadvantaged*

economic attainment of teen mothers.¹⁸⁵ Furthermore, Arline Geronimus, in her study of pairs of sisters, has found that women who have children in their teens do not seem to be at a significant disadvantage in terms of future employment or income.¹⁸⁶ In a long-term study published in 2005, economists V. Joseph Hotz, Susan Williams McElroy, and Seth G. Sanders found that “by age 35, former teen moms had earned more in income, paid more in taxes, were substantially less likely to live in poverty and collected less in public assistance than similarly poor women who waited until their 20s to have babies.”¹⁸⁷

While historically cited for its role in creating poverty and barring educational attainment, teen pregnancy may not lead to any of the disastrous outcomes it is so often linked to. Rebecca Maynard’s report on teen childbearing that compared low-income teen mothers to non-childbearing low-income teens found that “teen mothers were more likely to complete high school or obtain a GED, teen mothers’ welfare dependency was the same as teens who delay childbearing, [and] teen mothers worked more hours and earned more money than non-parenting teens.”¹⁸⁸ Thus, the conception that teen pregnancy causes poverty, derails the lives of teen mothers, and creates broken families has so far been proven to be a myth. Since many of the “negative outcomes” typically associated with teen pregnancy have been disproven, negative constructions of teen mothers that conceptualize them in relation to their cost their communities and to society at large become all the more troublesome. Not only do these constructions of teen motherhood maintain a belief in the “rights and wrongs of individual behavior, rather than more political issues such as sexism, racism, and unemployment,” they also ensure that structural

¹⁸⁵ Wanda S Pillow Unfit Subjects 122

¹⁸⁶ Geronimus

¹⁸⁷ http://www.healthyteennetwork.org/index.asp?Type=B_BASIC&SEC=%7B8778D296-842F-4146-9940-6A471A9E37F4%7D&DE=%7BDA66A028-4FB4-4FA4-8BF2-2530B28F82E3%7D

¹⁸⁸ Wanda S Pillow Unfit Subjects 117

inequality is ignored in the policies implemented regarding teen pregnancy.¹⁸⁹ By recognizing teen mothers as rational actors responding to limited life opportunities, I suggest that policy must begin to prevent not only teen childbearing, but the systematic reproduction of structural disadvantage that make childbearing economically and socially viable. In what follows, I focus on how the reproduction of educational inequity has contributed largely to this phenomenon.

CONTEXTS OF LITTLE OPPORTUNITY: HOW EDUCATIONAL INEQUITY RENDERS EARLY CHILDBEARING “RATIONAL”

Educational attainment has been directly correlated with one’s likelihood of becoming a young mother, as demonstrated by numerous studies that have concluded that those with higher educational attainment tend to delay childbearing, and are able to avoid unintended pregnancy altogether. Thus, in that the vast majority of teen mothers come from low-income or socioeconomically disadvantaged communities where their opportunities for educational attainment are often vastly limited, it is useful to further analyze the links between education and childbearing patterns. In a 2006 nationwide study that compared unintended pregnancy rates between poor and higher-income women, it was found that “[w]omen with the fewest years of education had the highest unintended pregnancy rates, and rates decreased as years of education attained increased.”¹⁹⁰ Those with no college experience demonstrated the highest levels of unintended pregnancy rates while “higher-income women, white women, college graduates and married women have relatively low unintended pregnancy rates (as low as 17 per 1,000 among higher-income white women—one-third the national rate of 52 per 1,000).”¹⁹¹ Furthermore, even when women with better educational prospects did experience unintended pregnancy, they were found to be less likely to carry their pregnancy to term than those with less educational

¹⁸⁹ Deidre m Kelly. Pregnant with meaning: teen mothers and the politics of inclusive schooling 69

¹⁹⁰ <http://www.guttmacher.org/media/nr/2011/08/24/index.html>

¹⁹¹ <http://www.guttmacher.org/media/nr/2011/08/24/index.html>

attainment. Women who do not hold high school diplomas were found most likely to continue an unintended pregnancy, yielding an unintended birth rate that is “almost twice the national rate and nearly four times the rate for college graduates.”¹⁹² Even as women with high levels of educational attainment experience unintended pregnancy at much lower rates than most, they are also much more likely to end such pregnancies through abortion¹⁹³.

As the majority of adolescent pregnancies are unintended, the study shows that women with substantial economic and educational prospects are much better at delaying childbearing than their lower-income peers. Thus, patterns of early childbearing must be understood as they relate to socioeconomic factors; pregnancy may not be as actively prevented among women with low educational attainment because childbearing would do little to alter their future economic and educational careers. Women who are enrolled in college, and are therefore 1) more likely to be from higher income backgrounds and 2) have greater future economic prospects, have more at stake by early childbearing than do their lower-income counterparts and will thus go to greater means to avoid unintended pregnancy. This corresponds with studies on varying levels of contraception use amongst teens as “sexually active teenagers who considered pregnancy an impediment to their ability to achieve educational or vocational goals are twice as likely to report prior and planned contraceptive use”.¹⁹⁴ The implications of these results are striking; not only do they point to the inefficiency of combating teen pregnancy through providing access to contraceptive services, they force us to consider the ways in which socioeconomic circumstances and early childbearing are inextricably linked.

