

# Briefly...

## Unplanned Pregnancy and Community Colleges

### Summary

- Half of all pregnancies in the United States—three million annually—are unplanned.<sup>1</sup>
- More than one-third of all unplanned pregnancies (1.1 million) are to unmarried women in their 20s. In fact, seven in ten pregnancies among unmarried women in their 20s are unplanned.<sup>1</sup>
- Nearly half (48%) of community college students have ever been pregnant or gotten someone pregnant.<sup>2</sup>
- Unplanned pregnancies increase the risk of dropping out or stopping out of college—61% of women who have children after enrolling in community college fail to finish their degree, which is 65% higher than the rate for those who didn't have children.<sup>3</sup>

### Background

More than one million unplanned pregnancies occur to single women in their 20s each year—a group that includes many in community colleges. These unplanned, often unwanted pregnancies (as characterized by the mother herself), result in a large number of single parents who struggle with finances, interrupted or indefinitely postponed education, unstable relationships, and a host of challenging health, educational, and social consequences for their children. Additionally, teen pregnancy is a serious problem among older teens, ages 18-19, a group represented in growing numbers on community college campuses.

Given their standing and respected presence in communities around the country, community colleges are well-positioned to become part of an effective and far reaching effort to reduce the high rates of unplanned pregnancy among young adults. The critical role that community colleges play in educating and preparing the nation's workforce is gaining increased attention and support. In July 2009, President Obama announced

*"Whether the opportunity for education is lost or delayed, unplanned pregnancy often makes life harder for those trying to achieve the 'dream' of a college education."*

- Mary Ellen Duncan, President Emerita  
Howard Community College

the American Graduation Initiative to build on the strengths of community colleges and fund innovative strategies to promote school completion.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, a report by the Economic Mobility Project, an initiative of the Pew Charitable Trusts, highlighted the powerful role that community colleges play in boosting economic mobility.<sup>5</sup> Because an unplanned pregnancy presents one more hurdle for students to overcome—with its additional demands on time, added financial responsibility, and further complication of relationships—decreasing high rates of teen and unplanned pregnancy can ultimately have a positive effect on such important community college goals as increasing student retention and completion and helping students achieve their educational objectives.

This brief paper summarizes the problem of unplanned pregnancy and why it matters for community colleges, and points to several federal policy initiatives that could help. Please visit <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/cc.aspx> for additional information, along with ideas on what some colleges are doing.

### Scope of the Problem

Although many Americans have a general understanding that teen pregnancy is a major problem in the United States, few realize that *young adults* also struggle with pregnancy planning.

- Half of all pregnancies in the United States—three million annually—are unplanned.<sup>1</sup>

- More than one-third of all unplanned pregnancies (1.1 million) are to unmarried women in their 20s.<sup>1</sup>
- Seven out of ten births to never-married young men in their early twenties were the result of an unplanned pregnancy.<sup>1</sup>
- Among unmarried women in their 20s with some college education, 77% of all pregnancies are unplanned.<sup>1</sup>
- Of unmarried women in their 20s who have had an unplanned pregnancy, 40% have attended at least some college.<sup>1</sup>
- The teen birth rate increased 5% between 2005 and 2007 (most recent data available) after declining for 14 consecutive years between its record high in 1991 and 2005. Three-quarters of this recent increase can be attributed to older teens ages 18-19.<sup>6</sup>
- Unplanned pregnancies increase the risk of dropping out or stopping out of college—61% of women who have children after enrolling in community college fail to finish their degree, which is 65% higher than the rate for those who didn't have children.<sup>3</sup>
- Unplanned pregnancies can increase emotional and financial stress on the young men and women involved, which can impede academic performance.<sup>7</sup>
- Unplanned pregnancies can also add to the overall costs of operating community colleges themselves, through increased demand for child care and related support services.

## Consequences

There are a wide variety of serious consequences for the young men and women—especially those who are unmarried—who experience an unplanned pregnancy, as well as for the children born as a result of such pregnancies. From the standpoint of community colleges, the consequences may be especially compelling because, taken together, they can distract, delay, or derail students from reaching their educational goals.

