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Kristen Amber Contos Krueger
December 2013

FROM PROBLEM GIRLS TO WELFARE QUEENS:
TEENAGE PREGNANCY AND PUBLIC POLICY, 1950-1980

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department

of History

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirement for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

By the 1976, newspapers, parents, and politicians feared that an “epidemic” of teenage pregnancy was sweeping the United States. Their anxiety stemmed not from a statistical rise in the rate teenage pregnancy but from changes in the public image of teenage parents. The epidemic rhetoric arose from a series of changes in the perception of pregnant and parenting teens underwent a series of changes from 1950 to 1980. The 1950s image of the “problem girl,” rescued by maternity homes and rehabilitated through relinquishing her baby for adoption, ceased to be relevant and maternity homes closed their doors in large numbers. The decline of maternity homes forced teen pregnancy into the public eye. Though African American and other minorities had always dealt with teen parenthood within their communities, white families who had relied on the secrecy of maternity homes had to find a new way to care for their problem girls. Teenage girls chose to stay home and keep their babies as unwed mothers, evidence of how the feminist call for women's independence had trickled down even to very young teens. One result was the passage of federal legislation that provided modest programs to aid parenting teens.

This dissertation argues that the 1970s were a decade of potential opportunity for adolescent mothers, a brief interlude where it seemed possible to treat pregnant teens as something more than “problem girls.” Teenage mothers and their advocates argued they were young women who could move beyond one sexual mishap if given the right support and education. However, as the decade came to a close, conservative voices grew stronger. To pass key legislation for pregnant and parenting teens, liberal leaders began to threaten that without support, these girls would end up dependent on welfare for their

entire lives. Conservatives seized on this image, and the “welfare queen” was born. To effectively evaluate this story, this project uncovers the voices of teenage girls themselves in interviews, letters to advice columns, and fan letters to authors of young adult fiction in addition to relying on sources from professional and legislative groups. This dissertation not only analyzes the changing experiences and perceptions of teenage pregnancy after *Roe v. Wade*, it also demonstrates that teenage girls approached sexuality in a more nuanced and thoughtful manner than adults believed.

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I am indebted to many individuals who supported this project during the course of my graduate career. I am deeply grateful to my advisor Landon Storrs who has guided this project from its conception in her graduate seminar. She challenged me to give my work added depth, pushed me to see greater significance in my analysis, and offered unending encouragement. Her patient guidance helped the project gain focus, stronger organization and a more compelling argument. My gratitude extends to the members of my dissertation committee: Nancy Young for her close reading of chapters and genuine encouragement; James Schafer for his insightful questions and broad perspective; and Elizabeth Gregory for her enthusiasm about the project. Further thanks to Todd Romero and Eduardo Contreras whose seminar courses gave me a broader historical base to build upon.

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I am thankful to the institutions and organizations that funded my research. The Social Welfare History Archives at the University of Minnesota honored me with a Clarke Chambers Fellowship which allowed me to spend two weeks immersed in the collections that became the backbone to my dissertation. The History Department at the University of Houston granted me a Core Teaching Fellowship that allowed me to have a fully-funded semester to focus on writing without other commitments as well as a Murray Miller Research Grant that subsidized my trips to several archives. The Department of Women's Studies at UH awarded me the Blanche Espy Chenoweth Graduate Fellowship and the Williams History Essay Prize that allowed me to complete my archival work.

Any historical project requires the support of archivists and librarians. I am grateful to those who helped facilitate my research. Archivists David Klaassen and Linnea Anderson at the Social Welfare History Archives made my visit to their library both enjoyable and productive. The archivists at the Schlesinger Library went out of their way to ensure that the files I requested were available and to suggest new collections for me to examine. The staff at the Carter Presidential Library responded with enthusiasm when I explained my project. Alex Simons at the UH M.D. Anderson Library located directories and other un-catalogued items.

My writing was interrupted by the premature birth of my daughter who arrived three months before her due date. After seventy-three days in the NICU and a year of isolation, there were many moments that it seemed easier to walk away and leave this project unfinished. It is only with the support of family and friends that I found the strength, time, and energy to complete this dissertation. My parents never stopped cheering me on, learning when to ask about my writing and when to offer much-needed

distractions. Peggy Hahn, my mother, helped me find my way back to my work and my sense of self. All seven of my siblings made me laugh and offered the kind of teasing encouragement that can only come from brothers and sisters. I may be one of the few graduate students whose grandparents read each of my seminar papers and early drafts of my dissertation. I am blessed to have them as role models. Most importantly, to my husband Karl, thank you for the gifts of time, empathy, laughter, movie nights, critiques, margaritas, and inspiration. And to my daughter Cora, thank you for teaching me that the impossible is possible and that the greatest joy comes in the smallest of victories.

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This dissertation is dedicated to Phyllis and Edward Dusang who taught me how to make an argument and support it with facts before my tenth birthday. Their constant encouragement, lifelong learning, and example of unconditional love gave me the courage to undertake this project. I am honored to share a small part of their story in these pages.

From Problem Girls to Welfare Queens: Teenage Pregnancy and Public Policy, 1950-1980

Introduction

Decades before teenage mothers became reality television stars or the subject of “tween” melodramas, Phyllis Dusang graduated from a New Orleans high school two months pregnant. It was 1958. Phyllis was 17 and very scared. Her fiancé Eddie had joined the Navy and was stationed in Tennessee when she missed her period in April. She wrote him with her fears, telling him that she was pregnant. They were planning a wedding on May 24 of that year but she knew her parents would be furious. “I had a white wedding dress, my aunt made it. It had daisies on it. In April I had a wedding shower and I knew I was pregnant then...I was so scared to tell my parents,” she remembered.¹

It turned out Phyllis did not have to give the news to her parents. Just a few weeks after the shower, her mother read one of Eddie’s letters and discovered the truth for herself. “She was hysterical. They treated us like we were criminals. Like we were below dirt because any girl who would get pregnant before she got married was unheard of to my mom and dad” she said. Her parents cancelled the big, elaborate wedding immediately.

Phyllis’s parents waited for Eddie to come home on leave that weekend, immediately packed both teens into the car, and her father “drove like a mad man” to Mississippi where they were married by the Justice of the Peace just two weeks before their planned wedding date. Phyllis recalled “My daddy didn’t say a word the entire time.

¹ Phyllis Dusang and Edward Dusang, Aug. 28, 2013. Personal communication to author.

He was awful. My mother was worse.” She wore a blue dress, the same dress that she would wear a few weeks later at her high school graduation. The handmade wedding dress disappeared; Phyllis never learned what happened to it. After the shotgun marriage, the young couple moved to a rental house near the Navy base. Eddie remembers feeling isolated and alone. “We were on our own. We were on an island. As soon as she graduated from high school, we moved to Memphis. We were broke. We rented a house and rented furniture. The only thing we owned was a washing machine.”

When their daughter Peggy Sue was born, Phyllis and Eddie remained isolated for a few weeks. Then her parents came to help in spite of their anger. They fell in love with their granddaughter and some of the tension between Phyllis and her parents began to disappear. Her parents continued to treat Eddie badly, however. At best, they ignored him and at worst, they threw him out of their house when the young family returned to New Orleans to visit. While the strained relationship with her parents added a lot of stress, Phyllis found motherhood came naturally. She recalled, “I just knew how to be a mom. I knew how to take care of her.” She loved her daughter and her husband. Rebuilding a relationship with her parents, however, took years.

Looking back, Phyllis remembers wondering why her parents, especially her mother could not offer any kind of support when she discovered Phyllis’s pregnancy. She felt “it wasn’t near the disgrace” to her as it was to her parents. Both Phyllis and Eddie knew they would keep, raise, and love the baby that she carried. That baby was just conceived too soon. She remembers worrying about how they would raise a baby with no money. Like many young mothers, she thought about how having a baby would change her life. Above all, she feared telling her parents--a fear that was realized when

they reacted with anger. Phyllis said, “You know what I resent more than anything? It was never something I could talk about with my mom. It’s like life just passed over it and the whole thing never happened. You just close that door. Even now I’ll never understand how I couldn’t have a conversation with her without her screaming and crying and talking nasty to me.”

Phyllis’s and Eddie’s story was repeated by countless of their peers across the country. Phyllis said “I had friends, the same thing happened to them. They quit school and some of them got married and kept their babies. A lot gave their babies up for adoption.” These were the options for white teenage girls who got pregnant in the 1950s. For Phyllis and Eddie, the shotgun wedding created a stable home for their young family and they raised three girls together. Not all their peers were so lucky.²

Good Intentions and Missed Opportunities

The story of how teenage pregnancy came out from behind the doors of maternity homes and shotgun marriages to become a source of national entertainment is rooted in changes in American education, politics, and popular culture. It is a story of good intentions and missed opportunities. National perceptions of teenage pregnancy underwent dramatic changes from the 1950s to the 1980s, hinging on the decade of the 1970s when liberal and conservative politicians struggled to define national legislation that would aid teenage parents. At the same time, teenage girls experienced a sexual revolution of their own, growing up in a world that allowed them to renegotiate their sexual identities in much more complex ways than their adult contemporaries often realized. While adults tried to create and fund programs to aid pregnant and parenting teens, teens moved beyond the stereotypes that the media created and continued to ask

² Ibid.

more complicated questions about sexuality. The 1970s would prove to be a pivotal decade for the public perception of adolescent sexuality. For the first time teenage girls felt empowered to make choices about unplanned pregnancies, many became unwed mothers rather than choosing adoption or marriage, and experts worked to create public systems to support these very young, single mothers. This was a reflection of other, bigger national anxieties around sexuality, morality, and the welfare state.

The teenage years are inextricably tied to sexuality, as female adolescence by definition refers to the years during which a young woman becomes physically able to bear children and emotionally begins to experiment with sexual feelings. The morality of a society is often measured by the ways girls act upon those desires. As a result, teenage girls become symbols of both purity and pollution and are often at the center of political debates.³ The way social scientists, politicians, and media portray teenage girls often tells historians more about the social changes occurring around the girls than the experiences of girls themselves. Politicians, doctors, and other social observers use the sexual purity of young women to reflect the purity of modern nations. When girls push sexual boundaries, they are seen as the symbols of moral pollution. This was particularly true in the 1970s, as conservative leaders perceived that a crisis in family values was the cause of the decline of American power and prestige. Historian Susan Cahn has demonstrated how the sexuality of young women challenged and shaped cultural norms and public policy in the South. She argues that as white and African American girls

³ Mary Jo Maynes, "Age as a Category of Historical Analysis," *Journal of the History of Children and Youth* Winter (2008); Steven Mintz, "Reflections on Age as a Category of Historical Analysis," *Journal of the History of Children and Youth* Winter (2008); Leslie Paris, "Through the Looking Glass: Age, Stages, and Historical Analysis," *Journal of the History of Children and Youth* Winter (2008); Blanca Premo, "How Latin America's History of Childhood Came of Age," *Journal of the History of Children and Youth* Winter (2008); Peter Sterns, "Challenges in the History of Childhood," *Journal of the History of Children and Youth* Winter (2008).

pushed their sexuality into the public sphere through dating and other relationships, they forced their society to redefine the connections between white womanhood and purity. Unwed teenage mothers negotiated each of these boundaries on a national scale during the 1970s and early 1980s. Unable to hide their sexual activity, teenage mothers became targets for both liberal and conservative leaders hoping to shape national politics. This project builds on Cahn's insights to examine the specific topic of teen pregnancy in a later period and on a national scale.⁴ Unwed teenage mothers often pushed for rights and freedoms before political leaders, educators, or social experts were ready.⁵

Teenage pregnancy made a convenient scapegoat for politicians and social critics in the late twentieth century because it combined a number of problems. By the 1970s, voices ranging from local newspaper editors to U.S. senators cried out against an epidemic of teen pregnancy that supposedly was spreading across the nation. In truth, as we shall see, these voices reacted to a series of societal changes rather than an actual

⁴ A number of historians and sociologists have written about teenage pregnancy in earlier decades or specific regions. Some of the most influential for this study include: Beth L Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988); Rachel Devlin, *Relative Intimacy: Fathers, Adolescent Daughters, and Postwar American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005.); Charles H. Harrison, "School Girl Pregnancy: Old Problem: New Solutions" (Washington D.C.: Education USA, 1972); Deirdre M. Kelly, *Pregnant with Meaning: Teen Mothers and the Politics of Inclusive Schooling*. (New York: P. Lang, 2000.); Regina G. Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Others and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Jeanne Warren Lindsay and Sharon Enright, *Books, Babies, and School-Age Parents: How to Teach Pregnant and Parenting Teens to Succeed* (Buena Park, Calif.: Morning Glory Press, 1997); Amanda Hope Littauer, *Unsanctioned Encounters: Women, Girls, and Non-Marital Sexuality in the United States 1941-1963* (Berkeley: University of California, 2006); Nancy López, *Hopeful Girls, Troubled Boys: Race and Gender Disparity in Urban Education* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Kristin Luker, *Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984); Luker, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Wendy Luttrell, *Pregnant Bodies, Fertile Minds: Gender, Race, and the Schooling of Pregnant Teens* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Solinger, Rickie, *Wake Up Little Susie* (New York: Routledge, 2000)

⁵The following historians argue that girlhood and adolescent sexuality can be used as indicators of larger social changes. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat*; Julie Bettie, *Women Without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Winifred Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007)

increase in teen pregnancy. Second-wave feminism, the legalization of abortion in *Roe v. Wade*, and the civil rights movement's legislative success all played a role in the way Americans understood teen pregnancy. Sociologist Kristin Luker argues that the idea of "teenage pregnancy" was constructed in the 1970s as a response to the many rapid changes that occurred roughly between 1968 and 1975.⁶ Couples of all ages engaged in premarital sex more readily and more openly than ever before, young people had greater access to contraception and abortion, and when a young, unmarried, white woman got pregnant, she no longer hid her pregnancy or relinquished her baby for adoption. Living in the aftermath of these changes, it is easy to forget the swift transformation that happened around sexuality in American culture. The pace at which these changes happened fueled the idea that teen pregnancy was sweeping the nation. My work attempts to understand the political and cultural moment out of which the epidemic rhetoric arose as well as to uncover the experience of teenage mothers themselves in the context of the sexual revolution, the decline of liberalism, and the rise of the New Right in American history. . This dissertation also shifts the timeline in the current historiography of teen pregnancy to examine the experiences of pregnant and parenting teens in the decades following *Roe v. Wade* (1973).⁷ In doing so, I am able to examine girls' experiences of single motherhood in the aftermath of the sexual revolution.

For the first half of the twentieth century, unwed white mothers were secreted away in maternity homes where they lived out their pregnancies cloistered with other young women in the same condition. Supervised by religious leaders, social workers or other well-meaning adults, maternity home girls learned that the best way to atone for

⁶ Kristin Luker, *Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996)

⁷ Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings*, Kunzel, *Fallen Women*, *Problem Girls*

their sexual transgression was to relinquish their baby for adoption, return home, and pretend the whole experience never happened.⁸ According to historian Regina Kunzel, the maternity home period was marked by the professionalization of social workers, who viewed unwed motherhood as a social problem that they could solve. Despite their best efforts, the rate of teenage motherhood climbed throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Adoption was rarely an option for African Americans and other minorities because segregation and financial limitations usually barred them from maternity homes and social workers struggled to find homes that would adopt minority children. Feminists of the late 1960s and early 1970s criticized this system for not providing unwed mothers with choices about how their pregnancy would progress, how their children would be raised, or who would raise their babies. As maternity homes came under fire, teenage girls chose to raise their babies at home. The transition away from maternity homes had lasting consequences for the way Americans viewed teenage parents. This was particularly true for the white Americans who had relied so heavily on the maternity home system. Seemingly overnight pregnant white teens moved into public view, staying in their communities and schools throughout their pregnancies, choosing to keep their babies, and becoming single mothers. Unable to ignore or hide the issue of teen pregnancy, white Americans began to panic about the consequences of unwed motherhood for their teenage daughters.⁹

At the beginning of the 1970s, Americans faced a number of possibilities. They could embrace the feminist, black civil rights, and other liberal movements of the 1960s

⁸ Wayne E. Carp, *Adoption in America: Historical Perspectives* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002); Barbara Melosh, *Strangers and Kin: The American Way of Adoption* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Claudia Nelson *Little Strangers: Portrayals of Adoption and Foster Care in America, 1850-1929* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003)

⁹ Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*; Luker *Dubious Conceptions*; Solinger *Wake Up Little Susie*

or turn toward the nation's growing conservative voices. For those who worked with teenage mothers, there was no turning back; the era of maternity homes had come to an end. National organizations of social workers, including the Child Welfare League of America and the National Council of Illegitimacy, shifted their focus from overseeing maternity homes to advocating for teenage parents. They argued that legislators had an opportunity to shape public policy to create holistic programs for sex education and for pregnant and parenting teens. Those issues also gave lawmakers a less controversial way to discuss lowering abortion rates. While opposition to *Roe v. Wade* was beginning to grow and Democratic President Jimmy Carter personally opposed abortion, Democrat senators and congressional leaders wanted to avoid directly discussing the issue. Here I develop Rosalind Petchesky's argument that abortion is the "fulcrum of a much broader ideological struggle in which the very meanings of the family, the state, motherhood and young women's sexuality are contested."¹⁰ Instead of directly engaging the abortion debate, leaders looked to the issue of teen pregnancy as a politically "safe" way to decrease abortion statistics. After all, they reasoned, who would oppose the idea of fewer abortions for teenagers?

Lawmakers including Democrats Edward Kennedy (MA) and Birch Bayh (IN) took up the cause, fighting for pregnant teens on the Senate floor. In this political moment, it seemed possible that national leaders could alter the public view of teen pregnancy. Rather than perpetuate the stereotypes that pregnant teens were immoral or victims, supporters tried to project a new image of empowered teen mothers who should have a voice in the decisions made for their children. This approach also emphasized

¹⁰ Rosalind P. Petchesky, *Abortion and Women's Choice: The State, Sexuality, and Reproductive Freedom* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), xi

encouraging teens who did become parents to complete their educations and lead independent lives. They went so far as offering legal protection and federal funding to support this plan. Teen pregnancy experts rallied around this cause, sensing the possibility of real change and new support for adolescents. However, this hope was dashed as politicians made concessions, adopted the rhetoric of “teen pregnancy epidemic,” and recast adolescent parents as irresponsible young people likely to become dependent on the welfare system. Economics, always a central facet of conservative rhetoric, became the key factor in Senate debates on the teen pregnancy bill.¹¹ Political deal making compromised this opportunity to change the public image of teen pregnancy and create a better way of aiding pregnant and parenting teens, leaving teenage parents at the mercy of negative stereotypes once again.

The perception of pregnant and parenting teens underwent a series of changes from 1950 to 1980. The "problem girl" who was rescued and rehabilitated by maternity home matrons was both a victim of a morally loose society and a loose woman at the same time. The decline of maternity homes forced teen pregnancy into the public eye. Feminist criticisms of the coerced adoption system forced many maternity homes to close.¹² Though African American and other minorities had always dealt with teen parenthood within their communities, white families who had relied on the secrecy of maternity homes had to find a new way to care for their problem girls. Building on the success of the feminist movement, teenage girls chose to stay home and keep their babies

¹¹ Mark A. Smith, *The Right Talk: How Conservatives Transformed the Great Society into the Economic Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007)

¹² Ann Fessler, *The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006); Ellen Messner and Kathryn E. May, *Back Rooms: Voices from the Illegal Abortion Era* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1994); Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie*

as unwed mothers. That they made this choice in increasingly larger numbers is evidence of how the feminist call for women's independence had trickled down even to very young teens. This led to several federal laws that offered minimal protection and support. As a result, the 1970s were a decade of potential opportunity for adolescent mothers, a brief interlude where it seemed possible to treat pregnant teens as something more than “problem girls.” Teenage mothers and their advocates argued they were young women who could move beyond one sexual mishap if given the right support and education. However, as the decade came to a close, conservative voices grew stronger. To pass key legislation for pregnant and parenting teens, liberal leaders began to threaten that without support, these girls would end up dependent on welfare for their entire lives. Conservatives seized on this image, and the “welfare queen” was born.

Finding Pregnant Teens

The legislative history of teen pregnancy can be reconstructed from the archival collections on which historians typically rely. The *Congressional Record*, newspapers, and the papers of presidents, legislators, and interest groups, chronicle the words and deeds of policy makers and experts. Teenage girls, however, leave less obvious records, making it difficult for historians to find their unfiltered voices. In writing this history of teen pregnancy, it was important to me to tell the story using the words and experiences of teenagers as well as those of their adult advocates and critics. In order to do this, I employ a wide variety of primary sources ranging from archival records to young adult fiction. This creative collection of sources provides a more holistic approach to studying teenage girls.

As teen pregnancy carried a stigma for young women, it was not a topic they openly discussed. Rickie Solinger circumvented this problem by interviewing women decades after they had relinquished their babies for adoption. Most of her participants were members of organizations like Concerned United Birthparents, a feminist group formed to help women heal from the pain of surrendering their babies during the heyday of maternity homes. These interviews resulted in her groundbreaking book *Wake Up Little Susie*, which portrays the racialized experience of unwed mothers before *Roe v. Wade* made abortion legal.¹³

I did not want to rely solely on memories for this project. While memory is a powerful historical tool, it is fraught with complications. I uncover the voices of teenage girls in two different ways. First, I utilize the Project Girl records at the University of Minnesota's Social Welfare Archives.¹⁴ Project Girl was originally the research of sociologist Gisela Konopka, who hoped to improve services to adolescent girls. The collection contains almost one thousand interviews with girls from all over the United States. Project Girl is the type of collection that historians dream about. Konopka's careful research design included girls from every race, economic group, and geographic region, ranging in age from twelve to nineteen. A majority of these interviews—hitherto unexamined by historians-- include lengthy discussions of sexuality. Using the words of the Project Girl participants, I created a database that shows statistical trends in how girls viewed premarital sex, menstruation, sex education, pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, and unwed motherhood, among other categories. Combining the database and the

¹³ Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie*. Other historians also rely on interviews and memory to write the history of maternity homes. See Fessler *The Girls Who Went Away*, and Messer and May *Back Rooms*

¹⁴ Project Girl, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries

individual interviews provides a snapshot of how girls felt about their experiences in the early 1970s.

In addition to the Project Girl collection, I looked to fiction and advice columns written specifically for teenage girls during the 1970s, and also at girls' letters to the authors of those portrayals and prescriptions. The authors of these books and columns were adults, but they touched adolescent life in a personal way. Judy Blume's, Norma Klein's, and Ann Head's novels created fictional settings in which girls could explore their questions and worries about sexuality. According to the letters they wrote to the authors, reading about characters who struggled with puberty, masturbation, and losing their virginity made teenage girls feel more normal. Novels provided a safe way for girls to wonder about their own sexuality. Teens wrote Blume thanking her for the openness in her books and asking her to clarify specific issues. By the 1980s, these books and their authors were caught up in a storm of criticism and censorship because of the candid discussions. Girls also turned to advice columns in newspapers and magazines in their search for answers to questions about sex. Elizabeth Winship's "Ask Beth" column became a national sensation as Winship tackled questions about premarital sex, abortion, and virginity. Winship's blunt answers appealed to her teenage readers, if not to their parents. Novels, fan letters, and letters to advice columns like "Ask Beth" offer a glimpse into the culture that shaped teenage girls. The fact that they embraced Blume, Klein, and Winship so enthusiastically demonstrates a hunger for information on behalf of girls and a reticence on behalf of the adults in their lives.¹⁵

¹⁵ Historians often look at popular culture as a way to understand social change. Work on similar topics that informed this study include: Avila, Eric, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Bailey, *From Front Porch to*

This variety of sources makes my study stronger because it allows me to capture the experiences of teens in their own words. Historian Peter Sterns writes that because children and youth leave few historical documents of their own, much of what historians know about their lives is tempered through the experience of adults.¹⁶ Most early work in the history of childhood relies on prescriptive literature rather than the voices of children. While this project does include prescriptive literature from the files of social workers, maternity home directors, and politicians, it goes beyond those sources to find the voices of teenage girls. The result is a more complete portrayal of teenage sexuality.

A growing cohort of historians elevates the category of age to the same status as race, class, and gender throughout historical work. Scholars who focus specifically on the unique experience that comes with age argue that the experiences of childhood and youth both reflect society's anxieties and shape the development of adult society. Regardless of other systems, everyone is constantly negotiating the cultural expectations based on their age.¹⁷ Steven Mintz argues that age is used to categorize and create social hierarchies similar to those of gender.¹⁸ Though the hierarchies of age do not shape an individual's entire life, he believes that age may prove to be the most important power structure for young people. This does not mean that children of different classes, races, and genders, experience childhood in the same way. Rather, he argues that for children and youth, the power structure of adult-child might be more important than the others. This history of teenage pregnancy, however, challenges Mintz's belief that age transcends sex, race, and

Back Seat; Devlin, *Relative Intimacy*; Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994)

¹⁶ Peter Sterns, "Challenges in the History of Childhood," *Journal of the History of Children and Youth*, Winter (2008)

¹⁷ Maynes, Mintz, Paris, Premo, and Sterns *Journal of the History of Children and Youth* Winter (2008)

¹⁸ Steven Mintz, "Reflections on Age as a Category of Historical Analysis," *Journal of the History of Children and Youth* Winter (2008)

class as the most important power system in a young person's life. The biological fact that only women can become pregnant and give birth meant that adolescent girls experienced unexpected pregnancies differently from their male partners. For unwed teenagers, race and class played profound roles in the way their pregnancies progressed. Though all teenage mothers faced similar stereotypes, white middle-class teens had more options for how to deal with teen pregnancy. While maternity homes presented their own set of problems regarding teenage agency, they were not an option for poor whites or African American teens. In fact, it was not until large numbers of white teenage girls chose to keep their babies that lawmakers began to pay attention to the so-called "epidemic" of teen pregnancy. This dissertation contributes to the growing field of girlhood and the history of age by focusing on the way age impacted how adolescent girls experienced sexuality and how adult advocates and critics responded to the perceived pregnancy epidemic. However, I argue that race and class remain equally important categories of analysis.

Chapter Organization

This story of teen pregnancy begins with the 1950s, the heyday of maternity homes, traces public perceptions of teenage sexuality through the 1970s, and concludes with the conservative ascendancy of the early 1980s. Social scientists of the 1950s believed that maternity homes provided the best possible option for unwed pregnant mothers. By separating pregnant teens from their peers, the sexual transgression could be hidden, sparing both the teen and her parents further embarrassment. After six to nine months, the baby could be sent to live with a carefully screened family and the teen would return to life as normal. The opening chapter argues that the social workers who

regulated maternity homes failed teenage girls on two counts. First, the white girls who made up the majority of maternity homes' clientele were forced to relinquish their babies without concern for the emotional trauma that this separation caused for young mothers. Second, African American girls had limited access to homes for unwed mothers and were rarely able to choose adoption. A lack of personal choice plagued pregnant teens across racial and economic boundaries. Parents, social workers, economic realities, and racial biases all contributed to life-changing decisions that usually left adolescent girls out of the conversation completely.

The closing of maternity homes set the stage for teen pregnancy to move into a national spotlight. Chapter Two argues that public education became the first battleground for how pregnant teens would be received outside the walls of maternity homes. Public schools expelled girls upon discovering that they were pregnant. This created a myriad of problems for pregnant and parenting teens. If a girl chose adoption, she was able to return to school but was a full year behind her peers. If she kept her baby, she was either refused re-entry or forced to drop out because of the responsibility of raising a child. Few schools offered support for pregnant or parenting teens, making it almost impossible for them to complete their educations. The first legal challenge to this system came in the Mississippi case *Perry v. Grenada*, when an African American teen mother sued the school system to gain admittance to her high school. This case, previously overlooked by historians, laid the groundwork for a legislative battle to support pregnant teens. The first federal legislation to protect the right of pregnant and parenting teens was Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which said that schools could not expel a girl on account of her pregnant or parenting status. Teen

pregnancy became more visible as girls moved their pregnancies out of maternity homes and into public schools, where girls, teachers, parents, and social workers had to negotiate new relationships.

Chapter Two also challenges previously held perceptions of how social workers and educators viewed race in connection to teen pregnancy. Historians of teen pregnancy argue that social scientists assumed that African Americans had higher rates of unwed pregnancy and were culturally predisposed to premarital sex and single parenting.¹⁹ The Child Welfare League of America and the National Council of Illegitimacy began examining social worker's belief that racial minorities had higher rates of teen pregnancy and unwed motherhood as early as 1969. Chapter 2 uncovers previously overlooked statistics and studies that make it clear that these two leading organizations moved beyond racial stereotypes earlier than historians have previously believed. Adoption and marriage statistics, when viewed longitudinally, actually demonstrate that unwed pregnancy rates are similar across the races, and the main social work groups understood this. It was only a difference in access to abortion, adoption, maternity homes, and financial security that made it appear as if African American women were more likely to get pregnant as teens. These findings revise our understanding of the outlook of predominately white social workers during the late 1960s and early 1970s and confront current stereotypes of African American motherhood.

In the politically charged atmosphere on the heels of *Roe v. Wade* and Title IX, legislators began to organize. They saw teen pregnancy as an ideal way to support Title

¹⁹ Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002); Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*, Luttrell, *Pregnant Bodies, Fertile Minds*, Messner and May, *Back Rooms*, Solinger *Wake Up Little Susie*, Maris Vinoskis, *An "Epidemic" of Adolescent Pregnancy? Some Historical and Policy Considerations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988)

IX without challenging *Roe v. Wade*. Teen pregnancy became a safe political battle for the Carter administration because lawmakers could advocate lowering rates of teen pregnancy, always a popular idea, without directly engaging the political quagmire of abortion and women's rights. Chapter Three argues that politicians responded to the higher visibility (not higher rates) of teen pregnancy by fueling the fear that there was a "teen pregnancy epidemic." The liberals among them tried to use the epidemic rhetoric to challenge negative perceptions of pregnant teens. However, while they succeeded in passing legislation that provided funding for pregnant and parenting teens, by the end of the decade politicians bowed to the very stereotypes they had set out to change. Historians of the decline of liberalism and the rise of the New Right argue that the political shift can be traced to so-called "morality issues."²⁰ Conservative politicians adeptly used issues such as abortion, teen pregnancy, and welfare to gain voter support, creating a coalition of voters who made political choices based on one "moral" issue rather than casting votes that would benefit their race, gender, or class. The threat of an epidemic of teenage pregnancy certainly falls into this category of political rhetoric.

²⁰ Edward D. Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); William C. Berman, *America's Right Turn from Nixon to Clinton* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), W. Carl Biven, *Jimmy Carter's Economy: Policy in an Age of Limits* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Mary Brennan, *Turning Right in the 1960s: The Conservative Capture of the GOP* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Topeka: University of Kansas Press, 1996), Gordon, Linda. *Pitied but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); Michael Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989); _____ *In the Shadow of the Poorhouse: A Social History of Welfare in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1996); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Jennifer Mittelstadt, *From Welfare to Workfare: The Unintended Consequences of Liberal Reform, 1945-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005) Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008)

As white conservatives fled urban centers to the safety of the suburbs, evangelical churches, and wealth, they could not escape the reality of their daughters' sexuality. By placing teenage sexuality at the center of this period, I argue that when teenage pregnancy entered white, suburban communities in more public ways, young women pushed politicians to action. The chapter first examines federal lawmakers and then traces the influence of these laws by examining the state of Texas. At the federal level a coalition of liberal Democrats, led by Edward Kennedy, led the successful fight for the Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act of 1978, the first legislation focusing solely on teen pregnancy. State lawmakers learned from federal leaders and also began addressing teen pregnancy in more dynamic ways. This chapter then examines Texas because the state had some of the highest rates of teen pregnancy in the nation and the number of unwed mothers was distributed almost equally across racial groups. The state funded alternative programs for teen parents and elevated the role of sex education in public schools. Like their federal counterparts, liberal Texans found that in order to achieve political success, they had to give in to conservative constituents in ways that ultimately hurt the population they hoped to serve.

The congressional leaders, almost all men, who supported legislation on behalf of teenage girls often had little knowledge of the perspectives of the teens for whom they advocated. Chapter Four turns away from social scientists, lawmakers, and other adults to examine the experience of teenage girls in their own words. The database I created from the Project Girl records provides a statistical portrait of how teenage girls thought about sexuality between 1970 and 1975. Their discussion of sex education, menstruation, premarital sex, and pregnancy reveals that teenage girls had more nuanced opinions about

sex than the adults in their lives often realized. While federal and state lawmakers painted an image of sex-crazed teenagers, the Project Girl participants repeatedly demonstrate that they took sex quite seriously. These girls, who came of age after the sexual revolution moved sex out of the bedroom and into public discourse, were confronted with sexual decisions at a younger age than many of their parents. Their sex education courses shifted from the 1950s curriculum that invited students to discuss their feelings about sex to a biology-based course that emphasized contraception and the consequences of sex ranging from pregnancy to venereal disease. Sex education in the 1970s concentrated on the physical experience of intercourse, encouraging classes to ask questions about contraception, masturbation, and any other topic they chose to bring up. The result was that most girls were armed with a plethora of facts. Even with these facts, adolescent girls often found themselves looking for open conversations rather than lectures from adults. Above all, the Project Girl interviews make a strong case that legislators might have created different images of pregnant teens had they spent more time talking to them.

The dissertation concludes with a look into the culture of teenage fiction and advice columns in the 1980s and the conservative backlash against public conversation about adolescent sexuality. The rise of the New Right coincided with an influx of young adult novels that candidly discussed issues of sexuality. By examining the discordance between New Right leaders and teenage readers, this chapter traces the changes in teen culture and sex education that came with the increasing power of conservative organizations at the beginning of the 1980s. Judy Blume, Norma Klein, and Elizabeth Winship gained notoriety for their frank discussions of sexuality. Young people wrote thousands of letters to Blume thanking her for creating characters that struggled with

menstruation, puberty, masturbation, and the decision to have sex. By the 1980s, these topics began to disappear from sex education curricula as conservative groups advocated for abstinence-centered programs. As a result, many teens turned to fiction to fill the information gap. Blume's books *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, *Deenie*, and *Forever* topped fiction charts from their publication dates in the mid-1970s throughout the 1980s. It was not until the 1980s, after the conservative revolution, that Blume became a target for censorship. Her books, along with Klein's, were banned from schools and libraries. New Right organizations such as the Moral Majority criticized the authors for writing about teens who had sex. Winship's nationally syndicated teen advice column received similar criticism when she took on the topics of sex education, pregnancy, and abortion. At the same time, sex education turned toward abstinence-focused curriculum that left teens with more questions about their sexuality. Caught between inadequate sex education courses and conservative parents who did not discuss sex at home, teens turned to Blume and Winship, looking for advice and answers that they could not find elsewhere. The authors answered with an openness that teens adored and parents abhorred.

A Note on Terminology

This dissertation uses the terms "pregnant and parenting teens," "teen pregnancy" and "teen parenthood" to distinguish between distinct experiences. "Teen pregnancy" or "pregnant teens" refers to young women between the ages of 12 and 19 who become pregnant. This term refers to the period of pregnancy only and includes young women who miscarry, seek abortions, or relinquish their children through adoption. "Parenting teens" refers to young women who become parents between the ages of 12 and 19. These

groups are referred to as “pregnant and parenting teens” when discussed together. Both groups suffered similar stigmas, although young women who endured pregnancy but did not become parents experienced this differently than those who also became parents. I do not refer to pregnancies as “wanted” or “unwanted” unless a pregnant young woman volunteers this information herself. Instead, I use the terms “unplanned” or “unexpected,” as these terms effectively demonstrate the uncertainty involved with most teen pregnancies without assuming whether or not a teen mom wanted her pregnancy or her baby. When discussing the adoption process, I use the term “relinquish” to describe the birth mother’s decision to terminate her parental rights. Although social workers today commonly use the phrase “to make an adoption plan,” this obscures the intense emotion that is tied to such a decision. The older phrase “to give up for adoption” implies that a young woman had a choice in the matter, though the historical record shows that many girls felt they were forced into the decision. Instead, the term “relinquish” connotes both the action of surrender and the agency of the birthmother.²¹

Between the maternity homes of the 1950s and the uprising against the Judy Blume novels of the 1980s, there was a moment of opportunity. Social workers, who had built their profession by advocating for maternity homes and adoption, particularly for white middle class girls, began to challenge the very system they helped create. They were spurred by the feminist movement, by *Roe v. Wade*, and by teenage girls themselves. Adolescent girls of the 1970s grew up in a world of birth control and legal abortion. The rate of teen pregnancy decreased as a result. Teenage girls who became pregnant pushed their adult advocates into action by choosing to raise their babies, attempting to complete their educations, and giving teenage pregnancy a more public

²¹ Melosh, *Strangers and Kin*

status that ever before. At the same time, girls became pregnant at younger ages, causing alarm for the adults in their communities.

These changes rallied liberal politicians and social experts to legislate federal funding that would support pregnant and parenting teens. They financed programs that would help teenage mothers stay in school, gain access to government support, and learn to parent their children. In order to pass this legislation, however, lawmakers turned to increasingly negative stereotypes for young women. Rather than promote the idea that unwed teenage mothers could succeed with support, politicians began to argue that without government intervention, the nation would face an uncontrolled epidemic of teenage pregnancy. This epidemic, they suggested, would create a generation of welfare dependent young families. The opportunity for changing the image of teenage parenthood from that of a problem girl fallen from her virginal pedestal, gave way to a new stereotype, coined by Ronald Reagan. Teenage mothers no longer appeared to be victims; they became welfare queens. Even this new label could not reverse the changes of the 1970s. Young women had learned that they could make choices about their own sexuality. Those who engaged in premarital sex rarely did so without careful thought. If a girl became pregnant, she could choose between adoption, abortion, or to raise their own child. There was no turning back to the days of maternity homes.

