



SUPPORTING LATINA/O YOUTH: Strengthening Latina/o Young Families and Communities

Justice for Young Families! Issue Brief 1

OVERVIEW

Latina/o adolescent pregnancy and birth rates are oftentimes an unwanted reminder that adolescents have their own sexuality. Societal expectations are such that Latina/o youth sexuality is neither acknowledged, nor viewed in any semblance of normalcy. This skewed approach is fueled by and perpetuates the image of Latinas as “hot,” “spicy” – in other words, hypersexual – and young men as “irresponsible” partners, even from a young age. As a result, Latina/o youth reproductive and sexual health issues have been circumscribed to a punitive framework that blames youth for their “choices” and their “conditions.” This is reflected in the narrow focus placed on the “teen pregnancy problem” and the social and economic “costs” of youth sexuality and teen pregnancy often touted by the same institutions aiming to assist youth. As part of California Latinas for Reproductive Justice’s (CLRJ) work to advance reproductive justice for Latina/o youth, it presents this issue brief as the first in a series aimed at shifting the approach to address adolescent childbearing in a manner that is de-stigmatizing and holistic. In this first issue, CLRJ examines how the current approach to Latina/o youth sexuality, pregnancy and parenting falls short; demonstrates the systemic factors failing our youth; and proposes a new paradigm to address the issue at its roots to ensure justice for young families.

The dominant perspective on youth sexuality has failed to consider the broad context of young Latinas’/os’ lives as it centers on changing individual behavior and erroneously leaves out the role of their social, economic and political environments. Placing the blame



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for adolescent pregnancy solely on the behaviors/decisions/choices of youth is not only unjust, it fails to tackle the systemic health, educational and economic inequities that may lead to such outcomes. This focus also paints a hetero-normative picture of Latina/o youth sexuality that excludes lesbian, gay, transgender and queer youth altogether. It is time to discuss Latina/o youth sexuality in the context of the many factors in their lives with the goal of strengthening families and communities.

CLRJ recognizes that the issue of adolescent childbearing in the Latina/o community is much broader and complex. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to shift the way society – policymakers, community members and leaders, adults involved in teenagers' upbringing, service providers, advocates and youth themselves – thinks about and addresses Latina/o youth sexuality, particularly in regards to pregnant and parenting youth. CLRJ's overarching goal is to broaden the conversation around Latina/o youth sexuality and effect community-informed policy change. Policy work needs to prioritize supporting Latina/o youth in navigating their sexuality and health so that they can make the best decisions for themselves, with access to the information, resources and opportunities to facilitate making those decisions. To that end, CLRJ developed its Justice for Young Families Initiative (J4YF) to challenge the dominant frame, account for the inequities experienced by Latina/o youth and address the root causes to ensure Latina/o youth who are pregnant and/or parenting can thrive.

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LATINA/O ADOLESCENT CHILDBEARING: Isolated and Inadequate Approaches Ignore Youth Sexuality and Socioeconomic Realities

Preventing adolescent childbearing among Latinas/os garners considerable attention and resources, as Latinas experience a substantially higher adolescent birth rate than any other racial and ethnic group in California. Paradoxically, it is important to note that Latinas are *also* driving the state's teen birth rate reduction.¹

Despite reduced Latino pregnancy and birth rates, funding for youth sexuality programs continues to focus on this singular issue which further exacerbates the individual "blame" frame. This frame, adopted by policymakers, researchers, advocates, media and the public alike, deems adolescent childbearing as a grave "social ill" and carries a strong message about the "costs to society." Among these "costs" referenced by the dominant frame are: the poverty rate among Latinas; the rate of public assistance sought by Latina young mothers (assuming absentee fatherhood); and the low levels of educational attainment of Latina young mothers. Ironically, the very programs designed to support youth are also part of what is measured and factored into the social costs of adolescent childbearing. All of these figures build an argument to falsely conclude that these conditions were caused by adolescent pregnancy, ignoring that young women who give birth tend to have pre-existing disadvantages compared with those who do not. Nearly 60 percent of adolescent mothers are already living in poverty at the time of giving birth.² Furthermore, new research demonstrates that in many circumstances, the life course for parenting teens may not be substantially different from that of their socioeconomic peers.³ And contrary to popular opinion, many

adolescent parents, children, and families do equally well compared to their peers, particularly when provided with strong social and functional support.⁴

