

# Research Brief



FEBRUARY 2014

Publication #2014-04

## Reducing Teen Childbearing among Latinos:

AN INNOVATIVE  
ANTI-POVERTY  
STRATEGY

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### OVERVIEW

Having kids during the teen years raises the risk of poverty. Latinos in the United States are particularly vulnerable in this regard. They experience high rates of poverty<sup>1</sup> and—not coincidentally—they experience relatively high rates of teen childbearing, despite recent declines. We know from research that delaying childbearing can reduce the risk of poverty, especially when delays are accompanied by increased educational attainment.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, to reduce poverty among Latinos, it seems vital to reduce teen childbearing. This important insight underscores the need to expand the number of effective teen pregnancy prevention programs designed specifically for Latinos.

To address this need, an interdisciplinary team of social scientists at Child Trends used multiple research methods to identify promising approaches to reduce early childbearing among Latino adolescents. This work included a review of research studies, a scan of intervention programs, focus groups with adolescents, interviews with parents and with program designers and program staff, as well as analyses of national data bases.<sup>1</sup> In this issue brief, we synthesize the results across these various research methods to identify major findings and implications for teen pregnancy prevention efforts for Latinos.

### KEY FINDINGS

Six pivotal findings from our review can be used to inform teen pregnancy prevention efforts for Latinos:

**Interventions should be built on the understanding that the vast majority of Latinos value education and do not want to be teen parents.**

- Despite the perception that Latino teens want to get pregnant or to father a child, most Hispanic teens don't want to be parents in adolescence.
- National data indicate that nine in ten Hispanic teen mothers did not intend to become pregnant. Similarly, results from focus groups that Child Trends conducted with Latino teens and from interviews it held with parents of Latino teens indicate strong motivations to avoid early childbearing.

i For full report findings, see [\\*\\*http://www.childtrends.org/?publications=reducing-teen-childbearing-among-latinos-an-innovative-anti-poverty-strategy\\*\\*](http://www.childtrends.org/?publications=reducing-teen-childbearing-among-latinos-an-innovative-anti-poverty-strategy)

- Latino adolescents and their parents value education, understand that having a child will interfere with their education, and hold mostly positive attitudes about birth control.
- Programs should develop strategies to help teens avoid births that they do not want and achieve the education that they very much do want.

#### **Effective program approaches will help align teens' behavior with their goals**

- Despite having high aspirations and not wanting to be a parent until early adulthood, more than 40 percent of Latino girls become pregnant before they turn 20.<sup>3</sup>
- Although Hispanic teens have similar levels of sexual activity as their peers in other racial-ethnic groups, Hispanic teens are less likely to use contraceptives and to use them consistently.<sup>4</sup>
- For this reason, it is critical that programs focus on helping teens align their sexual and contraceptive behavior with their educational and life goals.

#### **However, very few intervention programs target Latinos**

- Rigorously evaluated adolescent pregnancy prevention programs that include large samples of Hispanics are almost nonexistent; nor are there many programs tailored specifically for Latinos.
- Few of these teen pregnancy prevention programs evaluated with Latinos had impacts on sexual behavior or contraceptive use—outcomes that are critical for reducing teen pregnancy. And very few measured impacts of effective methods of contraception other than condoms, in part because of a focus on STD prevention. This limitation underscores the need to learn more about how to increase Hispanic teens' use of hormonal methods of contraception (such as the pill, patch, or ring) and long-acting methods of contraception (such as the IUD or implant).

#### **Programs for Latinos need to be culturally relevant**

- In some Latino families—particularly those in which parents were immigrants—tension arises between teens and parents around what teens perceive to be their parents' traditional values around teen dating and sex and what parents perceive to be overly lenient values about these issues in the United States. This tension can influence teens' relationships and communications with parents and partners, as well as their risks linked to pregnancy and childbearing.
- As a result, adolescents often hear mixed messages and experience countervailing pressures about sexual activity, contraceptive use, and pregnancy.
- Therefore, Child Trends recommends that programs aimed at reducing teen pregnancy among Latinos be culturally sensitive, and address the concerns and needs of both Hispanic teens and parents. In practice, this means more than translating materials into Spanish; it means developing content and activities that incorporate the experiences of Latino teens.
- In this context, programs need to recognize traditional cultural values that can shape expectations around sexual behaviors and interactions with parents and teens. These cultural values include putting a premium on familismo, female virginity, and respect for elders.

#### **Positive, supportive relationships with parents, peers, and partners can foster teens' responsible sexual behavior**

- Romantic, peer, and parent-child relationships influence adolescents' knowledge and decision-making about sexual activity and contraceptive use.
- Communication with parents, peers, and partners needs to clarify values and expectations, set limits, avoid mixed messages, be mutually respectful of one another and Latino culture, and support adolescents' steps to achieve their goals.
- Positive and supportive relationships and clear, open communication with parents, peers, and partners can help adolescents develop and implement what they want to do in life.
- Teens may need help communicating more effectively with parents and romantic partners and negotiating the boundaries of their relationships.

#### **Latinos need comprehensive information on sex and contraception, with a particular focus on long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs)**

- Empowering adolescents to achieve their educational and life goals means that they need to be able to control their sexual and reproductive behavior.
- Programs to reduce teen pregnancy among Latino adolescents need to be comprehensive, focusing on efforts to delay and reduce sexual activity and also to improve the consistent use of effective contraception.
- Programs for younger teens, in middle school, should emphasize delaying sex, while also becoming knowledgeable about sex and contraception. When Latinos become sexually active, they need to have accurate information about the safety and effectiveness of varied methods, including long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs).<sup>5,6</sup>

## CONCLUSION/IMPLICATIONS

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These key findings highlight the limited number of culturally relevant teen pregnancy prevention programs for Latinos and suggest the need for approaches that: help align teens' sexual and contraceptive use behaviors with their high aspirations for completing education and delaying fertility; incorporate culturally relevant content and activities to better engage and retain teens; highlight the development of healthy relationships; strengthen communication with parents, peers, and romantic partners; and provide information about and access to highly effective methods of contraception, including long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCS).

Such an approach holds the promise of reducing teens' exposure to unprotected sex, either by increasing abstinence or improving contraceptive use. Reducing this exposure, in turn, will reduce the experience of early pregnancy and parenthood, thereby increasing educational attainment and lowering the subsequent risk of poverty.

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Editor: Harriet J. Scarupa

We gratefully acknowledge The JPB Foundation, whose grant funded this study.