The phenomenon by which low-income and minority students are disserved by the American educational system is well documented by studies that allude to the existence of an

¹⁹² <http://www.guttmacher.org/media/nr/2011/08/24/index.html>

¹⁹³ Women without class 68

¹⁹⁴ Contraceptive experiences among adolescents who experience unintended birth

“achievement gap” between students of color and their white peers, or low-income students and their higher-income peers.¹⁹⁵ While 9.3% of Black students and 17.6% of Hispanic students dropped out of high school in 2009, only 5.3% of whites did.¹⁹⁶ According to The Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard, Latino and Black students have been documented to fare worse in “virtually every measure of achievement” compared to whites, including national “math and reading test scores, high school completion rates, college enrollment and college completion rates.”¹⁹⁷ That the educational system is failing its minority and low-income populations has not been lost on the American public—sensational statistics that document more Black men currently in prison than in college have been accompanied by widespread support for the charter school movement as well as the rampant growth of teacher-placement programs like Teach for America. From numerous studies that attribute low wage earnings to low educational attainment¹⁹⁸ to others that document an increasing disparity between the nation’s rich and poor¹⁹⁹, the economic implications of our vastly unequal educational system is becoming clear as they are dictated most saliently according to race. As a college degree has become increasingly important to economic advancement even in fields where degrees are not required, that Black and Latino youth nationwide are failing on a number of educational measures becomes all the more alarming.²⁰⁰

Conceiving “teen pregnancy” for its potential to set one on a “negative trajectory” requires that one enjoy a relative degree of hope for the future. In that “nearly half of the nation’s African American and Latino students attend high schools in low-income areas with dropout

¹⁹⁵ <http://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/achievement-gap/>

¹⁹⁶ <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=16>

¹⁹⁷ <http://www.agi.harvard.edu/projects/thegap.php>

¹⁹⁸ http://mckinseysociety.com/downloads/reports/Education/achievement_gap_report.pdf

¹⁹⁹ <http://www.npc.umich.edu/poverty/>

²⁰⁰ <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/26/sunday-review/26leonhardt.html>

rates in the 40-50% range,” America’s educational system may deny low-income teen mothers high prospects for the future.²⁰¹ “Drop-out factories”, or schools that have a “typical freshman class [that] shrinks by 40 percent or more by the time students reach their senior year,” are comprised of mostly low-income and minority students.²⁰² Within these poorly funded, failing schools, it is not surprising that adolescents do not have high educational prospects. As Mettler and Soss point out: “the design and implementation of public policy constitute important forces shaping citizens’ orientations toward the institutions of policies of government”.²⁰³ Thus, low-income adolescents who are students at systematically failing schools may become disillusioned with education, and may not see the worth of earning a high school degree. In the absence of this normative life stage, early childbearing may be rendered a rational decision.

Thus, given that our country’s educational system is failing to meaningfully provide avenues for economic mobility for its minority and low-income youth, we can understand early childbearing as a “rational” response to a context of little opportunity. In this context, the common conception of teen pregnancy as a cause for future poverty and a barrier towards educational attainment does not hold. As Bonnie J. Ross Leadbeater and Niobe Way point out in their analysis of teen motherhood in New York City, “it is unlikely that interventions that address teenage promiscuity or teenage childbearing alone can stem the compounding negative contributions of substandard education, inner-city joblessness, discrimination, and family background in perpetuating intergenerational poverty”.²⁰⁴ While researchers have contended that early childbearing is thus “an appropriate and adaptive response to physically and

²⁰¹ <http://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/school-dropout-prevention.aspx>

²⁰² http://www.all4ed.org/about_the_crisis/schools

²⁰³ [mettler](#) and [soss](#)

²⁰⁴ Bonnie j. ross Leadbeater and niobe way. Growing Up Fast: Transitions to Early Adulthood

psychologically debilitating circumstances of urban poverty,” I take this argument further.²⁰⁵ It is not simply a context of poverty that prompts early childbearing; it is a lack of means to acquire meaningful educational and economic attainment. As one Boston teen succinctly puts it, “[W]hy should you wait? Who’s coming?”²⁰⁶

Sociologist Wanda Pillow has analyzed the “why wait?” mentality as it becomes a recurring theme in her extensive analysis of educational policy’s impact on teen mothers. In that a lack of educational engagement often contributes to one’s likelihood of early childbearing, Pillow finds that many of the students she interviews do not perceive themselves to have meaningful educational opportunities prior to becoming pregnant. While some blamed themselves for this predicament, “I don’t know, maybe if I would’ve been more into school stuff I wouldn’t have gotten pregnant,” others attributed it to the failure of the school system itself: “I already felt like school weren’t teaching me so I felt like why wait.”²⁰⁷ By equating high educational achievement with the ability to delay childbearing, the teen mothers in Pillow’s analysis suggest a direct correlation between low educational attainment and early childbearing. Indeed, as many as 60 percent of teen mothers drop out prior to becoming pregnant while many more either struggle with learning disabilities, are tracked into low-ability classrooms, are less likely to be in high-ability math classes by the eighth grade, and attend low-performing schools.²⁰⁸ The notion that there is no reason to “wait” to have children points to the reality that, for many teen mothers, early childbearing does little to derail one’s educational trajectory, as their educational prospects are often constricted by the time they are finishing middle school.