Blaming youth has also led to a great deal of stigma as it labels young Latina/o parents as unsuccessful, irresponsible, unfit caregivers and failures of society. This stigma is demonstrated and exacerbated by educational institutions that segregate pregnant and parenting students, thus diminishing their opportunities to graduate, prepare for higher education and improve economic conditions.⁵

While funding for sexuality education is absolutely necessary, the frame continues to place “personal responsibility” as its hallmark, blaming “high-risk” youth (mainly youth of color, formerly incarcerated youth, youth in foster care) for their sexual and reproductive health outcomes as if they occur in a vacuum. Unless intervention programs aimed at supporting youth desist from stigmatizing pregnant and parenting youth and labeling them as “irresponsible,” addressing adolescent childbearing will remain inadequate.

The dominant frame also fails to acknowledge the fact that half of Latina youth pregnancies are planned.⁶ Considering this data, it is clear that the stereotype of youth as “irresponsible” is a false premise and it is important to examine the reasons why some young women would delay childbirth, such as preparing for a career, going onto higher education, or having tangible educational or economic opportunities.^{7,8} While this issue requires more exploration, it further demonstrates the need for programs to address adolescent childbearing through holistic and interdisciplinary approaches that empower youth rather than those that intend to prevent a singular behavior that is deemed “socially inappropriate.”

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Although preventing unintended adolescent childbearing is a part of the equation to help youth navigate their sexuality, this narrowly focused approach is not enough. Social norms need to expand to include youth sexuality and health needs from a perspective that acknowledges young people’s rights to education, access, autonomy and opportunities.

CALIFORNIA SEVERELY REVERSES EFFORTS TO PROTECT AND SUPPORT YOUTH - PARENTING OR NOT

As a leader in advancing reproductive freedom, California has created broad policies and invested in programs and services that have made great strides in increasing adolescents' access to family planning and reproductive health education and services and support (See Figures 1 and 2 below). Despite these important legal protections and investment in programs, access to comprehensive, confidential, culturally and linguistically appropriate reproductive and sexual health services and information continues to be lacking for the most disenfranchised youth in California. This has unfortunately created barriers for youth to be equipped with vital information and services, such as preventing unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STI), and using contraceptives more effectively.

FIGURE 1: CALIFORNIA'S YOUTH REPRODUCTIVE AND SEXUAL HEALTH SERVICES AND PARENTING SUPPORT PROGRAMS*

Information and Education Programs (I&E) provide adolescents with sexual health education and linkages to clinical health care. These programs also support the parents and other adults involved in teens' lives.

Family Planning, Access, Care and Treatment (Family PACT) program provides a package of contraceptive and related reproductive health services at no cost to California adolescents and adults, with incomes up to 200% of the federal poverty level.

Adolescent Family Life Program (AFLP) funds programs in county health departments, schools, hospitals, and community-based organizations to

help pregnant and parenting youth have healthy babies, graduate from high school, and delay subsequent children until adulthood.

California School Age Families Education (Cal-SAFE) program is designed to help pregnant and parenting youth improve their academic achievement, build their parenting skills, and provide quality child care and development opportunities for their children.

Cal-Learn program helps pregnant and parenting youth attend and graduate from high school by providing case management to help youth obtain education, health, and social services; payments for child care, transportation and educational expenses; and bonuses and sanctions to encourage school attendance and good grades.

*California State Department of Public Health

FIGURE 2: CALIFORNIA STATUTE ON SEXUALITY EDUCATION

California State Education Code 51930-39 (California Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS Prevention Education Act) and Health and Safety Code 151000-03 (Sexual Health Education Accountability Act) established curriculum

guidelines for school-based and other state-funded sexuality education programs to be comprehensive, age-appropriate, medically accurate, objective, equally available to English learners and appropriate to students of all races, genders, sexual orientations, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and students with disabilities.

