

Office of Adolescent Health (OAH) Podcast Series

Social Determinants of Health that Impact Teen Pregnancy

CASSANDRA CHESS, OAH: Welcome to the Office of Adolescent Health Podcast Series. Our speaker today is Ms. Myriam Hernandez Jennings from JSI Research & Training Institute. Ms. Jennings has been working in the field of sexual and reproductive health; and social justice for the past 18 years. Ms. Jennings is a Senior Consultant at John Snow, Inc. and directs a Teen Pregnancy Prevention training project that is funded by the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) in partnership with the Office of Adolescent Health. Today Ms. Jennings will discuss the social determinants of health that impact teen pregnancy and tell us a little more about her experience with incorporating social determinants of health into programs, the challenges that her team has faced, and what lessons they have learned.

MYRIAM HERNADEZ JENNINGS: The social determinants of health are the circumstances in which people are born; grow up, live, work, and age, as well as the systems put in place to deal with illness. These circumstances are in turn shaped by a wider set of forces like economics, social policies, and politics which contribute to disparities in health and more specifically to teenage pregnancy. Personal responsibility, coupled with recognizing the social determinants that make adolescents vulnerable to teen pregnancy may contribute to a reduction in teen birth disparities. The CDC Initiative targets communities with the highest rates of teen pregnancy and births, specifically African American and Latino/Hispanic youth between 15–19 years of age. JSI's role is to build grantees' capacity to engage and serve diverse youth and youth in "at-risk" situations through teen pregnancy prevention programs and social services. Where youth live, learn, work, and play influences their sexual and reproductive health behaviors so a large part of what we do is raise awareness among grantees and their community partners about how the youth's reality impacts teen pregnancy. Once grantees understand this, we then work to identify feasible strategies, such as training clinical providers to ask questions beyond sexual behavior to determine if the young person in front of them has enough food, is safe at home, is engaged in school, etc. . Once needs have been identified, providers will make the necessary linkages within the community to refer youth to the appropriate organization or agency to provide for their needs. We may also work with grantees to establish community health worker or Promotoras programs to educate community members about specific determinants that are impacting youth. By addressing the context of where youth live, learn, work and play a holistic approach can emerge which actively engages communities in a process that supports and promotes positive youth development and healthy relationships and lifestyles.

CASSANDRA CHESS, OAH: While the CDC Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative has had success in identifying feasible strategies to address specific social determinants of health, it has not come without challenges. We asked Myriam about the challenges of replicating evidence based models, including working with diverse populations.

MYRIAM HERNADEZ JENNINGS: The connection between social conditions and health is well established, but the idea of social factors influencing health outcomes, including teen pregnancy, does not resonate with everyone. Because of this, raising awareness of organizations and their community partners about the link between teen pregnancy and social determinants of health is not a small or easy task.

Many do not “naturally” think about health in terms of social factors or that teen pregnancy could be a manifestation of larger societal and community issues. Talking about the concept of social determinants of health that impact teen pregnancy in a way that is understandable, meaningful, and credible can be challenging. Relying on interventions alone to address teen pregnancy may not achieve lasting reductions in teen pregnancy which we’d like to see. Including the wider social and environmental factors will help achieve long-term sustainability and positive long-term health outcomes.

CASSANDRA CHESSE, OAH: Despite these challenges, Ms. Jennings has learned about the importance of addressing contextual factors in teen pregnancy prevention efforts.

MYRIAM HERNADEZ JENNINGS: Many of our youth today live in stressful environments where there is violence, poor housing conditions, and many of the youth experience discrimination on a daily basis. These determinants impact how youth perceive their future or lack thereof and consequently also impact their sexual decision-making around use of birth control. The education or foundational learning that we do explores these determinants—these root causes of teen pregnancy— and then moves on to a process of appreciative inquiry—recognizing the potential and identifying feasible opportunities for change. We call these the “small wins”—creating more positive opportunities and interactions for youth that may inevitably change their perception of their future. There are a lot of complex socio-economic and cultural issues that come into play when examining the issue of teen pregnancy. Inequity in teen pregnancy is not the result of personal failure, but rather reflects the unjust distribution of social and economic resources that leaves young people living in poverty, alienated and without power. However, if we start to address these contextual factors in our teen pregnancy prevention efforts and incorporate principles of youth development, our youth—our country’s future—will be able to live to the great potential that I know each and every one of them has.

CASSANDRA CHESSE, OAH: Thanks for joining us for today’s podcast about social determinants of health that impact teen pregnancy. To access more resources related specifically to teen pregnancy prevention and working with diverse communities, please visit us at <http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/>.