²⁰⁵ Stevens-Simon, C., and R. Lowy. 1995. “Teenage Childbearing: An Adaptive Strategy for the Socioeconomically Disadvantaged or a Strategy for Adapting to Socioeconomic Disadvantage?” *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*. (149): 912-915

²⁰⁶ Dodson L. *Don’t Call Us Out of Name: The Untold Lives of Women and Girls in poor America*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 97

²⁰⁷ *Unfit Subjects*, 120

²⁰⁸ *Unfit Subjects* 117-122

Already discouraged and disenfranchised from education, Pillow points to the striking ways in which school administrators and educators perpetuate student feelings of isolation and rates of low achievement: “[F]or Black teen girls, “low teacher ratings were associated with an increased risk of school-age pregnancy, even after controlling for test scores, grades, and aspirations. This finding points dramatically to the power, role, and influence of teacher attitude toward students and how particularly for African-American female students, supportive, engaged, and positive interactions with adult teachers have the potential to affect personal and educational outcomes for the student.”²⁰⁹ Consistent with Soss’ and Mettler’s theories on policy’s influence on mass behavior, low-budgeted, poorly managed schools that provide little institutional support thus shape students’ negative perceptions of their life opportunities and educational trajectories.²¹⁰ Furthermore, as students are tracked into low-achieving classes, these negative perceptions of one’s potential educational aspirations become thoroughly compounded by the school itself. In a context of limited educational opportunity, teen mothers do not conceptualize childbearing as a deterrent to their future educational attainment; their experiences in schools assure them that these institutions will not serve as a meaningful avenue of mobility. Thus, while early intervention programs may improve educational outcomes for adolescent mothers, it remains clear that young mothers need academic support prior to becoming pregnant. As data shows that “the educational success of minority group adolescent mothers clearly depends on the attention given to reducing school failure in adolescent girls *before* they become parents,” education for teen mothers must be situated within the larger issue of education for all low-income, young women.²¹¹ In order to meaningfully address educational outcomes among

²⁰⁹ Unfit Subjects, 122

²¹⁰ Mettler and Soss

²¹¹ Leadbeater 51

teen mothers, policy must address how to successfully provide education for all female students.

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Immobilized by a failing education system and often struggling with other circumstances of poverty, teen mothers understand their pregnancies not as isolated events, but as indicative of a greater context of life hardship. By documenting the narratives of teen mothers enrolled in a school parenting program, Wendy Luttrell's ethnography Pregnant Bodies: Fertile Minds provides an informative account of teen mothers' lives as they are often framed by socioeconomic struggle, revealing an understanding of pregnancy largely at odds of teen pregnancy as a "crisis". Though the girls she interviews face many difficulties as a result of their decision to have children, they often situate such difficulties in a greater context of economic struggle. That the "hardness of life" is a recurring theme in the narratives of teen mothers points to the ways in which their economic and educational environment shaped not only the implications of their pregnancies, but the ways they would navigate their consequences. As "standing alone"; "making it on my own"; "facing the world by myself"; being "tough and independent"; "not taking shit"; and "depending only on myself" were all traits that the girls identified as possessing, the contexts of hardship and little opportunity that required adolescents to develop "thick skin" also aided them in managing the trials of pregnancy.²¹³ Thus, contrary to the conception that early childbearing results from the "bad" behavior of teen mothers that leads to an eventual descent into poverty, the hardship that characterized the lives of teen mothers in Luttrell's study led teens to view their pregnancy as only one another trial amongst many.

Furthermore, within this context of hardship and economic and educational inequity, the neo-liberal framework that expects the poor to "pull themselves up by the bootstraps" and that

²¹² Pillow 122

²¹³ Pregnant bodies, fertile minds 54

renders teen mothers at blame for their poverty, becomes increasingly punitive. Because structurally reproduced disadvantage shapes the experiences of teen mothers, agency, as it assumes that one has the ability to produce one's life circumstances, becomes compromised. Indeed, in her illuminating analysis of teen mother's discourse surrounding abortion, Luttrell finds that teen mothers seldom use the word "choice" when discussing the contexts of their lives. Instead, the teen mothers in her study used "a lexicon of words and phrases that had to do with decision making, but not options or choices".²¹⁴ Hence, the girls conceived of their pregnancy as an incident that would inevitably lead to childbearing, framing their pregnancy around the question: "how will I live with a decision that is not deliberate?" rather than "what choices do I have?" Though adoption, abortion, or "keeping the baby" are often framed in public discourse as viable "options" in response to unintended pregnancy, teen mothers largely spoke of their own situations outside of these conceptualizations of "choice". Even as girls acknowledged they were "too young" to have children, their discussion of pregnancy as an event from which they lack the "choice" to prevent is reflective of the larger circumstances of their lives, as such circumstances are determined by structural inequality and thus outside the realm of "real choices".²¹⁵ Furthermore, in that teen mothers do not view abortion as a means by which to respond to their pregnancy, reproductive "choice" as a pressing political concern may not resonate with low-income teens in the way that it does for their middle-income counterparts. As I discussed in the previous chapter, movements for reproductive rights that have focused narrowly on securing women's "choice" may therefore do little to address the issues that are more relevant to securing the health and well-being of low-income women.