In 1983, Phyllis's and Edward's youngest daughter came home from college to tell her parents that she was pregnant. Like her mother, Anna was planning to have a wedding only a few weeks after disclosing her pregnancy. The way Phyllis approached her daughter's confession embodies many of the changes in the way Americans approached teen pregnancy in the span of just one generation. Remembering the anger

and harsh words from her own mother, Phyllis decided to respond to her daughter with love. “When it happened to Anna, I did not want to do [what my mother did to me] to her. I wouldn’t do that to my own daughter. I supported her. I talked to her.” Refusing to repeat the past, Phyllis and Eddie gave their daughter the big wedding with a white dress regardless of her pregnancy. Anna’s older sister Peggy Sue was a bridesmaid. As Peggy’s daughter I was the flower girl.²²

²² Phyllis Dusang and Edward Dusang, Aug. 28, 2013. Personal communication to author. The name of Edward’s and Phyllis’s youngest daughter has been changed at their request.

Chapter 1: Problem Girls: The Culture of Motherhood and Teenage Pregnancy in the 1950s

“The tide of illegitimate births in the U.S. is ever-rising and great efforts are being made to stem it. More than half of today’s ‘girls in trouble’ are teenagers,” proclaimed a 1958 headline opening a series of articles about unmarried mothers and maternity homes.¹ Long before the sexual revolution of the 1960s, unwed pregnancy inspired this kind of rhetoric, particularly when associated with teenage girls. Throughout the 1950s and most of the 1960s, journalists, social workers, and psychologists interested in the plight of unmarried pregnant teens focused on maternity homes as the primary option for girls hoping for “rehabilitation” and “redemption.”² They believed that homes for unwed mothers would allow “problem girls” to reevaluate their choices, relinquish their babies for adoption, and reenter society without the stigma of unwed motherhood attached to them or their families.³

In the article “Why Teenage Girls Go Wrong,” published as part of the newspaper series on unwed mothers quoted above, the author focused on the lack of maternity homes and their inability to reach pregnant teenagers. The author estimated that the 200 maternity homes in the United States served approximately 28,000 girls annually. This meant the homes served only about seventeen percent of the nation’s unwed mothers in 1955.⁴ The solution for this problem? Establish more maternity homes where social scientists could help wayward girls. The sentiment in this series reflected the general attitude of experts across the United States in the 1950s and early 1960s. Groups such as the Child Welfare League worked tirelessly establishing guidelines

¹ Wade Andrews, “America’s Unmarried Mothers,” *Journal-American*, April 1958. SWHA, Folder 11, Box 84, ASHA Papers, The Social Welfare History Archives, The University of Minnesota Libraries

² Regina Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993)

³ Andrews, “American’s Unwed Mothers Need More Maternity Homes.”

⁴ *Ibid.*

for maternity homes, adoption procedures, and education for unwed teens. Maternity homes became a popular way for middle class families to “get transgressive pregnancies out of sight and to rescue the identity of the ‘illegitimate’ baby through adoption.”⁵

“She may come from a rich home or a poor one. Her parents may be happily married, separated, or divorced. She may be a known delinquent, or the victim of one unfortunate mistake.” Regardless of her family and social standing, she would forever carry the label of “problem girl” or unwed mother unless social scientists intervened to rescue her by placing her in a maternity home and teaching her to relinquish her baby for adoption.⁶ As a result, social scientists of the 1950s dedicated time and research to diagnosing the causes of unwed pregnancy and setting standards for caring for young women pregnant out of wedlock. Social workers resisted popular pressure to classify problem girls as juvenile delinquents, a popular term for young deviants of all sorts in the 1950s, saying that the typical unwed teenage mother did not “belong to a gang or club” but was a “loner” who used her sexuality to build relationships.⁷ Unwed pregnant teens came from families from every social and cultural sector of United States. The post-war period represents one of the highest rates of teenaged motherhood in United States history. Although the rate of teen pregnancy reached record levels during this period, rates of teen marriage also soared, legitimizing many teenage pregnancies. As a result, both contemporary social scientists and twenty-first century historians have a skewed understanding of teenage pregnancy during this period.

The tumultuous 1960s would usher in new perspectives about maternity homes and teenage pregnancy for young women themselves and the experts who worked with them. The

⁵ Barbara Melosh, *Strangers and Kin: The American Way of Adoption* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002)

⁶ Wade Andrews, “Why Teenage Girls Go Wrong,” *Journal-American*, 8 April 1958. SWHA, Folder 11, Box 84, ASHA Papers, The Social Welfare History Archives, The University of Minnesota Libraries

⁷ Andrews, “America's Unmarried Mothers”

advent of oral contraception, dramatic debates about sex education in public schools, and the early second-wave feminist movement began to make maternity homes seem backwards and old fashioned. With these changes came increased public awareness of the sexuality of teenage girls, particularly white teenage girls, upon whose sexual purity social order supposedly depended. These shifts attracted the attention of prominent national political leaders, a trend that made teenage pregnancy a national issue in the 1970s. The growing tension around sexual freedom and sex education combined with the changes in maternity homes set the stage for new legislative and cultural debates that placed teenage girls at the center. In order to understand the way teen pregnancy came to play such a major role in 1970s political discourse, it is important to trace the changes in perceptions of sexuality, unwed motherhood, practices of social workers, and experiences of adolescent mothers in the context of the cultural changes of the immediate postwar decades.

Motherhood: “The Ultimate Fulfillment of Female Sexuality”?

With the end of World War II Americans welcomed victory, peace and prosperity, and a new generation became mothers. Unlike their own mothers who struggled to raise children through depression and war, post-war mothers looked forward to a period of economic growth and security. All forms of media promised them a happy, clean, “modern” lifestyle, available to anyone who worked hard. Many young mothers eagerly began families, embracing the now iconic views of 1950s America. However, these ideals, while pervasive in public discourse, only represented a segment of American mothers in the post-war years. In truth, the suburban ideal was not accessible to all, regardless of an individual’s desire to achieve the good life. Many people, restricted by poverty, race, or religion, were not allowed into the new suburban communities. Working moms, divorced families, and countless others did not fit into the *Leave it*

to *Beaver* mold. According to historian Stephanie Coontz, at the end of the 1950s one-third of American children were poor, only half the population had any kind of savings, and one-third of native-born white families were two-income households.⁸ Despite the economic and racial divides, “Americans from all backgrounds rushed into marriage and childbearing.”⁹ The baby boom generation was born.

Young women who started families after World War II were caught in a period of upheaval about women’s roles. After the war men returned to the jobs they held before being sent overseas and Americans had to decide “whether it was more important for a mother to care for her children...or to contribute her skills to the work force.”¹⁰ Overwhelmingly, the answer was that women should not join the workforce, but should raise children and support the family from within the home. Although women’s sphere had been “significantly expanded,” traditional ideas about gender roles remained ingrained in society.¹¹ The number of working mothers increased by 400 percent in the 1950s. However, the majority of married women with jobs were over the age of 35 and their children attended school during working hours.¹² They worked outside the home but only after they had fulfilled their duties as stay-at-home mothers.¹³ *Atlantic* journalist Agnes Meyer, famous from her muckraking during the war, summarized post-war sentiment by writing “while women had many careers, they had only one vocation: motherhood.”¹⁴

⁸Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 30.

⁹ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), xvii.

¹⁰ William Henry Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 151.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹² Coontz, *The Way We Never Were*, 160.

¹³ *Ibid.* and May, *Homeward Bound*.

¹⁴ Chafe, *The American Woman*, 206.

People of every class and ethnicity joined the baby boom, embracing motherhood as “the ultimate fulfillment of female sexuality.” At the same time, 1950s social experts also promoted motherhood as the best way to control female sexuality.¹⁵ Ultimately women learned the marriage bed was the only acceptable arena in which to express sexual desire and pleasure. As families grew at unprecedented rates, moved into suburban areas and enjoyed a prosperous economy, the conception of motherhood evolved once again. Women became mothers younger and more often than their forebears.¹⁶ As the Cold War culture of motherhood took hold on families across America, it was not uncommon for high school aged girls to leave school to get married and start a family. Birthrates for teenage girls soared throughout the 1950s, reaching the highest point between 1955 and 1960. However, the majority of these births came from married teens between the ages of 17 and 19.¹⁷ While families celebrated young married mothers, throwing extravagant weddings and baby showers, pregnant unwed adolescents found themselves far outside the bounds of acceptable sexuality.

By the 1950s as many as 39 percent of unmarried girls had sex before their twentieth birthday.¹⁸ Contraception was rarely available to unmarried women, especially teens, resulting in the high rate of teenage pregnancy. Neighbors and experts labeled them “girls in trouble” at best, but more commonly pregnant teens were accused of being “loose women” or worse. Furthermore, children born out of wedlock in the 1950s received the title “illegitimate.” Many states even went so far as to stamp the word “bastard” on a child’s birth certificate. Most secondary schools required young women to leave school at a specific period of the pregnancy,

¹⁵ May, *Homeward Bound*, 123-124, 86.

¹⁶ Coonz, *The Way We Never Were*, Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*, May, *Homeward Bound*

¹⁷ Maris A. Vinovskis, *An “Epidemic” of Adolescent Pregnancy?” Some Historical and Policy Considerations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 26.

¹⁸ Fessler

usually after the first trimester.¹⁹ Thus, young women faced with pregnancy often found themselves in one of three situations. Many endured their pregnancies at maternity homes or worked with adoption centers, relinquishing their babies either by choice or by coercion. Others left school for the duration of their pregnancy, hoping to return after giving birth and complete their educations while raising their children alone. About half, particularly those who they became pregnant after age 16, married their baby's father under pressure from parents and society.²⁰ In this situation, the mother often did not return to school after giving birth; instead she took up the role of housekeeper and mother while her teenage husband attempted to balance school and a job.

Fighting the Cold War through Family Planning

Cold War motherhood rhetoric was so pervasive that it even included organizations like the relatively feminist Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA). In a telling publicity measure, the organization changed its name from the "American Birth Control League" to the "Planned Parenthood Federation of America" in 1941, an early sign of an ideological shift that would continue into the post-war period.²¹ Margaret Sanger, founder of the Birth Control League, argued against the new name because it intentionally obscured the League's history as a women's rights organization. In reaction to the new direction, Sanger resigned as chairperson of the new PPFA and passed the leadership to those more focused on family planning. By intentionally aiding married, not single women, Planned Parenthood leaders adapted to 1950s'

¹⁹ Rickie Solinger, *Wake up Little Suzie: Single Pregnancy and Race before Roe V. Wade*, Revised Edition ed. (Routledge: Routledge Press, 2000). In this monograph, Solinger addresses the dual power struggle between race and gender which she concludes led to "racism, misogyny, and prejudice against poor people" in the "politics of female fertility."

²⁰ Fessler

²¹ Ellen Chesler, *Woman of Valor: Margaret Sanger and the Birth Control Movement in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992)

values by keeping sexuality within the bounds of marriage.²² Far from the ideology of “motherhood as a choice” that had dominated early birth control rhetoric, the “modern” concept of family pushed PPFA in new directions. Eliminating the phrase “birth control” and often leaving “planned” off the new title of “Planned Parenthood” allowed PPFA leaders to cater to the Cold War culture. This change also left the movement’s feminist ideology behind as it replaced the idea of a woman’s ability to control pregnancy with that of planning a family.²³ PPFA’s leaders understood how to use the current political situation in their favor. Even Sanger claimed to be working for “national security through birth control” by limiting family sizes and helping the right type of women to become mothers.²⁴ Anchored in a culture of polarized gender roles, Planned Parenthood leaders helped support the ideology behind “no job is more exacting, more necessary, or more rewarding than that of housewife and mother.”²⁵

The idea that planning births would help women become the best mothers possible and provide an idyllic childhood for every child born held a pivotal place in PPFA leaders’ creeds and influenced their actions. Fully believing that “we owe the children of our community the birthright of healthy bodies, adequate care and a warm and loving home,” local and national PPFA leaders again reshaped their idea of motherhood. If a woman wanted to be a mother, she must “find the right husband, bear and rear his children, and make...for them a gay, happy home.”²⁶ By advertising family planning and child spacing, Planned Parenthood found a niche within this ideology. Through this ideological shift, Planned Parenthood was able to recruit

²² “Planned Parenthood Drive Set to Open,” *Dallas Morning News*, 19 January 1951.

²³ Many historians have commented on the significance of the change to Planned Parenthood and its connections with the feminist movement. Among these are: Chesler, *Woman of Valor*; Donald T. Critchlow, *Intended Consequences: Birth Control, Abortion, and the Federal Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002); Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*; Rickie Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion, and Welfare in the United States* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001)

²⁴ May, *Homeward Bound*, 133.

²⁵ Chafe, *The American Woman*, 206.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 179.

powerful supporters in religious communities. PPFA formed a religious advisory committee of thirty clergymen representing major Protestant groups. The committee's goal was to "encourage a closer working relationship between the birth control movement and religious organizations."²⁷

Religious institutions had struggled with dogmatic policies around contraception for decades or, in the case of the Roman Catholic Church, centuries. With rising birth rates and a new focus on family, clergy from many Christian denominations began to speak out. Protestant clergy largely supported contraception as a method of family planning. For example, in 1947 both "white and Negro" chapters of the Dallas Pastor's Association released "statements [that] approved the program of planning childbirth, thereby insuring the health of the mother, providing adequate education for the family and making a comradeship based on love and leisure."²⁸ Protestant leaders began advocating birth control as a way to care for a woman's health and to ensure well-cared-for children. Some even went as far as preaching family planning as a "moral obligation," a major shift from earlier periods when most religions viewed birth control with distrust or even "open hostility."²⁹ Jewish organizations also began to publicly endorse contraception at this time.³⁰ This significant move reflected the pervasiveness of the new concept of "family planning" instead of "birth control."

Not all religious leaders supported the idea of family planning. The most formidable opponent to birth control used within marriage was the Roman Catholic Church. Unlike Protestant religions whose leaders re-evaluated their staunch opposition to contraception, the Catholic Church continued its teaching that any activity that interfered with procreation was sinful. In 1951 Pope Pius XII reiterated the Church's opposition to artificial birth control but

²⁷ "Clerics to Aid in Birth Control," *Dallas Morning News*, 18 November 1959.

²⁸ "Pastors Back Parent Center," *Dallas Morning News*, 17 February 1947.

²⁹ May, *Homeward Bound*, 133-134.

³⁰ Nell DeGolyer, "Planned Parenthood Correspondence," Folder 6, Box 17, Series 7, The Nell DeGolyer Papers, The DeGolyer Library, Southern Methodist University

proclaimed natural family planning as an acceptable form of birth control.³¹ Despite the criticism from the Vatican, birth control became socially acceptable to a larger range of people throughout the 1950s.

The concept of planning births in order to help women become the best mothers possible and to provide an idyllic childhood for every child born held a pivotal place in the minds of social science experts focused on issues of unwed pregnancy.³² Fully believing that “we owe the children of our community the birthright of healthy bodies, adequate care and a warm and loving home,” local and national leaders reshaped the way they portrayed motherhood.³³ A good mother was not defined solely by her ability to provide economically for children. According to the *Ladies Home Journal*, if a woman wanted to be a mother, she must “find the right husband, bear and rear his children, and make...for them a gay, happy home.”³⁴ By advertising family planning and child spacing, Planned Parenthood found a niche within this ideology but the organization’s policies continued to make birth control difficult for unmarried women of any age to obtain.

Profiling Teen Pregnancy

Experts who worked with teen mothers created a profile for “problem girls” that followed unwed mothers for decades. This stereotype shaped the way experts, policy makers, educators, and the media portrayed pregnant and parenting teens until the 1970s. Social workers cast unwed motherhood as a social disease. One social worker wrote that illegitimacy was “a family

³¹ Pope Pius XII, “Nature of their Profession: Allocation to Midwives,” 29 October 1951

³² Frances Mary Penna. *Specific Factors in Casework With the Very Young Adolescent Unmarried Mother and Her Family*. Committee on Services to Unmarried Parents, 1950. Folder 9, Box 47, Child Welfare League of America, The Social Welfare History Archive, The University of Minnesota Libraries; Helen Ross. “Psychological Considerations in Understanding and Working with Unmarried Mothers.” Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis, June 1955; Child Welfare League of American Papers. Social Welfare History Archives.; “Constitution of the National Association on Service to Unmarried Parents,” September 1953; Child Welfare League of American Papers. Social Welfare History Archives; Kenneth Herrold, “An Educational Project for the Improvement of Communication Among Parents and Adolescents.” Greenwich Health Association, November 11, 1957; Florence Crittenton Collection. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

³³ “Planned Parenthood Drive Set to Open.”

³⁴ Chafe, *The American Woman*, 179.

problem, as is every neurotic illness to a great degree.”³⁵ The idea that unwed motherhood stemmed from a disease directly shaped the way experts cared for pregnant teens. Approaching teen pregnancy as a disease meant that experts looked for ways to “cure” the young mothers in their care. Society’s emphasis on family and homemaking as the best roles for women also contributed to the expanding culture of adoption, allowing women who could not biologically achieve the status of motherhood to join the ranks of the baby boom mothers.³⁶ This persuasive ideology greatly influenced the way social scientists treated pregnant adolescents.³⁷

Though journal articles and conference presentations argued that social workers were “never satisfied with a single point of view” when trying to categorize the girls most at risk to become pregnant, judgments about race, class, and intelligence persisted in each successive journal article, presentation, and news article.³⁸ One psychologist described unwed pregnancy almost as if he were watching a melodrama unfold:

The unwed expectant mother suffers from feelings of shame, fear, and guilt ...
The putative father slips away from the scene ... and is left to lick his psychic
wounds in anonymity
Society feels threatened and disturbed because the keystone of its monogamous
structure is being chiseled away which may lead to the spread of social problems
and increased tax burden.³⁹

This melodramatic depiction of teenage pregnancy brings to life several of the key elements that formed the reigning stereotypes of unwed mothers. Young mothers experienced the full range of

³⁵ Ross, “Psychological Considerations in Understanding and Working with Unmarried Mothers.”

³⁶ Melosh, *Strangers and Kin*, 4.

³⁷ In addition to May’s work on this topic, see E. Wayne Carp, *Adoption in America: Historical Perspectives* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 2002); Chafe, *The American Woman*; Critchlow, *Intended Consequences*; Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*; Linda Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (New York: Maxwell MacMillian International, 1994)

³⁸ Ross, Helen. “Psychological Considerations in Understanding and Working with Unmarried Mothers.” Chicago Institute for Psychoanalysis, June 1955; Child Welfare League of American Papers. Social Welfare History Archives

³⁹ Ovid Parody, “The Uninterrupted Education of Unwed Mothers.” National Council on Illegitimacy, May 21, 1963. Folder 19, Box 47, Child Welfare League of American Papers. Social Welfare History Archives, The University of Minnesota Libraries

emotions described here throughout their pregnancies. They shouldered the responsibility of pregnancy alone, as the father was rarely held responsible if the couple did not marry. Most significantly, pregnant teens symbolized an intangible threat to social stability. Their swollen bellies provided a visible image of sexual indiscretion that came to symbolize social disease. Increased welfare spending to care for unwed mothers cast a long shadow over young girls, particularly African American unwed mothers who were most likely to keep their babies during this period. The Florence Crittenton Association challenged the fear that unwed mothers and their children would become tax burdens. Citing federal data they claimed, “less than 25 percent of AFDC children are born out of wedlock.”⁴⁰ This fact, however, did little to quell concerns that teenage mothers would soon dominate the welfare rolls. As we shall see, this fear would soon overtake the benevolent attempts to rehabilitate girls in maternity homes.

Not all of the characteristics assigned to teenage mothers held negative connotations. Pregnant adolescents attracted pity almost as frequently as scorn. Unmarried mothers were portrayed as emotionally immature, unable to plan for the future, and “often not high on the intelligence quotient.” They acted on “impulses without much, if any cerebration.”⁴¹ In other words, they were typical teenagers. Building on this image, social workers created a sympathetic image, usually reserved for white teens. Evelyn, a fourteen year old maternity home resident, personified this image. She was a “bright, attractive, and likeable adolescent” who arrived at the maternity home after admitting her pregnancy to her mother. Evelyn was “very confused, uncertain and vulnerable” upon her entrance to the home. Through counseling, she learned that she was “facing a situation of which she had no preparation” and agreed to relinquish her baby.

⁴⁰Ellen Winston. “Unmarried Parents and Federal Programs of Assistance.” Washington DC: Florence Crittenton Association of America Inc., 1966. Folder 4, Box 50, Florence Crittenton Collection, The Social Welfare History Archives, The University of Minnesota Libraries

⁴¹ Ross, “Psychological Considerations in Understanding and Working with Unmarried Mothers.”

Evelyn, and girls like her, became the poster child for maternity home success.⁴² The polarizing images of the potential AFDC client and rehabilitated Evelyn quickly became the most pervasive representations of unwed motherhood in American culture.

Maternity Homes, An Ideal Solution

In the midst of the cultural trends that placed family and marriage at the center of social discourse, maternity homes thrived. Maternity homes fit into the post-war ideology of family values by allowing middle-class white families to send their pregnant daughters away, saving the family from the indignity of having a daughter who did not fit into nuclear family roles. This also provided families with an avenue for shaming their daughters for the sexual decisions that led to the unplanned pregnancy. That a daughter was caught having sex outside the confines of marriage embarrassed her parents and in some cases threatened a family's social standing. Maternity homes simultaneously catered to white families wishing to hide their daughter's sexual indiscretion and families struggling with infertility. The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), the oldest child welfare organization in the United States, played a major role in setting the standards of care across the nation's maternity homes. The CWLA was founded in 1921 to focus on private and publically funded care for children. By the 1950s, their mission expanded to include providing standards of care for all institutions for children and teens. Though the CWLA did not run maternity homes, but instead the organization served as a clearinghouse for social workers and other experts to examine theories and ideas that would dominate the practices at maternity homes overseen by private, religious, and secular groups. From 1955 to 1960, the CWLA held a series of focus groups and circulated drafts of what would become the *Standards for Services to Unmarried Parents*. Representatives from government

⁴² Penna, *Specific Factors in Casework With the Very Young Adolescent Unmarried Mother and Her Family*.

agencies including state welfare departments, private groups, maternity homes, doctors, clergy, and a variety of other experts approved these standards, making the final publication a comprehensive representation of how groups working with unwed mothers understood their goals and practices.⁴³

First and foremost, the CWLA's *Standards for Services to Unmarried Parents* recognized that unwed parents experienced such extreme social disapproval that they were unlikely to seek traditional means of assistance in their communities or even their own families. As a result, most of the initial recommendations reminded social workers of popular attitudes and biases toward the unwed mother. The authors reminded social workers that they must treat each woman as an individual case and avoid bringing their own biases related to culture, economics, or age. Social workers walked "warily between two bewilderments: the girl's, about her own immediate security and welfare, and the [girl's] family's concern for the future."⁴⁴ Concern for the teenage mother was almost always considered alongside her family's need for secrecy. Though CWLA cautioned that each pregnant woman should be treated without prejudice, the *Standards* actually reinforced stereotypes about unwed mothers as a group and about the ways different cultural and economic groups addressed the issue.⁴⁵

The number of children born out of wedlock increased significantly between 1955 and 1960, according to the CWLA records. Approximately 62 percent of those births occurred among mothers under the age of twenty, with the majority being between eighteen and twenty years old. Thus, the largest group of women who gave birth outside of marriage was made up of

⁴³ "Working Committee on Standards for Services to Unmarried Parents," Child Welfare League of America, July 1958. Folder 9, Box 14, Child Welfare League of American Papers. Social Welfare History Archives, The University of Minnesota Libraries

⁴⁴ Ross, "Psychological Considerations in Understanding and Working with Unmarried Mothers."

⁴⁵ *Child Welfare League of America Standards for Services to Unmarried Parents*, CWLA Standards Project, Child Welfare League of America, 1960, Folder 8, Box 14, Child Welfare League of America Papers, Social Welfare History Archives, The University of Minnesota Libraries.

women who were technically adults but did not have the life experience of a more mature parent. A significant number were legally minors who required child welfare services in addition to their new needs as unwed mothers. Social workers and other maternity home leaders typically promoted adoption as the best choice for babies and birthmothers alike. Using adoption as the best solution for a young unwed mother, maternity homes became “total institutions” controlling “every aspect of residents’ lives” to ensure complete rehabilitation for birthmothers.⁴⁶

Adoption: The Best Option for White Teens

The *Standards for Services to Unmarried Parents* cautioned social workers to help unwed mothers make the best decisions possible for their children’s futures. While acknowledging the mother’s legal right to keep her child, caseworkers argued “in the majority of cases, adoption is the best plan for mother and child.” The hope was that through adoption both the mother and child would receive a chance at a new and better life without the stigma of unwed pregnancy or illegitimacy. Convinced that “illegitimacy was the primary justification for adoption,” social workers “worried that clients who did not agree were not good candidates for [the] rehabilitation” that occurred in maternity homes.⁴⁷

The pressure to relinquish a child through adoption is evident in the CWLA’s suggestions for social workers. The section titled “Decision to keep the child” lists only negative outcomes the mother ought to consider should she choose to raise her child alone. Caseworkers were instructed to help the mother evaluate the social stigma attached to both parent and child, family dynamics with the mother’s parental family, financial challenges, and the likelihood that she would need continued social assistance. On the other hand, in counseling a woman to relinquish her baby for adoption, caseworkers focused exclusively on the positive outcomes. A mother

⁴⁶ Melosh, *Strangers and Kin*, 134.

⁴⁷ Melosh, *Strangers and Kin*, 123.

could ensure that her baby make strong attachments with a new family and limit her own emotional loss by parting with the baby as soon as possible. Psychologists believed “it was not the fact of giving birth that made for attachment, but rather daily care of an infant” that created maternal bonds.⁴⁸ Additionally, she could know that her baby was well cared for by the adoptive parents. The CWLA did caution social workers that birth mothers could have anxiety or guilt over relinquishing a baby but concluded that “this may be the best plan for both” regardless of the pain it may have caused for the birth mother.⁴⁹

Caseworkers treated adolescent unwed mothers as a special category. Because of their age, social workers believed the young mothers were “confused about values, vacillating and ambivalent.” An adolescent mother also presented the problem of someone who was legally a minor having a baby, complicating the legal status of her decisions for her child. Frequently, the legal right to decide whether a minor should raise her baby or relinquish it for adoption belonged to her parents. This meant that if an unwed mother was under the age of 18, her parents could decide that she must relinquish the baby for adoption, removing any sense of agency from the pregnant teen. In one case worker’s notes fourteen year old Helen “had no alternative but to comply with her family’s wishes for the baby” though she expressed her desire to keep the baby on several occasions.⁵⁰ The psychologist believed that Helen’s wish to keep her baby was like “a little girl’s wish for a doll” rather than a mother’s plea to be taken seriously. CWLA cautioned that age should not play a role in forcing a young woman to choose relinquishment, urging social workers to treat each woman on a case-by-case basis. Even so, the *Standards* recommended that in “situations where she does not wish to give up the child and cannot recognize her inability to provide care, it may be in her best interest and that of her child to take legal action to terminate

⁴⁸ Penna, *Specific Factors in Casework With the Very Young Adolescent Unmarried Mother and Her Family*.

⁴⁹ *Child Welfare League of America Standards for Services to Unmarried Parents*.

⁵⁰ Penna, *Specific Factors in Casework With the Very Young Adolescent Unmarried Mother and Her Family*.

her rights, even though she has the legal rights to make a decision.” This policy was usually applied to women under the age of 18, though the CWLA did not specify a given age. Thus, because of her age, a pregnant teenager often lost her right to determine what happened to her child.⁵¹

The Florence Crittenton Association, which oversaw the nation’s largest network of maternity homes, emphasized anonymity and concealment during a young woman’s stay. Residents received aliases, fictitious mailing addresses, and alternate phone numbers. Housemothers carefully screened visitors to ensure that a young woman’s secret was guarded. Such secrecy allowed a pregnant teen to return to her home community after the baby’s birth “with few people the wiser for her absence.”⁵² This secrecy was particularly important for adolescent mothers whose caseworkers and families viewed the maternity homes as a way to erase the pregnancy and sexual indiscretion entirely from the girl’s past. The need for concealment further heightened the pressure for a young woman to choose adoption. If she returned home with a new baby, the plan for secrecy would be lost along with her chance at redemption. As a result, seventy-five to eighty percent of Florence Crittenton residents relinquished their babies.⁵³

The secrecy extended after the birth and adoption of an unwed teenage mother’s child. The laws protecting the identities of adoptive parents and birth mothers became an important part of national adoption policy and practice. Confidentiality went beyond protecting the rights of an adopted child, as historian Barbara Melosh points out; secrecy became the “hallmark” of postwar

⁵¹ *Child Welfare League of America Standards for Services to Unmarried Parents.*

⁵² Rose Bernstein, “Expanding Services to the Unwed Parent and Her Child.” Charlotte, North Carolina: Florence Crittenton Association of America Inc., 1966, Folder 4, Box 50, Florence Crittenton Collection, The Social Welfare History Archives, The University of Minnesota Libraries, 4

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 4

adoption.⁵⁴ Maternity home leaders such as Edna Gladney saw this as a part of their work to ensure the best home for each child. The adoption process at the Gladney Center, like many other homes at the time, focused on keeping the identities of the birth mother and adoptive parents from one another. Potential parents underwent a thorough screening and interview process, in keeping with CWLA standards. After initial approval for placement, a family underwent a six-month trial period with home studies and observations before legal adoption was “secured.”⁵⁵ When the adoption was finalized, the birth mother’s name was removed from the child’s birth certificate making it almost impossible for adopted children to trace their birth families. Birth mothers received no information on their child’s adoptive family. Protecting the identities of all parties involved was of utmost importance in this process.

Some birth mothers considered the secrecy of maternity homes and the promotion of adoption programs blessings. In their view, it added an additional protection for their family and personal reputations. While at the maternity home, young mothers were counseled about the adoption process. Social workers pressed the idea of relinquishment as the best solution to unwed pregnancy. One birth mother remembered the center as a refuge because of its focus on her own welfare and the community it provided. She told interviewers:

I knew I would never be able to love that child the way it needed to be loved...and so I went to the Gladney home and spent six months of my life...it changed my life. It changed my self-image. The women who ran the Gladney home were so kind to me...it was dormitory style, and what we expected to find was, you know, a conclave of whores, and each of us would be the one nice person there. But what we found was each other. A handful of women abandoned by society...I was lucky being in a place where you were cherished, feeling like you would be allowed to go back to your own life as a free person. They did a wonderful thing because it prepared me to let go of that child...I began to think of women with a kind of tenderness that comes from

⁵⁴ Melosh, *Strangers and Kin*, 133.

⁵⁵ Joan Slater, "The Woman's Angle: Gladney," *Dallas Morning News*, 17 January 1954.

being part of a group of women who have...chosen within the structure of society to live a different way...⁵⁶

The feelings of freedom and renewed self-worth were integral to the experience of some birthmothers, and a vital part of the maternity home system's continuing development in the post-war world.

Not all maternity home experiences were remembered with such affection, however. Life in an institution and the anticipation of relinquishing a baby for adoption often caused melancholy, anxiety, and sadness for maternity home residents. After visiting a maternity home in 1955, one social worker noted that "much depression can be observed" among the residents as they approached their due dates. She believed that the sadness stemmed from the fact that "the baby is imminent, likewise a return to her family and society," where she would be denied the celebration of childbirth that a married woman typically experiences. Even after observing the sadness in maternity home residents, this social worker continued to advocate that teenage mothers live in such institutions and relinquish their babies through adoption.⁵⁷

A small number of psychologists and social workers criticized the adoption policy at maternity homes, arguing that "adoption is rarely about mothers' choices; it is, instead, about the abject choicelessness of some resourceless women."⁵⁸ Family members or other social welfare organizations forced many of the young residents of maternity homes into hiding as a way to escape social disgrace for their "immoral" actions. This was particularly true of women who were sent to maternity homes as teenagers who felt they were not given a choice in their experience, again demonstrating the biases associated with

⁵⁶ Ellen and May Messer, Kathryn E., *Back Rooms: Voices from the Illegal Abortion Era* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1994), 34.

⁵⁷ Ross, "Psychological Considerations in Understanding and Working with Unmarried Mothers."

⁵⁸ Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*, 67.

the unwed mother's age. A woman who was sent to live at a maternity home remembers the experience like this:

Because I was not a Mrs. Somebody...I was seen, not as a mother but as the producer of valuable product, a white, healthy infant of college-education parents...I was the means to an end.⁵⁹

The so-called choice of adoption was for some a painful decision forced upon them by parents and experts instead of the selfless act of love that social workers described. One birth mother remembered a doctor threatening to send her to a mental institution if she considered keeping her baby. Another recalled, "I was completely dehumanized."⁶⁰ Many adolescents who lived at maternity homes and relinquished their babies through adoption without a feeling of agency in the decision held on to the grief of that loss throughout their lives. In 1977 one birthmother remembered her experience as a sixteen-year-old pregnant girl this way:

The morning after my daughter had been born, a social worker came to by bedside in the hospital to pressure me to surrender my baby...I was NEVER given the legal counsel of an attorney nor advised of any other alternatives to adoption, nor treated in any humane manner ... Every attempt I made to indicate to this woman that I did not wish to surrender my child to adoption was met with counseling (?) designed to bully and intimidate me into submission ... To make a painful story short, in the end my spirit was broken and so was my heart.⁶¹

This author, along with other birthmothers like her, grew up to be active in the feminist movement of the late 1960s. The younger a woman was when she entered a maternity home, the more likely she was to be presented with few options and little power in her decision.⁶²

In this way, the maternity home conveyed conflicting views of motherhood. For some birth mothers it provided a second chance at life for both birth mother and child in addition to

⁵⁹ Ibid., 73

⁶⁰ Ibid, 70

⁶¹ Linda Shipley, "To Women's Day Magazine Regarding Adoption Process," February 4, 1977. Boston Women's Health Book Collective, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

⁶² Ann Fessler, *The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades before Roe v. Wade* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006); Messer and May, *Back Rooms*; Solinger *Wake Up Little Susie*

providing a “worthy” couple with the opportunity for a family. Others felt a complete loss, and saw themselves treated not as mothers but as incubators supplying a “true” mother with a chance for fulfillment. Although unwed mothers were given attention and support, they were still “problem girls” who should relinquish their newborns to a more qualified mother.⁶³ For maternity home leaders, a “good mother” was married, financially stable, able to be at home with her children, and willing to undergo an intense screening process. It followed that the unwed teenage birthmothers who met none of these criteria were not considered mothers at all.

In addition to age, class and race played important roles in how an unwed mother experienced social services in the immediate post-war years. The maternity homes that CWLA and other groups praised as the best option for unwed mothers largely catered to white middle-class families. Many charged the girl’s family tuition or required her family pay medical costs, making a stay in a home impossible for many young women. Florence Crittenton homes, for example, readily recognized that accessibility to maternity home services was “determined primarily not on the basis of need, but rather in terms of economic status and the plan for the baby, which in most instances is another way of saying on the basis of color.” Though the Crittenton homes did endeavor to expand their services to women in lower socioeconomic brackets, finances continued to define maternity home populations.⁶⁴ The greater a woman’s access to financial support, the more easily she concealed her pregnancy through private organizations.

African American Unwed Mothers

In 1965, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan released his infamous treatise, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. Moynihan’s report

⁶³ Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls*

⁶⁴ Bernstein, “Expanding Services to the Unwed Parent and Her Child.”

immediately became one of the most controversial discussions of the African American family of its time. Moynihan argued, “there is a considerable body of evidence to support the conclusion that Negro social structure, in particular the Negro family, battered and harassed by discrimination, injustice, and uprooting, is in the deepest trouble.”⁶⁵ He further argued that compared to white families, African American families were caught in a “tangle of pathology” that was “capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world.”⁶⁶ This pathology, according to Moynihan, stemmed from the tradition of matriarchy in African American families. Among other things, this report fueled the belief that unwed pregnancy was a uniquely African American problem. While white unwed mothers could be rehabilitated in maternity homes and sent back into the world to live a new life, black teen mothers were simply embodying the pathology of their culture and could not be helped. Solinger argues that most social workers viewed black women as inherently sexual.⁶⁷

As a result, pregnant unwed African Americans often found themselves with few options. In addition to steep financial restrictions to gain admittance to maternity homes that made it difficult for many African Americans to stay, many homes did not admit girls who did not choose adoption. As there were “insufficient opportunities for adoption” for nonwhite babies, this meant that women of color were much more likely to keep their babies than their white counterparts.⁶⁸ The Florence Crittenton Association praised “heroic” efforts of organizations that searched for “more adoptive homes for nonwhite children,” claiming that finding such placement

⁶⁵ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action," ed. Department of Labor (Office of Policy Planning and Research, 1965). For an excellent collection of responses to this report, see Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, eds., *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy* (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1967).