Moreover, these already limited state-funded teen pregnancy prevention efforts have been severely decimated. California's fiscal troubles have steadily dismantled every program aimed at providing youth the tools to make the best decisions for themselves. In 2008, the Governor completely eliminated funding for two of California's five major Teen Pregnancy Prevention Programs (TPP), the Male Involvement Program and the Teen SMART Outreach Program, and reduced funding for the Information & Education Program by approximately forty percent. During the 2011 fiscal cycle, \$20 million were redirected from TPP, eliminating the Community Challenge Grants. Currently, the state allocates a mere \$2 million in funding for one program on sexuality education, a 93% reduction in state funding for sexuality education programs since 2006.⁹ During that same period, programs supporting pregnant and parenting youth were reduced by nearly \$44 million.¹⁰

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The federal landscape for funding programs targeting youth sexuality is not any better. Despite an initial investment in evidence-based sexual health education programs and the elimination of the previous administration's wasteful financing of abstinence-only programs in 2008, the recent appropriations bill provided \$5 million to refund these ineffective programs.¹¹

DISMANTLING THE MYTH OF THE LATINA/O TEEN PREGNANCY PROBLEM

Up to now, the majority of laws and interventions intended to solve the issue of adolescent childbearing are focused on the individual and do not address the systemic factors in the lives of Latina/o youth that might have led them to become young parents. The fact is that Latina/o youth – pregnant, parenting, or not – are experiencing extensive health, educational and socio-economic inequities that must be tackled in order to ensure all Latina/o youth can thrive.

Poor health outcomes are a concern for both the young mother and father and the child. It is often cited that adolescent mothers have high rates of premature births. The factors causing premature births are complex, however, and for young Latinas, access to health care is a serious barrier. Latinas are the most uninsured in California; approximately 6 out of 10 uninsured women are Latina.¹²

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Lack of a quality education and access to real opportunities for advancement are significant problems unaddressed through traditional strategies focused on preventing unintended adolescent pregnancies alone. Educational outcomes for Latinas/os, parenting or not, are dismal. Whereas Latinas/os comprised 45% of ninth graders in 2004–05, four years later they were only 38% of graduates. Among 18-24 year olds, 33% of Latinas/os have not completed high school, compared to 11% of Whites.¹³ As California demographics continue to shift, it is especially important to pay close attention to Latina/o youth's educational attainment. The majority of youth in grades K-12 in

California are Latinas/os.¹⁴ Moreover, Latina/o youth live in neighborhoods where the quality of education is subpar due to under-resourced districts.¹⁵

In the case of pregnant and parenting youth, educational institutions are creating systemic conditions that prevent youth from graduating and preparing for college, both unintentionally and intentionally. In CLRJ's previous research, a rising theme was the discriminatory practices by school officials that included forcing

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pregnant youth out of their educational settings or providing subpar instruction.¹⁶ Even in cases where a school's intentions are to support parenting youth, the effect of isolating pregnant and parenting Latinas into separate educational settings or providing a different standard of instruction, is wrong, biased and illegal. Pregnant and parenting youth have a constitutional right to continue their education and extra-curricular activities as stated in both U.S. and California State Code.¹⁷

The unacceptable graduation rates for Latinas/os are a call to action; addressing the reasons young parents are not finishing high school is paramount. Oftentimes, the catalyst for young mothers and fathers to continue their education rests upon their ability to obtain childcare. Just as with adult parents, lack of affordable child care is a major impediment for completion of work or schooling and thus a barrier for economic advancement. Focus groups with young parents conducted by CLRJ reaffirm this obstacle. Youth cited lacking child care services as a problem both for attending school and for obtaining employment. In the same focus groups, CLRJ also found a different narrative that is rarely raised in the public. Young mothers and fathers discussed how becoming a parent motivated them to continue their education and in some cases stated that their children "changed them for the better." The educational rates, thus, tell a broader story that must be explored and addressed. Research shows that many adolescents drop out of school before they become pregnant; their academic difficulties predate and perhaps contribute to their pregnancies.¹⁸ Educational outcomes, as expected, are better when academic achievement was higher pre-pregnancy and high levels of family support exist.¹⁹ Furthermore, the "cycle of poverty" stems from long-term inequities, which leave almost half of Latinas between the ages of 25 and 64 who lack a high school diploma unemployed, and for those who are employed earning an average annual income of only \$15,030.²⁰