Furthermore, because childbearing is not conceptualized from the normative, middle

²¹⁴ Pregnant bodies, fertile minds 123

²¹⁵ Pregnant bodies, fertile minds 123

class conception that posits it as a deterrent to one's educational trajectory, low-income adolescents may view their pregnancies, even as they are unintended, as transitions into adulthood. Julie Bettie explains this phenomenon in her ethnography on working-class Mexican teens: "For non-prep girls who do not have college and career to look forward to as signs of adulthood, motherhood and the responsibility that comes with it can be employed to gain respect, marking adult status".²¹⁶ Leadbeater and Way further echo this conception of childbearing as a logical step towards adulthood in the absence of educational or economic mobility: "A lack of career opportunities for poor young women makes their choice of limiting childbearing less costly... Indeed, giving up a low-paying job may not be so difficult for a young mother when the high levels of stress encountered by poor working mothers are weighed against the pleasures of caring for a young child."²¹⁷ However, even as they may see childbearing as a transition into adulthood, many teen mothers recognize that having a child alone is not enough to make one "grown." Contrary to common conceptions of teen pregnancy's effect on limiting future educational and economic attainment, Bettie contends that early childbearing is often accompanied by assuming other "adult roles," including an increased likelihood to further one's education: "The "going away to college" experience was decidedly a prep one, while working class performers were likely to attend the local community college and begin their adult lives as workers, parents, and spouses at the same time".²¹⁸ Thus, constructions of the teen mother as lazy, dependent, and unfit for parenthood, is contradicted by teen mothers who assume their parenting roles with other adult responsibilities. In the absence of the educational opportunities that would allow one to pursue a four year degree, childbearing often complements, rather than

²¹⁶ Women without class, bettie, 69

²¹⁷ leadbeater 53

²¹⁸ Women without class, bettie, 71

thwarts teen mothers' efforts to gain educational attainment. Hence, for many teen mothers, childbearing is not the beginning of their descent into intergenerational poverty; on the contrary, it is often cited as the reason for which mothers gain the motivation to return to work or school. This conception of childbearing as a transition to adulthood may explain why teen mothers generally exhibit patterns of "resiliency" in that they manage to retain comparable levels of economic and educational success as their peers who delay childbearing.

Even as low-income teen mothers maintain agency to often overcome great obstacles in their lives and react "rationally" to contexts of poverty, I do not mean to suggest that the state has no role in providing them with public aid. Instead of aligning with the disciplinary approaches towards teen mothers that have only resulted in punitive and ineffective policy, I argue that teen mothers need to be given a broad array of circumstances by which they can secure a promising future. It does not follow that just because many teen mothers manage to make the most out of adverse circumstances, they do not deserve greater opportunities for educational and economic advancement. As political theorist Tommie Shelby points out, "Individuals are forced to make choices in an environment they did not choose. They would surely prefer to have a broader array of good opportunities. The question we should be asking--is whether the denizens of the ghetto are entitled to a better set of options, and if so, whose responsibility it is to provide them."²¹⁹ Teen mothers have proven that they are capable of withstanding conditions of extreme adversity—now it is the state's responsibility to ensure that they should not have to. Even as the educational system continues to fail and disenfranchise low-income, pregnant teens, the "resilience" of teen mothers only points to their remarkable capabilities for success. If given the opportunities afforded to their middle class peers, it is

²¹⁹ Michelle Alexander the new jim crow 206

undeniable that low-income girls around the country would achieve comparable levels of educational and economic success.

Unlike the constructions of teen mothers as “deviant” or “unfit” to parent, I argue that teen mothers do not act out of individual failures, but rationally respond to structural inequalities facilitated by the state. In detailing how educational inequity has rendered early childbearing a viable decision in the absence of a normative, middle-class educational trajectory, I have hoped to draw attention to how structurally produced inequality contributes to teen mothers’ lives of “hardship”. In the next section, I discuss how this “hardship” is reproduced by the state, particularly in educational policy that stigmatizes and further isolates teen mothers from school.

“DON’T BE ASHAMED”: DISCRIMINATION WITHIN THE SCHOOL

From being posited as “wrong girls”, responsible for “wrong families,” or simply as products of a “wrong society,” teen mothers have historically found themselves subject to an unprecedented degree of stigmatization, cruelty, and unfair and inequitable treatment, especially in schools. In this section, I detail how educational policy has been especially punitive towards teen mothers, and how teen mothers are faring in response.

In 1972, amidst the growing momentum of the civil rights movement, the Mink Equal Opportunity in Education Act was passed, ensuring that “a recipient of [federal funding] shall not discriminate against any student, or exclude any student from its education program or activity, including any class or extracurricular activity, on the basis of such student’s pregnancy, childbirth, false pregnancy, termination of pregnancy or recovery therefrom, unless the student requests voluntarily to participate in a separate portion of the program .”²²⁰ The legislation, commonly known as Title IX, was designed to address such gender inequalities that made the