⁶⁶ Moynihan, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action."

⁶⁷ Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie*

⁶⁸ Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie*, Melosh, *Strangers and Kin*

was a difficult task.⁶⁹ African American women were frequently turned away from maternity homes and adoption centers solely based on race. One survey showed that in 1961 less than ten percent of non-white unwed mothers received support from public or private agencies designed for unwed mothers. Among maternity homes, the numbers were more striking; only two percent of non-white unwed mothers who applied for help were served.⁷⁰

Many maternity home leaders helped create the divergent paths of white and nonwhite unwed mothers. A Florence Crittenton publication asserted that the adoption programs in their centers were “arranged along with the color line.” The author argued that relinquishment was “more appropriate” for white women than African American women because “the stigma is likely to be greater and the social penalty more exacting” for white single mothers.⁷¹ Social workers generally believed that “among a great many families of the Negro race no stigma attaches to the child by reason of his birth status,” leading them to assume that African American communities accepted illegitimacy and adolescent pregnancy.⁷² However, the high incidence of unwed motherhood was more tied to lack of options than a cultural acceptance of teenage pregnancy.

As pregnant African American teens were unable to afford or gain admittance to maternity homes, it was common for unwed mothers to keep their babies and raise them among family members. This created a cycle that furthered incurious social workers’ belief that unwed mothers and their children were “accepted and supported without question” by African American communities.⁷³ While it is true that African American women facing unwed motherhood were

⁶⁹ Bernstein, “Expanding Services to the Unwed Parent and Her Child.”

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 3

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² “The Problem of Births Out of Wedlock,” American School Health Association Papers, Social Welfare History Archives, The University of Minnesota Libraries, 14

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 14

more likely to keep their babies, social workers' explanations of this decision were flawed. They did not take into account the limits of systemic racism in the adoption process. Assuming that illegitimacy was acceptable ignored the lack of alternatives for unwed mothers of color. As long as maternity homes did not welcome African American clients and adoption centers viewed nonwhite babies as liabilities, what choice did an unwed mother of color have but to raise her child at home?

Taken together, these factors had important impacts on the public face of unwed teen pregnancy. Many young black women started at a socioeconomic disadvantage. Complicating this by adding the responsibility of raising a child without the ability to finish schooling or finding a job with an adequate salary and childcare, meant that unwed black teenage mothers faced countless struggles in their daily lives. The poverty that usually accompanied their situations made a lasting impact on the public image of teen pregnancy. As long as white, middle-class women chose the options of secrecy and adoption, it appeared that most teenage mothers came from working-class, minority families.

Education for Unwed Teens

Homes for unwed mothers boasted that girls could continue their education while living in their residential institutions. If a girl did not relinquish her baby through adoption, unwed motherhood typically meant the end of her formal education. Providing a home, food, clothing, and other necessities took precedence over high school diplomas. In this way, race, class, or personal choice directly impacted the education and therefore professional future of unwed mothers. For the white, middle class girls who spent their pregnancies within the walls of a maternity home, educational opportunities were significantly different from that of their home school.

Maternity homes used their education practices to promote their own goals of rehabilitation that prepared girls for marriage and working-class jobs rather than providing intellectual development that could lead to professional opportunity for their residents.⁷⁴ Public schools generally subscribed to the “myth that out-of-wedlock pregnancy may be contagious” and expelled pregnant students to hide their pregnancies as well as to “punish her for her misdeed.”⁷⁵ Those who gained access to maternity homes received varying degrees of continued instruction. Formal education was not a priority in many maternity homes. The CWLA’s list of problems faced by unwed mothers included “the mother may be discriminated against and not permitted to enjoy the same privileges of the community as others. She may be denied school attendance...” among other activities. To help balance this, the CWLA recommended that local school districts provide tutors or teachers for girls who would return to secondary school after pregnancy. However, they further advised that homes for unwed mothers focus on vocational and home economics programs rather than the academic courses the girls would have participated in at their schools.

Most residential maternity homes offered classes for their clients. Edna Gladney, a national leader in maternity home protocol and the head of the Edna Gladney Maternity Center in Dallas, Texas, organized classes to meet two goals at once. Other maternity home leaders followed her lead. First, the home established a school for residents that taught skills such as typing to help the birth mothers to find jobs and support themselves after leaving the institution. Certified teachers taught classes at the Gladney School. Such classes were intended to equip birthmothers to start new lives without the burden of unwed motherhood. Gladney even provided

⁷⁴ *Child Welfare League of America Standards for Services to Unmarried Parents.*

⁷⁵ Sally Headsten, “Involvement of the Total Staff in the Treatment of the Individual,” Denver, CO: Florence Crittenton Association of America Inc., 1966, Folder 4, Box 50, Florence Crittenton Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, The University of Minnesota Libraries, 1

the women with “new wardrobes and money in their purses to support them long enough to get a job” as a way of assisting the women in moving forward with their own lives with the best possible opportunities.⁷⁶ Throughout their time at the Gladney Center, adolescents learned to imagine a new life without the stigma of their pregnancy. In sum, upon leaving the home, birthmothers received a new wardrobe and the skills necessary to support themselves until they could get married, begin a family and have a new child within the socially acceptable realm of marriage.⁷⁷

Maternity homes fulfilled their second educational goal both inside and outside the classroom. In homes like the Gladney Center, pregnant adolescents learned in no uncertain terms that the actions leading to their pregnancies were a mistake. Throughout their time at a maternity home, young women heard numerous messages separating their lives from that of their children. In order to encourage birth mothers to relinquish their babies, homes separated pregnant women from those who had already given birth, making labor a “rite of passage” into a new life in which the pregnancy (and the sexual activity that caused it) would disappear.⁷⁸ Maternity homes hoped to achieve complete separation of birthmother and child, while simultaneously teaching birthmothers that the choices they made prior to arriving at the home must never be repeated outside the bonds of marriage. The lesson of maternity homes was clear: relinquish your baby, forget the incident and start life anew. For those who could do this successfully, maternity homes offered a second chance for an idealized life.⁷⁹ The education patterns at Gladney mirrored

⁷⁶ *Child Welfare League of America Standards for Services to Unmarried Parents.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Child Welfare League of America Standards for Services to Unmarried Parents.*

⁷⁹ Many women who lived in maternity homes later spoke of conflicted feelings about their time there. Although many claimed they would still have relinquished their babies, the guilt that they learned while at the home followed them throughout their lives. Additionally, most homes practiced closed adoption policies making it almost impossible for birthmothers and their children to reunite or learn about one another later in life.

systems across the country, all intended to allow teens to return to their high schools after an extended absence as if they had not given birth at all.

After relinquishing her baby, maternity home residents reentered traditional high schools. For some, this meant returning to the school that had forced them to drop out with the stigma of unwed pregnancy. Others chose to attend new schools, night school, or complete school in a new town by moving in with a relative. The National Council on Illegitimacy (NCI), an umbrella organization for organizations that worked with unwed mothers in partnership with the CWLA, recommended that upon returning to school, a girl should go through a process known as “guided re-entry” to help ease the transition into uninstitutionalized life. In this procedure, social workers aided formerly pregnant teens as they rejoined their communities. The NCI advised that social workers should motivate their client to return to school quickly after giving birth as a way of “facilitating healthier attitudes toward herself” and to encourage her to “realize her potential as a human being and productive member of society,” putting her shameful past behind her. Guided re-entry programs helped girls choose a school that would accept transfer credits from her previous school as well as from the maternity home if she had attended school while there. NCI social workers also assisted girls as they worked through any emotional problems with re-entry. This demonstrated a realization that a girl’s emotional health may be fragile upon re-entering her old world after the life-changing experience of relinquishing a child. Social workers advised that girls focus on “achieving reasonable and satisfying life goals” rather than dwelling on the past.⁸⁰

Advent of the Sexual Revolution

Maternity home traditions thrived in the context of the early Cold War by teaching young women to forget their sexual transgressions in favor of pursuing a traditional marriage and family. Race determined the choices available for single, pregnant adolescents. Maternity homes

⁸⁰ Parody, “The Uninterrupted Education of Unwed Mothers.”

and adoption centers held a particular attraction for the white middle class, while African American adolescents were more likely to keep their babies. During pregnancy, unwed white women were sequestered in maternity homes where they learned proper deportment, cooking, sewing, and other conventional domestic duties. Educators hoped that the girls in their care would use these skills later in life when the girls married and had additional children after relinquishing the baby they currently carried. Throughout their time in the maternity home, they learned that the only acceptable way to have a baby was within the confines of marriage. By relinquishing her baby, a “problem girl” could start anew. There were few maternity homes to offer redemption for African American women. White social workers often viewed black sexual deviance as a cultural norm, limiting the choices for unwed African American mothers. Though social workers who ran maternity home and adoption centers ardently believed they could rescue and rehabilitate “problem girls,” this treatment was usually reserved for the white girls they believed most worthy of their time.⁸¹

Even as they pushed to open more homes for girls, maternity home leaders and social scientists began to feel change approaching. In 1953, the publication of Alfred Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* sent shockwaves through universities and living rooms as Americans discovered that women, like men, enjoyed sex. Kinsey’s report was immediately labeled “perverted” for its willingness to discuss topics such as the female orgasm, homosexuality, and abortion.⁸² Medical doctors Edmund Berler and William S. Kroger furthered the antagonistic response to Kinsey’s research by publishing their reactionary *Kinsey’s Myth of Female Sexuality: The Medical Facts*, arguing that female sexuality should indeed be

⁸¹ Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie*

⁸² Chafe, *The American Woman*, 186.

contained.⁸³ At the same time, rock music and the seeds of sexual freedom invaded youth culture, young people gained more independence with the pervasive automobile culture, and teens began to experiment sexually in larger numbers. Courtship, traditionally supervised by parents, moved out of the living room and into the drive-in. This allowed teens more freedom to explore their emotional and sexual relationships. Many limited their sexual experience to petting and other forms of touch, preserving what historian Beth Bailey calls “technical virginity.”⁸⁴ By stopping just short of intercourse, teens walked a fine line between the expectations of the 1950s culture and the new undercurrents of what would be known as the sexual revolution. The sexual revolution of the 1960s changed the way Americans experienced sexuality not only because men and women engaged in premarital sex publicly for the first time but because it shifted the way Americans thought about sex. This had lasting consequences for teenage girls whose first sexual experiences ended with unwanted pregnancies and limited options.

Maternity homes, established to rehabilitate teens and cure the social disease of teen pregnancy, were the primary method of caring for white unwed mothers during the 1950s and 1960s. These homes for “problem girls” provided a place for white families to hide their daughter’s sexual missteps and allowed girls to start anew after relinquishing their babies for adoption. The pressure for girls to choose adoption was the central educational theme within the home. Social workers counseled girls that they could not raise their own children and should instead focus on preparing themselves for a future marriage and family that would erase past indiscretions.

⁸³ Ibid., 186-187.

⁸⁴ Beth Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988)

Within the walls of maternity homes, social workers singular focus on adoption meant that they often did not give credence to the emotional turmoil that came with relinquishing a baby. Though many girls welcomed the opportunity to hide their pregnancies and return home as if nothing had happened, other birth mothers remembered the experience as emotionally traumatic. The latter group grew up to form the backbone of the feminist movement against maternity homes in the 1960s.

For pregnant African American teens, adoption was rarely an option. Few maternity homes admitted minority women and adoption agencies complained of how difficult it was for them to place black children. The strikingly different experiences of white and black unwed mothers furthered the stereotype that African American culture accepted or even condoned single motherhood. In truth, these young women rarely had a choice about what to do after they found out they were pregnant. As a result, the public perception of teenage pregnancy was often that of a young African American single mother struggling to raise her baby at home. This dichotomy created dueling images of teen pregnancy. The white unwed mother who could be rehabilitated through adoption stood on one side of the spectrum and the welfare-dependent single African American mother at the other. The sexual revolution and feminist movements of the 1960s would challenge both of these profiles of pregnant teens.

Chapter 2: National Anxiety about Teen Pregnancy Grows

With the coming of the sexual revolution, women who endured maternity homes began to speak out against institutions that did not provide enough support and understanding for birth mothers. At the same time feminists adopted the critical theory of body politics, arguing that a woman's body and its reproductive abilities should be reclaimed as woman-centered spaces.¹ These trends led feminist social workers and educators to argue against maternity homes' regulation of adolescent pregnancy, calling the institutions "archaic and puritanical and sadly in need of a complete turnaround."² The women's liberation movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s sped the transition toward more public awareness of teen pregnancy across racial and class lines through its vocal disapproval of maternity homes but also because feminists argued that girls should have more control over their own bodies and futures, regardless of an unplanned pregnancy.

While teen pregnancy reached record heights in the 1950s, the late 1960s ushered in a number of social changes that pushed the issue into further into the political spotlight. Traditional beliefs about premarital sex were turned on their heads as couples embraced sex outside of marriage. At the same time, feminists called for the end of maternity homes, criticizing the very institutions hailed by experts as perfect solutions a decade earlier. Public schools also faced new pressure about their treatment of pregnant students as more pregnant

¹ For further discussion of body politics and second wave feminism, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Wendy Kolmar and Frances Bartkowski, *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, 2 ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2005). For an example of how body politics inform adolescent sexuality see Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

² Solinger, Rickie, *Wake Up Little Susie* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 4

teenage girls chose to remain at home and keep their babies. As sex education moved into the public sphere, maternity homes closed, and teen mothers chose to keep their babies, the federal government began to turn its attention to plight of pregnant teenagers.

Teaching Teens about Sex

The sexual revolution sped changes in the way schools approached sex education. The changes came in a two-fold process. On one end of the spectrum, conservatives rallied against the sexual openness of the late 1960s and demanded a more limited sex education curriculum. Conversely, feminists and other activists demanded increasingly open discussions about sex, contraception, venereal disease, and pregnancy in order to protect the health of teens. Much of the argument for open communication and sex education curriculum starting in elementary school came from the growing national concern about teen pregnancy. Mary Calderone, co-founder of the Sex Information and Education Council for the United States (SIECUS), went so far as to argue that the entire debate around sex education and contraception revolved around the fact that “the teenage girl is having sex, the teenage girl is getting pregnant, therefore we have to decide if we’ll provide contraception for teenagers.”³

The 1960s were a transition period for sex education curriculum. Throughout the 1950s, many schools provided an open “family life education” program that invited students to ask questions and discuss issues of sexuality in the classroom. Teachers focused on emotional rather than biological aspects of sexual relationships. The purpose of this approach was to “help our boys and girls develop more robust personalities so that they may face up to

³ Mary Calderone, “Contraception, Teenagers, and Sexual Responsibility.” *The Journal of Sex Research* 2, no. 1 (April 1966), p 1

emotional problems later in life” when faced with making personal sexual decisions.”⁴ The strength of this curriculum lay in its focus on emotions. Sexuality was not presented as a purely biological act, rather discussions included the emotional aspects of dating and preparing for marriage. This gave students an opportunity to explore their feelings in addition to their physical experiences. Despite this seemingly open method, the courses also reflected the biases of their times. Teachers discussed sexual intercourse using veiled terms like “going all the way” that gave students little information about the biological process of reproduction. This led to a generation of young people with scant knowledge about how to physically prevent pregnancy. The ASHA curriculum admonished girls that they should use their power to “always say ‘no’” as a method to have control on their dates. She should also “refuse to subject any male to undue sexual stimulation” in order to protect him from “his weakness or poor judgment.”⁵ Through this lesson on their “power” in relationships, girls learned that they were responsible not only for keeping their own emotions in check, but also those of their partner. Doubtless this caused significant pressure and guilt on young women discovering their own sexuality in the backseat of cars at the decade’s iconic drive-in movies. Each of these discussions emphasized the idea that sexual intercourse outside marriage resulted in negative consequences ranging from heartache and difficulty finding a marital partner to venereal disease and pregnancy. This combination of open discussion with the focus on marriage meant that teenagers had limited access to information on the biological elements of sexuality or contraception. Sex was only acceptable after marriage, anything outside of that was immediately eschewed.

⁴ Susan Kathleen Freeman, *Sex Goes to School: Girls and Sex Education before the 1960s*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2008), 29

⁵ Freeman, *When Sex Goes to School*, 34

Suddenly, as historian Jeffery Moran writes, “more than a century’s worth of sexual prohibitions was overthrown” when the sexual revolution ushered in the belief that sexual intercourse was acceptable within the bounds of a “meaningful” relationship, regardless of marital boundaries.⁶ Though premarital sex had always been part of courtship rituals, young people of the late 1960s made their actions into public statements rather than hiding in the backseat at a drive in⁷. In the words of one college student, “we’ve discarded the idea that the loss of virginity is related to degeneracy” and replaced it with the belief that sex, within a relationship, could be normal and healthy.⁸ In rejecting the idea that a woman’s worth was tied to her virginity, feminists claimed that women and men could participate in sexual relationships equally. Seemingly overnight the family life classes appeared out of touch with student’s realities.⁹ Educators entered a new era in which students were exposed to sex outside of marriage in music, books, television, and newscasts. From this upheaval came a tug-of-war from within the sex education community. Conservative educators pushed to maintain the curriculum of the past, focused on emotional decisions, responsibility, and, above all, marriage as the safe place for sex. Others argued that the curriculum needed to change to fit the times. As American girls sang “will you still love me tomorrow?” with The Shirelles, classes based on the idea that girls did not want to engage in premarital sex seemed glaringly out of place.¹⁰

⁶ Jeffrey P Moran, *Teaching Sex : The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 160

⁷ Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat : Courtship in Twentieth-Century America*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988) and Moran, *Teaching Sex*

⁸ “The Morals Revolution on the U.S. Campus,” *Newsweek*, 6 April 1964, p 52-53

⁹ Moran *Teaching Sex* and Freeman *Sex Goes to School*

¹⁰ Susan Douglas *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media*. (New York: Times Books, 1994)

In the midst of these changes, Mary Calderone, the “grandmother of sex education,” helped establish the Sex Information and Education Council for the United States (SIECUS).¹¹ The organization quickly became the nation’s leading advocate for comprehensive sex education and open distribution of contraception. Calderone, who left her job as the Medical Director of Planned Parenthood to form SIECUS in 1964, believed that teens could only make sound decisions about sex if they were grounded in the “honesty and integrity” of the educators and parents teaching the lessons.¹² As such, she encouraged adults to adopt frank and open discussions with young people of all ages.

The belief that teens were sexually active and deserved access to information about their own sexuality was the central thesis underlying SIECUS’s work. Calderone made a point of claiming that it was not a question of whether teens were having sex, but a question of providing accurate and comprehensive information in language that they would understand. Additionally, her work at Planned Parenthood underscored her belief that sexually active teens should have access to contraception. As a result, SIECUS emphasized that parents and educators should focus on “telling it like it is” rather than avoiding or sugar-coating conversations about sexuality.¹³ Only with forthright conversation could teens begin to understand their sexuality, make healthy choices, and hope to avoid teen pregnancy.

Reacting to the Sexual Revolution: Teens Seek Answers about Sexuality

Calderone’s argument that young people needed more information about sexuality is proven in letters from teens themselves. Letters to a popular teen advice column demonstrate

¹¹ Jane E. Brody, “Mary S. Calderone, Advocate of Sexual Education, Dies at 94” *New York Times*, October 25, 1998 <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/25/us/mary-s-calderone-advocate-of-sexual-education-dies-at-94.html?pagewanted=all>.

¹² Mary Calderone, “Family Life for Sex Education”. Speech, August 21, 1968, Folder 30, Carton 2, Mary Calderone Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

¹³ *Ibid.*

the ignorance, misinformation, and fear surrounding sex for adolescents. One note, scribbled on a torn scrap of paper asked “I know that you have probably answered this question a hundred thousand times but what is V-D? And please don’t use those big scientific words.”¹⁴ A 1973 letter, written on lady bug stationary from a 13 year old girl, goes to the heart of the question of ignorance about sex.

Dear Beth,
I am 13 years old and afraid to ask my mother this question. “Do you have to make love to have a child or is it dangerous to make out constantly?” In other words, could simply getting in bed with a boy, without making love, get you pregnant?
Sincerely,
Anonymous¹⁵

This young woman is a prime example of the lack of sex education that SIECUS fought against. Winship’s answer mirrored Calderone’s frustration. It began “you need to ask someone about the process of reproduction. Burns me up that kids like you haven’t got all the info long before age 13” and concluded with the fact that getting in bed with a boy will likely lead to making out but not necessarily lead to pregnancy.¹⁶

Calderone and SIECUS made it their mission to advocate for comprehensive sex education by teaching parents, educators, and physicians how to talk about sex. Quoting a teenager who asked “If sex is something to be appreciated, why do many parents and other adults....feel they have the right to make us think that it is something dirty....” Calderone argued that adult attitudes toward sexuality shaped young people’s experiences.¹⁷ Rather than make sex seem dirty, she wrote in a 1965 article in *The PTA Magazine*, parents and educators

¹⁴ “‘Ask Beth’ Letters”, n.d. Elizabeth Winship Papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ “‘Ask Beth’ Letters”, n.d. Elizabeth Winship Papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

¹⁷ Calderone, Mary, “Teenagers and Sex” *The PTA Magazine*, October 1965. Folder 246, Box 15, Mary Calderone Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

should ease fears about sex while promoting morals and providing information about contraception.¹⁸ The result was that teens of the 1970s whose sex education curriculum was influenced by SIECUS learned detailed biological information but were also encouraged to ask questions and engage in dialogue with their parents and teachers on the topic of sexuality. This meant that teens of the 1970s were better informed about sexuality than their parent's generation.

One of the central tenets of the sex education movement was access to information. Just as SIECUS encouraged parents to talk with their children about sexuality beginning at an early age, the organization worked with librarians, school doctors, and teachers to provide accurate and accessible information in schools. If adolescents did not learn about sex at home, they should learn about it in school. If no formal classes existed, the library should at least provide books to answer students' questions. Calderone chastised librarians and other educators who chose "silent ignorance" over the opportunity to ensure students could learn about their sexuality.¹⁹ In her view, the only way to stem the rising teen pregnancy rate was for educators to stop being "blind, stubborn, stupid and fearful," and instead to do whatever they could to grant young people access to the information that could help them make healthy sexual choices.²⁰

One of Calderone's favorite ways to challenge young audiences was to ask them to give a four-letter word that ended in "k" and meant sexual intercourse. After an awkward silence and giggles, she would give her answer "talk" and explain her belief that "we never

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Calderone, Mary, "Young People, Sexuality, and Librarians." *Top of the News* (Winter 1977), p 2, Folder 34, Carton 2, Mary Calderone Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

²⁰ Ibid

talk as nonsexual people.”²¹ Empowering adults to talk to students about their relationships as “sexual people” shaped the mission and work of SIECUS, resulting in significant changes to sex education. As a result, schools adopted curricula that introduced issues of sexuality from elementary school through high school despite conservative backlash. The students who attended such open classes surely benefited from their experiences.

Unfortunately, not all adolescents experienced the honest dialogue that Calderone promoted. Many parents did not broach the subject of sex at all, even as they protested sex education in schools.²² One Alabama girl reported learning about sex by reading bathroom stall graffiti while a young woman in Alaska was given pictures of animals engaged in sexual intercourse as part of her lesson. She describes her experience in an interview several years later. “They had a picture of a cow and I thought my god, is that what we do? And, uh, I hadn’t really thought of that until a couple years later I walked in on a friend of mine. I thought now that looks better than a cow.”²³ The same girl goes on to describe that her first real lesson sex came at the age of 13 when she had sex with a 24-year-old man who she considered her boyfriend.

In other cases, sex education curriculum included gaps. A Californian teen explained that she would not have sex before marriage because “intercourse is a really serious step to take now-a-days-because you know a lot of diseases are going around, you know like V.D.” But when she was asked about how she would obtain contraception, she replied, “what’s that?” Her teachers had missed a significant opportunity. While teaching young people that

²¹ Brody, “Mary S. Calderone”

²² The Birch Society, famous for its opposition to sex education in schools would not become vocal until the 1970s, largely in response to the programs promote by organizations such as SIECUS.

²³ Project Girl Interview AK-SH-18, Sexuality-Alaska Folder, Box 20, Project Girl, The Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries

venereal disease (VD) could result from unprotected sex, they did not provide any information about how the young people in their classroom could protect themselves.²⁴

“So, then, where does a girl who is sexually active go for help? Society is going to have to decide this, because they’re not going to stop sexual activity just by our saying *no!*”²⁵ Calderone raged against sex education programs that did not include information about contraception. She further argued that physicians should take a larger role in sex education, providing biological facts about sexual intercourse, contraception, and sexuality to teens. A 1968 study by the Ortho Pharmaceutical Corporation, whose main product was birth control pills, revealed that doctors gave out information about birth control to higher numbers of teens at the end of the decade than they had in the early 1960s. Obviously the drug company would have looked for this type of answer as it promoted its product. That the drug had only been available for eight years also suggests that by 1968 some doctors had accepted birth control as a safe method of contraception, even for teenage girls. However, other questions in the survey shed light on the way teens and their doctors interacted. One of the most telling statistics shows that a majority of general practitioners and OB/GYNs only provided contraceptive information to adolescents after securing approval from the teenager’s parents. As the adolescents in question were legally minors, parental consent seemed the safest option. However, this meant that a majority of teens who may have felt uncomfortable talking to their parents and looked for information on how to avoid pregnancy from their doctors were turned away with little information. Even Planned Parenthood, the organization behind the birth

²⁴ Although birth control is a significant part of the abortion debate today, that was not the case in the 1970s. Most anti-abortion activists focused strictly on abortion and accepted birth control as a method of family planning. It was not until the 1990s that activists started to argue that birth control could also be considered an abortifacient.

²⁵ *Teen-Age and Premarital Sexual Counseling*, Report and Commentary on Current Problems in Medical Practice. Ortho Pharmaceutical Corporation, 1968, Folder 263, Box 16, Mary Calderone Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

control pill, required parental consent for teens to learn about contraception. Combined with the lack of contraceptive education in school curriculums, sexually active teenagers in the 1960s had few options for places to learn about how to prevent pregnancy.²⁶

These stories may seem extreme but they appear with surprising regularity throughout the historical record. Even many of those who reported learning about sex in school or from their parents said that the situation was so clinical or awkward that they did not feel fully informed. Calderone was correct that sex education seldom occurred in an open, honest, informative and safe way for teenage girls. For too many girls, sex education came after a sexual experience that resulted in an unplanned pregnancy. For those young women the case of too little, too late had life-altering consequences.

Pregnant and Parenting Teens in Public Schools

Like the maternity home girls of the previous decade, young women in the 1960s who did not relinquish their babies through adoption or maternity homes, formal education often ended with pregnancy and childbirth. The rules governing school attendance demonstrate that school officials found the pregnant teen's body, the physical manifestation of sexual indiscretion, inappropriate for public schools. The most typical regulation required students to "withdraw from the regular school program at the end of the third month of her pregnancy" or before she began to "show."²⁷ Other schools mandated a student leave immediately after she disclosed her pregnancy, supposedly to avoid the possibility of her pregnancy influencing others. Despite this rule, few schools offered any alternative system of education once a student was forced to leave. Furthermore, schools did not permit students to return to classes

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Charles H Harrison, "School Girl Pregnancy: Old Problem: New Solutions," ed. National School Public Relations Association (Washington D.C.: Education USA, 1972).8

during the school year in which they delivered the child. This meant that even if a young woman gave birth in September, she returned to school at least a year behind her peers, regardless of her academic abilities.²⁸

Given these strict policies, it is not surprising that so few students returned to school after childbirth. A survey of unwed mothers in Ohio in 1963 found only eleven of 118 respondents returned to school after the birth of their first child. Among women surveyed, only thirty-two completed high school after their child was born.²⁹ Most found themselves unable to attend school, secure affordable childcare and work to support their child. As they attempted to balance the new demands of parenthood, they also entered a limited job market with low wages and long hours. In addition to shouldering the economic responsibilities of parenthood, students contended with public school policies that deterred students from returning after pregnancy.

Adolescents who lived at home during and after pregnancy faced routine discrimination within their high schools. *Education USA* reported a litany of rules that condemned pregnant students to second-class status even after the birth of their children. Pregnant and parenting students were banned from school clubs, holding honorary positions such as student council officer, running for homecoming or prom queen, and earning awards from the school. For example, one Midwestern school district ruled pregnant youth “may not take part in extracurricular activities during the school year in which her pregnancy occurs, either before or after they deliver.” The same student “may not hold office or represent the

²⁸ Gail L. Zellman, "The Response of the Schools to Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood." Santa Monica, CA: National Institute of Education, 1982.

²⁹ Ellery F. Reed and Ruth Latmir, *A Study of Unmarried Mothers Who Kept Their Babies* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Social Welfare Research Inc., 1963). Many of those who completed high school did so before they discovered their pregnancies.

school” during or after her pregnancy.³⁰ Though “awards received prior to conception...will be presented privately,” she could not receive additional awards, no matter how well deserved.³¹ Most of these rules focus on both punishing the student for her sexual indiscretion while simultaneously hiding the results from her peers. Significantly, the report includes no mention of punishment for unwed fathers.

Female students who opted to get married after discovering a pregnancy faced a more lenient system. Although schools dismissed unwed mothers from school entirely, many policies dictated that “married girls who become pregnant and are thus dropped from school may be furnished a home teacher,” and they continued their education during their pregnancy.³² By legitimizing the child, and therefore the sexual act, through marriage, adolescents maintained their status within the school system. Interestingly, the schools also published rules for married adolescent males. While unmarried young men faced no documented sanction, schools did bar married men from representing the school “during the school year (or years) of his paternity.”³³ This demonstrates that schools did punish young men for their role in sexual activity but only with admittance of paternity. However, unlike married or unmarried pregnant women, adolescent fathers did not face institutional policies that limited their rights to complete their education.

As the school system did not make allowances or create programs to help alleviate any of these struggles, most unwed teenage mothers faced little choice but to leave school prematurely and permanently. Thus, many of these young women never completed high school. Their “sexual deviance” and lack of the adequate economic resources to gain

³⁰ Harrison, "School Girl Pregnancy: Old Problem: New Solutions," 8

³¹ Ibid, 8

³² Ibid, 9

³³ Ibid, 8

admittance to a maternity home or seek an illegal abortion effectively sentenced these young mothers to a lifetime of limited employment opportunities.³⁴ These policies most directly impacted unwed mothers of color and those who came from families without the financial resources to send them to maternity homes.

Challenging Assumptions about Race and Unwed Pregnancy

As early as 1969, the National Council on Illegitimacy (NCI) began to challenge the assumptions that race and unwed pregnancy were inextricably linked. The organization's experts looked for statistical reasons for the discrepancy in illegitimacy rates between white and nonwhite women. For example, they found that on average one in four teenage brides during the 1950s and early 1960s was pregnant at the time of her wedding. Almost all of these brides were white, a fact NCI attributed to socioeconomic differences between the races. While they found that a young white couple was likely to be self-supporting or have the help of their families, "the young Negro male is in a very unfavorable position with relation to his ability to support a new family."³⁵ This argument was founded on the fact that unemployment rates for nonwhite men were almost three times that of the national average for white men in 1969. The disparity was greater among teenagers, with the result that nonwhite couples often waited for marriage until they were financially able to support themselves. This argument is further supported by the fact that one third of black unmarried mothers did marry their baby's

³⁴ For detailed accounts of abortion before *Roe v. Wade*, see: Linda Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women*, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2002); Deidre M. Kelly, *Pregnant with Meaning: Teen Mothers and the Politics of Inclusive Schooling* (New York: P. Lang, 2000); Regina Kunzel, *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Mothers and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993); Ellen and May Messer, Katheryn E., *Back Rooms: Voices from the Illegal Abortion Era* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1994); Rickie Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie*, (New York: Routledge, 2000.); Solinger *Beggars and Choosers: How the Politics of Choice Shapes Adoption, Abortion and Welfare in the United States* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

³⁵ "Comments on Incidence of Illegitimacy Among Nonwhites," June 1969, Folder 3, Box 48, Child Welfare League of American Papers, Social Welfare History Archives, 6

father within five years of childbirth. These marriages occurred too late, however, for their children to avoid the stigma of illegitimacy and helped skew the statistics against African American couples because the children were technically born out of wedlock.³⁶

Social workers also began to use adoption statistics to challenge the perception that African Americans had a higher rate of unwed motherhood. In 1967, for example, sixty-seven percent of white unwed mothers relinquished their children for adoption while only six percent of unwed nonwhites did.³⁷ This gap was based largely on the fact that most maternity homes served white women and encouraged them to place their babies with adoptive families. In fact, agency procedures often discouraged African American women from choosing adoption because “of the lack of suitable adoptive families.” By treating white and nonwhite women with opposite approaches, 1950s social workers at maternity homes and adoption centers helped create the impression that there were more nonwhite unwed pregnancies.³⁸

An NCI report published in 1968 states that nonwhite mothers gave birth out of wedlock almost six times more than white women.³⁹ This statistic is misleading because it measures births rather than pregnancies, and women’s access to adoption and abortion varied just as their access to contraception did. According to Dr. Howard Osofsky, many of the stigmas attached to unwed mothers in the 1950s and early 1960s developed from unequal access to contraception and therapeutic abortions. White women from families with financial means were often able to find doctors willing to perform legal “therapeutic” abortions. Access to this option was limited by both financial means and doctor’s biases. Osofsky found

³⁶ Ibid, 6

³⁷ Ibid, 7

³⁸ Ibid, 7

³⁹ “Comments on Recent Trends in Illegitimacy in the US,” Folder 3, Box 48, Child Welfare League of American Papers, Social Welfare History Archives, 2

“physicians’ evaluation is more likely to be favorable for middle- and upper-class women than it is for the poor,” leaving women from working-class families with few options for legal abortion. Osofsky concluded that though for the middle and upper classes “current abortion laws may be unfair,” for women in the lowest socioeconomic groups, “the present laws are clearly discriminatory.”⁴⁰

Unequal access to abortion further slanted the statistics and public perception of teenage pregnancy. The fact that abortion was not legally open to all women ensured that poor women and women of color would continue to have more babies out of wedlock than their white counterparts. This was not due to nonwhites’ greater cultural acceptance of teenage pregnancy or illegitimacy, as many sociologists in the 1950s asserted, but rather to a system that privileged some women over others. The women’s liberation movement called for a change in abortion law to make abortions legally available to all women facing unwanted pregnancy. Underground organizations like Jane in Chicago worked to help women access safe, illegal abortions throughout the late 1960s.⁴¹ Feminists argued that women should have control over their own bodies and be able to make the choice to have a safe, legal abortion rather than an unwanted pregnancy. Many doctors agreed, pointing out that the procedure was medically safe and that illegal operations often led to dangerous side effects. Some states including New York, Hawaii, and Washington, began to bow to the pressure from feminists and doctors, legalizing abortion for the first time in the twentieth century. The abortion rights movement did not go unnoticed by groups working with unwed mothers. Organizations like NCI joined the campaign to legalize abortion, arguing that equal access to abortion and

⁴⁰ Howard J. Osofsky, MD, *The Pregnant Teenager: A Medical, Educational and Social Analysis*, (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas Publishing, 1968), 100-10

⁴¹ Laura Kaplan, *The Story of Jan: The Legendary Underground Feminist Abortion Service* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995)

contraception would help women of all socioeconomic and racial groups avoid unwed pregnancy.

Feminist Backlash against Maternity Homes

Many white women also felt that they had been treated unfairly when confronted with teenage pregnancy. Those who were sent to maternity homes and coerced into relinquishing their babies began to form organizations like Boston's Concerned United Birthparents that grew into a national organization intent on speaking out against the experience of maternity homes. Former birth mothers spoke against the institutions that did not provide enough support and understanding for birth mothers. They shared stories of years of grief from losing the babies born in the maternity homes. One woman reflected "I am now happily married but I can never forget that I gave away my first child. I never, never will feel right about it. I still think I was talked into it."⁴² Soon members of the women's liberation movement campaigned for better treatment of birth mothers and open adoption laws that would allow birth mothers to remain in contact with their children even after adoption. Social workers reflected that women's reactions against the long-praised maternity home system was evidence of a cultural shift resulting in "less obedient acceptance of their fate as outcasts and stronger resentment of the still-existing double standard" that sex outside of marriage was acceptable for men and not for women.⁴³ As women claimed their right to sexual freedom, challenging misogynistic norms, they changed the way experts viewed unwed pregnancy. No longer could social workers simply label unwed mothers as "problem girls" to be rescued.

⁴² Gisela Konopka, "A Changing Culture Asks for Changing Services." Denver, CO: Florence Crittenton Association of America Inc., 1966, Folder 4, Box 50, Florence Crittenton Collection, The Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries, 2

⁴³ Ibid, 2

Maternity home leaders struggled with how the sexual revolution challenged their methods. Crittenton leaders praised greater access to birth control and sex education in schools as significant developments for the prevention of illegitimacy. However, the simultaneous rise in premarital sex caused great concern for those hoping to stem the number of unwed pregnancies. Most significantly, social workers influenced by feminist ideology noted the contradiction in society's changing attitudes toward sexual freedom. While sexual experimentation was celebrated, the cultural tendency to "censure, condemn and punish the results of illicit coition" remained.⁴⁴ Feminists and social workers began to organize around this paradox, arguing that unwed mothers and their children should be freed from social stigma.