### Cristyane's Story

Cristyane is a 25-year-old single mom with a 4-year-old daughter, working part time and taking classes at the community college. After finishing high school, she wasn't sure what she wanted to do so she worked various jobs to support herself. At age 20, Christyane found herself unexpectedly pregnant.

Eventually, Cristyane moved closer to her mother and chose to enroll in her local community college because she felt that more schooling was the only way to provide enough for herself and her child.

Today, Cristyane is determined to move forward on the path to an Associate Degree and, hopefully, afterwards to a BSN. She says that continuing her nursing goal would be nearly impossible if she had another unplanned pregnancy.

## Why Community Colleges?

Community colleges are a key partner in The National Campaign's efforts to help older teens and young adults delay pregnancy and parenting until they have achieved their educational goals.

- **Key Fact:** *There are 11.5 million students in community colleges, representing nearly half (46%) of all undergraduate students in the United States.*<sup>8</sup>
- For many years, community colleges have provided a great deal of support to students who are single parents, which is deeply admirable. But little if any attention has been paid to preventing unplanned pregnancy in the first place in curricular or co-curricular activities. For example, women's centers were initiated to provide support for female students, including parents, yet in many instances preventing unplanned pregnancy has been a minor focus at best.
- **Key Fact:** *Only two out of ten students at two-year institutions report receiving information from their college on pregnancy prevention, compared to 33% of students at four-year institutions.*<sup>2</sup>

The last time many college students say they received information about pregnancy prevention and related topics was in middle or high school. Not surprisingly, many simply don't remember what they have been taught, have gaps in what they do know, harbor inaccurate information, or rely on information that is not up-to-date. For example, preliminary findings from qualitative research with community college students indicate that they severely overestimate the risks of side effects due to birth control use.<sup>11</sup> Although there is opportunity to address such issues in freshman orientation or a "College 101" course, many community colleges do not. For example, a recent study by the South Carolina Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy found that 88% of two-year community or technical schools

in South Carolina offer a “College 101” course, but only 21% include sexual health information in the curriculum.<sup>12</sup>

- **Key Fact:** *A recent study by the Health Services Association of California Community Colleges found that 5.4% of students attending California community colleges reported having an unintended pregnancy after enrolling, more than twice the percentage of students (2.4%) from primarily four-year colleges and universities nationally.*<sup>13</sup>
- **Key Fact:** *Approximately 15% of all community college students are single parents.*<sup>9</sup>

Data on the incidence or impact of unplanned pregnancy for community colleges is limited, yet a number of community college administrators recognize unplanned pregnancy as a barrier to their students’ success. As the health services coordinator at one community college said, “The students who have lived through the experience are the first to confirm the challenges they face.” As another college nurse said, “I have seen unplanned pregnancy cause some students to drop out or lose valuable class time.”

- **Key Fact:** *Two-thirds of community college students report having sex in the last 30 days, and among those less than one-quarter (24%) report consistent use of condoms.*<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, there is a significant proportion of students who are sexually active and at high risk of unplanned pregnancy, as well as sexually transmitted infections. Recent survey data of students from six community colleges indicate that there is both good and bad news: Although 58% of community college students reported that they always use some form of birth control, 42% use birth control only most of the time, some of the time, or never.<sup>14</sup> Of the students who don’t use birth control all the time, 65% reported that the reason is because they didn’t want to, found it inconvenient, or forgot.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, a survey of community college students in California found that more than one in five (21%) sexually active students reported that they or their partners have used emergency contraception within the last school year.<sup>13</sup>

- **Key Fact:** *Nearly half (48%) of community college students have ever been or gotten someone pregnant.*<sup>2</sup>

For both women and men, an unplanned pregnancy can derail their education either temporarily or permanently. In a recent survey of two-year students at the University of Wisconsin Colleges, 80% responded that it was a problem—for some, a significant problem—for college students to experience an unplanned pregnancy.<sup>15</sup> Conversations with student services personnel and students themselves confirm that many single parents struggle with balancing academic and family responsibilities, finances, obtaining health insurance, and often take a

## Robin’s Story

Robin is 28 years old, single, the mother of three children, and working at a childcare center. Robin became pregnant with the first of her three children when she was just 15. Although she at first had no plans to go to college, she did want to better herself and be a good example for her daughter, so she chose to enroll in community college.