²²⁰ Unfit subjects 61

systematic expulsion of visibly pregnant teens standard protocol in most public schools. However, while the legislation guaranteed that teen mothers could not be explicitly denied education, the “once you show, you go” sentiment remained largely in place as teen mothers continue to be frequently barred from a range of educational opportunities and extracurricular activities.²²¹ Attitudes that posit teen mothers as “bad influences” on other students have been used to justify a “separate but equal” policy that has justified their dismissal from schools and otherwise discriminatory treatment.²²² In an undercover study done in Santa Clara in 2003, investigators found that six out of twenty four schools unlawfully denied registration to a tester that posed as a teen mother and two other school officials questioned whether a pregnant student would be allowed into the school.²²³ One school even asked a caller if her “tummy show[s] yet,” suggesting that once the tester started “showing,” she should register for the alternative education program for teen mothers.²²⁴ In a similar study conducted in 2000 in New York, undercover callers had similar results, as high schools routinely denied them registration materials and inquired about the visibility of the pregnancy.²²⁵ As the body of the pregnant student is often understood as a symbol of immorality and promiscuity, schools continue to blatantly stigmatize and discriminate against adolescent mothers, reinforcing the discourses that posit teen mothers as “wrong girls” whose sexuality is “deviant” and taboo.

Understood as “bad examples” for other students in school, teen mothers have traditionally been pressured and placed into separate educational programs, where they are effectively quarantined from their schoolmates and hidden from the mainstream. Although Title IX protects teen mothers’ rights to an equal education, many schools successfully pressure teen

²²¹ Unfit subjects 56

²²² Unfit subjects 63

²²³ <http://www.lawfoundation.org/documents/ReportreDenialofEd.OpportunitiesforPreg.TeensinSCC1.2003.pdf>

²²⁴ <http://www.lawfoundation.org/documents/ReportreDenialofEd.OpportunitiesforPreg.TeensinSCC1.2003.pdf>

²²⁵ <http://www.nyclu.org/content/nyc-doe-failing-pregnant-parenting-students>

mothers into leaving their mainstream high schools for “alternative” education programs, failing to inform students that their enrollment in such programs is voluntary. These programs are inferior to mainstream high schools on a number of counts as they have “fewer curriculum options such as electives and advanced classes; and fewer, if any, opportunities for participation in extra-curricular activities, including athletic programs.”²²⁶ Many alternative education programs offer GED classes rather than an accredited high school degree, have been acknowledged by service providers and teens alike as “academically deficient”, and “generally do not satisfy the entrance requirements of four-year colleges and universities.”²²⁷ Thus, while teen mothers are guaranteed a comparable education to that of their peers, they are often tracked into low-achieving programs that provide them a minimal amount of educational accreditation, inflexible hours and locations, and a dearth of academic support. That these “separate but equal” programs provide wholly inadequate educational options for students who are likely to need them the most is indicative of the punitive attitudes toward teen mothers that characterize common constructions of teen pregnancy.

Indeed, even when teen mothers remain in mainstream high schools, they are subject to blatant forms of discrimination and stigmatization, as cases in which pregnant teens are forced to sit in desks that they hardly fit into have only served to highlight the degree of prejudice that school officials project onto pregnant girls. Such discrimination is found both at the classroom and administrative levels alike as “schools refus[e] to give excused absences for pregnancy related doctor’s appointments, teachers refus[e] to allow make-up work, counselors coerc[e] students into substandard alternative schools, excluding them from school activities based on “morality” codes,” and “disparaging, discouraging and disapproving comments from adults and

²²⁶ <http://www.lawfoundation.org/documents/ReportreDenialofEd.OpportunitiesforPreg.TeensinSCC1.2003.pdf>

²²⁷ <http://www.lawfoundation.org/documents/ReportreDenialofEd.OpportunitiesforPreg.TeensinSCC1.2003.pdf>

students” are commonplace.²²⁸ In this punitive context, it is no not surprising that an overwhelming number of teen who become pregnant while enrolled in school drop out before carrying their pregnancy to term. As schools continue to reinforce “images of teenage mothers as sexually irresponsible, likely to be bad mothers, and destined to become dependent, nonproductive citizens,” pregnant adolescents become further isolated from their educational environment.²²⁹ In addition to the psychological effects of such stigmatization, the inflexibility of school policies, as they refuse to accommodate teen parents, may further incite teen mothers’ disenfranchisement from school. As teens face such simple obstacles as not being allowed more frequent bathroom breaks or unexcused absences, continuing one’s education at a mainstream high school becomes a near impossible feat for many pregnant adolescents.

At the same time that schools have denied teen mothers opportunities a decent education, many teen mothers have made significant educational gains in the face of adversity and discrimination. As found in numerous studies, many teen mothers who drop out before becoming pregnant return to school afterwards, citing a sense of responsibility to their children as a motivating factor in wanting to continue their education: “If I hadn’t gotten pregnant I wouldn’t still be in school; I’m here for my baby.”²³⁰ The “resilience” of teen mothers to the obstacles of early pregnancy may thus in part be attributed to this personal commitment to making significant educational and economic gains, despite circumstances of extreme hardship. Furthermore, discrimination and stigmatization itself, as it becomes such a shaping facet of the teen mother’s experience, may further motivate teen mothers to overcome adversity: “I think that you try harder because you have so much pressure from society. We get discriminated [against] so often that we strive to be the best that we can, whereas some older parents, they’re 25 or 30 or

²²⁸ <http://www.aclu-wa.org/blog/teen-pregnancy-discrimination-and-dropout-rate>

²²⁹ <http://www.aclu-wa.org/blog/teen-pregnancy-discrimination-and-dropout-rate>

²³⁰ Leadbeater, Furstenberg, pillow 21

whatever, right? They don't have that pressure.”²³¹ By deflecting the discourses of shame rampant in mainstream schools, many teen mothers are able to cope with and overcome some of the obstacles that have been fueled by the punitive educational policies that discriminate against some of the country's most disadvantaged students. Nevertheless, in that negative constructions of teen pregnancy have informed discriminatory and punishment-oriented policy against teen mothers, the importance of constructing teens as “rational” actors living in contexts of structurally reproduced inequality becomes all the more important.