Access to comprehensive sexuality education continues to be inconsistent despite California's robust Education Code 51930-39, which outlines what components comprehensive sexuality education must include. Many school districts are not adhering to the law,²¹ and the state does not have sufficient resources to enforce it. The California Department of Education currently has one staff charged with reviewing health and sexuality curriculum. With over a thousand school districts, one staff presents an obvious problem for enforcement.

Access to reproductive health information and services beyond sexuality education is also a factor. Access to contraceptives plays a major role in preventing unplanned pregnancies. Sexually active adolescents who do not use a contraceptive have 90% chance of becoming pregnant within a year.²² Despite

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California's progress in making family planning and reproductive health services widely available to low-income youth and adults, youth continue to face challenges in both consistently obtaining and using effective contraceptive methods. Youth have a harder time accessing contraceptives for many reasons, such as stigma associated in trying to purchase them, lack of knowledge and misinformation about contraceptive methods, or they do not know how and where to obtain them.²³ In some cases youth are deterred by: 1) adults who mistakenly deny the purchase of condoms by minors and 2) the locking of condoms behind glass cases at drugstores.²⁴ California's family planning



access program, Family PACT, has played an important role in ensuring that youth have access to contraceptives and other reproductive health services, such as STI screenings. Fifty-five percent of youth (19 and younger) who used Family PACT in 2009-2010 (fiscal year) were Latina/o and 87% of the youth served were women.²⁵ The higher utilization rate by young women also points to the little attention that males receive in the reproductive health realm. Ignoring the needs of young men is not only unfair, it continues to place an undue burden on young women. Young men need as much access to education, access to confidential services and de-stigmatization of their sexuality – whether they are young fathers or not.

Pregnant and parenting youth must be treated with respect and dignity, recognizing that they too form part of our state's future.

Poverty is at the center of the factors previously described in this section. In the dominant framework, poverty is often described as an effect rather than an underlying cause. Low-income youth make up approximately 38% of all young women (ages 15-19) and account for 73% of teens who give birth.²⁶ Thirty-five percent of Latina/o youth (ages 12-17) in California are already in poverty.²⁷ Whether parents or not, the current economic outcomes for Latina/o youth are bleak. For Latina/o youth to succeed, California must seek ways to educate and support all youth to reach their full potential. Pregnant and parenting youth must be treated with respect and dignity, recognizing that they too form part of our state's future.

INTRODUCING A NEW PARADIGM ON LATINA/O YOUTH PARENTING - JUSTICE FOR YOUNG FAMILIES!

The Justice for Young Families Initiative seeks to address and shed light on this misrepresented aspect of Latina/o youth sexuality. For Latina/o youth that choose to become parents, whether planned or unplanned, systemic conditions often condemn them further to a life of poverty and poor health outcomes. Latina/o youth who are pregnant and/or parenting need and deserve support to ensure there is a path for them to thrive. Recent CLRJ research demonstrated that while Latina/o adults generally expressed negative feelings toward adolescent childbearing, the majority overwhelmingly conveyed a need to support young parents.²⁸ The dominant framework also chastises Latina/o parents as being permissive in welcoming their teen's pregnancy and thus, are another culprit in the high rates of adolescent childbearing among

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Latinas/os. The fact is young parents are part of many Latina/o families' reality, and providing family support does not equal enabling. This support is critical, considering that nearly one-half of female adolescents who dropped out of school stated becoming a parent played a role in their decisions to leave school, and an additional one-third said it was a major factor.²⁹ The disproportionately high birth rate among adolescent Latinas, coupled with the fact that only 59 percent of Latinas graduate on time with a standard high school diploma (compared to 78 percent of young White women)³⁰ challenges us to find better, more culturally relevant approaches to support all Latina/o youth.