A New Focus for Social Workers

These changes led to the end of the maternity home era. While maternity homes did not disappear, they were no longer the most desirable solution for aiding young women facing unwanted pregnancy. Many closed their doors permanently, while those that remained open made significant changes to allow birth mothers more rights. Social worker and expert on adolescent girls Gisela Konopka argued that organizations working with unwed mothers should educate the public to move towards "genuine acceptance of responsibility" for both unwed mothers and fathers rather than rely on maternity homes to hide girls from public scorn. This acceptance did not include the approval of unwed motherhood or the sexual decisions leading to the pregnancy. Her desire to balance the new and old practices was reflected in her recommendation that social workers can both "honor the institution of

⁴⁴ "Mobilizing for Community-Wide Services To Unwed Parents." The Charles N. Crittenton Lectures, 1968, Folder 5, Box 50, Florence Crittenton Collection. Social Welfare History Archives, 4-5

marriage” as the best situation in which to raise a child while also providing “support to any mother of child who, for one reason or another, is not in this best possible circumstance.”⁴⁵

The shift from maternity home care that focused on the needs of the baby and adoptive parents to advocating for the rights of unwed mothers reflected the ideology of the women’s liberation movement. As the feminist movement gave voice to women, including those sequestered in maternity homes, it became impossible for social workers to focus singularly on the needs of the baby. Konopka encouraged her colleagues to “be courageous” and to “stand up straight for the rights and dignity of both the illegitimate child and the mother,” particularly as women began to reject institutional care and decide to raise their babies alone in larger numbers.⁴⁶ For most social workers engaged in work with unwed mothers, this meant a turn away from maternity homes and a renewed focus on the way society at large perceived their clients.

Public education policies drew sharp criticism from the leaders of this new trend in social work. The condemnation of sexual activity implicit in public school policies for pregnant students represented the negative mark of unwed motherhood that social workers began to condemn. Unlike pregnant teens in the immediate postwar decades, by the late 1960s young women were increasingly likely to keep their babies. Although many unwed mothers still chose adoption, social workers noted that in 1970 four out of five unwed mothers in California chose to keep their babies.⁴⁷ These trends led feminist social workers and educators

⁴⁵ Konopka, “A Changing Culture”

⁴⁶ Ibid, 12

⁴⁷ Harrison, “School Girl Pregnancy” 4

to argue against attitudes toward adolescent pregnancy in public schools, calling such practices “archaic and puritanical and sadly in need of a complete turnaround.”⁴⁸

Perry v. Grenada: Testing the Education System

In 1969, an unmarried mother successfully sued for the right to return to school after her child was born. Clydie Marie Perry, an eighteen-year-old African American, was prohibited from attending school after giving birth, though she had made plans for childcare. Her lawyer, hired by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, argued that she deserved the right to attend school and graduate with her high school diploma. The amended complaint charged the school district with enforcing its policy of refusing admission to unwed mothers on a racially discriminatory basis. Judge Omar Smith declined to address the issue of race, as both parties agreed to drop that element of the case, after the defense demonstrated that the school district applied the policy of expelling unwed mothers across racial lines. Adding Emma Jean Wilson, a second unwed mother, to the case brought greater weight to the argument because it showed a pattern of behavior by the school district toward pregnant and parenting teens. In *Clydie Marie Perry v. Grenada Municipal Separate School District*, Judge Smith sided with the unwed mothers’ plea to return to school though he added some qualifications.⁴⁹

Judge Smith’s opinion, the only reported decision on this issue, highlights the tension between the two perspectives on working with unwed mothers.⁵⁰ While he acknowledges the school’s concern about the presence of an unwed mother and her effect on her peers, he also argues that she should return to school after she “has the opportunity to realize her wrong and

⁴⁸ Ibid. 4

⁴⁹ Clydie Marie Perry et al, Plaintiffs, v. Grenada Municipal Separate School District (United States District Court for the Northern District of Mississippi Western Division 1969).

⁵⁰ Until uncovering this case, the general consensus among historians and other scholars was that teenage unwed mothers did not challenge school systems because of their lack of agency, support, or knowledge of the law.

rehabilitate herself.”⁵¹ Here he supports the idea that unwed teenage mothers are “problem girls” who could, if rescued by social services, return to society as if the problem had not occurred. The judge’s opinion states that if she was successfully rehabilitated, the young woman should be allowed to return to school. Furthermore, Perry and Wilson’s lawyers demonstrated that the ability to continue their education gave the teenagers “hopes for the future” that would prevent repeat births. Thus, public school could become an alternate site of rehabilitation, allowing teenage mothers to avoid the trap of repeat pregnancies with the promise of bright futures.⁵²

Despite his sympathy with women’s desire to return to school, Judge Smith opined that the school was not required to provide alternate facilities or educational programming for unwed mothers during pregnancy. Only after the baby was born should the girl have the opportunity to return to school. He reasoned that though schools could expel students who displayed a “lack of moral character,” the example of one unplanned pregnancy did not qualify for such measures. The judge likened her situation to that of “a typhoid carrier who otherwise is an acceptable student in every other way.” In this case, it was Perry’s sexual choices that made her undesirable, worrying school officials that her mere presence may “present a threat to the health of all other students.”

The final ruling in *Perry v. Grenada* ordered that the school district could not exclude teen mothers from their schools simply based on the fact of previous pregnancies. However, under the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment the school could expel a student if a fair hearing determined that the student was “so lacking in moral character” she

⁵¹ Clydie Marie Perry et al, Plaintiffs, v. Grenada Municipal Separate School District (United States District Court for the Northern District of Mississippi Western Division 1969).

⁵² Ibid

would “taint the education of other students.” This case demonstrates the tension between rescuing and rehabilitating problem girls and granting rights to unwed mothers that shaped the discourse of the late 1960s.⁵³ Issues such as age and race further complicated the way a young woman’s rights were determined in the court system, in public schools, and in the offices of social science experts.

These themes did not go unnoticed by social workers and the organizations dedicated to working with unwed mothers. CWLA’s report to the United States Children’s Bureau in 1975 on childbearing among teenage white mothers demonstrates the way national organizations responded to these trends. Of the 210 white unwed mothers interviewed in the study, 187 chose to keep their baby.⁵⁴ This represents a significant increase from the previous decades when most white unwed mothers either married or relinquished their babies. The feminist movement’s outcry against maternity homes and assertion that women should be able to choose their own paths sexually helped shape this change. With fewer maternity homes available and an increasing number of women choosing to raise their babies, the middle-class white girls who made up most of the homes’ clientele began to experience unwed pregnancy at home in larger numbers than before.

As a result white women joined the women of color who had rarely been welcomed into maternity homes or given the option of therapeutic abortion. For the first time, the public image of adolescent pregnancy included a notable number of white and middle-class girls in addition to the stereotypical African American and working class women. This meant that school systems that had previously expelled students for pregnancy found themselves under

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ “Progress Report on the Study of the Childrearing of Young White Mothers,” Child Welfare League of America, March 5, 1975. Box 29, Child Welfare League of American Papers. Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries

pressure to find ways to “accelerate programs for continued schooling” of teenage mothers.⁵⁵ Healthcare, social services, and other community agencies also began to feel pressure to change their practices. By choosing to live at home during their pregnancy and raise their babies as unwed mothers, girls brought new attention to the issue of adolescent pregnancy. These choices provided the impetus for legislative change in the 1970s.

The discriminatory policies of the post-war era and their lasting effects drew the attention of the growing second-wave feminist movement in the late 1960s. Combining forces with the already strong civil rights movement, women’s liberation leaders pushed some groups to broaden their recommendations and argued that pregnant teens deserved more support and understanding from their communities.

Teen Pregnancy Goes Public

As more white students chose to endure unwed pregnancies at home and in public schools rather than hidden in maternity homes, they changed the public face of teen pregnancy. No longer could Americans assume that adolescent pregnancy stemmed from deviancy of the black family. Instead the increased visibility of pregnant white students caused social workers and policy makers to claim “the sexual mores that used to be attributed to lower-class kids for public housing are now rampant among affluent whites.”⁵⁶

As young women made their pregnancies public by keeping their babies, they unintentionally challenged social norms. During the 1950s and early 1960s, young women who did not marry the father of their child regularly chose adoption as the best solution to

⁵⁵ “Comments on Recent Trends in Illegitimacy in the US.” National Council on Illegitimacy, February 13, 1970. Folder 3, Box 48, Child Welfare League of American Papers. Social Welfare History Archives. University of Minnesota Libraries Page 3

⁵⁶ Wanda Pillow, *Unfit Subjects: Educational Policy and the Teen Mother* (New York: Routledge Books, 2004)

unwed pregnancy.⁵⁷ As demonstrated in Chapter 1, this was particularly true for white women. African American and women from other minorities did relinquish their babies but they did so with the knowledge that minority babies often languished in state homes or foster care programs rather than finding permanent placement.⁵⁸ This knowledge coupled with economic differences meant that minority women kept their babies more often than white women.⁵⁹ When white families stopped sending their daughters to maternity homes, the public image of teenage pregnancy changed to include a multi-racial group. No longer could politicians or educators pretend that only minority teens struggled with teenage pregnancy, instead the higher rates of white girls choosing unwed motherhood began to renew national concern about adolescent mothers.

By 1970, almost 85% of the school-age girls who gave birth decided to keep their babies and raise the child regardless of their marital status or race.⁶⁰ The feminist movement had helped break down some of the stigma attached to unwed motherhood and girls began to feel empowered to act on their own desires to keep their babies. Responding to the feminist movement of the late 1960s, many young mothers not only chose to keep their babies but also

⁵⁷ Historians and social workers continue to debate the language surrounding adoption as the “best option” for unwed mothers. Many young women were coerced into relinquishing their babies against their will. Closed adoption practices continue to make it almost impossible for adopted children and birth mothers to reunite. For further discussion on adoption politics see: Maria H Anderson, "Private Choices Vs. Public Voices: The History of Planned Parenthood in Houston" (Dissertation, Rice University, 1998); E. Wayne Carp, *Adoption Politics: Bastard Nation and Ballot Initiative 58*, (Topeka: University of Kansas Press, 2004); Gordon, *Pitied but Not Entitled*, Linda Gordon; *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); Timothy A. Hacsí, *Second Home: Orphan Asylums and Poor Families in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Kunzel, Regina G. *Fallen Women, Problem Girls: Unmarried Others and the Professionalization of Social Work, 1890-1945*; (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Melosh, Barbara. 2002. *Strangers and kin: The American way of adoption*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press., Marianne Novy, ed. *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2001); Jean Paton, *The Adopted Break Silence: The Experiences and Views of Forty Adults Who Were Once Adopted as Children* (Philadelphia: Life History Study Center, 1954); Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*.

⁵⁸ Melosh, *Strangers and Kin*.

⁵⁹ Solinger, *Wake up Little Suzie*.

⁶⁰ Charles H Harrison, "School Girl Pregnancy" The study does not discuss the ethnicity or class of the young women sampled for its statistics.

began to expect schools and other public institutions to accommodate their choices. This caused such a stir in the education world that *Education U.S.A.*, an independent weekly newsletter, issued a special report on school-age pregnancy. In that 1971 special edition *Education U.S.A.* claimed that “high school marriages should be discouraged on the premise that they hinder development of desirable moral, social, and economic values.”⁶¹ This assertion directly challenged the shotgun marriages popular in the previous two decades and necessitated national discussions about how to best address the needs of pregnant or parenting teens.

The final change that inspired federal national politicians to pay attention to teen pregnancy was girls having babies at younger ages. Even as the overall birth rate for teenagers declined, the numbers for the 12 to 15-year-old demographic rose. For example in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1963 twenty percent of the women under 18 who carried a child to term were between the ages of 12 and 15.⁶² By 1969, that number jumped to thirty percent. This trend repeated in cities across the country.⁶³ This change simultaneously raised two concerns. First, the *Journal of School Health* reported that of girls who gave birth before age 16 “60% will have another child while still of school age.”⁶⁴ This dramatically increased the likelihood that the family would require welfare benefits. Further complicating matter for very young mothers, pregnancy and parenthood remained the number one reason women did not complete their high school educations. Although no studies provide definitive evidence, many educators speculated that parenthood also caused a number of young men to leave school

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare *School-Age Mother and Child Health Act, 1975*, First Session, November 4, 1975.

⁶³ Ibid, Harrison, "School Girl Pregnancy: Old Problem: New Solutions;" Zellman, "The Response of the Schools to Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood."

⁶⁴ Marion Howard, "Pregnant School-Age Girls," *Journal of School Health* 41, (September 1971).

early.⁶⁵ This left young parents without the prerequisite training or education for jobs that provide wages and benefits necessary to support a child, thereby increasing unemployment. It was at this juncture that feminists pushed the federal government to pay attention to the education rights of young women.

Protecting Women's Rights in Education: Title IX

At the same time that pregnant teens and their advocates began to contest the treatment they received in public schools, feminists began to lobby the federal government to protect women's rights within the education system more broadly. Although Title VII of the Civil Rights Act included a prohibition against discrimination based on sex, it excluded educational institutions. This was rectified in Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which protect the rights of women to be treated fairly in all aspects of education. Though the legislation focused on admissions and hiring policies and would soon become synonymous with collegiate sports, it also provided protection for pregnant teens.⁶⁶

The legislation that became Title IX began when Bernice Sandler, who had recently completed her Ph.D. at the University of Maryland, struggled to find a full time academic job because she "came on too strong for a woman."⁶⁷ Sandler sought the help of the Women's Equality Action League (WEAL), Representatives Edith Green (D-Oregon) and Patsy Mink (D-Hawaii), and Senator Birch Bayh (D-Indiana). She found a particularly strong advocate in Mink, who had personal experiences with the issue of gender discrimination in higher education. After completing her Bachelors of Arts degree at the University of Nebraska in

⁶⁵ Harrison, "School Girl Pregnancy: Old Problem: New Solutions," 32-25

⁶⁶ Karen Blumenthal *Let Me Play: The Story of Title IX: The Law that Changed the Future of Girls in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster Publishing, 2005); Welch Suggs, *A Place on the Team: The Triumph and Tragedy of Title IX* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁶⁷ Bernice R. Sandler, "'Too Strong for a Woman'--the Five Words That Created Title IX," *National Association for Women in Education Spring, About Women on Campus* (1997).

1947, Mink hoped to attend one of the nation's highly ranked medical schools. Although she had high grades and test scores, Mink received rejection letters from every top-ranked school in the nation because none admitted women. Instead of becoming a doctor, Mink attended the University of Chicago Law School, earning her J.D. in 1951. She drew on her experiences in the medical school application process as she argued passionately for the passage of Title IX, focusing on the elements that emphasized equality in higher education.⁶⁸ After two years of debate on Capitol Hill, the bill passed in the spring of 1972. The final document was "designed to eliminate (with certain exceptions) discrimination on the basis of sex in any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."⁶⁹

Though the hearings focused on employment, higher education admissions and student counseling, scholars agree Title IX's most significant impact turned out to be in its provisions for athletic programs, as evidenced in the majority of federal court cases invoking Title IX.⁷⁰ However, the amendment also provided an opening for pregnant and parenting teens. Responding to the increasing number of pregnant students choosing to keep their children, the authors of the final legislation guaranteed the right of pregnant and parenting students to complete their educations by declaring that public schools

shall not discriminate against any student, or exclude any student from its education program ...on the basis of the student's pregnancy, childbirth, false pregnancy, termination of pregnancy, or recovery there from.⁷¹

It further instructs schools that pregnancy cannot limit a student's participation in extracurricular activities or any other opportunity available to the rest of the student body. If

⁶⁸ Susan Ware, "Title IX: Thirty-Seven Words That Changed American Sports," in *Title IX: A Brief History with Documents*, ed. Susan Ware (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007).

⁶⁹ United States Department of Labor. Title IX, Education Amendments of 1972, Title 20 U.S.C. Sections 1681-1688. The "certain exceptions" included in the amendment's wording are not explained in the text.

⁷⁰ Welch Suggs, *A Place on the Team*. Suggs provides a clear overview of the impact of Title IX on athletic programs in public schools.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

enforced, the amendment would provide equal opportunities for pregnant students, ending the decades of discrimination inherent in the public school systems. Although this section of Title IX received little public attention, it provided new opportunities for young parents. Many schools set up alternative programs in an attempt to provide resources for pregnant students. Rather than requiring students to leave school upon disclosure of pregnancy or after the third month, young women had the opportunity to continue their education through the duration of their pregnancies.

Enforcing Title IX

The rights guaranteed by Title IX did not always result in equal opportunities for pregnant and parenting teens. Almost a decade after Congress passed Title IX, the Office for Civil Rights commissioned a study to evaluate its effects on pregnant students. The study concluded “Title IX has had little effect on school site policies regarding pregnancy” in the thirty schools evaluated. While school officials no longer forced pregnant students to leave school, the schools provided limited or no resources to help them succeed in the academic system. The law forbids schools to force students to drop out because of pregnancy and mandates that any program specifically for pregnant students should be both elective and “comparable” to programs for students who are not pregnant. It did not require that schools provide support systems or programs in an attempt to keep pregnant students in school. Ultimately, schools could comply with the letter of Title IX by doing nothing for pregnant students. The result of Title IX programs for pregnant teens was remarkably similar to that of explicit discrimination.⁷²

⁷² For more on the failures of Title IX see Deidre M. Kelly, *Pregnant with Meaning*, Pillow, *Unfit Subject*, and Zellman, "The Response of the Schools to Teenage Pregnancy and Parenthood."

Even as Title IX guaranteed a student's right to education regardless of parenting status, it intensified public attention to teen pregnancy. As federally funded schools began establishing programs for pregnant students, teenage parents and their choices became more public. Pregnant and parenting students, who either enrolled in specialized programs or remained in public schools, quietly challenged the dogma of the previous generation. No longer hidden away, these students called attention to their sexuality through the simple act of attending school. Although none of the legal challenges to Title IX focused on this issue, educators, social workers and parents could no longer ignore or hide the presence of pregnant adolescents.⁷³ The local and state-level discussions quickly motivated national leaders to pay attention to this demographic.

Less than a year after the implementation Title IX, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of abortion rights in *Roe v. Wade*. While the decision did not directly address teen pregnancy, it did have strong implications for the ongoing national discussion. Legalized abortion gave young women a new legal option when facing unplanned pregnancy.⁷⁴ *Roe v. Wade* also changed the types of services open to young girls, as abortion clinics and counseling services opened across the country. As girls no longer needed to convince a doctor of their need for a costly therapeutic abortion, more young women turned to services that allowed termination of their pregnancies. According to Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA), school-

⁷³ There are no documented challenges to Title IX's protection for pregnant and parenting teens right to equal education. The closest is a case in which an unwed mother used Title IX to fight her expulsion from the school's chapter of the National Honor Society. For an overview of this case see Deborah Brake, "Legal Challenges to the Educational Barriers Facing Pregnant and Parenting Adolescents," *Clearinghouse Review* (1994).

⁷⁴ The impact of *Roe v. Wade* has attracted scholarly attention from a variety of disciplines and political views. Among the most comprehensive on both sides of the discussion are: Donald Critchlow, *Intended Consequences: Birth Control, Abortion, and the Federal Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Ellen May and Messer, Kathryn E., *B Back Rooms: Voices from the Illegal Abortion* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1994), Leslie Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867-1973* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Solinger, *Beggars and Choosers*, Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Catholics and Contraception: An American History* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004).

aged women accounted for fully one third of the abortions their clinics performed between 1973 and 1975.⁷⁵ In 1975, 31.2 percent of pregnant women aged 15-19 was 31.2 percent. elected to have an abortion. By 1979 that number jumped to 42.4 percent.⁷⁶ Access to safe, legal, affordable abortion made a significant impact for teens who did not want to carry their pregnancies to term. The high rate of abortions also spurred policy makers to action. Even as lawmakers looked to instate parental consent laws for minors seeking abortions, they looked for ways to increase preventative measures and support for pregnant and parenting teens.

Both Title IX and the Supreme Court's decision *Roe v. Wade* set the stage for the first federal legislation to address school-age parents. As more pregnant students remained in public schools due to Title IX programs, they impacted public discourse about their place in society. Doctors argued that public school provided "no danger to petitioner's physical or mental health" during pregnancy and encouraged students to remain in school.⁷⁷ Increased visibility in public schools also induced a national discourse about funding for such programs. The abortion debate that arose after *Roe v. Wade* further politicized the growing statistics demonstrating young women's choices to keep their babies rather than place them for adoption. Every young woman who chose to raise her child as a single mother shouldered (often unwittingly) the contradictory labels of welfare recipient and anti-abortion success. Finally, legalized abortion dramatically impacted the already prevalent concern about younger girls having babies. If adult women seeking abortions brought heated discussions, the prospect of abortions for girls under the age of 15 induced panic.

⁷⁵ Congress, Senate Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare *The National School-Age Mother and Child Health Act of 1975*, 94th Cong. 1st session, Nov 4 554

⁷⁶ Guttmacher Institute, U.S. Teenage Pregnancy Statistics National and State Trends and Trends by Race and Ethnicity Jan 20a10

⁷⁷ Harrison, "School Girl Pregnancy: Old Problem: New Solutions."

From the moment women began declaring that sex was acceptable, even desirable, outside of marriage, the national perspective on sex was forced to change. Reacting to the sexual revolution, organizations like SIECUS demanded that sex education become more open and provide factual information on the emotional and biological aspects of sex. Sex education courses that had previously used veiled terms and focused on saving sex for marriage transformed into biologically based discussions that frequently included information on contraception. This transition, accepted in part because of the rising rate of teen pregnancy, meant that girls of the 1970s were much better equipped to make decisions about sexuality than girls of previous generations.

At the same time, social workers began to revisit their own biases about the rate of teen pregnancy and unwed motherhood in African American communities. They argued against the belief that African Americans simply accepted teenage motherhood, pointing to the limited options for minority women. As a result, groups such as National Council for Illegitimacy and the Child Welfare League began to work on behalf of black unwed mothers. This changing stereotype resulted in the landmark case *Perry v. Grenada*, the first law suit to protect the rights of teenage mothers of all races to attend school after giving birth.

Public schools faced significant challenges as more teenage girls chose to remain at home and keep their babies. As more middle-class white girls brought their pregnancies into the public eye, they changed the face of teen pregnancy, forcing federal government to pay attention. The protection for pregnant adolescents provided by Title IX reflected the significant cultural shift that occurred during the 1960s. Title IX was a small step toward

federal and state support for programs for teenage mothers. The 1970s ushered in further change and protection for pregnant and parenting adolescent girls.

Chapter 3: Legislating Teen Pregnancy

“The United States faces a problem that has reached the dimensions of a national disaster comparable to a flood, epidemic or famine—and one that results, similarly, from a colossal flaw of nature” proclaimed the *Boston Globe* on Christmas Day of 1977.¹ The potentially catastrophic problem worthy of such dramatic holiday coverage was the declining age of female puberty and the spread of teen pregnancy. By 1977 the national press was in an uproar about the issue of teen pregnancy, building on tension that had grown for almost a decade. Fueling this anxiety, Planned Parenthood president Jack Hood Vaughn told senators that “talk of an epidemic is not exaggerated and claims that the health of future generations will be affected by decisions made about this problem are not exaggerated.”²

Ironically, as teen pregnancy emerged as a national emergency, the rates of teenaged pregnancy in the United States had declined when compared with teenage pregnancies and birthrates of the 1950s and early 1960s. This chapter will look at the legislation on the federal level and provide a case study by tracing how federal legislation impacted state government in Texas to examine why politicians chose to address teen pregnancy at this time. The rise of epidemic rhetoric and the theme of abortion that ran throughout the debates on Capitol Hill provides context for the heightened awareness of teen pregnancy at this political moment. Texas offers a unique case study as the state’s racial makeup also represented a snapshot of national trends. Mirroring statistics across the nation, white girls reported pregnancies more frequently than either African American or Hispanic teens. As a result, the state’s powerful

¹ Melvin Konnor, “Teen Pregnancy and Abortion,” *Boston Globe*, 25 December, 1977, p A2

² Senate Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare *The National School-Age Mother and Child Health Act of 1975*, 94th Cong. 1st session., Nov 4 1975, 569

educational organization made teenage pregnancy a significant issue for the state legislature.³

The chapter will also demonstrate the changes in the way politicians and social scientists interpreted care for teen mothers in the mid-1970s. These changes reflect larger shifts in how Americans understood teenage sexuality, government intervention, and premarital sex as the country began to turn towards the more conservative politics that would dominate the 1980s. Ultimately, as liberal politicians worked to pass legislation to aid teenage mothers, they found themselves perpetuating the social stereotypes that limited young women's abilities to define themselves outside of their sexual missteps.

Establishing an Epidemic

National reactions to school age pregnancy at the end of the twentieth century must be viewed as responses to the end of the maternity home era and the rise of the sexual revolution. The increasingly public nature of adolescent pregnancy directly challenged mid-twentieth century practices. Gradually, the perceived need to keep "fallen girls" hidden in maternity homes gave way to a new culture that allowed but did not encourage pregnant teens to endure their pregnancies at home. As this shift accompanied an increase in the number of young unwed mothers choosing to raise babies and a decline in the age of teen mothers, national emotions ran high, causing congressional leaders to address teen pregnancy for the first time in 1975. Each of these changes occurred in the shadow of the women's liberation movement. Thus, legislators reacted to changing perceptions rather than an actual increase in teen pregnancy.

The key factors that led to the increased federal attention to the problem of teen pregnancy during this period were changes in the visibility of teen parents that came with the

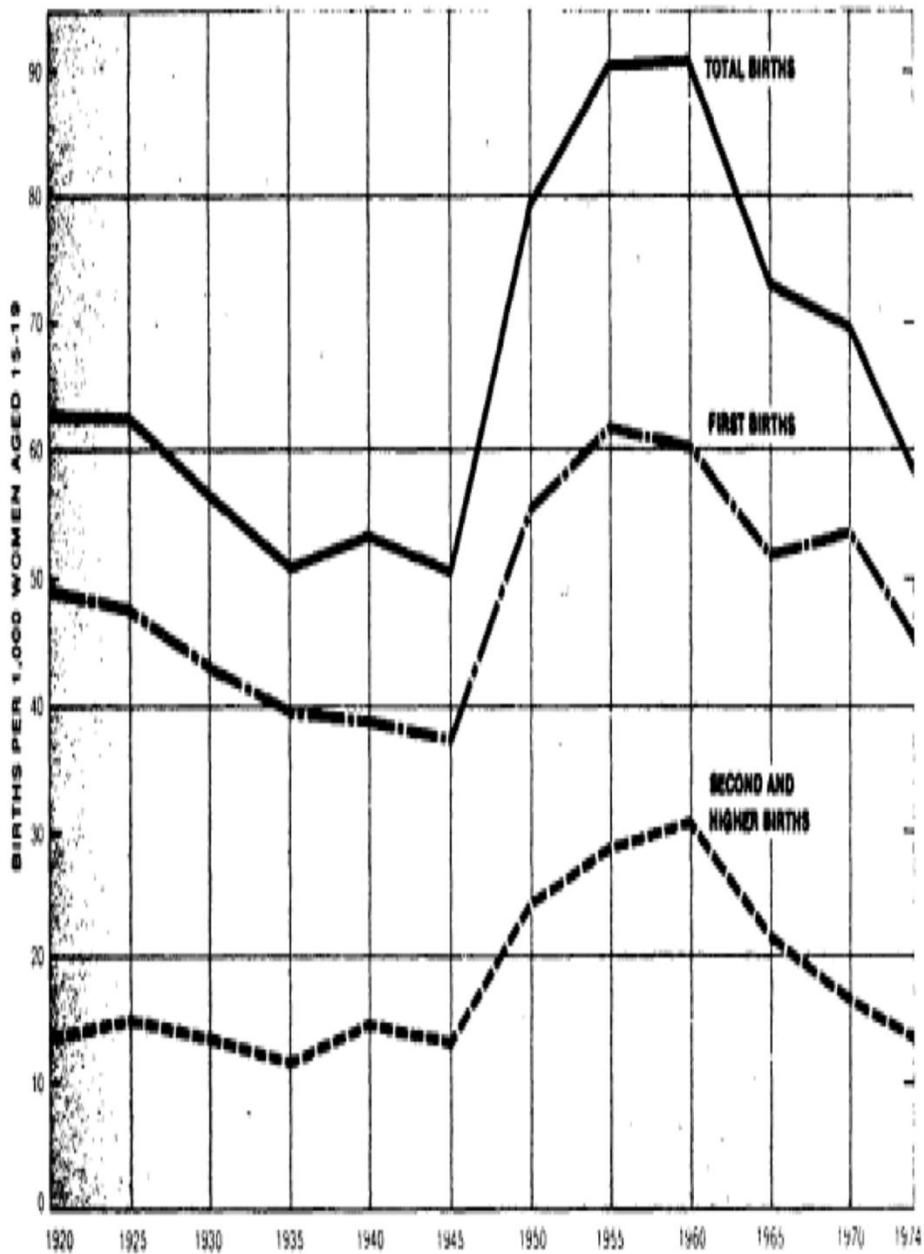
³ Texas Education Agency, "Education for Self-Responsibility: Prevention of School-Age Pregnancy," (Austin, Texas 1988)

increasing number of young people choosing to raise their children as unwed mothers and the lower average age of teen mothers from the late 1960s through the 1970s.⁴ All three contributed to the way politicians perceived adolescent childbearing and parenting. Race and class biases as well as the sexual revolution and conservative backlash complicated each of these changes as advocates of programs for pregnant and parenting teens attempted to navigate changing political minefields.

Teen pregnancy became increasingly visible in the 1970s because of a combination of factors. Teenage parents chose to keep their children at home in record numbers, some influenced by the growing women's movement. In 1971, 94 percent of all teen mothers kept their babies at home, a dramatic change from the previous decades when maternity homes had waiting lists of girls who would relinquish their babies for adoption.⁵ The end of the maternity home era propelled teen pregnancy into the spotlight in part because it meant that white families were unable to hide their pregnant daughters effectively. In previous decades, white families had carefully hidden their pregnant daughters in maternity homes or forced daughters to relinquish their babies through adoption. Thus, teen pregnancy was publically understood as a minority problem. As pregnant white teens chose unwed motherhood rather than being pushed into early marriage or adoption, their plight became increasingly visible, making it appear that there were more pregnant teenagers despite statistical evidence to the contrary. Finally, even as the overall rate of teen pregnancy slowed, the number of pregnancies for girls

⁴ Maris A. Vinovskis, *An "Epidemic" Of Adolescent Pregnancy?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 25

⁵ *Eleven Million Teenagers: What Can Be Done About the Epidemic of Adolescent Pregnancies in the United States*. The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1976.



Sources: National Center for Health Statistics, *Fertility Tables for Birth Cohorts by Color: United States, 1917-1973* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1976) Table 3A; advance 1974 data supplied by Robert L. Heuser, Chief, Natality Statistics Branch, Division of Vital Statistics, National Center for Health Statistics.

Figure 1 Fertility Rates of US Women Aged 15-19: 1920-1974⁶

⁶ Committee on Human Resources, *Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act of 1978*, 95th Congress, 2nd session, 14 June and 12 July 1978

15-17 increased, causing great concern about the potential problems faced by these very young mothers and their children.⁷

While politicians did little to respond to high teen pregnancy rates in the 1950s and 1960s, the prevalence of younger, whiter, unwed teens having babies and choosing to raise them at home propelled many to act in the 1970s. Not only did the epidemic rhetoric justify political interest in the issue, it also allowed a post-*Roe v. Wade* Congress to skirt directly supporting abortion rights. Senator Birch Bayh (D-Indiana), a chief supporter of Title IX and legislation to aid pregnant and parenting teens, fully embraced the epidemic language. He argued, “the only alternative to this grim future now available to many of our teenage mothers is an abortion. I submit that this cannot be our national response to this growing problem.”⁸ In other words, Bayh used fear of abortion among conservative legislators as a tool to recruit their support for social programs for pregnant teenagers. By the time the Senate Committee on Human Resources held its 1975 hearings, national rhetoric equated adolescent pregnancy with epidemics of monumental proportions. Throughout the 1970s, policy makers in all levels of government enacted legislation, funded research, and organized programs as they attempted to curb perceived increases in teenage pregnancy.

Federal Legislation for School-Age Mothers: The First Attempt (1975)

Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Massachusetts) introduced the School-Age Mother and Child Health Act of 1975 into this highly politicized atmosphere. Hoping to build on the momentum of Title IX, *Roe v. Wade*, and the national attention on pregnant teens, Kennedy proposed legislation focused on reducing the rate of teen pregnancy by “encouraging the

⁷ Vinovskis, *An “Epidemic of Adolescent Pregnancy?”*

⁸ Senate Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare *The National School-Age Mother and Child Health Act of 1975*, 543

provision and coordination of comprehensive health...and other social services” for school-age parents.⁹ Senator Bayh warned of the dire consequences facing young mothers if the act was defeated. He pointed to a federal survey that showed teen mothers “to be unfocused and ill-suited to meet the problems they face,” leading to higher dependence on welfare and unfair disadvantages for their children because of the mother’s young age.¹⁰

The bill stated that Congress must pass the legislation to curb the growing problem of adolescent pregnancy. Citing the higher school drop-out rates, dependency on welfare, and poor health education for teenage mothers, Kennedy and his co-authors proposed that Congress put into place a series of programs to aid young mothers and their children. The act articulated four central goals.¹¹ First, to strengthen family life by coordinating health care and education for school-aged mothers, including vocational training and educational opportunities listed in Title IX, in order to encourage child-bearing as an alternative to abortion. Second, politicians planned the creation of a system for nation-wide coordination of existing services. Next, the authors planned to establish a nation-wide program to encourage family planning to prevent unwanted pregnancies while simultaneously lowering drop-out rates by encouraging teenage mothers to stay in school.¹² Finally, they wished to create programs to improve parenting ability of young mothers and fathers to ensure brighter futures for the children born to unwed teens.¹³ In order to achieve these goals, the authors proposed to establish a federal office to coordinate and improve existing services for pregnant teens,

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, 543

¹¹ Ibid, 4-5

¹² Significantly, the official wording does not define “family planning,” leaving the contentious term open for interpretation. This may have been an intentional choice to neither include nor exclude abortion.

¹³ This list is a simplified version of the proposed legislation. For the complete wording, refer to pages 4-15 of the Senate Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Labor and Public *Welfare School-Age Mother and Child Health Act, 1975.*

oversee health care for pregnant teens, create a set of policies and procedures for ensure that all pregnant and parenting teens had access to these services and establish new federally supported clinics and counseling centers across the country.

During the hearings senators focused on adolescent pregnancy and parenting as a social problem that could be solved with increased access to contraception and improved educational opportunities. Most of the testimony from senators supporting this bill focused on the projected costs of sustaining a young mother and her family in the welfare system. This was to become the central strategy for advocates of the School-Age Health Act as it allowed senators to align their goals with those of the Gerald Ford administration and it also tapped taxpayer hostility to welfare. Expecting to gain support from fiscal conservatives, the bill's advocates primarily focused on economic issues throughout the hearing. Senator Bayh argued

for every dollar we now refuse to invest in family planning services, in keeping young parents in schools, in vocational training, in providing health care to prospective mothers and their offspring in assistance in funding jobs and in comprehensive quality child care, we will spend far greater amounts feeding the results of our neglect on welfare programs, crime and foster or institutional care for rejected offspring or disadvantaged children.¹⁴

By framing the bill as a long-term solution to cut welfare spending, senators hoped to accrue conservative support. Despite their best efforts, they were not successful.

Critics of the bill came from a variety of groups. Surprisingly, Planned Parenthood and its research arm, the Alan Guttmacher Institute, declined to fully support the proposition.

While legislation designed to support pregnant and parenting teens clearly fit the organizations' missions, PPFA president Jack Hood Vaughn brought several concerns to the table. He argued that until the bill more fully addressed the issues of sex education and

¹⁴ Senate Subcommittee on Health of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare *The National School-Age Mother and Child Health Act of 1975*

pregnancy prevention, it would not succeed in caring for adolescent parents or in reducing the number of teen pregnancies. Sex education figured foremost of Vaughn's concerns. He argued that without more comprehensive sex education, teen pregnancy would rise. Second, in keeping with PPFA's mission, he called attention to the "urgency of providing better contraceptive techniques and devices in a more sensitive and imaginative way than is currently done" in order to prevent unwanted pregnancies for sexually active teens.¹⁵ Vaughn affirmed the bill's aim to provide support services for school-age parents, noting the high drop-out rates and limited economic opportunity for young parents, and he pushed the senators to consider more comprehensive services. Most controversially, he argued that unless the government-supported programs also included access to "high quality, inexpensive, legal early abortion services when the teenager decides that is the course to take," it would not meet the needs of young women who faced unwanted pregnancies.¹⁶ Vaughn would have been aware that Congress then was considering several proposals for bills to limit access to abortion. In the period between *Roe v. Wade* and the Hyde Amendment, "pro-life" politicians worked tirelessly to enact bills intended to restrict the Supreme Court's ruling.