A BETTER APPROACH: PREVENTING POVERTY RATHER THAN PREGNANCY

Unfairly constructed in public discourse as social “burdens” and “unfit” parents, the resulting policies through which we have addressed teen pregnancy have done little more than stigmatize and misunderstand early childbearing among low-income teens. In that teen pregnancy is a response to little opportunity, approaches to teen pregnancy must focus on providing meaningful life opportunities for not just pregnant teens, but low-income girls nationwide. In the next chapter, I conclude by emphasizing that efforts to reduce poverty and structural inequality will be necessary to reduce teen pregnancy rates and improve the lives of low-income girls.

CHAPTER 5: WHAT POLICY IS NOT DOING: SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

In my previous chapters, I have critiqued mainstream constructions of teenage pregnancy as they have led to punitive and punishment-oriented policy that has reproduced hardship for black and Latina low-income mothers. In this final chapter, I argue that teen pregnancy must not be approached as a problem in and of itself, but as a manifestation of poverty. This will allow us to formulate policy that meaningfully improves the lives of low-income teens, rather than policy

²³¹ Pregnant with meaning 179

that stigmatizes and punishes them.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that mainstream constructions of teen mothers as social “burdens” and “unfit” to parent have narrowly focused on prevention policy, and have not only failed to meaningfully reduce teen pregnancy, but have failed to address the structural forces that produce socioeconomic inequality among the lives of teen mothers. Furthermore, these constructions have often relied on the construction of teen mothers as “deviant”, resulting in the “oversubscription” of punitive and punishment-oriented policy. These negative constructions of teen mothers ensure that policy that is formulated around them keep existing structural hierarchies intact. Drawing on sociologist Herbert Blumer’s work on prejudice, racial theorist George Lipsitz analyzes how sustained discrimination against marginalized groups serve to maintain existing power structures: “Blumer concedes that members of dominant groups often express personal prejudice and disdain for those they view as different, but... do so largely because they fear that humanizing the subordinated group would threaten the dominant group’s entitlements, privileges, and prerogatives.”²³² In that humanizing teen mothers would require us to view their life circumstances as not faults of their own, but as a result of the inequality and discrimination perpetuated by an unequal opportunity structure, negative constructions of teen mothers are useful to maintain existing structural hierarchies. Because addressing teen pregnancy would require a fundamental commitment to investing in America’s poor, constructing the teen mother as a “deviant” is useful in producing superficial policy solutions to the “teen pregnancy crisis”.

In presenting teen mothers as rational actors responding to a context of limited life opportunity, I have hoped to humanize low-income girls in a way that public discourse has not. The mainstream continues to dehumanize Black and Latina low-income women, thus

²³² How Racism Takes Place, 20.

maintaining the power dynamics that allow society's most disadvantaged members to remain at the bottom of the economic ladder. We continue to label minority women as "lazy," "deviant", "promiscuous", "welfare queens" and "wrong" girls because we are afraid of acknowledging their humanity and rationality, a task that would require us to respond to their life circumstances with compassion rather than punishment. In this chapter, I suggest that we need policy that will alleviate poverty in order to effectively address teen pregnancy. We need to improve schools and neighborhoods, increase the life circumstances of Black and Latina low-income girls, who find themselves continually underserved by the state. This shift can only occur when we move away from negative constructions of teen mothers.

In the same way that teen mothers must be understood as "rational" actors in a context of little opportunity, teen pregnancy must be understood not as a crisis itself, but as a measurement of growing socioeconomic inequality in the United States. With this understanding, we will be able to enact policy that prevents teen pregnancy by first addressing the underlying power structures that vastly limit the life opportunities of low-income populations. In what immediately follows, I offer suggestions as to how I believe teen pregnancy can be better addressed, and how the lives of low-income girls can be improved at large.

SUGGESTIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL AND ECONOMIC REFORM

In the preceding chapter, I have argued that early childbearing does little to alter the life opportunities of low-income women. In that the life opportunities of many Black and Latina women are already constricted, early childbearing has been shown to have little effect in negatively impacting their overall life trajectories. Thus, even as rates of early childbearing have decreased, low educational attainment have persisted: "Younger African American women, for whom the rates of childbearing have dropped most steeply, were no more likely in 2005 than in

1995 to graduate from high school.”²³³ If educational attainment has shown little improvement with the fall of early childbearing, poverty rates have shown even less of a correlation with early childbearing patterns. Though early childbearing has fallen to historic lows in the past couple of years, poverty rates for children 18 and under have “increased by 12 percent from 2000 to 2005”, with the nation’s overall poverty rate at 15.1% in 2010, the highest it’s been since 1993.²³⁴ Hence, even as more and more women have begun to put off early-childbearing till later years, rates of poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage continue to climb at astronomical rates