Aside from trying to prevent adolescent pregnancies, CLRJ challenges policymakers, advocates, and providers to consider what happens to youth that fall through the prevention framework. Half of youth pregnancies are unintended, similarly as adults. Acknowledging that youth sexuality is a normal part of development and that some youth will become sexually active as adolescents compels us to think beyond preventing pregnancy. Information on and access to all contraceptive methods, comprehensive sexuality education that includes exploration of sexual and gender identity, sexual orientation, and healthy relationships, and providing meaningful pathways to delay parenthood, are issues to be thought of as part of healthy youth development, not merely "pregnancy prevention." California policies must turn attention to addressing the multiple realities that surround youth's lives, such as poverty, lack of quality education, lack of access to comprehensive sexual health education, lack of access to health care, amongst other issues, as the primary indicators of negative health, educational and economic outcomes rather than focus on individual behavior.

The long-term goal of Justice for Young Families is to reframe current messages that place individual blame on youth for "teen pregnancies," yet offer little or no support by way of policies and access for young parents. Through Justice for Young Families, CLRJ intends to initiate policy advocacy to promote the health, equity, and dignity of young parents by partnering with pregnant and parenting youth, organizations and individuals that work with young families to change the way young mothers and fathers are perceived and treated.

Acknowledging that youth sexuality is a normal part of development and that some youth will become sexually active as adolescents compels us to think beyond preventing pregnancy.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Addressing Latina/o Adolescent Childbearing through a Reproductive Justice Lens

It is clear that future public policy work needs to tackle the extensive health, educational and systemic inequities many low-income Latina/o youth are facing, such as access to comprehensive sexuality education, information and access to contraceptives, educational and economic opportunities, and poverty. On a broader community level, though, we can all immediately begin to shift our thinking about youth sexuality and refrain from blaming youth for society's shortcomings. Advocates, service providers, political leaders, and families can:

- Stop using punitive messages regarding Latina/o youth sexuality, particularly young parents.
- Support policies that improve educational outcomes for all Latina/o youth, pregnant, parenting or not.
- Invest resources in programs that offer both comprehensive sexuality education and support young parents.
- Support community-informed research to better elucidate the sexual, reproductive and overall needs of young Latinas/os and improve approaches that normalize human sexuality.
- Invite young people to inform policy decisions that reflect their lived experiences and uphold their dignity.

AFTERWORD

While this issue brief sheds light on many of the overlooked facets of Latina/o youth sexuality in regards to pregnant and parenting youth, there is still much more to explore and discuss. In the coming years, as a part of the Justice for Young Families Initiative (J4YF), CLRJ will continue to examine and uplift the diverse experiences and needs of young families and develop a policy agenda in partnership with organizations and individuals that work with young families. Areas for future examination include but are not limited to:

- Amplifying the definition of and approach to young parenting to include the discussion of youth as caregivers for their own siblings and/or other family members.
- Exploring both the various roles young fathers play and ways to provide support systems.
- Identifying the unique needs of incarcerated youth, parenting or not.
- Understanding intersectional layers influencing high birth rates amongst youth in foster care.
- Examining experiences of coercion and violence and stark partner age difference.
- Including diverse narratives of adults who were young parents.
- Analyzing connection between school “push out” and young parenthood.
- Investigating reasons why young people plan to become parents at a young age.

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Justice for Young Families is part of a broader agenda to reclaim "family" values to include all our family structures as part of the Strong Families Initiative (reproductivejustice.org/strong-families).

California Latinas for Reproductive Justice (CLRJ) is a statewide policy and advocacy organization whose mission is to advance California Latinas' reproductive health and rights within a social justice and human rights framework. CLRJ works to ensure that policy developments reflect Latinas' priority needs, as well as those of their families and their communities.

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