The hearings for the proposed School-Age Mother and Child Health Act reflected the three major concerns of the decade. As Senators Kennedy and Bayh demonstrated in their testimony, the nation perceived an increase in teen pregnancy despite the decrease in actual numbers. Their arguments illustrated concerns about the implications of public teen pregnancies, younger girls giving birth, and fewer women choosing adoption. The attempt to gain conservative support by invoking welfare costs reinforced emerging stereotypes of

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

pregnant teens as life-long welfare recipients.¹⁷ This fear remained closely tied to race as the potential number of young white women claiming welfare benefits increased with the trends of the period. As white girls were the most likely to endure maternity homes in the previous decade, they also became the most visible group of teen mothers as the maternity home era ended.¹⁸ This resulted in a growing fear of white teen mothers on welfare in addition to the already prevalent stereotype of dependent minority women. Finally, Vaughn addressed the problem of younger girls seeking abortions in higher numbers than before. Though Vaughn did cautiously endorse the bill, his critique cast a shadow over the proceedings as he demonstrated the bill's failure to confront some of the central concerns in the larger debate surrounding teenage pregnancy. Because of the outcry of critics, the School-Age Mother and Child Health bill of 1975 did not pass. In essence, the bill failed to garner the support of conservative politicians while also provoking criticism from the left, who felt that the bill did not go far enough in terms of sex ed and abortion services.

The Carter Administration Takes on Teen Pregnancy

In 1977 the newly elected Carter administration used the growing perception of a teen pregnancy epidemic to shift attention away from the issue of abortion. As a Democrat who was personally opposed to abortion, Carter walked a fine line on the issue during his campaign.¹⁹ In one interview he stated, "we should do all we can to minimize abortions and to favor a national statute that would restrict the practice of abortion in our country."²⁰ Even so,

¹⁷ Though the term "welfare queen" would not be coined until Ronald Reagan's 1976 speech, the bias existed long before his infamous speech.

¹⁸ Rickie Solinger, *Wake Up Little Susie: Single Pregnancy and Race Before Roe v. Wade*. (New York: Routledge: 1994)

¹⁹ Carl E. Schneider and, Maris A. Vinovskis ,eds. *The Law and Politics of Abortion*.(Lexington: Lexington Books: 1980)

²⁰ "Planned Parenthood-World Population Washington Memo," The Alan Guttmacher Institute, December 13, 1976, Box 63, Mongan and Onek Files, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

Carter repeatedly assured voters “I have taken an oath of office and I will, of course, uphold the law as interpreted by the Court.” He further emphasized that he was opposed to a pro-life constitutional amendment and preferred to leave the issue to state legislatures.²¹ The National Abortion Rights Action League petitioned Carter to clarify his stance on abortion and family planning in response to the vague position he claimed in interviews. Then-candidate Carter’s written reply argued that “the need for abortion services can be minimized by improved family planning services” and that as president he favored allowing the courts and the states to make decisions on abortion law.²²

After his election, Carter quickly acted on the national anxiety around teen pregnancy. The Center for Disease Control reported more than 300,000 teenage abortions in 1976, a slight increase from the statistics for 1975.²³ The increased abortion rate fueled national fervor about the perceived epidemic of teenage pregnancy. Teen pregnancy provided a useful political distraction for an administration balancing its commitment to lowering abortion rates while protecting women’s right to choose. At Carter’s direction, HEW Secretary Joseph Califano appointed an interagency task force on “Alternatives to Abortion” in 1977.²⁴ The task force quickly moved to appoint a subgroup that would focus on adolescent issues, asserting that teen pregnancy was one of the highest priorities for the president’s domestic agenda.²⁵ With the focus on teen pregnancy, they hoped to shift the political conversation

²¹ Ibid.

²² “President Carter’s Views on Abortion During the 1976 Presidential Campaign”, July 22, 1980, Box 138, White House Central Files-First Lady’s Social Office Files, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

²³ Congress, Senate Committee on Human Resources *Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act*, 95th Cong. 2nd sess., 14 June and 12 July 1978, 29, 173.

²⁴ Carter further ameliorated the fears of women’s rights organizations when he appointed Sarah Weddington Special Assistant to the President in 1978 and then Assistant to the President in 1979. Weddington rose to national fame when she became the youngest lawyer to argue a Supreme Court case representing “Jane Roe” in *Roe v. Wade*. She used her time in the White House to promote women’s issues.

²⁵ Vinovskis, *An “Epidemic” of Adolescent Pregnancy?*, 55

away from abortion to gain the support of both pro-choice and pro-life constituents. With the epidemic rhetoric at an all-time high and a growing “pro-life” movement, teen pregnancy seemed a safe political issue to tackle. Lowering the rate of adolescent pregnancy appealed to both liberal and conservative voters in addition to offering a way for the Carter administration to find ways to lower the abortion rate without directly addressing abortion.

In addition to the Carter administration’s vested interest in limiting abortions, liberal politicians recognized an opportunity for pregnant and parenting teens in the wake of the Hyde Amendment. Passed in 1976, just after the failure of the School-Age Mothers bill, the Hyde Amendment effectively cut poor women’s access to abortion by making it illegal for Medicaid to fund abortion services. Pro-life congressional leaders had attempted to limit the reach of *Roe v. Wade* since the Court handed down its landmark decision, by arguing that human life begins at conception. Henry Hyde (R-Illinois) adopted a different tactic. Rather than debate the origin of life, Hyde simply stated that taxpayer money should not be used to fund abortions under Medicaid. After an emotional and heated debate, the amendment passed the House with a 199 to 165 vote and made its way through the Senate with a vote of 47 to 21. Carter, who was “personally opposed to government spending for abortion services,” supported the Hyde Amendment, much to the dismay of many fellow Democrats.²⁶

The ever-growing specter of a teen pregnancy epidemic added to the fervor for a Carter administration bill to aid pregnant and parenting teens. Pressure came from political organizations and family planning groups alike. Eunice Kennedy Shriver, sister of former President John F. Kennedy and chair of the Kennedy Foundation, undertook a personal crusade to support teenage parents, authoring several editorials and speaking at regional

²⁶ “President Carter’s Views on Abortion During the 1976 Presidential Campaign” For a legislative history of the Hyde Amendment see Schneider and Vinovskis, *The Law and Politics of Abortion*.

conferences on the issue. According to Shriver, the “often tragic outcomes” of teenage pregnancy resulted “not from love, but from an environment in which no one cared enough” to teach the teenagers responsibility, self-confidence, and safe sex.²⁷ The Kennedy Foundation provided financial support for services for teen pregnancy. Shriver argued, “young people today are incapable of making good choices about sex,” not because teens always make wrong choices but because “they have never been given a chance to take responsibility.”²⁸ Believing that the only way to end the teen pregnancy epidemic was through honest, clear sex education and parenting classes, the Kennedy Foundation’s leaders used their political influence to push the administration into a more comprehensive bill. Shriver later joined her brother Edward Kennedy in giving testimony before Senate committees in favor of legislation supporting pregnant and parenting teens, all the while reinforcing the idea of a growing epidemic of adolescent pregnancy.

Planned Parenthood and its research companion the Alan Guttmacher Institute helped validate the political rhetoric. A 1976 booklet published by the Guttmacher Institute asked, “what can be done about the epidemic of teenage pregnancy in the United States?” and spent the next sixty-four pages making the case for a teen pregnancy crisis and offering solutions. Teenagers, according to the pamphlet, were “biologically too immature for effective childbearing,” resulting in premature birth, low birth-weight, neurological issues and other long-term health risks at much higher rates than their adult peers.²⁹ However, with education, funding for support organizations, and better access to contraception and abortion, the Guttmacher Institute argued, teen pregnancy rates could be lowered. The booklet concluded

²⁷ Eunice Kennedy Shriver, “The absence of loving” *Boston Globe* (1960-1981); Jul 7, 1977; pg. 23

²⁸ Beth Winship, “The scope of the teenage pregnancy problem” *Boston Globe* (1960-1981); Dec 12, 1977

²⁹ *Eleven Million Teenagers: What Can Be Done About the Epidemic of Adolescent Pregnancies in the United States*. (The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1976), 21

by emphasizing that not only did the nation face an epidemic, “worse still it is an epidemic about which something can be done” with increased support from government funding.³⁰

Despite this rhetoric, actual rates of teen pregnancy continued to stay static or decline. The experts who adopted the epidemic language used it to propel the president and Congress into acting only a few years after they failed in 1975. Women who had their first baby between the ages of 15 and 17 were almost twice as likely to drop out of school, struggle to find work, and remain unmarried when compared to their 18-19 year old peers. The increasing number of young teen mothers, therefore, made a convincing case for federal legislation intended to curb pregnancy rates and support teen mothers.³¹ The combination of Carter’s political struggle around the abortion issue, the Hyde Amendment, and the perception of a teen pregnancy epidemic created a receptive environment for introducing another teen pregnancy bill.

Among the administration’s earliest proposals was a modest form of what would become the 1978 bill to support pregnant and parenting teens. The proposed 1978 budget included an increase of \$35 million to “develop and improve Alternatives to Abortion,” with a majority of the money marked for programs targeting teens.³² Carter’s original plan fell short of the expectations of organizations that worked with adolescents in part because it did not create new legislation or special centers to aid teen parents. One critic pointed to the fact that the proposed \$35 million drew almost entirely on existing budget lines, diverting money from low-income adult women whose needs were also great.³³ A coalition of Planned Parenthood,

³⁰ Ibid, 58

³¹ Ibid. 24

³² HEW Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, “Report on “Alternatives to Abortion”, August 1, 1977. Box 79, Mongan and Onk Files. Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Attachment 2

³³ Jeannette Atkinson, “Teen pregnancy prevention should be target,” *Boston Globe*, 24 May, 1978

American Public Health Association, National Family Planning Form, Population Council, Zero Population Growth Inc, and Great Lakes Family Planning Coalition argued that the administration had only offered “ineffective” alternatives to abortion and called for more comprehensive legislation.³⁴

The Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act of 1978

Three years after the 1975 bill failed to make it past the subcommittee, Senator Kennedy reintroduced the problem of adolescent pregnancy to the United States Senate. The Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Bill of 1978 (AHSPPC) drew directly from the experience of the 1975 hearings. In 1975, Kennedy and his co-sponsors Senators Richard Schweiker (R-Pennsylvania) and Alan Cranston (D-California) had relied on a handful of witnesses from congressional committees and PPFA. The new hearings invited leaders from a variety of local groups serving pregnant teens, medical and social work professionals, and adolescent parents themselves.³⁵

Witnesses who testified in the 1978 hearings before the Senate Committee on Human Resources and the House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor further emphasized the specter of welfare-dependent families resulting from adolescent parenthoods. This argument played upon growing concerns among Congress and the American public that the federal government needed to limit spending on social programs. HEW Secretary Joseph Califano Jr. emphasized the possible increase in Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) spending if the government did not act to curb teen pregnancy rates. In using the

³⁴ Victor Cohn. “Pregnancy Prevention Plan Proposed,” *The Washington Post* found in HEW Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation. “Report on “Alternatives to Abortion”, 1 August, 1977. Box 79, Mongan and Onek Files. Jimmy Carter Presidential Library, Attachment 2

³⁵ Committee on Human Resources, *Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act of 1978*, 95th Congress, 2nd session, 14 June and 12 July 1978

threat of increased welfare dependency as a tactic to pass legislation that would support teenage mothers, Califano, Kennedy, and others who supported this bill perpetuated stereotypes. In doing so, they increased conservative fears of poor young women engaging in casual sex, which likely decreased sympathy for welfare recipients. In this way they helped lay the groundwork for Reagan's "welfare queen." However, for the purpose of passing the 1978 Act, this tactic was successful.

Califano opened his testimony by reciting a series of statistics that painted a bleak image of teenage mothers. According to Califano, a typical young woman who became a mother before age 18 would not complete high school, would earn at least 30 percent less than a woman who waited to have her first child between ages 19 and 30, would endure unemployment and divorce, and would become one of the many women applying for federal aid under AFDC.³⁶ He went on to highlight the national emotion tied to this image, arguing, "scarcely anyone—liberal or conservative, permissive or restrictive—can read these figures about teenage pregnancy without a sense of shock."³⁷ Throughout his opening testimony, Califano struck a cautious balance between statistical data and emotional pleas for support as he attempted to attract liberal and conservative support.

Responding to their 1975 defeat, the bill's authors emphasized why legislation specific to the needs of teens was required. At the time HEW oversaw both the Maternal and Child Health services and Title IX, both of which included some support for family planning services. Senator Kennedy, who co-authored both the 1975 and 1978 bills, stated frankly that he understood the "real frustrations of people who are out in the countryside and feel that this is just going to be one more program, and that it is not justified or warranted or even cost

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid, 6

effective.”³⁸ Kennedy was referring to the fact that other government programs, notably Title IX of the Education Amendments and the Title X Family Planning Program, already provided protection for teenage mothers and funding for family planning.³⁹ He knew that constituents would not support government programs without clear justification and urged Califano to provide evidence that the AHSPPC was necessary.

The HEW secretary carefully articulated the key reasons that the Carter administration supported the AHSPPC in addition to the administration’s other programs for family planning, addressing questions from the 1975 hearings and providing the bill’s supporters with ammunition for the fight on the House and Senate floors.⁴⁰ He responded directly to Kennedy’s point that the administration did not need “just another program” by explaining that the programs providing family planning information under Maternal and Child Health Services and Title X were often unable to reach teenagers because they focused solely on family planning, and teens required a more holistic approach combining health services, education, and counseling. Expanding the focus on existing programs did not seem feasible under Title X. Califano argued that the narrowly defined focus on teenagers was central to the bill’s potential for success. By providing support to programs that provided services specifically for teens, the authors hoped to provide a more nuanced and flexible approach.

The new legislation would shift the power from federal oversight to community care, giving local leaders “the flexibility necessary to address the problem of adolescent pregnancy

³⁸ Ibid. 46.

³⁹ Title X of the Public Health Service Act (Public Law 91-572 Population Research and Voluntary Family Planning Programs Title X of the Public Health Service Act (established in 1970) provides comprehensive funding for family planning and related health services. Its stated goal is to encourage healthy pregnancies and families at reduce or low cost. This is achieved by providing federal funding to health clinics.

⁴⁰ Senate Committee on Human Resources *Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act*, 95th, 57.

in a manner consistent with their priorities and needs.”⁴¹ Studies showed that sexually active teens were not likely to go to family planning clinics. The authors of the bill hoped to bring family planning information and products to places students were more likely to frequent, including schools, community organizations, and clubs. By emphasizing community leadership, the authors of the bill were able to deflect some criticism about the federal government interfering with local views about sex education and contraception. Finally, the bill shifted focus back to prevention as the key element in addressing teenage pregnancy. This addressed PPFA’s concerns while also appealing to fiscal conservatives, given that educational programs cost significantly less than AFDC and other support benefits.

The Great Debate: Prevention Versus Support Services

Prevention services became one of the central points of contention during the Senate hearings. The new bill promised that “prevention is our first and most basic line of defense” against teen pregnancy.⁴² This approach answered the calls for more widespread sex education and open discussion of preventative measures at a moment when schools were turning toward abstinence-centered sex education policies.⁴³ Despite this trend, the bill’s authors embraced sex education that included information on family planning and contraceptive use by promising to dedicate “a significant portion” of the proposed \$60 million

⁴¹Senate Committee on Human Resources, *Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act*, 57.

⁴² Congress, Committee on Human Resources, *Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act of 1978*, 11

⁴³ In the 1970s, even educators who favored abstinence as the best option for teenagers discussed methods of contraception. The abstinence-only programs that are popular today did not gain ground until the 1990s. Today educators speak of abstinence-only methods but during the 1970s, most schools turned toward abstinence-centered policies that included limited discussion of contraception. For critical views of the history of sex education see Susan Kathleen Freeman, "Making Sense of Sex : Adolescent Girls and Sex Education in the United States, 1940-1960" (Thesis (Ph D), Ohio State University, 2002., 2002), ———, *Sex Goes to School : Girls and Sex Education before the 1960s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

budget to family planning and educational services.⁴⁴ Family planning, sex education, and training for educators fell under the umbrella of “prevention services,” all designed with the goal of preventing future teen pregnancies. The bill also included funds for “support programs” including education, parenting classes, and medical care for pregnant and parenting teens.

The bill’s proposed breakdown of spending included a rough estimate that demonstrated how many teens the grant programs would have served if the money was split evenly between prevention and support programs. Programs focused on education, family planning, and other measures intended to keep teen pregnancy in check were notably more affordable than those intended to provide support for teen parents. Based on programs operating around the country at the time, prevention care cost \$80 per client while supportive programs cost more than nine times that at \$750 per client. If the proposed \$60 million was split evenly between the two types of work, then 415,000 adolescents could be served according to the bill’s authors. While this would not reach the entire population, it would be a significant increase in opportunities for teens across the country.⁴⁵

Members of the Senate Committee on Human Resources questioned the fact that the bill did not focus exclusively on preventative measures. Many believed that with enough prevention, there would be no need for the support programs. Research, however, suggested a very different reality. One study showed that only 30 percent of teenagers cited lack of access as the reason they did not use birth control.⁴⁶ The same study showed that teens who had

⁴⁴ Senate Committee on Human Resources, *Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act*, 51

⁴⁵ Senate Committee on Human Resources, *Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act*, p 51

⁴⁶ Senate Committee on Human Resources, *Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care*

access to information about contraception used it improperly or chose not to use it at all. Though they were aware of contraception as an abstract idea, many teens learned inaccurate or conflicting information about the side effects. One fifteen-year-old Californian girl explained that she did not use birth control “because I heard too much about birth controls [sic]. You get too fat. Heard you get too skinny. I heard birth control pills they make you have double babies, twins.”⁴⁷ Others were embarrassed to ask for information, chose to abstain from birth control (but not premarital sex) for religious reasons, or simply did not follow through in taking a pill daily. Since no primary prevention program could ensure that girls would, with the right education, choose birth control, it was clear to the bill’s supporters that a prevention-only approach would not work. Instead, the bill maintained a commitment to continue support teenagers who became pregnant and chose to keep their babies.

Significantly, support for moving beyond prevention services came from both sides of the political spectrum. The testimony from American Citizens Concerned for Life (ACCL), a pro-life organization, argued strongly for the bill to move beyond focusing solely on preventing teen pregnancies. Similarly Karen Mulhauser, the Executive Director of the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL), criticized the bill for not providing more specifics on both types of programs but emphasized her belief that “comprehensive services are important for adolescents” and should include both prevention and support programs.⁴⁸

Fiscal conservatives emphasized cost benefits while pro-life activists preferred to spend more money on support services rather than on preventative care that included access to

Act, 58

⁴⁷ Interview CA-JB-8, Folder 20, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota,

⁴⁸ House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor, *Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act*, 95th Cong. 2nd session H.R. 12146 24 July 1978, 107

abortions. As part of their push for fiscal conservatism and their own pro-life agenda, ACCL preferred that “the majority of the funds used in supportive services” for teenage mothers rather than preventative services that had mixed results in lowering teen pregnancy rates. Speaking for a coalition of pro-life groups, ACCL President Marjory Mecklenburg urged the House Committee for Education to focus on “finding new methods of prevention which are effective” in addition to programs in the areas of family life, parenthood and “value-oriented sex education programs” for new mothers.⁴⁹ She supported sex education programs centered on abstinence, appealing to a new group of conservatives in favor of abstinence-only education. The “value-oriented” programs for new mothers would include parenting classes and programs that taught new mothers about adoption, always leaving abortion out of the discussion. Mecklenburg’s testimony proved particularly effective in swaying conservative opinions as she emphasized the moral issues at the center of the abortion debate. She emphasized the need to support girls who chose to “continue their pregnancies” and recommended that HEW delegate funds to “eliminate the problems which lead to abortion and to a destructive pattern of life.” As ending abortion was her organization’s focus, Mecklenburg argued that teens would have less need for abortion if the legislation provided an alternative to abortion in programs that offered respect and protected pregnant and parenting teens.⁵⁰

Although NARAL and ACCL were on opposite sides of the debate about legal abortion, NARAL’s arguments mirrored ACCL’s in that the organization also pushed for more comprehensive care than prevention alone would provide. NARAL’s executive director pressed Secretary Califano to make the bill more specific in its goals for prevention and

⁴⁹ Ibid. 110

⁵⁰ Ibid. 107

support. Mulhauser argued that “there must be a variety of approaches” and that these approaches should be more clearly defined to avoid “haphazard” allocation of the bill’s limited funds.⁵¹ NARAL proposed that comprehensive services should include sex education and contraception as preventative programs available to both teens and their parents. Support services ranging from early pregnancy detection and prenatal care to day care and vocational training should also fall under this umbrella. Finally, Mulhauser added, abortion should be included in support services as a last resort for teenagers who failed to use contraception effectively but did not want to continue with pregnancy. Echoing Mecklenburg’s argument that every attempt should be made to lower the abortion rate for teens, she added “once pregnant, it is too late to talk about prevention” but she diverged from Mecklenburg concluding that forcing a teenager to complete an unwanted pregnancy as punishment for her sexual indiscretion “is not the answer.”⁵² As a result of the combined testimonies from ACCL, NARAL, and other groups, the bill maintained its dual focus on support and prevention services.

Race and Teenage Pregnancy: A Changing Landscape

Race played a different role in the second attempt to pass legislation for the protection of teenage mothers. The needs of the nation’s growing Hispanic population, absent from the 1975 hearings, shaped the 1978 hearings in several key ways. Rodolfo B. Sanchez, National Executive Director of the National Coalition of Hispanic Mental Health and Human Services Organizations (COSSMHO), opened his testimony by noting that Hispanics were not only the second largest minority in the country, but that 44 percent of the Hispanic population was under the age of 18, making it a very young population compared with other groups in the

⁵¹ Ibid. 118

⁵² Ibid. 119

country.⁵³ Further, Hispanic women's fertility was about 20 percent higher than the total childbearing population.⁵⁴ As such, he argued, the legislation should give special attention to the needs of Hispanic teens.

Sanchez supported the need for comprehensive programming but challenged the committee to go beyond supporting previously existing services, asking, "how many minority communities have these types of programs going on?" He urged HEW to use the money designated for poor and minority groups to create bilingual resources and establish organizations to serve communities lacking services for pregnant teens. As the Hispanic community grew, Sanchez's testimony made clear, its needs would have to become a bigger factor in any legislation focusing on social needs. As the Hispanic community of the late 1970s struggled with poverty, high drop-out rates (33-75 percent, according to Sanchez), and high birth rates, programs such as those administered under the Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act would have to shift to include culturally-specific programs.⁵⁵

Fiscal Responsibility

Senator William Hathaway (D-Maine) turned the hearings from questions of administration and program to remind the committee that the Senate and the American people would need to see evidence of financial benefits of the programs. He argued, "the only way to convince them ... is to show them that the program is a good investment."⁵⁶ Indeed, this was one of the reasons the 1975 bill failed to pass. Armed with answers on this topic, Califano

⁵³ Ibid, 128

⁵⁴ Ibid, 128

⁵⁵ Ibid, 129

⁵⁶ Senate Committee on Human Resources *Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act*, 102

estimated that “in just one year, it is a payoff of 6 or 7 to 1” when comparing the cost of enrolling one adolescent in the act’s proposed programs as compared to one year of welfare services.⁵⁷ Senator Kennedy elaborated that this act would capitalize on volunteerism, supporting already existing institutions rather than creating new ones.

Financial debates eventually circled back to the discussion of preventative versus supportive programming. Proponents of the bill believed that supportive programming was fiscally responsible because without prenatal care, parenting classes, and education, young mothers and their babies faced futures that were not only bleak, but expensive to taxpayers. According to the March of Dimes (MOD), women aged 17 and younger had the highest rate of prematurity and other birth defects of any age group.⁵⁸ Low birth weight and other birth defects often resulted in costly hospitalizations for both mother and baby. These conditions also threatened each baby with greater chances for life-long handicaps that would require further public support from government programs. MOD Vice President for Public Affairs Clyde E. Shorey argued that one of the main goals of the bill should be to provide additional resources to educators. Such resources should attempt to reduce the shame, fear, and lack of knowledge associated with teenage pregnancy in order to help young mothers receive the best care possible. By funding both supportive and educational programs, the MOD argued, the bill would have great potential to change the lives of young mothers and their babies while also saving taxpayers significant amounts of money in the long run.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid,102. Califano estimated that it would cost \$750 per adolescent in the program, whereas providing welfare services to the same girl cost an average of \$4,000 to \$5,000 annually.

⁵⁸ House of Representatives Committee on Education and Labor, *Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act*, 152

⁵⁹ Ibid, 153

Teenage Parents Testify

Perhaps the most noteworthy testimony in the 1978 hearings came from a panel of adolescent parents who benefited from the type of programs the bill hoped to support. This panel provided the most emotional and persuasive testimony in favor of the Adolescent Health Services Act. Valerie Kee, a nineteen-year-old mother enrolled in the Johns Hopkins Center for teenage mothers, told the senators that without the support of the center's staff she "probably would have been lost." Kee further urged her audience to support the bill because "there are a lot of people my age who need to know that there is some place to go ... it would be better if they knew that there was something they could do" to prevent unwanted pregnancy and to find support in the case of unplanned pregnancies.⁶⁰

Access to education and lack of job training was a common theme in the testimony from young parents. Joanne and Daniel Saffer, a married couple who had their first child before they completed high school, spoke at length about the hardships of raising a child and completing an education in order to find jobs. Joanne, who worked as a vocational counselor at the Johns Hopkins Center for Teenage Mothers and their Infants, spoke candidly about her experience. As an honor student at a private high school, she felt "totally unprepared" when she became sexually active, noting "pregnancy was never discussed." When she found herself pregnant at 16, she was expelled from her private school, denied access to the regular public school system, and forced to take GED classes at night. Daniel completed school with no disciplinary consequences. With the support of the Johns Hopkins program, Joanne finished college and entered graduate school while Daniel finished an apprenticeship program and found a job to support their family while she earned her professional credentials. Both young

⁶⁰ Ibid, 137

parents emphasized that they would not have achieved such success without the support program. Joanne told the committee that the bill “would give these teenagers a good start” toward successful lives, adding that she found it “extremely difficult to understand how teenagers without program supports can make it through pregnancy, birth, and parenthood.” None of the students testified about the role their parents played in their experience, leaving the existence of parental support open to speculation.⁶¹

Senator Kennedy carefully directed the testimony to help ensure approval for his bill. During his examination of Tajuana Roberts, who gave birth at 17 and relinquished her child for adoption, Kennedy focused on Roberts’ lack of prenatal care. As she confirmed that she received no medical attention during the first eight months of her pregnancy, Kennedy pointed to the dangers to the health of mother and child in this situation. Even those who believed pregnant teens had “made their bed and should lie in it” had concern for the health of the baby and could support initiatives for prenatal care. Kennedy sculpted the testimony of each member of the teen parent panel in this way, ensuring each would present information that would help his bill gain the votes it needed. The young parents gave compelling testimony that directly influenced the bill’s success. This tactic succeeded as the bill was signed into law, creating a federal office to coordinate service for pregnant teens.⁶² The Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act of 1978 became one of the hallmarks of Carter’s presidency with regard to women’s issues. His 1980 campaign material claimed that the law would “ensure that pregnant adolescents and adolescent parents

⁶¹ Ibid, 137-139

⁶² Ibid. *March 1976*

receive adequate medical, social, educational, and other services. . . .to help them lead productive and independent lives.”⁶³

Enacting Federal Legislation in Texas

The Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act of 1978 offered federal funding to state and local programs that reduced teen pregnancy or supported pregnant and parenting teens through the Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs (OAPP). Although the OAPP remained underfunded and understaffed from its inception, its existence spurred states to address the topic, some for the first time. Texas provides a good example of state response to the Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act of 1978 and to the issue of adolescent pregnancy and parenting in broader terms. Texas faced some of the highest rates of teen pregnancy in the nation during the 1970s and 1980s. In 1985 Texas was second among the states in birthrate to women between the ages of 12 and 15. In the same year, the ethnic distribution of school-age pregnancy (women age 19 and younger) in Texas was 40 percent Anglo, 38 percent Hispanic, and 20 percent Black.⁶⁴ Not only did Texas have a high rate of adolescent pregnancy and parenthood, but the women facing pregnancy most frequently represented the young, white woman whose decision to keep her child had first brought national attention to the issue. The three issues that inspired federal policy--increased visibility of pregnant teens, more young women choosing to keep their babies and a high rate of very young pregnant women--each influenced the way Texas approached the issue of teen pregnancy. Texas lawmakers approached teen pregnancy

⁶³ Interdepartmental Task Force of Women, *Honoring a Commitment to the People of America: The Record of President Jimmy Carter on Women's Issues*, Box 18, The Office of Sarah Weddington, The White House, Washington DC, 1980, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

⁶⁴ Texas Education Agency, "Education for Self-Responsibility: Prevention of School-Age Pregnancy," (Austin, Texas, 1988).

primarily as an education issue, adopting new programs for teen parents, adjusting the sex education curriculum, and commissioning studies on other ways to prepare teenage mothers for a successful future.

Texas also is an important example because it influenced other states' policies. The Texas Board of Education shaped the decisions of other state education boards across the country, particularly in regard to textbook and curriculum adoption. The state's large population as well as its textbook selection process led to this status. When Texas adopted textbooks, many other states followed its lead rather than setting up similar processes and boards. As Texas grappled with ways to adapt the education system to address teen sexuality, pregnancy and parenting, other states watched, and they sometimes adopted its policies.

Protecting Education for Pregnant and Parenting Teens

Responding to the perception of a national crisis of pregnant and parenting teens, in 1978 the Texas Department of Human Services established the Teen Parent Initiative (TPI) to develop statewide plans and program for pregnant and parenting teens. In 1985, TPI established two demonstration projects, Project T.E.A.M. in Houston and Project Redirection in El Paso.⁶⁵ Both pilot programs helped TPI and the Texas Education Association (TEA) evaluate the best ways to educate pregnant and parenting teens. Project Redirection provided pregnant and parenting teens with a school hosted at the El Paso YMCA, visits from an OBGYN from Texas Tech University, and visits from a caseworker with the Women, Infants

⁶⁵ While state documents provide the information included here about these programs, neither seemed to garner media attention. Searches through databases such as LexisNexis and local news outlets did not provide any additional information. The only other source for information on these projects is a University of Texas at El Paso dissertation: Maria Wilson, "Project Redirection: A Responsive Program for El Paso Teenage Mothers" (PhD diss., University of Texas at El Paso, 1991)

and Children's nutrition program (WIC). As the program grew, it added a nursery so that adolescent parents could attend classes without the added burden of finding childcare.⁶⁶

After three years of student participation in the pilot programs, leaders of TPI concluded that successful programs must be culturally sensitive, highly supportive, and broadly based. The pilot programs' locations in ethnically diverse Houston and largely Mexican-American El Paso taught both teams about the importance of cultural sensitivity, including the need for counselors fluent in Spanish, and familiar with Catholicism for Mexican-American clients. TPI also learned that the programs had to be focused on supportive services including high school education and contraception if they were to attract clients. Such programs should "involve male partners and other significant persons" and "consider the social/environmental milieu in which the pregnant or parenting teen lives" in order to effect real change in the lives of the young women served.⁶⁷ The El Paso program demonstrated a need for childcare, counseling, health care, and access to government services as well.⁶⁸

TPI explored ways state agencies could work with existing groups to reduce teen pregnancy through abstinence education. The organization founded the Texas Teen Project, aimed at teaching "the postponement of sexual activity among teens" in the fall of 1988, in partnership with Planned Parenthood of San Antonio.⁶⁹ The Texas Teen Project included a

⁶⁶ Maria Wilson, "Project Redirection: A Responsive Program for El Paso Teenage Mothers" (PhD diss., University of Texas at El Paso, 1991), 30-31

⁶⁷ Robert J. Ambrosino, "TPI Pilot Projects: Early Lessons," in *Connecting Points* (Texas Department of Human Services: Family Self-support Service Branch, April 1988), 4

⁶⁸ Maria Wilson, "Project Redirection: A Responsive Program for El Paso Teenage Mothers" (PhD diss., University of Texas at El Paso, 1991), 30-31

⁶⁹ "Texas Teen Project," in *Connecting Points* (Texas Department of Human Services, Family Self-support Services Branch, November 1988), 3

short video with a study guide, radio announcements and posters that the PPFA of San Antonio and TPI distributed in sixteen cities.⁷⁰

The TEA also looked for alternative methods of education for pregnant and parenting teens. Reflecting an ideological shift in educational policy from what it had been before Title IX (1972), the TEA proclaimed educating school-aged parents an “exciting challenge” that the system could overcome by promoting “positive outcomes for both society and the individuals involved.”⁷¹ Despite that sunny outlook, TEA’s 1986 assessment, "Pregnant and Parenting Adolescents: Alternatives for Developing School-Based Programs and Services," continued to uphold several negative stereotypes about young pregnant or parenting women. The report categorized the adolescents most likely to become teen parents as “at-risk ... potentially capable but greatly influenced by factors in the larger society” including peer pressure, increased openness about sexuality, and early biological maturity.⁷² TEA leaders further characterized the children of adolescent parents as “tending to have lower scores on intelligence tests and more apt to repeat a grade in school.”⁷³ This argument demonstrates that the social stigma of teen pregnancy followed not only the parent but also their children’s experience in the public education system. The report recommended establishing a network of organizations providing services to pregnant and parenting teens. This network, also endorsed by the 1978 Adolescent Health Services Act, would help young women gather as much information as possible regarding the services available to them.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Linda R. Glosson and Jacque R. Lytle, "Pregnant and Parenting Adolescents: Alternatives for Developing School-Based Programs and Services," (Texas Education Agency, 1986).9

⁷² Ibid, 5-6

⁷³ Texas Education Agency, "Education for Self-Responsibility: Prevention of School-Age Pregnancy." 4

As a result, Texas created a register for organizations that served pregnant and parenting teens. The *Texas School-Age Pregnancy and Prevention Services* directory provided a list of organizations and programs, broken down by county. The School-Age Pregnancy and Prevention Clearinghouse of the University of Texas's Center for Social Work Research published updated versions of this directory regularly, attempting to list all relevant state and local organizations. In addition to its yellow pages format for local organizations, the directory included a section that provided information about state and federal agencies ranging from the State Department of Commerce to the Department of Health. These pages described the available services and provided contact information for young women who wished to seek assistance. By the fourth edition, published in 1992, the directory included 530 pages of agencies and organizations designed to assist pregnant and parenting teens, demonstrating the wide range of options available to pregnant and parenting students that did not exist only a few decades earlier.⁷⁴

Epidemic Rhetoric Grows in the Texas Legislature

While the TEA reworked education for pregnant and parenting teens and changed its approach to sex education, the Texas Legislature continued to examine the state's high rate of teen pregnancy. In 1987 lawmakers created the Texas Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenthood Advisory Committee (APPAC). This committee consisted of lawmakers, social workers, religious leaders, educators, and business leaders invested in teen pregnancy issues. The APPAC perpetuated the epidemic language, opening their report to the 72nd legislature with the claim that teen pregnancy was "a crisis of epidemic proportions" for the nation but

⁷⁴ School-Age Pregnancy and Prevention Clearinghouse, "Texas School-Age Pregnancy and Prevention Services: A State-Wide Directory of Programs, Networks, and Information," ed. Texas Department of Human Services (Austin, Texas: Center for Social Work Research, The University of Texas at Austin, 1992).

specifically for Texas.⁷⁵ The report further echoed national concerns as the authors emphasized the cost of teen pregnancy. In 1989 the state of Texas spent \$33.78 million on Medicaid births to adolescent parents. The state also spent \$22.9 million each month from the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program to teenage parents and their children.⁷⁶

Texas legislators and school board members responded to the same financial pressures that worried their counterparts on the federal level. Like Indiana Senator Bayh, Texas educators worried that “about 60 percent of all AFDC recipients had their first children as teens,” again demonstrating that the economic costs of teen pregnancy that continued long after the parents had matured into adulthood.⁷⁷ Educators sympathetic to school-age parents used the menacing shadow of increased welfare expenditures to lobby for support from Texas’s conservative legislature. Drawing on the expert research of social scientists, educators argued that “adolescent pregnancy was at the very heart of the U.S. poverty cycle.” In its 1989 report to the Texas Legislature, the Department of Human Resources used exact dollar amounts to argue in favor of programming for pregnant and parenting teens. APPAC estimated that for every one dollar spent in a TPI program, “\$8 [was] saved in direct first-year welfare cost,” saving the state a significant amount of money given the “monthly average of 51,440 Medicaid eligible teens” in Texas in 1989.⁷⁸ This tactic succeeded: the Texas Legislature continued to fund TEA and TPI programs for pregnant and parenting teens into the 1990s.