If the campaign to prevent early childbearing was initially intended as a means by which to alleviate poverty and strengthen low-income homes, it is clear that our efforts have been largely misguided. Early childbearing shows little effect in determining the life circumstances of low-income women as researchers have found that young, low-income mothers are able to successfully rearrange their life course in order to return to school and gain work experience at similar rates to their non-childbearing peers. However, even as these young mothers are not at a higher risk for poverty and disadvantage than many of their peers, they nevertheless struggle to find high-paying jobs and often remain poor. The reasons for this are manifold—pre-existing conditions of poverty, poor education, discrimination, and family instability all lower the likelihood that low-income women, regardless of their childbearing patterns, will be able to escape poverty. Indeed, given that only one of out five children who grow up in the bottom quartile of the income distribution make it to the middle class, it remains evident that the prevention of early childbearing as an antipoverty strategy ignores the larger opportunity structure that continues to maintain the country’s high levels of socioeconomic inequality.²³⁵

Given that our country’s poor live in extremely segregated communities in which

²³³ Furstenberg 162

²³⁴ http://money.cnn.com/2011/09/13/news/economy/poverty_rate_income/index.htm

²³⁵ Furstenberg 165

opportunities for education and employment are drastically limited, effective anti-poverty efforts would seek to reform current housing, educational, and tax policies, as they are responsible for the structural reproduction of these disadvantages.²³⁶ However, in that the poor are commonly constructed as individually responsible for their poverty, American public policy has reflected a markedly neo-liberal, market ideology that is routinely reluctant to provide social provisions for society's neediest populations. It is this ideology, Lipsitz contends, that not only supported the decline of the welfare state in the 1960's, as white, suburban homeowners became "fiscal liberals for themselves but fiscal conservatives towards [ethnic] others," but also provided the justification for state budget cuts in childcare, education, health and food stamps, while funds for projects like prison expansion increased to an all-time high.²³⁷ In that the current tax code benefits those who already have access to inheritance and capital at the expense of public investment, low-income minority populations find themselves barred from the types of superior schools and networks of job and business opportunities that typify the lives of white homeowners.²³⁸ Families in the top 20 percent of the population have more than doubled their net worth in household income over the past few decades while the poorest fifth of the population has experienced a much lower growth rate, at a staggering 18 percent.²³⁹ Furthermore, as public schools gain most of their funding from local taxes, those that are situated in highly-segregated white, suburban neighborhoods are vastly superior to those that are concentrated in low-income, urban sites. Property taxes have thus contributed to the creation of a public education system that is vastly unequal and systematically bars minority students from access to

²³⁶ Furstenberg 164

²³⁷ Lipsitz 11-12.

²³⁸ Lipsitz 8-9

²³⁹ http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/i/income/income_inequality/index.html

decent schools.²⁴⁰

It is far more likely that growing poverty rates are a result of these structural inequalities and persisting discriminatory policies than individual instances of teen pregnancy or low-income, single motherhood. Teen pregnancy prevention, as it has been touted as an anti-poverty effort, can be understood as a “silver bullet” in that its role in addressing poverty is nothing more than symbolic in its approach. Indeed, in directing attention away from the state’s disinvestment in the poor and from the structural reproduction of inequality, teen pregnancy prevention becomes counterproductive. In order to combat poverty, we must tackle issues of unequal education and employment as they are structurally imbedded in the state’s institutional structure. Alleviating poverty requires fundamental, structural change—thus, preventing teen pregnancy among low-income women cannot be understood as a genuine anti-poverty effort.

In that its negative effects are exaggerated and have often been unproven, teen pregnancy has been erroneously constructed in public discourse as an urgent social “crisis”. Far from being at the “root of critical social issues,” there is no substantial evidence that supports the claim that reducing early childbearing would do anything to combat the country’s gross levels of socioeconomic inequality.²⁴¹ Though the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy claims that reducing early childbearing would result in a “significant reduction of a host of social problems afflicting children in the United States, from school failure and crime to child abuse and neglect,” years of declining rates of early childbearing seem to prove otherwise.²⁴²

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that childbearing, regardless at what age, presents difficult consequences for women live in poverty and who are systematically disadvantaged by state policy. In that teen pregnancy efforts may alleviate some of the hardships

²⁴⁰ <http://www.unfinishedbusiness.org/20110517-residential-segregation/>

²⁴¹ <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/about-us/wim.aspx>

²⁴² <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/about-us/wim.aspx>

that these women face, prevention efforts are not wholly counterproductive. In what follows, I discuss how prevention efforts and teen mother support programs can benefit low-income girls and teen mothers, and work towards bettering their lives.