Even though she didn’t want to get pregnant, Robin acknowledged that she was not using contraception each of the three times she became pregnant. During her enrollment at school, parental and work responsibilities directed her days. She spent minimal time on campus.

Today Robin has earned two Associate’s degrees and is hoping to take a course at a four-year college next semester. She says that it would be impossible to continue on her educational path if she had another unplanned pregnancy. Her doctor continues to ask at appointments what if any contraceptive methods she is using. Robin’s response is that she is currently abstinent.

long time to complete his/her education. In some cases, young men are forced to leave school to work so they are able to financially provide for a child.

- **Key Fact:** *More than one-quarter (27%) of female students with children report reducing their course hours or quitting school because they had problems with childcare.*<sup>14</sup>

## Unique Challenges

Community colleges have fewer resources to address the non-academic needs of their students compared to universities and other four-year institutions. For example, a recent study by the South Carolina Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy found that two-year colleges in South Carolina were much less likely than their four-year counterparts to provide information, education, or services related to pregnancy prevention and related topics.<sup>12</sup> In particular, community colleges do not generally have comprehensive health services that meet the standards described in the American College Health Association’s ([www.acha.org](http://www.acha.org)) guide, *Healthy Campus 2010*. Many community colleges also report that health services are often only available for limited hours or focused more on physical fitness. However, community colleges with residential housing (approximately one-quarter) tend to provide better health services.

Additionally, the composition of students who attend community college can be very different from traditional students in four-year colleges. For example, many students enrolled in community colleges still live at home with their parents. Preliminary findings from qualitative research suggest that parents continue to be a large influence even into adulthood, and they can be either a barrier or a facilitator when it comes to a student's choices to use birth control.<sup>11</sup>

- **Key Fact:** 72% of all unplanned pregnancies to unmarried women in their twenties occur to women who have already had at least one pregnancy.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of the recent economic downturn and the rising costs to attend universities, a growing number of younger students who, in past years would have enrolled directly in four-year institutions, are now choosing to earn general education credits at a two-year college and then transfer to a four-year university to complete their degree program.<sup>10</sup> As a result, community colleges will likely need to consider providing a wider array of student services and student life activities to accommodate these students.

- **Key Fact:** Community college students are 2.4 times more likely to be single parents compared to students attending four-year institutions (public and private non-profit).<sup>9</sup>

## Legislative Opportunities

Federal encouragement and investment could go a long way to helping community colleges take steps to prevent unplanned pregnancy and promote healthy relationships among their students. For this reason, The National Campaign recommends that, as the Administration and Congress work to improve student retention and success, they support activities that will help community colleges address unplanned pregnancy and healthy relationships among their students.

One specific provision that addresses this issue is Title VI of The Preventing Unintended Pregnancies, Reducing the Need for Abortion and Supporting Parents Act (H.R. 3312), reintroduced in the 111th Congress by Representatives Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) and Tim Ryan (D-OH). H.R. 3312 includes demonstration grants to community colleges for the purpose of developing and implementing innovative approaches to prevent unplanned pregnancy and promote healthy relationships among women and men in community colleges in order to remove a barrier to degree completion, reduce poverty, and improve the success of these students. The bill

*"My buddy is a year older than me so he had his kid at 21 and we were both in community college; we were both at this campus. He had to drop out. He's working two jobs now. He's not even with the baby's mother. It's tough. I couldn't have a kid and still manage school and everything else."*

– Male community college student

authorizes \$15 million for each of fiscal years 2010-2012. For more information about this provision of the bill, visit [http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/Briefly\\_RyanDeLauro\\_Bill.pdf](http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/Briefly_RyanDeLauro_Bill.pdf).

Announced by President Obama in July and passed in September by the U.S. House of Representatives (H.R. 3221), the American Graduation Initiative also presents an opportunity to include pregnancy prevention as part of innovative strategies to improve student completion. As Congress completes action on this bill, and the Administration implements it, The National Campaign hopes there will be adequate flexibility within the new funding to allow community colleges to address this important retention issue.

## About The National Campaign

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy's goal is to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy for reaching this goal is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and responsible policies in both the public and private sectors.

If we are successful, child and family well-being will improve. There will be less poverty, more opportunities for young men and women to complete their education or achieve other life goals, fewer abortions, and a stronger nation.

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