⁷⁵ Pregnancy and Parenthood Advisory Council. *Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Recommendations and Strategies*. 72nd Texas State Legislature, October 1990, v

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, v

⁷⁷ Texas Education Agency, "Education for Self-Responsibility: Prevention of School-Age Pregnancy"4

⁷⁸ Claudia Langguth, "School-Age Pregnancy in Texas: Report to the 71st Legislature," ed. Texas Department of Human Services Texas parenting and Pregnancy Prevention Division (Austin, TX: Texas Department of Human Services, 1989), xi

Beyond the Classroom

Recognizing the need to find a balance between supportive and preventative services, APPAC advocated for services beyond the classroom that focused on job skills for young mothers. APPAC worked with the Field Foundation to commission studies on job training and employment opportunities for parenting teens. Understanding that a “young mother is trying to make the transition from childhood to adulthood” with “no room in which to err safely” because her mistakes impact another life as well her own, committee members recommended a variety of job training programs.⁷⁹ The resulting study, “Time of Transition: Teenage Parents and Employment,” argued that any job program must begin by teaching teenage mothers to think about themselves as breadwinners. By virtue of their age, lack of education, and gender, teen mothers were disadvantaged on the job market. Echoing feminist leaders across the country, Texan advocates for teenage girls pushed for state programs that would enable girls to rise above gendered stereotypes by providing images of brighter futures. As such, the study’s author argued that programs for school age mothers must include a focus on helping women “overcome the adverse effects of socialization” that often led to “an attitude of resignation in the face of sexist treatment in the workplace, less than equitable wages, and an inadequate share of authority.”⁸⁰

This was a tall order for the underfunded state programs struggling to provide education and job training for teen mothers. As a result, the APPAC reached out to the wide variety of organizations represented in its ranks. Sponsors such as the United Way and Southwestern Bell, organizations like the Texas Conference of Churches, and the TEA were

⁷⁹ McGee, Betsey, “Times of Transition: Teenage Parents and Employment,” Field Foundation Archives, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin, Box 2T7

⁸⁰ Ibid

invited to band together to build a diverse coalition of leaders advocating for more comprehensive services for pregnant and parenting teens.⁸¹ The result was the 1993 Texas Summit Meeting on Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention, hosted by Governor Ann Richards. The conference included educators, religious leaders, leaders from Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts and other similar groups, school counselors, and representatives from “employment-related services.”⁸² The summit addressed strategies for supporting school-age parents who wanted to complete their educations, encouraging job training, and promoting health services for pregnant teens.⁸³

Texas Sex Education

In addition to distributing information on existing agencies, the Texas State Legislature and TEA looked for new ways to prevent teen pregnancy and developed alternative programs for pregnant and parenting students. In 1988 the TEA published a set of curriculum changes intended to reduce the trend of teen pregnancy by changing educational programs at all grade levels. In implementing the “Education for Self-Responsibility” program, educators hoped to provide “a model for examining one’s own aspirations objectively and, as often as possible, prior to being faced with a choice about sexual activity.”⁸⁴ Public school leaders believed it could begin to reduce teen pregnancy rates by giving girls hope for a brighter future, a future that would be difficult to achieve if they had a baby in high school.

⁸¹ Ibid

⁸² Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenthood Advisory Council Meeting Agenda, Tuesday September 17, 1991. Texas Conference of Churches, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin, Box 96-380/4

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Texas Education Agency, "Education for Self-Responsibility: Prevention of School-Age Pregnancy." Texas Education Agency, 1988

This progressive attitude reflected the work of the women's movement and feminist scholarship. The late 1980s and early 1990s marked a moment of strong feminist leadership in the state of Texas, led by women including Houston mayor Kathryn Whitmire (in office 1982-1991). The election of Governor Ann Richards in 1993 further bolstered advocates who hoped to shape girls' education based on feminist ideals. However, even as Texan feminists made pathways toward changes in curriculum, the rise of the New Right brought constant challenges to their proposals.

The "Self-Responsibility" curriculum implemented a grade-by-grade plan intended to give girls higher self-esteem and dreams of college educations in order to combat teen pregnancy. This approach built on research that identified young women's insecurities and inability to see the future as a key reason why they were willing to engage in premarital sex⁸⁵. By giving young women the opportunity to believe in a different future for themselves, educators hoped to encourage young women to abstain from sex or to use contraception if they chose to be sexually active. The curriculum provided recommendations for curriculum changes from kindergarten through specialized high school elective courses. Elementary school programs focused on "personal, social and civic responsibilities" with activities and discussion intended to teach young children to recognize "socially acceptable and unacceptable behavior."⁸⁶ In an attempt to avoid controversy, the exact definition of "socially acceptable" was left to the individual school districts or teachers. The curriculum for older students placed issues of sexuality at the center of its definition of self-responsibility. Middle school students (ages 10 to 13) studied health education, emphasizing "concepts and skills

⁸⁵ Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002)

⁸⁶ Texas Education Agency, "Education for Self-Responsibility: Prevention of School-Age Pregnancy," 13

that foster individual personal health and safety” with the goal of helping students engage in “honest communication about the responsibility of decisions about sexual involvement to health relationships with peers.”⁸⁷ By the time a student reached high school, the curriculum suggested that classes ranging from advanced biology to food science include material on sexuality and child development. This progression from personal decision-making to sexuality to detailed discussion about the possible results of sexual activity constantly encouraged students to postpone sexual activity until marriage.

Self-responsibility curriculum, while effective in giving girls a new sense of personhood and teaching decision-making skills for young women who chose to abstain from sex, did little to teach students how to avoid pregnancy if they were sexually active. The APPAC’s 1992 report criticized the TEA for not going far enough in its sex education programs. Where the self-responsibility curriculum focused on decision-making, future planning, and abstinence, the APPAC endorsed “mandated, age-appropriate, comprehensive, scientifically valid human sexuality education.”⁸⁸ APPAC emphasized that the TEA did not go far enough by “recommending” that school add sexuality to the curriculum, insisting that sex education must be taught in every public school. APPAC was careful in its recommendation, however, leaving the actual course content up to local school districts. In addition to the TEA and TPI programs that provided education resources, APPAC advocated for services beyond the classroom that focused on job training for young mothers. Their interpretation of “comprehensive sex education” was bold compared to the TEA and other abstinence-focused groups. The APPAC bluntly stated that sex education must include both

⁸⁷ Ibid, 31

⁸⁸ Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenthood Advisory Council Fact Sheet Draft, Texas Conference of Churches, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin, Box 96-380/4

abstinence and contraception information.⁸⁹ Without both, the committee argued, teen pregnancy rates would continue to rise. Many Texas parents expressed outrage at the APPAC plan, resulting in the TEA ignoring the call for more comprehensive sex education.

Conservative parents launched a campaign to “Stop APPAC in its Tracks,” claiming that its recommendations would “limit parental rights” and teach inappropriate information to students.⁹⁰ One flyer asked, “do teens have the right to sex, contraceptives, condoms, and abortions regardless of how parents feel?”⁹¹ A quick look at the state’s teen pregnancy statistics indicated that teens were participating in those activities in spite of their parents’ opinions on the matter. An angry father alleged that if these recommendations were put into practice, “tax payers would foot the bill for immoral living” while innocent schoolchildren were encouraged to have sex and seek abortions.⁹² The APPAC limited its response to reminding the public that it could only make suggestions to the state legislature, and it was Texas lawmakers who would make the real decisions. The committee also released a fact sheet in hopes of assuaging some fears about its goals. The fact sheet reiterated that the committee supported “parents, schools, churches, and communities determining specific sexuality guidelines in their schools,” though they did support a broad approach to sex education.⁹³ Despite their attempt to pacify parents and state leaders, the APPAC lost the

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ “Stop APPAC In its Tracks” Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenthood Advisory Council, Texas Conference of Churches, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin, Box 96-380/4

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Letter to Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenthood Advisory Council from Frank Komarek November 1, 1992. Texas Conference of Churches, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin, Box 96-380/4

⁹³ Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenthood Advisory Council Meeting Agenda November 17, 1992, Texas Conference of Churches, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin, Box 96-380/4

support of the Catholic Church and the Baptist Churches in the state as a result of these recommendations.

The changes in sex education came as a direct response to the high rate of teenage pregnancies in the state. As Texas leaders on the APPAC and TEA looked for more innovative ways to teach students about responsibility, sexuality, and decision-making, they faced a conservative constituency that challenged this transition at every turn. As a result, Texas continued to support “abstinence-only” sex education. By 1993 the state was second in the nation for teen pregnancy rates and has continued to be ranked among the top ten states for teen pregnancy rates into the twenty-first century.⁹⁴

The strategies of Texan educators and lawmakers echoed the larger national debate about teen pregnancy and parenting that took place during the 1970s and 1980s. At state and federal levels, passionate groups or individuals succeeded in altering curriculum and providing at least modest funding to support student parents as they completed their educations. Early federal legislation such as Title IX (1972) laid the groundwork for focused reform in the Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act of 1978. State responses addressed the issue of school age parenting through a network of agencies and abstinence-centered sex education. By continuing to react to the increased visibility of school-age pregnancy, the rising number of girls choosing unwed motherhood, and the decline in age of pregnant teens, policy makers bowed to public pressure and recast stereotypes. In many

⁹⁴ Cindy Rugeley, “Council calls for sex education in Texas for all grades,” Houston Chronicle, February 17, 1993, Section A Page 1, 2 STAR Edition.

cases, however, the legislation enacted bills and proposals that intensified the very problems it attempted to solve. The same lawmakers and educators who passionately supported programs for teen parents used negative stereotypes to achieve their goals. Caught between the need to appeal to fiscal and religious conservatives in order to gain support for legislation, liberal politicians compromised their feminist values. In the course of two decades, pregnant adolescents shifted from “fallen girls” to be hidden away to potential “welfare queens” who needed government rescue to prevent them from draining public resources. Neither image allowed teenage mothers to create their own identity as individuals able to shape their own lives beyond childbearing. By creating programs and increasing funding to existing support systems for pregnant and parenting teens, the government kept teen pregnancy in the public eye but was limited by its inability to eliminate the stereotypes associated with adolescent pregnancy and parenting.

Chapter 4: A Portrait of Teenage Views on Sexuality

“Among the teenage girls who are pregnant you have really the most alienated young people that there are in society. They are alienated from their schools; they are mostly dropouts. They are alienated from hospitals; they have never gotten good medical care. They are alienated from their families. They have no job skills. So, these teenage girls are in a very difficult predicament. Unless we make a decision that these conditions have to be turned around, I think we are going to have the continuation of all the problems that you have heard this morning—in terms of welfare, in terms of child abuse, and in terms of injured babies born”

-Eunice Kennedy Shriver¹

When Eunice Kennedy Shriver appeared before the Senate Committee on Human Resources to discuss adolescent pregnancy, she spoke to a room of adults about the lives of adolescent students. In the aftermath of the sexual revolution, politicians placed teenage girls at the center of a political debate without fully understanding the experience of the young women for whom they claimed to speak. They relied on broad generalizations that failed to capture the reality for young women. The result was a policy trope of teenagers as uniformly immature, reckless, and uninformed about issues of sexuality. The truth was quite different. Young women dedicated significant time and energy thinking about the nuances of sexuality. Most did not make sexual decisions without careful thought, in direct contrast to the way legislators and experts often portrayed them. Instead, sexual activity and its consequences were at the center of teenage consciousness, as girls navigated a world that was more permissive than previous generations.

Between 1971 and 1979, the number of teenage girls who had sex before their 19th birthdays rose from 41 percent to 65 percent.² Statistics like this fueled the panicked rhetoric

¹ Congress, Senate Committee on Human Resources, *Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act*, 95th Cong. 2nd sess., 14 June and 12 July 1978, 115

in Congress but did not tell the whole story. Teenage girls struggled with their sexuality. Few made the choice to have sex lightly and those who had sex were usually fearful of the consequences. Sex education courses, conversations with friends, and life experience taught them about pregnancy, venereal disease, and contraception. This chapter turns away from the language of politicians and other experts to focus on teenage girls. Interviews with young women just beginning to experiment with their sexuality reveal that the image politicians presented missed several key points. Teenage girls growing up in the 1970s, at the height of the women's movement, understood and explored their sexuality at a moment of great social change, making their experiences distinct from those girls from previous generations. Whereas politicians decried the rise in premarital sex, teenage girls argued that if a couple was in love there was no reason to delay intercourse. When educators debated how to approach sex education, girls responded with a desire for more information on both biological and emotional topics. As parents asked why their children should have access to birth control and deplored the rate of abortions, pregnant teens fought internal battles deciding whether or not to keep their babies. This disconnect between adult and youth perspectives appears throughout conversations with teens. Examining records of teenage girls' words without the filter of adult voices reveals that teens faced difficult decisions about sexuality with a level of maturity that adults often failed to recognize.

The Project Girl Database

This chapter draws on the work of sociologist Gisela Konopka, an expert on adolescent girls in the 1970s. Konopka commissioned five hundred interviews with teenage

² Moore, Kristin. "Facts at a Glance: Births and Abortions to US Teenagers," The Urban Institute, n.d. Boston Women's Health Book Collective. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University. Accessed August 3, 2010.

girls across the country in an attempt to learn about their lives in their own words.³ She asked questions about topics ranging from politics and family life to sexuality and education. Of the 900 interviews Konopka's team conducted, 487 openly discussed issues of sexuality. Though Konopka's book *Young Girls: A Portrait of Adolescence* includes a chapter on the topic, neither she nor anyone else fully mined the interviews for what they show about how adolescent girls understood their own sexuality. Konopka presented the girls' quotations with limited analysis. This study will analyze Konopka's data on the subject of sexuality both qualitatively and quantitatively to establish a more complete portrait of young American women in the 1970s.

Konopka's interviewees lived in Alaska, California, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Puerto Rico, and Texas between 1970 and 1975.⁴ The only trait shared by all Project Girl participants was that they were between 12 and 19 years of age. They represented rural, urban, and suburban areas, came from six different ethnic groups, and came from families across the economic scale. Further, about one-third of the girls came from homes for girls or other institutions for adjudicated minors, and one-third were actively involved in at least one youth organization. A team of female graduate students in each state conducted the Project Girl interviews. Most of the interviewers came from programs in social work and psychology and all underwent considerable training to ensure that the interview style would be consistent across the project. Konopka's attention to diversity and consistency make this collection particularly valuable.

³ Gisela Konopka, *Young Girls: A Portrait of Adolescence* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc, 1976), p 4

⁴ Ibid. Konopka chose these states because of their populations. She believed they would provide the "variety of populations" she desired for the study. There are no further details about how this was defined.

Although it is possible that the young women were not fully frank or truthful with their adult interviewers, the interviews seem spontaneous and candid. The girls shared their views on abortion, sex education, menstruation, and premarital sex with little restraint. Interviewers assured each girl of complete anonymity, and their notes do not include any indication that they were skeptical of some interviewees. One might hypothesize that girls underreported sexual activity to protect their reputations or impress their interviewers. A thorough reading of the interviews makes this seem unlikely, however, as the girls answered each question frankly, often elaborating far past the interviewer's questions. Social context also makes it doubtful that many girls lied. As historian Susan Cahn points out with regard to the interviews in her book *Sexual Reckonings*, "most teens had little reason to withhold information because they found support for their moral beliefs and sexual practices among friends, some family members, and at least a portion of the surrounding community."⁵ These young women grew up in a post-sexual revolution world. Premarital sex, birth control, and pregnancy were part of their daily lives. This made it easier for them to talk openly about their own personal experiences. Even if a few girls did misrepresent themselves, the Project Girl collection is a uniquely valuable source that allows us to peek inside the minds of teenage girls in the early 1970s.

A careful reading of the interviews suggests several patterns in the ways girls viewed sexuality. Younger girls had much more definitive answers to the question "is it ok to have sex before marriage," tending toward the negative. By contrast, teens approaching the end of high school answered somewhere between "yes" and "no," often with qualifications to their statements. Girls from white-collar families were more likely than those whose parents were

⁵ Susan K. Cahn, *Sexual Reckonings: Southern Girls in a Troubling Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 100

in blue-collar or service industry work to report positive experiences with sex education and their first menses. The girls' candid answers often display continuity across regional, racial, and economic groups while demonstrating clear differences based on age.

In order to decipher patterns, I created a database to apply numerical analysis to the unscripted interviews. Doing so opened a new window into the lives of teenage girls. While the interviews provide rich personal thoughts and experiences, the database not only confirmed my hypotheses but also made patterns more discernible. Project Girl researchers tape-recorded their interviews, which then were transcribed onto McBee cards.⁶ From these cards, I created a database by assigning each answer a particular number based on a code I created. While this system was not perfect because it required me to code long-winded, teenage language as one- or two-word answers, losing some of the nuances, it nonetheless enables us to see the larger picture. By combining individual voices with the database, I could integrate personal experiences with broad trends. This innovative approach allows us a more nuanced view of the way young women understood their sexuality.

A Note on Race and Economics

Konopka's study required each site to provide a range of girls from different socioeconomic backgrounds and races. The interviewers succeeded in this to the extent that the girls represent more than six racial and ethnic groups (white, African American, Hispanic, American Indian, Eskimo, and Asian) and seven occupational groups (blue-collar, service,

⁶ McBee cards were a paper data storage system that used a system of punched holes to code data. In the system used for Project Girl, 5 x 8 inch cards made of heavy paper were punched around the edges to note demographic and other identifying factors for each interview. To sort the data, researchers would stack the cards and run a long, very thin needle through the stack. When the needle was lifted, any cards that were punched in that place would remain behind, giving the researcher a data set to work with. The center of the card was used to transcribe interviews. Computers made this method obsolete. For this project, I used all the McBee cards that Project Girl marked "sexuality" and catalogued the information typed on the card. A sample McBee card from Project Girl is included in the Appendix.

white-collar, unskilled, retired, farmer, and unemployed). The researchers who gathered girls for the interviews in each location recorded the economic status and ethnic group of each girl as part of the interviews. The interview records do not note if these categories were reported by the girls, assigned by researchers, or a combination of both.

The 1975 census issued most reports only using the categories of “white,” “negro” and “other.” To align this with the Project Girl data, this study will use the racial categories of “white,” “African American,” “Hispanic” and “other.”⁷ The three named ethnic groups were selected because they are represented in a statistically significant population within the data. The smaller groups (American Indian, Eskimo, and Asian) did not compromise a statistically relevant population until combined into one category (“other”). This method is consistent with the census data from the years of the Project Girl Interviews. However, when individual girls are quoted, their race will be noted as it appears in the interview.

It is not the purpose of this study to evaluate fully the complicated intersections between race and class. There are many excellent studies that develop the historical relationship more completely.⁸ However, as this study makes claims about the way girls of specific races and classes experienced sexuality, a few observations are necessary. Together, Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate that the distribution of race and class represented in Project. The

⁷ I am choosing to use the term “Hispanic” as it was the term used by Konopka and her interviewers. We will see that some girls had already adopted the word “Latina,” which was gaining in popularity by the mid-1970s, but the majority still labeled themselves “Hispanic” or “Mexican-American.” For more on the history of this term see George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican-American* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993)

⁸ Robert Bauman, *Race and the War on Poverty : From Watts to East L.A.*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight : The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City.* (Cambridge.: Harvard University Press, 2003); Alice O’Conner, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth Century U.S. History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon : Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003.); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis : Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit : With a New Preface by the Author.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.); Jill Quadagno, *The Color of Welfare: How Racism Undermined the War on Poverty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.)

majority (57%) of white girls interviewed came from white-collar families, making them by far the most economically advantaged racial group. African American girls were split almost evenly between blue-collar and white-collar families. The blue-collar group included girls from all racial backgrounds, but the Hispanics comprised the highest percentage of this social class. The girls from families in service industries or families where both parents were unemployed were predominantly from minority groups.

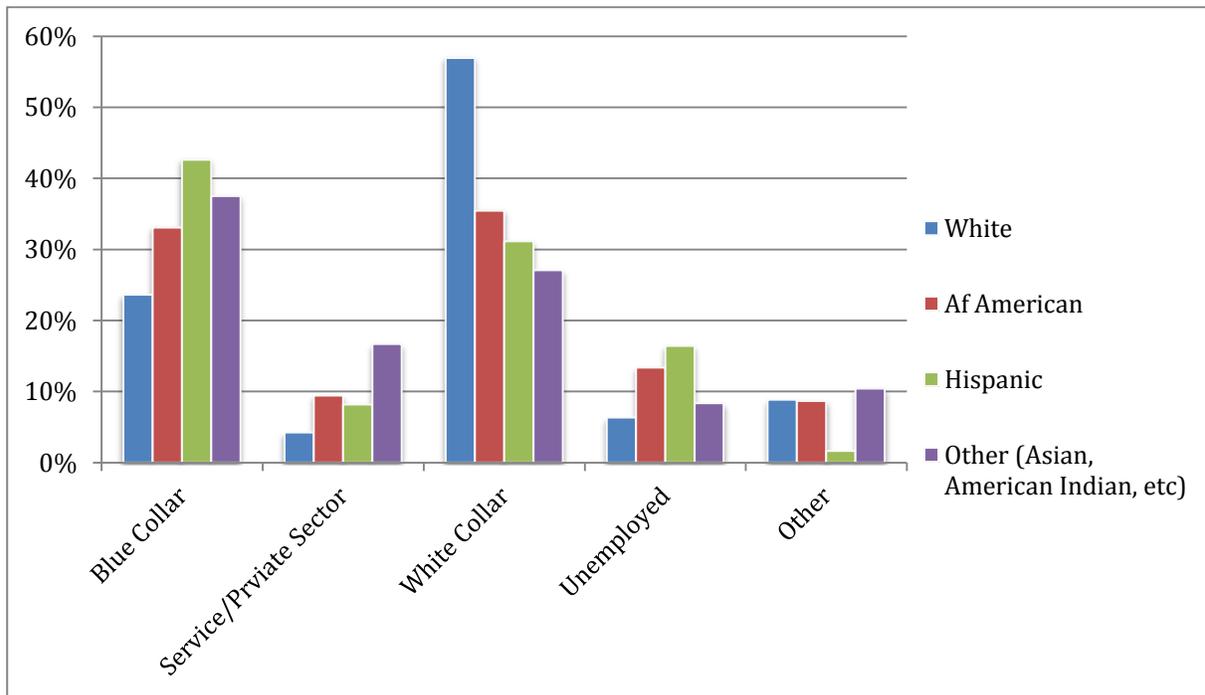


Figure 2: Distribution of ethnic groups within each class represented in Project Girl ⁹

⁹ The Project Girl records are not clear on how the researchers assigned economic class. From the notes, I believe it was based on what the girls reported and how interviewers interpreted that but the criteria for what meant "blue collar," "white collar," etc. is not readily available.

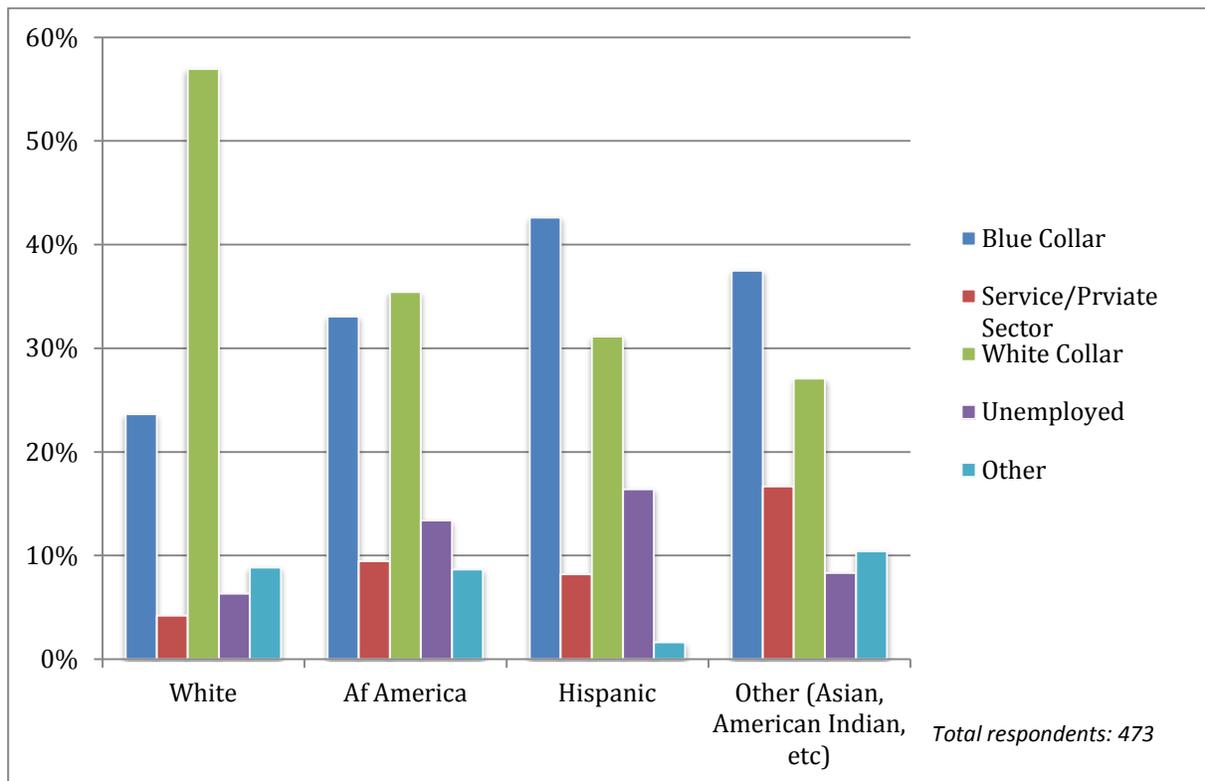


Figure 3 Distribution of economic class within each ethnic group represented in Project Girl

The Project Girl data confirms that race and class were inextricably bound together in the cases of the girls interviewed. Scholars have argued that the long history of racism in the United States created systemic poverty for people of minority races. Alice O’Connor’s *Poverty Knowledge* finds that politicians and social scientists have “diminished the importance of racially discriminatory institutions” in explaining patterns of poverty in order to avoid discussing the deeply racist history of social institutions.¹⁰ In doing so, experts created an arbitrary line between race and class, when in fact one cannot be effectively studied without the other. Sociologist Kristin Luker’s *Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage*

¹⁰ O’Conner, *Poverty Knowledge*, 17.

Pregnancy takes up the issue of race and poverty in connection to teenage pregnancy in the 1980s and early 1990s. Luker argues that economics plays a larger role than pregnancy or early childbearing in determining a teenage girl's future. She points to the history of education, poverty, and race as the key factors that determine whether a young woman will become pregnant and how she will support her child if she chooses to raise it.¹¹ Building on these arguments, this study assumes that socioeconomics and race cannot be viewed as entirely separate entities.

Views of Teenage Girls about Sex Education and Menstruation

Throughout the congressional hearings, experts testified that teenagers needed better access to sex education, stating that most teens did not receive any type of sex education. The Project Girl interviews tell a different story. Only twelve students who discussed sex education claimed that they had not learned about sex at all. Instead, a majority had some type of sex education course in school or had parents who discussed basic sexuality in the home. The inaccuracies in teenage knowledge about sexuality were rooted not a complete lack of sex education so much as a limited curriculum and false rumors that proliferated among teens.

The early 1970s, filled with the hope of a thriving women's movement, offered a moment when liberal sex education activists achieved measured success in reshaping the curriculum to include this broad range of topics. By the end of the decade, their work would come under attack by the conservative Birch Society, and sex education would begin its turn toward abstinence-only curricula. Led by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), reform-minded educators pushed the traditional boundaries of public school curricula in the 1970s. Mary Calderone, who served as the medical director for

¹¹ Kristin Luker, *Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996)

Planned Parenthood before founding SIECUS, argued that sex education must acknowledge “the normal, predictable, and absolutely valid sexuality of adolescence” if instructors wanted a chance of changing the way teenagers made sexual decisions.¹² Sex educators argued that the conservative courses used in the 1960s must be revised to include more accurate information about venereal disease, birth control, abortion, and pregnancy. Most importantly, SIECUS argued, sex education should be “value-neutral.” In other words, the courses should focus on scientific facts. This type of sex education class was scripted in two parts. First, instructors should provide accurate biological information to young people throughout their maturation, based on the needs of their age group. Second, schools and community centers were told to provide “ample opportunity for discussion under trained leadership,” allowing students to ask questions in an open dialogue.¹³ Schools and community centers, according to Calderone and other experts, should act *in loco parentis*, to ensure that young people had access to accurate information. Conservatives countered that schools should not act in the place of parents, concerned about the risk of teachers sharing advice that would conflict with a family’s values.

For most teenage girls, the first confrontation with sexuality arrived with menstruation. As such, early sex education often began by teaching girls about their impending introduction to womanhood. As Figure 4 shows, in the early 1970s most girls had enough sex education either from parents or in school to feel positive or indifferent about their first periods. According to the interviews, menstruation was anticlimactic for the majority of girls. Unlike previous generations for whom menstruation was a frightening or even traumatic

¹² Mary Calderone, “Teenagers and Sex,” *The PTA Magazine*, October 1965

¹³ Mary Calderone, “Sex Attitudes and Sex Education,” Speech presented at the Blair Academy, Blairstown, New Jersey, September 16, 1966, p 9

experience, most girls in this era found the experience more bothersome than scary. This change can be credited to the biological focus in sex education programs. Knowledge took away the fear for many girls. Project Girl interviewees complained about cramps or not being able to go swimming, but overall the experience did not elicit much of a reaction at all. In the words of one African American from Georgia, “Well, we had talked about that in the 7th grade so I wasn’t scared because I knew about it.”¹⁴ Her feelings echoed throughout the interview transcripts.

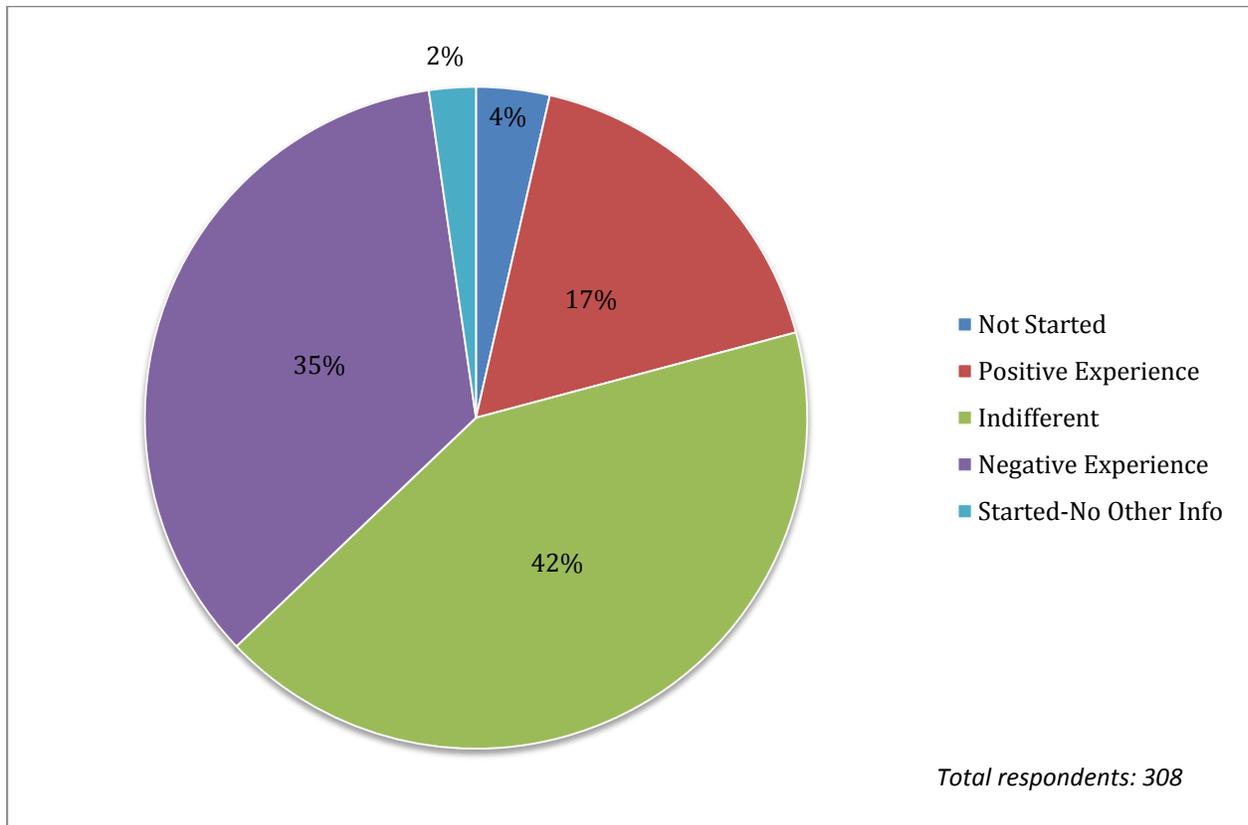


Figure 4: Project Girl responses to the question “describe your first menstrual period”

¹⁴ Interview GA-VR-1, Folder Sexuality-Georgia, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota The Project Girl interviews were conducted orally and transcribed at a later date. I have chosen to correct the spelling mistakes found in the transcriptions as the mistakes are likely those of the transcriber. In cases where girls use obvious slang, I left the text as it appeared in the original transcription.

The oft-repeated horror stories of first periods that left girls feeling scared, uninformed, or otherwise negative about the experience still appeared in the interviews. One Hispanic girl from Texas described her first period as “weird” because her “mother never told me nothing about it.” She went on to say that one morning she “woke up and the bed was all full of blood” causing her to “freak out” until her mother came in and explained everything. The girl was eleven.¹⁵ This story stood out as unusual because even the majority of girls who remembered their first period as negative experiences had seen videos at school or learned about menstruation from a parent or friend. Most negative experiences more closely aligned with the 16-year-old Massachusetts teen who worried because “It was just really strange. I remember the first time I had a lot of pain, I guess I just sort of wondered what, whether it was bad,” even though she had been taught what to expect.¹⁶

Menstruation was only the beginning of sexual experiences for teenage girls. Project Girl participants overwhelmingly answered “yes” when asked “do you believe you know enough about sex for your age?” Of the 342 students who answered that question, 84 percent (287) answered “yes,” 15 percent (52) “no,” and less than one percent (3) said “I don’t know.” Most learned about sex in school, from parents, and from friends. One third claimed that sex education in school was their primary source of information, though many described their sex education courses as embarrassing, stupid, or too late. An articulate Georgia teen explained that she believed sex education should begin before 6th grade when she watched a school-sanctioned film. She believed “if they’d just start earlier with kids and teach them that sex was a normal thing and it’s not dirty” students would have learned to take sex more seriously. She

¹⁵ Interview TX-ML-41, Folder Sexuality-Texas, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

¹⁶ Interview MA-CH-48, Folder Sexuality-Kentucky-Mass, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

went on to explain that her mother “gets embarrassed” about sex so she depended on the school’s course.¹⁷ Not all school programs were created equal. Some students expressed frustration that their schools “just told girls about their monthly periods and what you should do about them and about puberty and stuff like that” without explaining reproduction or the emotional issues surrounding sex ranging from disappointment and confusion to feeling loved and valued.¹⁸ Many girls learned about sex from their mothers. Some girls reported that their mothers reluctantly answered questions when asked, while others had open dialogues with their parents. One girl explained that sex education at school came too late for her and her friends because their mothers had already told them about the “birds and the bees.”¹⁹ Another girl’s mother reportedly had emphasized that sex was “something that’s natural” but it also brought potentially big consequences. This teen believed that “if you’re with someone you like and it leads to [sex], there’s nothing wrong with it” but she should be careful not to get pregnant.²⁰

Overall, the data in Figure 5 shows us that majority of girls interviewed had some form of sex education, either through their schools or their parents. Girls who did not have sex education in their schools almost uniformly expressed that “the more a girl wants to learn, they should be able to” have access to that information at school, particularly if they did not learn about sex at home.²¹ These students, often the same girls whose parents did not provide

¹⁷ Interview GA-AG-34, Folder Sexuality-Georgia, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

¹⁸ Interview GA-AG-34, Folder Sexuality-Georgia, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

¹⁹ Interview CA-JO-8, Folder Sexuality-California, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

²⁰ Interview CA-MS-22, Folder Sexuality-California, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

²¹ Interview GA-AG-35, Folder Sexuality-Georgia, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

much information, looked for details in books, gossiped with friends, and many simply learned through experience. This often led to misinformation such as the white fourteen-year-old who believed that venereal disease was something that “most blacks” had or the Californian teen who believed birth control pills would “make you have double babies, twins” and would cause weight gain.²²

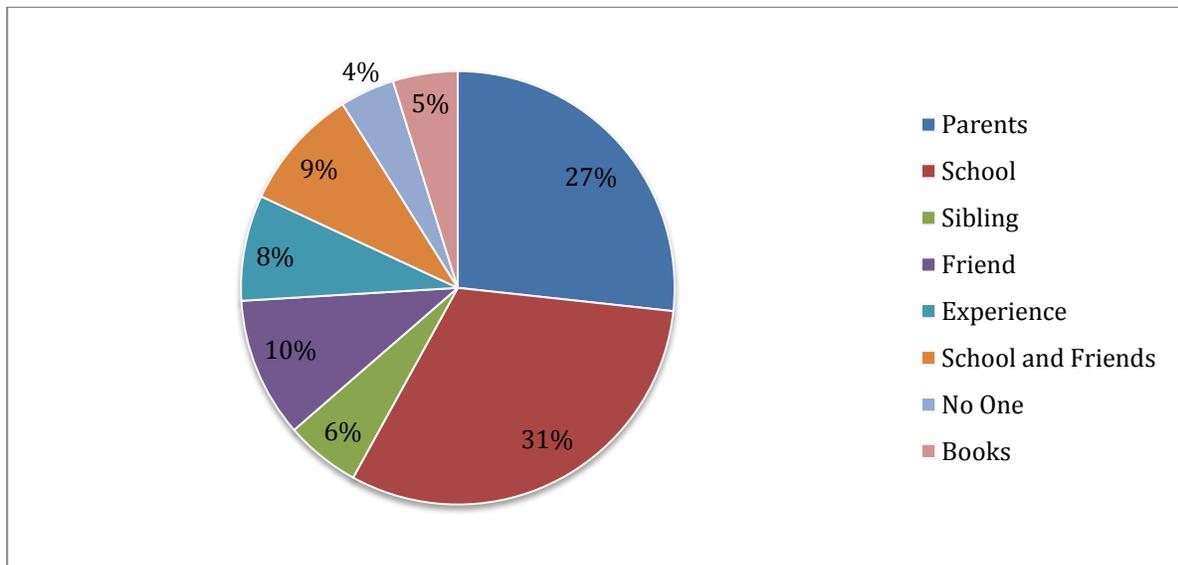


Figure 5: Project Girl responses to the question “who taught you about sex?”