PREVENTION FOR THE BETTER: WHAT WE CAN DO DIFFERENTLY

Teen pregnancy prevention efforts have focused on the individual “deviant” behavior of young women, ignoring the larger structural causes for early childbearing patterns. While welfare policy has attempted to provide economic “disincentives” for low-income girls and abstinence-only programs have attempted to shame and scare young women away from sexual behavior, the structural causes for teen pregnancy have gone widely unaddressed. As Pamela Erickson concludes in her work on Latina childbearing patterns in Los Angeles, the failure of “short-term, often clinically based, programs” to have more than a minimal impact on reducing teen pregnancy among low-income women may be indicative of the underestimation of the “powerful social, cultural, and economic forces that favor teenage motherhood among women of color and lower socioeconomic status”.²⁴³ Because they continue to approach teen pregnancy as a result of “bad” behavior, prevention programs are unable to address how contexts of limited opportunity may render early childbearing an appropriate and rational response. Thus, everything from abstinence-only curriculums to reproductive health services are only “isolated interventions” in which a “wide variety of problems unrelated to health, such as social, educational, and economic, and motivational issues” remain unaddressed.²⁴⁴

Furthermore, current prevention efforts often reinforce this view of teen mothers as social “deviants”. The National Campaign’s “Stay Teen” website illustrates this as it routinely posts dramatic clips from MTV’s *16 and Pregnant* followed by brief questions concerning the future

²⁴³ Pamela Erickson Latina childbearing 18

²⁴⁴ Politics of pregnancy 276

and well-being of the featured reality TV stars. In a post regarding one mother's unemployed boyfriend, the website asks readers: "Do you think he will ever get a job? What will they do about money in the future? Considering that their relationship has always been shaky, do you think Lindsey and Forest's relationship will last?"²⁴⁵ Encouraging readers to answer "in the comments" and warning that what they have just watched is "the kind of real-life drama that only adults should have to deal with," these prevention efforts are not only sensationalistic and draw on inaccurate media representations, they rely and perpetuate constructions of teen mothers as having made "bad" choices.²⁴⁶ Gaby Rodriguez, the CEO of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the US, admits to this widely-used tactic of stigmatization in current prevention efforts: "We frame [teen pregnancy] as something that is problematic or undesirable... A lot of teen pregnancy prevention programs use stigma and shame. It might not be their intended message, but that might be what comes across."²⁴⁷ These programs make no mention of the structural forces of inequality and disadvantage that influence early childbearing, and thus position teen mothers as "wrong girls" responsible for their disadvantage.

However, even as the majority of prevention efforts rely on mainstream constructions of teen mothers as "deviant" and fail to address underlying structural causes of teen pregnancy, others have taken a more holistic approach. Recognizing the powerful social, cultural, and economic forces that often contribute to early childbearing, these community-based programs have implemented multidimensional approaches to address teen pregnancy as it results from circumstances of disadvantage. The Carrera Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program is especially effective, providing: "(1) an extensive family life education program (two to three hours a week for fifteen weeks) that covers gender roles, relationships, and contraception; (2)

²⁴⁵ <http://www.stayteen.org/article/16-and-pregnant-season-4-lindsey>

²⁴⁶ <http://www.stayteen.org/article/16-and-pregnant-season-4-katie>

²⁴⁷ http://colorlines.com/archives/2011/05/teen_pregnancy_prevention_and_stigma.html

individual sports (squash, golf, tennis, and swimming); (3) enhancement of self-esteem through the performing arts; (4) career awareness and employment, including summer jobs; and (5) health and human services, including family planning information and provision of contraceptives.”²⁴⁸ Furthermore, the program places an emphasis on education as participants are not only provided tutoring and homework help but are “guaranteed a free college scholarship through the program” upon successful completion.²⁴⁹ With fifty of these programs now implemented in over twenty states, this comprehensive 3-year model has had marked success in improving the lives of low-income teens. In a controlled study published in 2003, the program was found to not only have reduced the likelihood of childbearing by 50%, it also increased participants’ likelihood to graduate high school by 30% and their likelihood to attend college by 37%.²⁵⁰ In that a study funded by the Center for Disease Control found these comprehensive “asset-based youth development” models to be effective in reducing teen pregnancy and addressing other adolescent “problem behaviors,” these empowerment models could have potentially far-reaching results in not only reducing teen pregnancy but increasing life opportunities for low-income teens at large.²⁵¹

Throughout the preceding chapters, I have demonstrated how structural inequality has raised Black and Latina low-income adolescent childbearing to disproportionate highs. Though implementing comprehensive sex education programs and increasing access to reproductive health services will be fundamental to helping teens avoid unintended pregnancies, these prevention strategies do little to address the underlying economic and educational circumstances that frame the lives of low-income girls. In that multidimensional, community-based approaches

²⁴⁸ Rhodes 276

²⁴⁹ Rhode 276

²⁵⁰ <http://stopteenpregnancy.childrensaidsociety.org/impact>

²⁵¹ <http://www.emeraldinsight.com/journals.htm?issn=0965-4283&volume=103&issue=3&articleid=871832&show=html&PHPSESSID=35s9orvhb07tuu2g501kffehm3>

have least recognized these factors in their approach and sought to alleviate them, further prevention efforts would do well to borrow from the models they have employed.

However, even as prevention programs may reduce rates of early childbearing and provide some low-income teens with economic and educational opportunity, teen pregnancy prevention cannot be a strategy by which to alleviate poverty at large. Teen pregnancy should not be viewed as a problem in and of itself, but as a marker of persisting socioeconomic inequality. In addressing teen pregnancy, we must first acknowledge the state's role in maintaining the systematic educational and economic disadvantage that low-income groups face. Only then can we work towards policy that aims to not only reduce teen pregnancy, but that will alleviate poverty and structural inequality, and thus meaningfully improve the lives of America's low-income, Black and Latina young women.