Sex Matters: The Information Disconnect That Plagues America’s Youth

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This research explores sex education policy at the state level, as well as the federal legislation and discretionary funding driving these policies. The specific period of interest for federal legislation is 1996-2010, in which time the nation witnessed the greatest expansion and subsequent reduction in funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage education programs. Looking at the states I have performed my own empirical test to observe teen pregnancy rates as a function of the “strength of sex education,” according to state mandates and regulations.

INTRODUCTION

This research analyzes the federal policy stream of the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) and the Title V funding stream of the Community-Based Abstinence Education Program (CBAE). The AFLA was established in 1984 and allocated $102 million in fiscal year 2009 (Boonstra 2010). The Title V funding stream was a product of the Clinton administration’s welfare reform. The program, whose purpose was to “prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies,” was allocated an annual $50 million with $37.5 million required in matching grants from the state recipients (Haskins 1997). This marked a significant change in the approach to abstinence education, which until now relied solely on the vague, lowly funded Adolescent Family Life Act (AFRLA) to educate on sex without receiving any information or contraceptives (Santelli 2006). In 1995, 8% of adolescent girls and 9% of adolescent boys were educated on sex without receiving any information about birth control; according to the 2006–2008 National Survey of Family Growth those numbers rose to 23% of females and 28% of males just a decade later (Lindberg 2006). Of teens aged 15-19 in 2008, I controlled for teen birth rates as a function of the “strength of sex education,” according to state mandates and regulations.

FEDERAL POLICY

Score for the states ranged from 2 (Arizona, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi) to 12 (Dist. of Columbia, Maryland, Vermont). On average, states with the lowest score, or weakest sex education policy, experienced an increase of 7.2 births per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 in 2008 compared to those states with the highest scores.

STATE POLICY

The Title V funding stream was a product of the Clinton administration’s welfare reform. The program, whose purpose was to “prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies,” was allocated an annual $50 million with $37.5 million required in matching grants from the state recipients (Haskins 1997). This marked a significant change in the approach to abstinence education, which until now relied solely on the vague, lowly funded Adolescent Family Life Act (AFRLA) to educate on sex without receiving any information or contraceptives (Santelli 2006). In 1995, 8% of adolescent girls and 9% of adolescent boys were educated on sex without receiving any information about birth control; according to the 2006–2008 National Survey of Family Growth those numbers rose to 23% of females and 28% of males just a decade later (Lindberg 2006). Of teens aged 15-19 in 2008, I controlled for teen birth rates as a function of the “strength of sex education,” according to state mandates and regulations.

METHOD

To rate the “strength of sex education,” I created a 14-point scoring system of the general requirements mandated by state law when sex and HIV education is provided. A high score is an indicator of a stronger, or more comprehensive, approach, while a low score indicates weaker, or less comprehensive, education requirements. Forty-one states and the District of Columbia were included in the statistical analysis. Teen birth rates were measured as the number of births per 1,000 teens aged 15-19 in 2008. I controlled for socioeconomic factors, specifically median household income and state-level poverty. Teen birth rates were assessed as a function of the state scores, i.e. the strength of the state’s sex education legislation.

RESULTS

The results show that teen birth rates are associated with the strength of states’ sex education requirements, with fewer regulations found among those states with the highest teen birth rates. This should represent an area for study in the causal link of varying teen birth rates, as well as a target for policy aimed to reduce these numbers. States set a minimum standard for education, built upon in local school districts. By requiring comprehensive education as a foundation, legislators may be addressing the information disconnect at its core.

TEENAGE PREGNANCY ESTIMATES

There are both social and fiscal costs associated with young motherhood. Teenage mothers have an educational attainment much lower than that of the peers who do not give birth as a teen; only 51% percent will obtain a high school diploma, 15% will receive a GED and 34% will not receive either of those by the age of 22 (Perper 2010). The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy estimated the public cost of teen childbearing to be $10.9 billion in 2008 alone. While the federal government determines discretionary funding to the states, the actual legislation lies in the hands of the states. State governments need to increase the strength of their sex education to ensure that children and teens are fully informed to protect themselves against disease and unintended pregnancy.

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