The SIECUS campaign to emphasize value-neutral facts in sex education appears to have made some impact in the way the Project Girl participants experienced sex education in their schools. There is no accurate way to trace the type of sex education each participant experienced as their schools, addresses, or other similar information is not included in the interviews. However, their answers reflect themes from the SIECUS emphasis on biology. By transcending the value-laden moralism of early curriculum, scientific sex education made an impression on adolescents. As one girl explained, her sex education courses emphasized “the

²² Interview CA-JB-9, Folder Sexuality-California, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota; Interview GA-AG-35, Folder Sexuality-Georgia, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

anatomy and the different hormones that become involved...it was really good because it prepared us and let us know what were the consequences and what were the advantages.”²³. Those who reported participating in sex education emphasized the scientific nature of the discussions. They often spoke more about venereal disease than about the emotional or long-term issues that could come with premarital sex. Eight-five percent of the girls interviewed had some knowledge of the causes and symptoms of venereal disease. Youth who learned about sex first from their parents reported conversations about pregnancy, menstruation, and morality. Conversations with friends or “on the street” led to myths and jokes, but also to factual information based on real-life experience. As young girls collected information on sexuality, they equipped themselves with an arsenal of information that they would use to navigate the pressing issue of premarital sex.

Is Premarital Sex Ever Acceptable?

While legislators argued that teenage girls were becoming more promiscuous and educators argued about the best approach for sex education, young women struggled with very personal decisions about their sexuality. Most did not approach sex outside of marriage casually, though they did believe it was acceptable. A middle-class white 18-year-old explained sex was complicated and this made it hard for her to take a firm stand on the issue. “I’m not against it. I don’t think ... I think the problem is most sex is used as either, you know, like a weapon or, you know ... if it’s for love and if it’s, you know, sincere, and if it’s actually an act of communication, I think that, you know, I think that’s alright.”²⁴ Her confused words echoed throughout interviews with teenage girls who struggled to find the

²³ Interview MN-JW-11, Folder Sexuality-Minnesota, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

²⁴ Interview CA-JO-3, Folder Sexuality-California, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

right words to convey their convictions. These young women did not shy away from talking about sex; many anxiously shared their opinions and made sure the interviewers understood that issues of sexuality required careful thought.

	OK	OK IF IN RELATIONSHIP	NEVER OK	NO OPINION	OK BUT CAN LEAD TO PROBLEMS	I DON'T KNOW
12-13	37%	17%	38%	5%	2%	2%
14-15	38%	17%	29%	2%	12%	2%
16-17	42%	22%	24%	1%	6%	5%
18-19	47%	35%	6%	3%	9%	0%

Figure 6: Project Girl responses to the question “Is premarital sex ever ok?” Answers by age of participant

Deciding to “go all the way” did not come easily for most girls in the study. Interviewers asked “have you had intercourse?” to avoid any confusion about the difference between making out, heavy petting, and premarital sexual intercourse. Some girls who were not sexually active shared stories about what sexual activities they found acceptable.²⁵ One Texan girl drew the limit at kissing, telling the interviewers “you just kiss him you know, but not go to bed with him” until marriage.²⁶ The numbers show that even for the youngest participants in this study, the majority did not believe that sex outside of marriage was wrong. By combining the percentages of those who said premarital sex is “ok” and those who answered it was “ok if you are in a relationship,” it is clear that there is not a single age group in which a majority opposed premarital sex under any circumstance. Most girls who believed sex was morally acceptable in a relationship would have agreed with the 14-year-old African

²⁵ Konopka, Young Girls

²⁶ Interview TEX-SD-28, Folder Sexuality-Texas, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

American from Georgia who explained, “if two people feel that good about each other and they want to do it, I feel that’s alright.”²⁷ Girls spoke of relationships where two people believed they trusted one another, wanted to express love, and treated one another with mutual respect as the best situations for sex. Even among the youngest participants surveyed, 54% believed sex before marriage was acceptable in some situations but only 38% staunchly opposed it. While sex within a relationship was almost always found acceptable, girls typically perceived casual sex as demeaning. An eighteen-year-old Texan saw the difference this way: “There’s dirty sex and there’s clean sex.” She explained “Dirty sex” was “just taking advantage of a person” while “clean sex” occurred in committed relationships.²⁸ This generation of young women, who came of age in the years immediately following the sexual revolution, was comfortable with sexual activity from an early age, but they held themselves and their peers to high standards. Teenaged girls’ perception that premarital sex was not wrong, particularly within a relationship, undoubtedly fed the panic about teenage sexuality that caused legislators to act as discussed in Chapter 3.

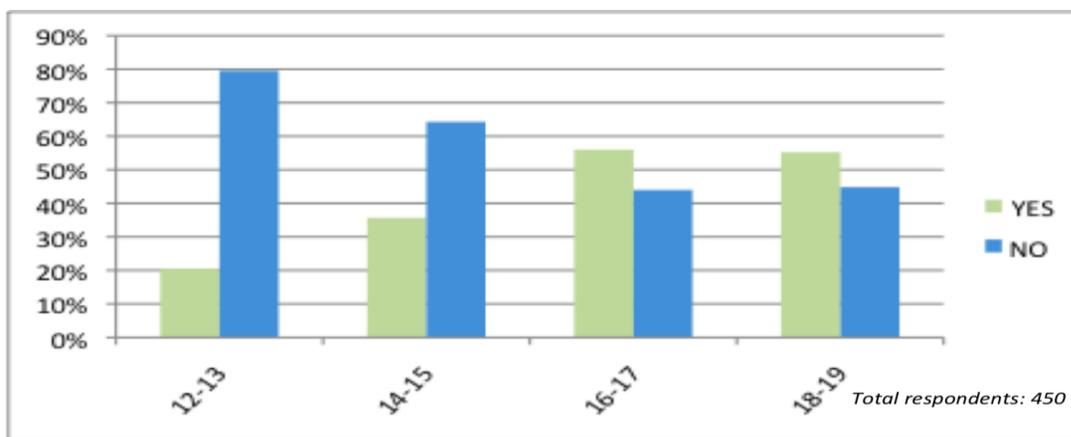


Figure 7: Project Girl responses to the question “Are you sexually active?” Answers by age of participant,

²⁷ Interview GA-IK-20, Folder Sexuality-Georgia, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

²⁸ Interview TX-SD-38, Folder Sexuality-Texas, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

From ages 12-17, the percentage of young women who did not believe sex is acceptable outside of marriage dropped incrementally. As girls matured, they became more comfortable with sex. This is not a surprising statistic and it follows the pattern of sexual activity among girls in that age range (Figure 7). As young women grew up, they were more likely to engage in premarital sex. As Figure 7 demonstrates, almost 80 percent of the youngest group of interviewees had not lost their virginity while 55 percent of their eighteen- and nineteen-year-old peers had at least one sexual partner. With this trend, they began to accept sexual activity as permissible, at least within the confines of a relationship. More noteworthy is the gap between ages 16-17 and ages 18-19. While 24% of girls age 16-17 opposed sex outside of marriage, a mere 6% of girls ages 18-19 did. Interestingly, there was no significant difference between the sexual activity of girls in these age groups, for both groups 55 percent admitted to having sexual intercourse while 45 percent had not had sex (see Figure 7). In both groups, more young women engaged in sex than abstained and the numbers remained relatively stable. This is consistent with other surveys from the same years. In 1974 the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published a survey of college women ages 15-25 that showed only 22 percent of participants expressed disapproval of extramarital sex, regardless of their own sexual activity.²⁹ By age 18, young women were leaving high school and looking toward college or jobs. Although they were young, they also felt more equipped to handle an unplanned pregnancy in comparison to their 13-year-old counterparts. A 17-year-old Californian teen who was not sexually active because of her religious beliefs explained that it was hard to judge her friends. Her answer started with a firm “As far as I’m concerned,

²⁹ Daniel Yankelovich, “Startling Shifts Found in Youth’s views of Work, Morals,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 28, 1974 quoted in Konopka *Young Girls*, 32

it’s not alright” but for her peers, she admitted she “didn’t see anything wrong with it” if it was what they wanted. The refrain of “it’s not for me, but it’s ok for my friends” appeared consistently in the interviews with older teens who were not sexually active but believed premarital sex was acceptable, even outside of loving relationships.

Even teens who did not engage in premarital sex believed it was acceptable in some circumstances. By combining the groups of girls with no sexual experience who believed that premarital sex was “ok,” “ok within a relationship,” or “ok but can lead to problems,” it is clear that over 50 percent of the girls who wanted to preserve their own virginity approved of the sexual activity of their peers (Figure 8). Aggregating the same categories for sexually active teens demonstrates that 80 percent of teens who engaged in sex before marriage believed they were doing the right thing. The majority of the girls who were

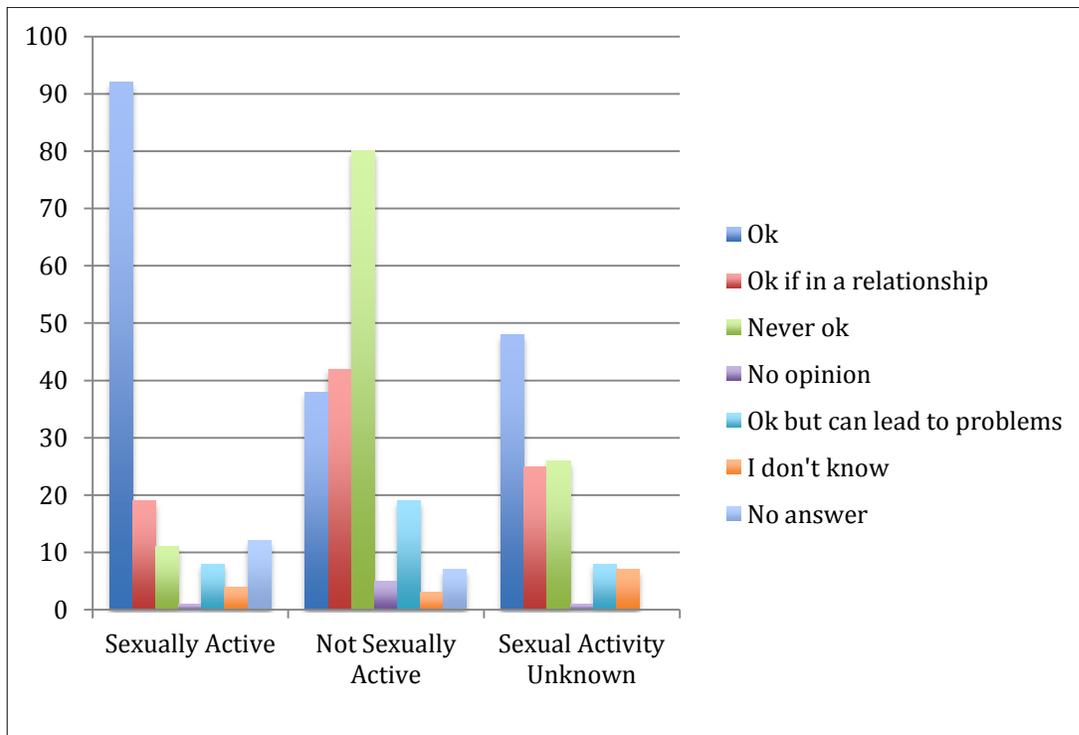


Figure 8 Project Girl responses to the question “Is premarital sex ever ok?” Divided by sexual activity.

sexually active but did not think premarital sex was acceptable told interviewers that they had stopped having sex. Project Girl researched counted them among the “sexually active” group because they had lost their virginity but it is possible that these girls did not have sex again until they were married. That data is not included in scope of the study.

Though they believed premarital sex was permissible, most young girls did not enter sexual relationships without careful thought. The popular image of teenagers having thoughtless sex in ever increasing numbers is misleading at best. The Project Girl interviews demonstrate that while teens did engage in sex--over half of them were sexually active by age 16--they did not do so without due consideration. Teens saw sex in a more nuanced way than adults often realized. Many expressed hesitation about when sex was acceptable. While few believed that it was never permissible, they struggled with what made sex safe and how to manage the consequences. Further, teens understood “safety” to include emotional as well as physical health. A 17-year-old urban girl from a blue-collar background shared her internal debate about premarital sex. “Yes, if people are willing to accept the consequences of a baby if it happens,” couples could have sex. But, she continued, “I know I don’t like to see it...I think if a girl is that into sleeping with guys or whatever, she should be on pills or something to prevent it.” For this young woman, and many of her peers, sex was only acceptable if the couple took steps to avoid pregnancy. Without birth control, the dangers of unwanted pregnancy made sex outside of marriage an irresponsible choice. Others learned this lesson

the hard way, like the pregnant California teen who explained “I’ve only had [sex] once and the time I had it, I got caught [pregnant].”³⁰

Even with the safety of a relationship, teens learned quickly that sex was not always what they imagined. After they engaged in sex or watched friends have sex, they were much more aware of the emotional and physical disappointments. An 18-year-old African American woman who learned about sex “on the street” at early age found sex disappointing. She told her interviewer, “it wasn’t much to me. Everybody said it was an expression of love but I couldn’t see how. How would you call that an expression ... because it wasn’t all that good.”³¹ Her feelings were repeated throughout Project Girl, particularly by teens whose first sexual experiences occurred early in life. This resulted from a lack of control or mature consent from the young girl. In many cases, the sexually active girls under 15 were in relationships with older men, lived in detention centers, or had histories of sexual abuse. Though this was not the case with all very young girls who had sex, these themes dominated their stories.

Both Project Girl and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) records make clear that a majority of girls engaged in premarital sex by the time they turned 19. As the age at which girls lost their virginity declined, adults panicked about pregnancy rates and began to portray a generation of teens as frivolous and careless about their sex lives. Conversations with teenage girls demonstrated that this could not be further from the truth. While it is true that some regarded sex casually, the majority thought carefully about sexual decisions and weighed their options. They believed that sex before marriage was acceptable, but only within

³⁰ Interview CA-JO-26, Folder Sexuality-California, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

³¹ Interview GA-VR-14, Folder Sexuality-Georgia, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

a relationship. Girls shunned their peers who approached sex too casually. A teenager from Texas explained her views like this: “it is bad to me if you go with just any boy, or with one after another.” She continued by reaffirming the belief of her peers “but if you feel that you are really gonna marry him or that you really love him I think it’s all right.”³² Almost all worried about the consequences of their sexual choices—both emotional pain and physical outcomes, including pregnancy and disease. More than any other generation before them, this group of teens turned to birth control and newly legalized abortion as legitimate, socially acceptable options.

What If You Were Pregnant?

By the early 1970s, teenage girls had considerable knowledge about birth control. Many sex education courses included information on contraception, and Planned Parenthood offered access to clinics across the country. Nonetheless, media headlines proclaimed “More teenagers are pregnant despite rise in contraception.” The truth was that though a majority of teens were aware of birth control, the majority of Project Girl interview participants did not use any forms of contraception. While 175 of the participants said that they knew about birth control and supported the idea, only 44 of the 148 sexually active girls confirmed that they used contraception including condoms, birth control pills, and IUDs.³³ Teens cited lack of access most often when asked about why they did not use birth control. Doctors and many Planned Parenthood clinics continued to restrict access to non-married clients. Other teens simply stated that they were embarrassed to ask for the pill or to talk about condoms with their boyfriends.

³² Interview TX_ML-6, Folder Sexuality-Texas, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

³³ Project Girl database by author

Many girls considered the possibility of unplanned pregnancy before engaging in sexual intercourse for the first time. Social workers and politicians decried the rise in abortion rates, particularly among teens. By focusing on the teenage population, they blurred the fact that women of all ages were seeking abortions in larger numbers due to the recent court decision in *Roe v Wade*. Few paused to ask girls what they thought about the increasingly politicized issue.³⁴ A Californian teen's response demonstrates the uncertainty with which girls approached this question. She explained that in her opinion, there was no good option.

It's a very important type decision whether you, you know, want to force somebody to marry you and live with that for the rest of your life or do you want to have an abortion and live with that for the rest of your life? Whether you want to be an unwed mother and schlub around a kid for the rest of your life...

She believed she had a choice in her future, even if she was pregnant but none of these seemed like attractive choices for her or for many of her peers. Though they claimed they understood the risks associated with premarital sex, teenage girls struggled with how they would cope with an unwanted pregnancy.

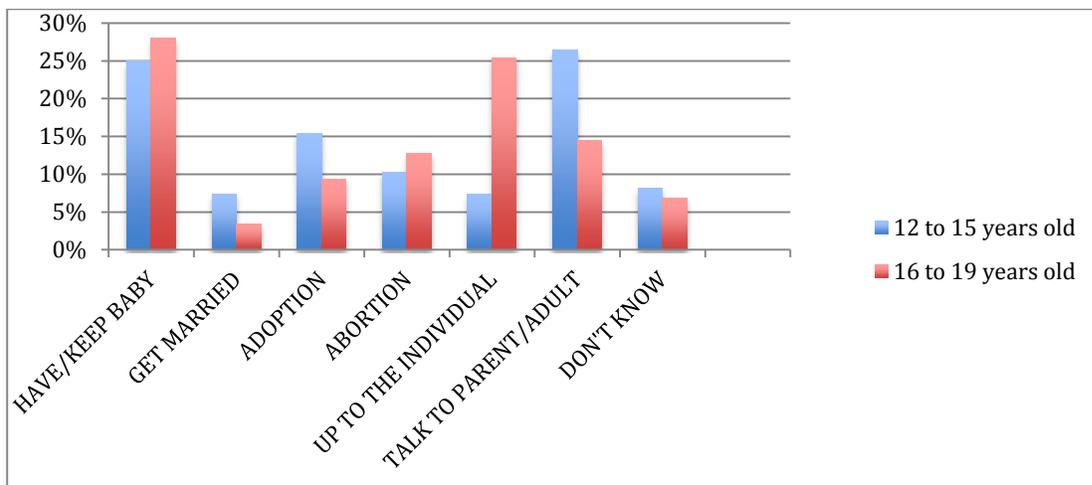


Figure 4: Project Girl responses to the question "What would you do if you were pregnant?" Answers by age

³⁴ Luker, *Dubious Conceptions*

The data in Figure 9 shows clearly that there was no consensus among teenage girls about the best option for unplanned pregnancies. Their answers to the question “what would you do if you were pregnant” varied widely. Notably, Project Girl participants interpreted this question in two different ways. Some focused on the immediate problem of who they would disclose their pregnancy to, naming parents, hotlines, doctors, and other healthcare professionals as their first line of support. An Indiana teen said a pregnant girl should “tell her parents. And if her parents are some type that don’t love her...then I think they should go to like a guidance counselor even if they don’t know them very well or an adult they do know that can help them.”³⁵ Others concentrated on the fetus, worrying about motherhood, adoption, abortion, and marriage as unattractive but necessary options. Many gave their answers from purely emotional perspectives responding with dramatic phrases such as “I would freak out” or “I would just die.” Or, like a Massachusetts teen, they focused on the idea that “my parents would kill me” before they addressed the problem of how to handle the pregnancy itself.³⁶ These two categories are not exclusive; a girl whose first reaction was “talk to a doctor or counselor” would also have to make a decision about whether or not she would continue her pregnancy and keep the baby. Similarly, a girl who chose marriage likely also chose to keep her baby while a girl whose answer was “keep the baby” may choose marriage or single motherhood. For this study, I categorized the answers based on a girl’s reaction, with the knowledge that their answers were not mutually exclusive. These initial responses seem predictable and typical of teenage girls, most of whom were not pregnant and did not know

³⁵ Interview ID-MM-5, Folder Sexuality-Indiana, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

³⁶ Interview MA-CH-21, Folder Sexuality-Kentucky-Mass, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

exactly how they would react. Some interviewers pressed the participants to go deeper with their response, and the result is a picture of girls who were unsure about how to make this life-changing decision.

A large number of girls believed that if pregnant they would choose to keep their babies. As unwed motherhood was increasingly visible and the school systems could no longer force a girl to drop out, it became a more realistic option for girls to raise their babies. Some approached this with the naivety of youth, like the Oregon teen who described a baby as “something that I could take care of and somebody to love, I could just love him” and hoped everything else would fall into place.³⁷ Most girls, however, were more realistic about the struggles faced by unwed mothers. Echoing the words of feminist leaders, they cited the cost of raising a baby, loss of friends, and the double standards applied to teenage mothers and fathers. In the words of one Indiana teen, “the mother, she’s the one that always gets stuck...she’s wrecking her life and the child’s life” if she was pregnant and kept the baby while the father “he just, you know, goes off on his way. Too bad, kid, you goofed.” The perception that teen mothers shouldered the bulk of the responsibility while fathers were able to move on with their lives consequence-free appears repeatedly in the interviews. Coming of age at the height of the women’s movement, adolescents understood the double standards that society would apply if they became pregnant before marriage. Girls knew that pregnancy would likely alter their lives much more dramatically than those of their partners. Even so, many believed that they would choose to keep their baby if faced with an unwanted pregnancy. Others argued that if a girl acquiesced to sex, she should have to deal with the

³⁷ Interview OR-BL-16, Folder Sexuality-Oregon, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

consequences of raising a baby saying “if a person had gotten pregnant, then they should be able to take the responsibilities of going ahead and having the baby.”³⁸

A handful, more among the youngest girls in the project, said they would choose marriage. Though few elaborated on the positive reasons for a pregnant teen to get married, it is likely that the younger girls felt this was the only acceptable option. Many had never experienced sexual relationships and so it is also possible that they had a more romantic view of sexual intercourse and marriage than their more experienced peers. Some commented that marriage was the only way to provide a baby with two parents as role models. They worried that “when a child grows up and asks for his daddy, she won’t know what to say” if a teenage mother chose to raise a child on her own.³⁹ Older students disparaged marriage, even if they believed that a girl should keep her baby. They thought the girl should include the father in the decision but “they don’t have to get married” unless both parents wanted to make that commitment.⁴⁰

Those who did not think they would keep their baby split almost evenly between adoption and abortion. Girls who thought they would choose adoption frequently did so because they were against abortion. For these girls, adoption became the default answer. A Hispanic 15-year-old from Texas explained “I think I’d rather give it up for adoption than have an abortion” even though it would be hard to “go through the whole thing.”⁴¹ For this girl, and those who echoed her thoughts, adoption was the only reasonable alternative to

³⁸ Interview OR_PL-11, Folder Sexuality-Oregon, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

³⁹ Interview OK-PT-8, Folder Sexuality-Oklahoma, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

⁴⁰ Interview TX-ML-22, Folder Sexuality-Texas, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

⁴¹ Interview TX-SD-6, Folder Sexuality-Texas, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

abortion. They “would never want to have a child and not be married,” but they were sexually active and did not want to marry at an early age.⁴² Adoption seemed to solve all of those problems on the occasion of an unwanted pregnancy. Adoption was also the preferred choice of girls who worried that unwed motherhood would cause them to be kicked out of school (although Title IX made this illegal at the time of the interviews, Title IX was new, unpublicized, and not well enforced) or cause them to miss out on the fun of being a teenager.

Abortion brought up strong emotions for many teens. Using the Project Girl data, it is clear that there was no consensus among teenagers. Instead, even those who had had abortions or who said they would seek an abortion if they got pregnant struggled with the decision. Like the issue of premarital sex, teens approached abortion with more mature and nuanced opinions than their adult advocates gave them credit for. As Figure 10 shows, the majority of Project Girl participants did not give a clear answer on the subject. Instead, they provided vague, uncommitted answers or declined to discuss the topic at all, demonstrating their ambivalence ambiguity about abortion. Of those who answered, teens split almost evenly between those who thought abortions were acceptable and those who opposed them in all situations. The contrast between their carefully worded answers to questions about sexual intercourse and the vague responses to questions about abortion demonstrates that while girls considered the abstract possibility of pregnancy when deciding to have sex, they were unable to form opinions on how to handle an unwanted pregnancy with as much certainty.

⁴² Interview MN-FH-10, Folder Sexuality-Minnesota, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

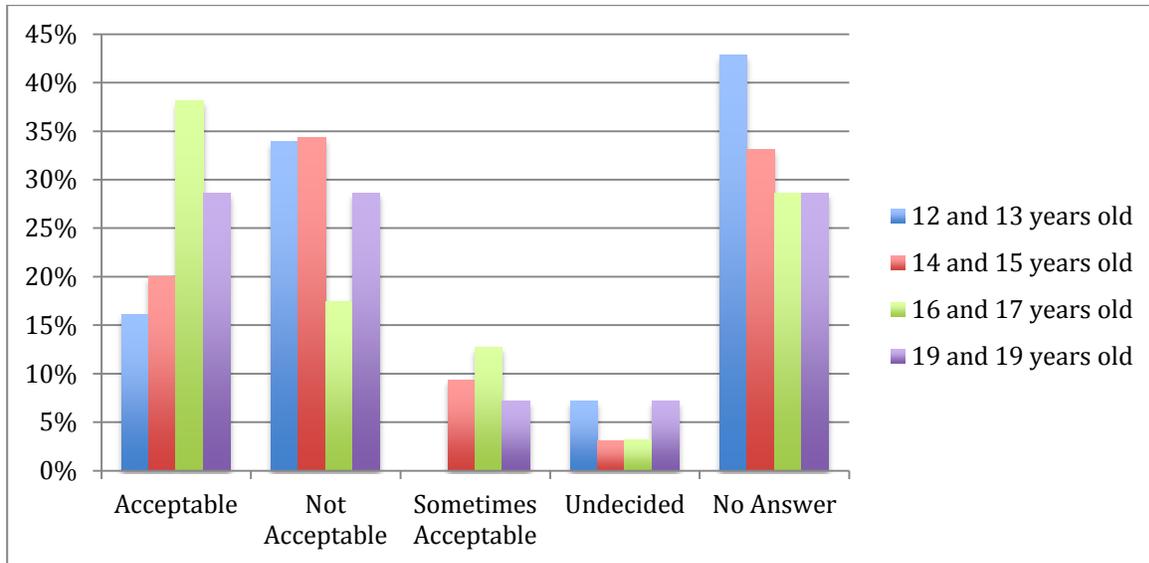


Figure 10: Project Girl responses to the question "What are your thoughts on abortion?" Answers by age. The Project Girl interviews took place between 1970 and 1975, abortion was only legal after 1973. This likely skewed some of the answers though it is impossible to tell from the data. The interviews do show that very few girls spoke about legality when explaining their answers.

Girls who opposed abortion gave straightforward answers when asked for their reasoning. "I don't know how they can stand it having a little baby killed and it's going to be in their mind all their life," explained a Hispanic girl from Texas.⁴³ Or in the words of a white 18-year-old girl, "I don't agree with abortion...it's an easy way out, you know."⁴⁴ These girls equated abortion with murder and saw it as a shameful way to avoid dealing with pregnancy altogether. For others, the idea of an abortion seemed easy, straightforward, and positive. "I think it's entirely up to the mother and the doctor if it's right for her. If she doesn't want to carry that baby, I don't see why she should have to," claimed a 17-year-old white teen.⁴⁵ Her peer in Massachusetts agreed, "I guess it's ok, because if you don't want to have a baby, why

⁴³ Interview TX-ML-1, Folder Sexuality-Texas, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

⁴⁴ Interview CA-JO-3, Folder Sexuality-California, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

⁴⁵ Interview MN-JW-49, Folder Sexuality-Minnesota, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

should you have to?”⁴⁶ For all of these girls, pregnancy was a theoretical situation; they based their answers on conversations with friends, parents, teachers, and religious leaders. Even those who answered with certainty that they opposed or supported abortion frequently appended their answers with “it’s really hard to say...if it happened to me I’d be able to know how I was feeling.”⁴⁷ Girls understood that until they were faced with an actual pregnancy, the question of abortion remained at least partially unanswered.

Interviewees who had had abortions also had mixed feelings about the procedure. Pregnant at seventeen and unable to get married, one of the Project Girl participants chose to get an abortion. She considered keeping the baby but after watching her cousins struggle to raise babies as unwed mothers, she realized that she did not want everyone to look down on her. After considering her options, she chose abortion. She claimed “I don’t regret it, not really, because I can still have some in the future if I want.”⁴⁸ Abortion was not always an experience that came without regret however. While the Californian girl felt sure of her decision and confident about her future, her Texan peer regretted her abortion. “I had one myself and my opinion is that, I wouldn’t have it again. I didn’t like it.”⁴⁹ It is unclear if this girl disliked the procedure itself, the emotional strain she experienced as a result of ending her pregnancy, or both. But she reiterated her regrets a number of times in her interview.

Decisions about abortion did not come easily to all teens. Some admitted that while they supported legal abortions in the abstract, it would be difficult for them to actually

⁴⁶ Interview MA-CH-24, Folder Sexuality-Kentucky-Mass, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

⁴⁷ Interview MA-CH-24, Folder Sexuality-Kentucky-Mass, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

⁴⁸ Interview CALIF-JB-30, Folder Sexuality-California, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

⁴⁹ Interview TX-ML-46, Folder Sexuality-Texas, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

undergo the procedure. “I agree with them but I’m not sure what I would do if I were going to have one. I know I agree with them as an idea but I don’t know if I could cope with it,” explained one Minnesotan teen.⁵⁰ Several girls who repeated similar arguments ultimately decided that abortion was too personal a decision for them to make for other girls. These girls fell into the “it’s up to the individual” category, the one category in Figure 10 where the older girls clearly dominate. While younger girls engaged in ideological debates about abortion or other options for pregnancy, older girls were more likely to have faced these decisions personally or through friends. When the situations became real, many older teens avoided passing judgment on their peers. The influence of the women’s movement and the feminist belief that all women had the right to make their own decisions is evident throughout the interviews on abortion. This mirrors their opinions on premarital sex: the idea that young women should have control over their own lives reigned supreme. For some of their peers, these decisions moved from hypothetical to reality with a positive pregnancy test.

Perspectives from Teenage Parents

Teenage mothers gave birth to an estimated 600,000 babies per year between 1970 and 1979 according to Carol P. Young, coordinator for Connecticut’s Young Parents Programs, which was funded partially by the Adolescent Health and Human Services Act. She lamented that even with good sex education and accessible birth control options, large numbers of teens got pregnant each year. Young told community leaders “somehow, we must find a way to

⁵⁰ Interview MN_JW_11, Folder Sexuality-Minnesota, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

make them realize how serious a commitment becoming a parent is.”⁵¹ For thousands of teenage girls, however, this was a lesson they learned through hard experience.

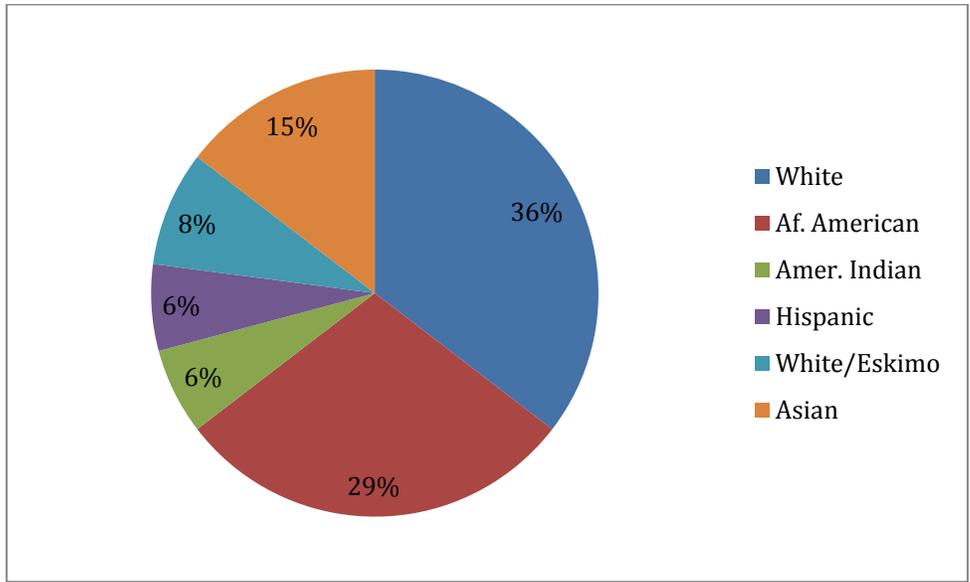


Figure 11: Ethnic groups represented by pregnant girls in Project Girl

Fifty-one Project Girl participants disclosed pregnancies to the interviewers. The racial make-up of the pregnant and parenting teens in the Project Girl study closely mirrored that of the larger population. Of the total pregnant or parenting girls, thirty-six percent were white, making them the largest racial group represented. Following closely behind in pregnancy rates, twenty-nine percent of the pregnant group was made up of African Americans. Hispanics, American Indian, Asian, and Eskimo girls made up the remaining thirty-five percent of pregnant girls, with a majority of these girls coming from Hispanic families.⁵² This

⁵¹ Sharon Cromwell, “Teen-Age Parents: Exploring Their World.” *News-Times*. December 14, 1979.

⁵² Pregnant white girls made up thirty-five percent of the total white population in the study. The pregnant African American girls represented thirty-seven percent of the total girls their ethnic group. Pregnant Hispanic girls made up fifty-six percent of the total Hispanic girls while sixty-six percent of the total American Indian, Eskimo, and Asian group were pregnant. The percentage of pregnant girls per ethnic group is a misleading number because of the way the interviews were collected. For example, most of the Hispanic, American Indian, and Eskimo girls were interviewed at juvenile detention facilities and state-run group homes. Many of them were sent to these facilities because of their pregnancies. On the contrary, white girls were often interviewed at home,

data is telling for several reasons. First, it confirms the idea that politicians adopted the language of a pregnancy epidemic at a time when white girls became more public about their pregnancies. It is unlikely that a decade earlier a similar study would have found so many pregnant white teens willing to share their stories, because most would have been shipped to maternity homes or given “therapeutic” abortions in secret. However, by the 1970s when these interviews were conducted, teenage pregnancy was public and even white pregnant teen moms were willing to talk about their experiences.

For almost every pregnant teen, the first landmark in her pregnancy was the moment she chose to share her situation with someone else. Without exception, the Project Girl interviewees chose to talk first to their parents or the baby’s father, with the hope that one or the other would offer some kind of support. Many, however, found themselves alone. Parental support changed everything for pregnant teens. Girls whose parents refused to help, sent them away, or cut them off shared stories of heartbreak, poverty, and hopelessness. They were unable to finish their educations, often had no answers for questions about their future or careers, and some lost their children to foster care.

One teen mother from Massachusetts explained, “I wanted the baby, but nobody was willing to help me.” Her parents kicked her out, and she found herself clinging to her boyfriend with desperation. Soon she realized that her baby’s father was using her for sex but she “would say OK to keep him there” because without him she was alone. Her parents kicked her out of the house and she spent the first trimester of her pregnancy sleeping on the streets or hiding in her boyfriend’s closet so his mom wouldn’t know she was there.

in schools, and in girls’ organizations such as Girl Scouts. The data sets from each skew the numbers to make it seem like minorities teens got pregnant at much higher rates than their white peers. As we have seen from other sources, that was not the case.

Eventually she and her boyfriend found an apartment. After her daughter's birth, she reconciled with her parents but they did not agree to help her support the baby. She was no longer in school and did not articulate plans for her future.⁵³ Though she loved her daughter dearly and expressed fierce pride in her role as a mother, this young woman's life was irrevocably changed. With no parental support, she left school because she needed to work to support her baby. Even with her hard work, her interview included allusions to the fact that Child Protective Services regularly checked on the health of the baby and threatened to take the baby away. The outlook looked bleak for mother and daughter in this situation.

With parental support teenage mothers, and therefore their children, faced much brighter futures. A teenage mom from Oklahoma who became pregnant at 17 illustrates this dramatic difference. Though she had a ten-month-old daughter, she told interviews that she loved school and planned to have a career as a legal secretary. After graduating from the tech program at her high school, she hoped to "go on to college and specialize" so that she could get a job that allowed her to support her daughter. While the teen mother attended school, her mom cared for the baby, allowing the baby's mother to achieve these goals. Unlike the mother above who claimed that teenage motherhood was "something I have to suffer through," this young mother believed that having a baby did not ruin her life.⁵⁴ On the contrary, she told the interview that because family members "were all standing behind me," having a baby gave her a reason to work harder. Both young mothers may have agreed that when "you've got someone depending on you, you can make more out of yourself, you try harder" to achieve

⁵³ Interview MA-CI-35, Folder Sexuality-Kentucky-Mass, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

⁵⁴ Interview MA-CI-35, Folder Sexuality-Kentucky-Mass, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

goals, but the two had very different expectations of their lives.⁵⁵ With no support, the first teen's goals included paying rent and finding money to feed the baby. For the girl whose mother helped raise the baby and whose father encouraged her daily, the future meant college, a career, and eventually marriage for love. It is impossible to know the full extent of family dynamics from the Project Girl transcripts, but the snapshots provided in the interviews make clear that girls who had some kind of support system through their pregnancies and into parenthood were more likely to be able to create stable homes for their children. It is also evident that the conservative predictions of welfare-dependent, poorly educated teenage mothers was in some ways a self-fulfilling prophesy. The belief that a girl could not be rehabilitated or was doomed to poverty justified parental abandonment for teenage girls, making them more likely to become dependent on government aid, work low-income jobs, and live in poverty.

After one pregnancy, the odds of a teen becoming pregnant during her teenage years for a second or even a third time increased significantly. Consider the case of a 17-year-old African American student from Massachusetts. At age 14 or 15 she discovered she was pregnant while living in a home for girls. One of the administrators took her to have an abortion. It is unclear how the girl felt about the situation prior to the procedure but she told her Project Girl interviewer that she regretted the abortion because the abortion was scary and painful. "If I had known, I'd give it up for adoption. It was awful. I was scared, they gave me needles. A whole bunch of needles." It is unclear whether the needles were shots, IVs, or part of the abortion itself but this young woman was traumatized by her experience. Two years later, the same girl was pregnant again. This time she chose to keep her baby, a choice

⁵⁵ SWHA interview transcript Project Girl box 12 OK-SF-26

supported by her mother. She recalled childbirth as a series of medical procedures punctuated by her own screams. “I kept screaming for my mother...they gave me stuff to stop my labor pains...I kept screaming and the next thing that happened to me I was in the delivery room getting ready.” She remembered that the baby “came out so weird, it looked so funny” before the doctors took him to the nursery. She did not see her son again for several hours. Five months later, this young mother’s life appeared to be on an uncertain path at best. She no longer attended school, Child Protective Services had custody of her baby, the baby’s father was in prison, and she lived at home. She told the interviewer that she hoped to get her baby back soon and that she did not understand why the baby was taken in the first place. Though she loved her child, this young woman’s teen years and adulthood were forever marred by unwed motherhood.⁵⁶

The youngest teen mothers often told traumatic and heart wrenching stories. A white Californian got pregnant at age thirteen after her first sexual experience. She waited several months before telling anyone because she was afraid of how they would react. When she could no longer keep her pregnancy a secret, she told her mom and her boyfriend. The boyfriend told her that they should get married. Her mother, likely out of concern for her daughter’s young age, gave her other options. She could “go and have an abortion,” “go to the next state and have the baby and then come back home” or her entire family could move so her mother could claim the baby was her own. The extremes to which this young girl’s mother was willing to go to hide her daughter’s pregnancy and avoid stigma reflect the values of the maternity home era in which young pregnant women were secreted away during pregnancy. At the age of thirteen, she chose to get married. Her pregnancy ended after her husband beat

⁵⁶ Interview transcript Box 10 Folder MA-Ch-31B SWHA Project Girl

her. After this episode, she moved back to her mother's home but became pregnant a second time by the same man. This pregnancy also ended in a miscarriage. She did not take birth control pills, believing they were not necessary because doctors told her that she could never have more children after she lost the first baby. Despite this assurance from her doctors, she found herself pregnant again. This time, she asked her current boyfriend to pay for an abortion because she was afraid of how her mother would react to yet another pregnancy.⁵⁷

The lives of these four young moms represent a wide spectrum of possible experiences for pregnant adolescents. Unwed teen mothers faced uncertain futures and struggled to find balance in their new lives as parents. Shunned by parents and friends, often abandoned by boyfriends, they discovered that no matter how much they loved their child, parenting was hard. While leaders in Congress attempted to fund programs and set up support centers to prevent teenage pregnancy, the teenage mothers they hoped to help struggled with daily tasks. Their hopes of careers or marriage often took a back seat to the constant effort to meet their baby's physical needs. Basic parenting skills, housing, and food were hard to come by for young women who had little support and incomplete educations. The lucky girls who found parental or community support faced much brighter futures even with the challenge of raising a baby. Legislators who responded to the perceived epidemic of teen pregnancy by setting up prevention programs and focusing on opportunities for higher education might have been more effective if they had broadened their approach to include the families of unwed teen mothers. By working with parents of pregnant and parenting teens, aid programs might have been able to create more positive outcomes for more girls. For those whose parents would not offer support, services including free childcare, alternative education and vocational training,

⁵⁷ Interview CAL-JB-2, Folder Sexuality-California, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

and parenting classes would have created a better chance at healthy lives for both adolescent parents and their babies.

The Project Girl records provide a window into the way teenage girls navigated the issues of sexuality in a decade when adults brought these issues to the forefront of political debate. While congressional leaders heard testimony of countless experts, the voices of the very girls they hoped to help were overshadowed. As a result, they politicized teenage sexuality without truly understanding it. As a group, teenage girls were not the promiscuous, immature, and reckless young people that adults often spoke about. Instead, they were caught in a perfect storm created by teenage hormones, a post-sexual revolution society, and a world that offered more medical and social options for pregnant girls than ever before. Teenage boys are conspicuously absent from both the interviews and political debate.

Sex education in the 1970s focused on biological facts, giving girls information about menstruation and reproduction without allowing much space for questions or discussing emotional consequences. Girls heard about contraception, abortion, and the challenges of unwed motherhood. However, none of this prevented them from engaging in premarital sex, nor did they think premarital sex was wrong. Surrounded by a culture that emphasized women's rights, self-fulfillment rather than self-denial, and the right to choose, girls believed that premarital sex, particularly in the confines of a relationship, was acceptable. Both anecdotal and statistical evidence makes clear that even girls who chose not to have sex had

no qualms about their friends choosing otherwise. As a generation, teenage girls stood together on this issue.

Even with this fairly uniform approval of premarital sex, girls and young women were divided on what should happen if a girl found herself pregnant. Their views on abortion varied as widely as those of their adult counterparts, struggled with the emotional consequences of adoption, and often chose to keep and raise their own babies in spite of their youth. Unwed teenage mothers struggled to find balance in their new lives. For many, pregnancy meant the end of their educations, living in homes for girls, or marriage to boyfriends who could not support them. Others found that with the emotional and financial support of their parents, new dreams were possible and the added responsibility of a baby provided inspiration to work harder to change their futures.

The Project Girl interviews show that if adults had found ways to listen to the teenage girls in their communities, programs might have been shaped differently. Girls could have been treated as having valid opinions and invited to engage in problem solving. The chance to be heard and respected was, after all, what young women craved above all else. In the words of a 16-year-old single mother from Massachusetts:

So many things are kept hush-hush now. Especially sex and things have always been taboo and you're not supposed to talk about them or do them. If you do them you're a sinful person and you're not supposed to feel that you're equal with anyone else. It's just been considered not the right thing to do. I don't believe this...but this is what you're taught. If you have somebody to talk to...so many people are inhibited that I think it brings more problems than it solves. I really think that if most people had somebody they could talk to and have some kind of an understanding that they would be able to function better and be able to cope with things a lot better.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Interview MA-CI-30, Folder Sexuality-Kentucky-Mass, Box 20, Project Girl Collection, Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota

Chapter 5: The Facts of Life: Teen Fiction, Young Readers, and Censorship, 1970-1990

Dear Judy,
Please send me the facts of life, in number order.

-Fern, age 9

Dear Judy,
Hi! My name is Beth. I'm twelve. I live in Longmeadow. I have a problem. You see, my mom hasn't told me one thing about sex, and we almost never talk. I really wish I had someone to talk about these things.

-Beth, age 12³³⁶

Young people seeking information about sex, their bodies, growing up, and relationships turned to popular children's author Judy Blume by the thousands in hopes of finding answers. Many letters claimed that parents, teachers, and other adults did not provide the information young people craved. Others stated that the young readers did not know how to talk about these topics with their parents. The letters frequently declared Blume the only person the teens could trust with their fears, stories, and questions. The intense and emotional ways young adults connected with the characters and storylines in teen fiction like Blume's, demonstrated in their letters, show adolescents' private struggles with sexuality.

Other teen fiction authors including Norma Klein and Ann Head also capitalized on the heightened awareness of teenage sexuality in 1970s and 1980s. The popularity of the fictional characters created by all three authors reveals the voices of teenage girls in their individual and collective journeys toward understanding their own bodies. Through fiction, each author provided alternatives to the political narrative of an "epidemic of teenage

³³⁶ Judy Blume, *What Kids Wish They Could Tell You: Letters to Judy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986). After almost a decade of receiving such letters, Blume published this collection. It features letters from young people and adults asking her advice on topics ranging from sex to divorce. The original letters are in an archive at the University of Minnesota but I was denied permission to use them.

pregnancy” that would result in teenage welfare recipients taking advantage of taxpayers. As we shall see, Blume’s characters questioned puberty, wondered about masturbation, and practiced safe sex. Klein’s turned to legal abortion when contraception failed. Only Head’s characters chose marriage and parenthood when confronted with unplanned pregnancy. Together the books dramatize the questions and experiences of teenage girls. The portraits of sexually active teenagers whose lives are not ruined by pregnancy offer a more complex story than the scary images painted by legislators and social experts. Most teenagers knew that sexual intercourse could lead to problems, but that it often did not. The fictional characters provided safe ways for teens to explore the “what ifs” of sexual activity.

Even as young people read Blume, Klein and Head’s novels in record-breaking numbers (Blume was at the top of best seller lists), the children’s author and her books became a battleground between adolescents and adults, as censors organized by conservative groups attacked the books.³³⁷ Claiming that the topics were inappropriate for young readers, librarians, parents, teachers, and administrators removed the books from their shelves. In each successive book Blume strayed further from the sanctioned versions of adolescent sexuality, and some adults responded by banning her books from public libraries and schools. Soon Blume topped the list of most censored authors in the United States. Klein’s books attracted similar animosity. The authors’ frank discussion of masturbation, menstruation, sex, and homosexuality allowed adolescents to explore their sexuality in ways not addressed in sex education programs and threatened the growing conservative political movement at the end of the 1970s. The negative reactions from conservative critics regarding the books’ discussions of sexuality illustrate a culture clash between young readers and the adults who attempted to

³³⁷ Gay Andrews Dillin, "Judy Blume: Children's Author in a Grown-up Controversy," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 10, 1981 1981.

control the information available in homes, schools, and libraries. Examining their voices and experiences uncovers the conflict between what young people needed in conversations about sexuality and the information provided by parents and schools during the 1970s and 1980s.

The connections between fiction and reality are evident in the letters that girls wrote to magazines and newspapers. In the nationally syndicated “Ask Beth” column, Elizabeth Winship fielded questions about sexuality from young readers, both male and female. It is safe to speculate that the young authors of the “Ask Beth” letters spoke for many of their peers across the country, sharing real-life problems and questions that mimicked the fictional experiences of teen fiction. Winship’s advice column ran weekly from 1963 to 2007.³³⁸ During her tenure, she developed a reputation for authentic advice that drew teenagers to read her column and inspired thousands to write her asking for advice. Like the young adult fiction authors of the 1970s, Winship found issues of health and sexuality at the center of her work.

The “Ask Beth” letters show several distinct shifts in how teens viewed sexuality, demonstrating the changes in culture as well as new approaches to sex education. Letters from the 1970s frequently asked about masturbation, women’s liberation and venereal disease. They wrote with questions ranging from “how does one know when they’re fully matured?” to “I want to go braless but is that ok?” and “I think I have gonorrhea [sic] ... I’m scared to death.” Their questions reflect the uncertainty of the teen years but also the ambiguity surrounding sexuality during the 1970s. The social movements of 1960s preached that both men and women should feel free to experiment but teens wondered how they would know

³³⁸ “Ask Beth” first appeared in the Boston Globe and was syndicated in over 70 newspapers, including the Los Angeles Times Syndicate, at its height. Starting in the 1980s, Peg Winship, Elizabeth Winship’s daughter, began assisting with the column. Peg became a co-author in 1993 and continued to write the column after her mother’s retirement in 1998.

their limits. Teenage girls watched the Miss America protest of 1969, heard about supposed “bra burnings” and wrote Winship wondering about the real-life consequences of going braless as part of the women’s movement.³³⁹ They knew sex could lead to venereal disease but feared the consequences. The “Ask Beth” letters and the letters to authors like Blume show that teens in the early 1970s were aware of political and social change though they did not always know how to negotiate these transformations in practical ways. By the beginning of the 1980s, young people also wrote increasingly about homosexuality and contraception, reflecting cultural shifts that came with the Gay Liberation Movement and conservative-driven changes in sex education curriculum that de-emphasized contraception and VD. Throughout the first three decades of Winship’s tenure, the “Ask Beth” mailbox was filled with letters asking “I know that I should stay straight, but I want to go all the way with him. What do you think?”³⁴⁰ Winship’s replies consistently focused on both emotional and physical consequences of engaging in premarital sex at a young age. Her files also include many letters from unwed teenage mothers hoping for advice about how to get their lives back on track, gain acceptance or support from their parents, or simply looking for a place to share their stories.

These sources are also noteworthy for what they do not share. Most of the letters from teenage fans do not include information about race, class, age, or geography. If that information was included at one time, authors and archivists erased it with the intention of protecting individual’s identities. As a result, it is impossible to know the demographics of the

³³⁹ Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad : Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Anne Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism, Radical Perspectives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open : How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*. (New York: Viking, 2000);

³⁴⁰ “Ask Beth” Letters, Elizabeth Winship Papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

readership. We can assume that a majority of the fiction readers were white (though Blume does not define the race of most of her characters). It is also likely that some of Winship's readers lived in the Northeast as her column ran in the Boston Globe for seven years before becoming syndicated in more than 70 newspapers across the country. These are educated guesses that give us an incomplete picture of the teenage girls who may have read these books and articles in the 1970s and 1980s. However, the high publication rates, regular media attention, and their continued place in pop culture references demonstrates that these books were widely read by teens from a variety of backgrounds. The "Ask Beth" letters confirm Blume's, Klein's, and Head's belief that teenagers sought answers about their sexuality and did not know where to turn. By providing public forums for discussion, the authors of teen fiction and advice columns gave teens two different outlets to find answers to these potentially life-changing questions.

The Rise of the New Right

The changing reactions to teen fiction and advice columns occurred within the context of the rise of the New Right and its backlash against women's liberation, *Roe v. Wade*, and the sexual revolution. Young women in the 1970s were caught in a period of upheaval surrounding gender roles. Conservative leaders used their growing political power to galvanize white, suburban, conservative voters—including many women--across the country. Richard Nixon's campaign catered to the "great silent majority of Americans," who felt suppressed or overlooked by liberal politicians.³⁴¹ Nixon alleged that liberals "believe that the only way to achieve what they consider social justice is to place power in the hands of a

³⁴¹ Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority : Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006). 5

strong central government...no matter what the majority thinks.”³⁴² Interestingly, Nixon’s social policies supported liberal goals. His welfare reform called the Family Assistance Plan, for example, was one of the most liberal systems proposed since the New Deal.³⁴³ Nonetheless, his rhetoric united conservative voters. Members of this so-called silent majority responded to the call to take back the White House, the nation’s politics and morals in large numbers. For some groups, young adult literature provided a central focus of their struggle against the country’s “seeming moral downfall.”³⁴⁴ As we saw in Chapter 4, Carter’s evangelical Christian faith influenced his social policy. Finally, the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 validated the New Right’s assertion that Americans wanted a return to “family values,” which they defined as anti-feminist, anti-abortion, and anti-welfare state.³⁴⁵

With the Reagan revolution, these groups saw a chance to play a larger role in national politics. Charging the liberal establishment with immorality, the New Right formed what historian Bruce Schulman calls the “family values coalition.” This coalition included antifeminism in the form of Phyllis Schlafly’s Stop the ERA movement and anti-abortion campaigns, a series of textbook protests led by West Virginia mother Alice Moore and the John Birch Society, and the anti-homosexual Save Our Children movement organized by Anita Bryant. Each of these movements drew strength from the Christian right.³⁴⁶ Together

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution 1963-1994*, 1996 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996); Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*; Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Mark A. Smith, *The Right Talk: How Conservatives Transformed the Great Society into the Economic Society*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s*, (Princeton University Press, 2005)

³⁴⁴ The Liberty Alliance/The Moral Majority Coalition, "Moral Majority Timeline." www.faihandvalues.us

³⁴⁵ Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*; Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2001)

³⁴⁶ Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005)

these groups believed “that the left has forsaken moral values.”³⁴⁷ Leaders of these groups met regularly with congressional conservatives to “plan strategies and establish objectives.”³⁴⁸

Among the most influential of these organizations was Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority. Organized in 1979, the Moral Majority united conservative evangelical Christians across the country. The group also played a key role in Reagan’s presidential nomination, guaranteeing high voter turnout in the Republican primaries.³⁴⁹ After his election, Reagan hired Moral Majority executive director Robert Billings as liaison to the Christian right and “openly appealed for the votes of evangelicals.” Falwell and his followers helped cement “morality issues” as political themes. The sexuality of teenage girls became a target for New Right critics as part of the New Right backlash against feminism. Conservative leaders including Phyllis Schlafly believed that feminism threatened the traditional male leadership in family settings. It is true that women’s rights activists challenged the powerful roles that men held in families by claiming that women should also be a part of the power structure. Conservatives interpreted this as an affront to so-called traditional values. Thus, abortion, feminism, textbook content, and even children’s literature became hotly debated topics.

The growth of the Moral Majority and other conservative organizations occurred as Blume ventured into increasingly risqué subjects. At the same time, the most poignant letters the author received came from young women who identified with the characters in Blume’s most controversial novels. Attacking the straightforward approach to sex and puberty in Blume’s books became an avenue for conservative leaders to personalize the threat of moral downfall and bring it into people’s homes and into their children’s lives. Blume wrote fifteen

³⁴⁷ Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies*, 201-202.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 197.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 216.

novels for children and young adults between 1969 and 1990, many focusing on issues of sexuality. As the New Right gained political influence, attacks on her books intensified.

Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret and the Politics of Menses

Blume's first novel to engage issues of teen sexuality, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, became an instant classic with teenage girls after its publication in 1970 and was named one of the best children's books that year.³⁵⁰ The novel tells the story of twelve-year-old Margaret, who punctuates her move from New York to a New Jersey suburb during her sixth grade year with regular conversations with God. Margaret's conversations with God reflect her anxiety about her changing body, boys, and peer pressure as she moves from childhood to adolescence. She also explores her uncertainty about her faith, as her Protestant mother and Jewish father chose to raise Margaret without a religious tradition. In this novel, the first of her books to create controversy, Blume asserted her position as an author who wants to speak directly to the experiences of girls, particularly on topics frequently ignored in young adult literature at the time.³⁵¹

Peer pressure plays a prominent role in Margaret's discovery of her own sexuality, beginning with her first day in the suburbs. Margaret's neighbor and new friend, Nancy, invites her to swim and critically scrutinizes Margaret's body as they change clothes. "Oh, you're still flat," Nancy laughs, sticking out her own chest and making Margaret feel like "some kind of underdeveloped little kid."³⁵² Later Nancy invites Margaret to join her secret society, the Preteen Sensations. Among the group's rules is that whichever girl gets her

³⁵⁰ Dillin, "Judy Blume: Children's Author in a Grown-up Controversy."

³⁵¹ Prior to *Margaret*, Blume published two other children's books. *The One in the Middle is the Green Kangaroo* in 1969 and *Iggie's House* in 1970, both with Bradbury Press.

³⁵² Judy Blume, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Bradbury Press, 1970). 6-7

period first must agree to “tell the others all about it...especially how it feels.”³⁵³ The group also mandates each member must wear a bra. These rules reflect the girls’ curiosity and anxiety around their changing bodies. Here the characters resonate with real-life experiences.

The story centers on Margaret’s wait to begin menstruating. Each girl in the novel approaches menstruation with varying degrees of anxiety and excitement. They giggle and roll their eyes through the school-sanctioned talk titled “What Every Girl Should Know” and secretly buy sanitary napkins to practice in secret. The fictional sex education course aligns closely with the experience of Project Girl participants in that it focuses strictly on biological facts. The popularity *Margaret* and Blume’s other books demonstrate that while girls needed the scientific facts, they craved more information on the emotional aspects of puberty as well. When Gretchen, the first to start her period, explains to the others that though she feels older, “that’s all there is to tell” about the experience, the girls are annoyed because she doesn’t share more.³⁵⁴ Gretchen’s first period infuriates her friends, particularly Nancy who expected to be first. One week later Nancy lies about getting her period. When Nancy’s turn truly comes, the incident terrifies her. Margaret discovers Nancy in the bathroom sobbing and runs for her friend’s mother. Margaret narrates her friend’s terror:

Mrs. Wheeler jumped up and followed me back to the ladies room. I could hear Nancy sobbing.

“Nancy?” Mrs. Wheeler called, trying the door.

“Oh mom—I’m so scared! Help me please.”

...

“It’s her first time,” Mrs. Wheeler explained. “She’s frightened.” Nancy was still crying and there was a lot of whispering going on.³⁵⁵

³⁵³ Judy Blume, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Bradbury Press, 1970). 33å

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 98

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 107

Initially Margaret reacts with anger at her friend for lying. However, the fear that her own experience might mirror Nancy's rather than Gretchen's quickly tempers Margaret's anger.

Nancy's experience, both in lying and in the trauma of getting her period for the first time, reflect real-life experiences. Blume admits her own adolescence inspired Nancy's lie. Like Nancy, Blume lied to her friends about getting her period because she was so anxious to fit in and feel normal.³⁵⁶ Nancy's fear also aligns with the experiences of many young women. In the words of a fourteen-year-old girl interviewed in San Antonio, Texas as part of Project Girl, although she "hadn't worried about it up until the time," getting her period for the first time "scared me to death" even though her mother had explained menstruation to her.³⁵⁷ When Margaret herself begins to menstruate at the end of the book, Blume offers yet another option. Margaret and her mother laugh together and celebrate the step toward adulthood. The array of incidents in the novel echoes the varied experiences and fears of prepubescent girls providing a safe way for teenage girls to explore the emotional elements of their newfound sexuality.

Margaret demonstrates Blume's realist approach to preteen girls and their sexuality, but it did not attract the storm of criticism her later novels did. While Margaret and her friends do not engage in sex, they practice kissing, play make-out games at parties, and keep journals listing the cutest boys in class. Most memorably, the girls engage in regular exercises chanting, "we must, we must, we must increase our busts!" in hopes of spurring physical development.³⁵⁸ Blume approaches these precursors to sexual activity with the same frank manner she uses in her discussion of menstruation; each of these activities is cut short by

³⁵⁶ Blume, *What Kids Wish They Could Tell You: Letters to Judy*.

³⁵⁷ "Project Girl Interviews," in *Project Girl* (Minneapolis, Minnesota Social Welfare History Archive, 1974).

³⁵⁸ Blume, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, 46

adult intervention. For example, during their first boy-girl party a mother discovers the students playing spin the bottle. She breaks up the game exclaiming, “any more hanky-panky and I’ll call each and every one of your mothers and fathers and report this abominable behavior to them!”³⁵⁹ The intervention makes the previous activity safe, limiting the time the characters can experiment with kissing and making out. Margaret’s regular conversations with God are punctuated by questions, reflecting her uncertainty about puberty and sexuality. Margaret resorts to stuffing her bra with cotton balls after God does not answer her prayer for a bigger bust size, telling God “Are you still there God? See how nice my bra looks now! That’s all I need—just a little help.”³⁶⁰ She continues to wait in vain for her own chest to grow. At her first boy-girl party, she is nervous about playing spin the bottle and other kissing games with the boys from her class. After getting kissed by the cutest boy at school, she concludes that she is not sure how she feels about the kissing games her friends play at parties. In her private prayers Margaret wavers between asking God to help her grow up faster and confessing that she is unsure about the changes happening to her body. The kissing games and puberty discussions took place within controlled spaces, limited by parental supervision, making Blume’s approach seem safe for protective parents and protecting *Margaret* from the censors that stormed Blume’s later novels.

Despite these built-in safety nets, reactions to *Margaret* foreshadowed the uproar that would follow some of Blume’s later books. One sales representative for Penguin, the noted publisher of children’s literature, recommended *Margaret* to librarians with caution. She said “kids will love a book like *Margaret* – which treats such subjects as masturbation - but their parents may be another matter, if they happen to pick it up first” and therefore urged librarians

³⁵⁹ Ibid, 89

³⁶⁰ Ibid, 82

to “take a reading on where the parents are and try not to offend them” with book choices.³⁶¹ *Margaret* does not actually discuss masturbation, perhaps the sales rep intended to say “menstruation,” but her sentiment about how teens and their parents would react proved quite sentient. Blume gave three copies of *Margaret* to her children’s school library as a gift. The male principal decided that the book was inappropriate for elementary school readers and removed all three copies from the shelves without consulting other educators or parents. Finally, one night Blume received a phone call asking if she was the author of *Are You there God? It’s Me, Margaret*. When Blume replied in the affirmative, the woman called her a communist and hung up. Blume writes that she “never did figure out if [the caller] equated communism with menstruation or religion,” the book’s major themes. These incidents foreshadowed the criticism that Blume would attract later in her career but no organized effort was made to censor the book or the author at the time of its publication.³⁶²

Deenie: Self Confidence, Inner Beauty, and Masturbation

Deenie, the story of a seventh-grade beauty who finds out she must wear a back brace to correct scoliosis, followed *Margaret* in 1973.³⁶³ The title character struggles with self-confidence as she negotiates her new identity as a person with a disability. Until her diagnosis, Deenie believes that her defining characteristic is her beauty. Her mother constantly reinforces this idea, telling anyone who will listen about the difference between her two daughters: “Deenie’s the beauty. Helen’s the brain.”³⁶⁴ Indeed, her mother’s dearest

³⁶¹ Margaret Hogan, "Paperbacks," *The Globe and Mail*, December 15 1979.

³⁶² Judy Blume, ed. *Places I Never Meant to Be: Original Stories by Censored Writers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001).

³⁶³ Scoliosis is a medical condition in which a person’s spine is curved, most often in the shape of the letter ‘s.’ In the 1970s it was treated by requiring the patient to wear a Milwaukee Brace that held the spine straight from the neck through the hips. This method has been replaced with less obvious braces, making the treatment less obtrusive. For more information visit the National Scoliosis Foundation’s website at <http://www.scoliosis.org>.

³⁶⁴ Judy Blume, *Deenie* (Scarsdale, N.Y.: Bradbury Press, 1973). 3

ambition is for Deenie to be a teen model. Deenie feels unsure about this life path but is unable to tell her mother about her concerns.

Deenie first learns that there may be a problem with her back when she fails to make the cheerleading squad. The gym teacher, who becomes a trusted adult in Deenie's life, calls her parents recommending that they take her to see an orthopedist for an examination. Throughout her exams, the doctors and nurses talk to Deenie's parents but do not give her any information. Instead, Deenie must look up information on her condition in the encyclopedia. Her mother cries when the doctor fits Deenie with her brace for the first time. Disappointed and scared for herself, the mother's initial response is to cry "Oh, my God! What did we ever do to deserve this?" and leave the room sobbing.³⁶⁵ Deenie learns that she must find ways to cope without the support of her mother. The loss of her potential modeling career, while devastating to her mother, provides Deenie with relief. Instead, Deenie begins to think about becoming an orthopedist. Between doctor's visits, Deenie engages in typical teenage rituals, including her first crush, holding hands with a boy, and a school dance. She worries that her crush will treat her differently after she returns to school with her brace, but he heroically approaches her and invites her to the school's fall social. At the end of the night Deenie learns that she has accepted her situation and receives her first kiss.

The book's message is twofold: first, it helps young people learn to accept disabilities and find self-confidence; second, it highlights the relationship between parents and children. Deenie's struggle to see herself as a person rather than just "the beauty" of her family allows her to grow into a young woman with more confidence than before her diagnosis. The character provides a model for teenagers who struggle with self-confidence or disabilities.

³⁶⁵ Ibid.85.

The book also shows readers that they can be stronger than their parents when faced with challenges. Blume hoped the story would help mothers and daughters learn to communicate about parental expectations and childhood experiences rather than imitate the mother-daughter dynamic in the book.³⁶⁶

The controversy around *Deenie* did not stem from the book's major themes or its message about finding self-confidence as a teenager. Rather, critics grasped at a handful of paragraphs discussing Deenie's discovery of masturbation. When stressed, Deenie calms herself at night by "touching her special place."³⁶⁷ Although this helps her relax, Deenie worries that this activity may not be normal or healthy. She even begins to wonder if masturbation caused her scoliosis. When her gym teacher invites her students to ask anonymous questions regarding sexuality, Deenie writes, "Do normal people touch their bodies before they go to sleep and is it alright to do that?"³⁶⁸ Her teacher answers in the straightforward words that were the trademark of Blume's writing:

"Does anyone know the word for stimulating our genitals? Because that's what we're talking about here you know."
It got very quiet in the gym. Nobody said anything for a long time. Then one girl spoke, "I think it's called masturbation."
"That's right," Mrs. Rappoport told us. "And it's not a word you should be afraid of. Let's all say it."
"Masturbation," we said together.
"Ok," Mrs. Rappoport said. "Now that you've said it, let me try to explain. First of all, it's normal and harmless to masturbate..."³⁶⁹

Mrs. Rappoport goes on to explain that both boys and girls masturbate, it does not cause illness, and it cannot make a person crazy. She tells the students that masturbation is perfectly natural and they should not worry about touching themselves.

³⁶⁶ Blume, "Judy Blume on the Web: [Http://Www.Judyblume.Com.](http://www.judyblume.com)"

³⁶⁷ Blume, *Deenie*.78

³⁶⁸ Ibid.79

³⁶⁹ Ibid.80

Critics and censors focused on this scene rather than the more prominent themes in the book. A *Washington Post* article referred to *Deenie* as a “soft-porn cine'ma verite' of childhood” for including this scene.³⁷⁰ Not until five years after its publication, however, did criticism of *Deenie* and its author develop into a firestorm. By 1978, fundamentalist Christian groups claimed larger memberships and participated in politics with more authority. The Moral Majority’s growing popularity by 1980 provided another boost to the book censorship movement. New Right groups attacked *Deenie* with vigor, claiming that its open discussion of sexual matters was inappropriate for children and young adults. Working to “take the bloom off the Blume books,” conservative activists demanded that the book be removed from shelves across the country.³⁷¹ Many of the mothers and fathers active in the campaign against *Deenie* and other Blume books “identified themselves as fundamentalist ministers, members of the Moral Majority, or anti-abortion activists.”³⁷² According to the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom’s assistant director Bob Doyle, attacks on Blume tripled between 1980 and 1981. He noted “you [could] utter Judy Blume and censorship in the same breath” by the early 1980s.

Regardless of the censorship movement, letters to Blume demonstrate that American adolescents had many questions about masturbation. Jolene, age thirteen, expressed the relief she felt after reading the masturbation scene in *Deenie*. She wrote, “I read all of your books. They help me not be afraid and they answer my questions.” Here the student affirms Blume’s instinct that children looked for answers to these questions and did not find them in

³⁷⁰ Sandy Rovner, "Talking It Out: The Writer's Controversial Message Gets Her Popular Books Banned," *The Washington Post*, November 3, 1981 1981.

³⁷¹ Dillin, "Judy Blume: Children's Author in a Grown-up Controversy."

³⁷² Lucia Mouat, "Public Library's New Target of Right Wing's Book Censorship Campaign," *The Christian Science Monitor*, December 22 1980.

classrooms or in conversations with parents. Jolene goes on to explain, “Like in your book *Deenie*--she touches her special place. Well, I do that too, but I always thought I was the only one.”³⁷³ For this teenager, the knowledge that she was not alone comforted her and calmed her fears.

The characters in Blume’s *Deenie* might have empathized with the teen who wrote Winship asking “My best friend is getting married in October. She told me she once masturbated. This was a long time ago. Now she doesn’t know if she’s a virgin or not. Frankly, neither do I. Can you help?” Winship’s reply was short and to the point. “Dear Maid of Honor, Tell your friend not to worry—she’s still a virgin.”³⁷⁴ The theme of masturbation appears regularly in the Winship files in letters from both girls and boys. The frequency with which questions about masturbation arise demonstrate that Blume and Winship’s brief but clear discussion of the topic was welcomed by teenage readers, most of whom were looking to be reassured that they were “normal.”

Other adolescents wanted more details than *Deenie* provides. Numerous fans wrote Blume asking for more in-depth explanations. Boys and girls asked Blume to debunk myths and for ways to approach the subject with their parents. One young woman requested a string of details, each reflecting her own fears:

Dear Judy,

I read your book *Deenie*. You wouldn’t believe how happy I was to know that I’m not the only person to do what *Deenie* does. You are the only person who has ever mentioned anything about this. So could you please answer my questions.

(1) How did you find out about this? (2) Is it a kind of disease? (3) How did I know to start doing this? (4) Am I weird? (5) Approximately how many people

³⁷³ Blume, *What Kids Wish They Could Tell You: Letters to Judy*.185

³⁷⁴ “‘Ask Beth’ Letters,” Elizabeth Winship Papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University. Mass, May 1973

do this? (6) Is what I do going to harm my insides (like by not letting me have children)? (7) Am I a fag?
I hope to hear from you very soon. Please!
Nikki, age 13³⁷⁵

In her response, Blume was cautious not to give out too much information. She replied suggesting that Nikki to talk to her parents or, if she was unable to so, find books about the subject to help ease her fears. This way she was able to give the reader an avenue for information but avoid some of the attacks from critics who said it was not the author's job to teach sex education. Others young readers simply asked Blume to give them the tools to talk to their parents about it even if though, in the words of fourteen-year-old Barbara, "something about it is really embarrassing."³⁷⁶ Here the author recommended that parents initiate conversation to make sure their children knew the topic was not off limits. Questions like this led Blume to publish a collection of letters in her book *What Kids Wish They Could Tell You*. Throughout the book Blume encourages parents to give kids access to information about growing up, answering both biological and emotional questions. For parents who are uncomfortable talking openly, Blume recommends providing children and teens with books that the family can discuss together. Blume answered the letters by referring young readers to talk to their parents or another adult but above all "not to worry alone." Aware of her position as a fiction writer, Blume tells parents that it was never her intention to give advice but she could not "ignore the pleas of the kids" who wrote such heartfelt letters.³⁷⁷ In order to balance her desire to help the young people who wrote these letters with her belief that parents should be the first people to discuss matters of sexuality with their children, Blume assured parents

³⁷⁵ Ibid. 187

³⁷⁶ Ibid. 185

³⁷⁷ Ibid, 4

that her intention was to encourage conversation within families.³⁷⁸ The conflict between parents who looked to protect their children from topics such as masturbation and their children's desire for information lies at the center of the censorship controversy. In their quest to shelter their children, parents missed an important opportunity to engage in open conversation with young people and to ensure that young people received accurate information.

As we have seen, a shift occurred as sex education courses began to adopt more conservative views by the late 1970s and early 1980s. The increasingly public role of white pregnant teens and accompanying epidemic rhetoric generated pressure from white suburban parents to change the curriculum. Conservative groups advocated a more strictly biological approach, limiting conversation to the mechanics of reproduction and menstruation while advocating abstinence as the sexual choice for teenagers.³⁷⁹ Also, urging young people to abstain from all sexual activity moved to the center of the curriculum. Other topics, including masturbation, remained part of the discussion but received cursory attention. Historian Susan Freeman emphasizes that in response to the lack of information in schools, young people looked for alternative narratives that helped them “reconcile contradictory messages about sex, gender, and sexuality in and out of school.”³⁸⁰ Conversations in hallways, at movies, and on dates played an equally important role in helping young people gather information about sexuality. The informal arenas in which students learned about sex often provided inaccurate or frightening information. As sex education shifted closer to abstinence-only courses in the

³⁷⁸ Ibid, 5

³⁷⁹ Jeffrey P. Moran, *Teaching Sex : The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); Kristin Luker, *When Sex Goes to School: Warring Views on Sex-and Sex Education-since the Sixties* (New York: Norton and Company, 2006).

³⁸⁰ Susan Kathleen Freeman, *Sex Goes to School: Girls and Sex Education before the 1960s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

1980s, these questions appear more frequently in letters to Winship's column. Clearly, Blume filled a need for countless teens looking for information that was being removed from formal sex education programs.

Forever: Innocence, First Love, and Teenage Sex

The opening lines of Blume's most controversial novel --"Sybil Davison has a genius I.Q. and has been laid by at least six different guys"--set the tone for the direct way the book deals with sex.³⁸¹ Sybil quickly moves to the background of the plotline but *Forever*, published in 1975, pushed the limits of how far teenage characters could experiment with sexuality in fiction. In this story, two teenagers, Katherine and Michael, fall in love and have sex without the unwanted consequences of pregnancy, abortion, or ruined reputations. Instead, the high school seniors meet at a friend's party and begin to date shortly thereafter. They fall in love, promising to be together forever.

The courtship between Michael and Katherine proceeds with predictable steps. They go to movies, spend time at one another's homes, and conspire to set up their best friends Artie and Erica. Their first sexual encounter occurs on a ski trip when they experiment with heavy petting. To make Katherine comfortable, Michael names his penis "Ralph" and teaches her how to touch him. The scene depicts pleasure, not fear, for both.

Katherine plans carefully for her next sexual experience. She asks her mom for advice about knowing when to have sexual intercourse. Her mom explains, "sex is a commitment...once you're there you can't go back to holding hands. When you give yourself both mentally and physically...well, you're completely vulnerable."³⁸² A few weeks later, Katherine and Michael find themselves alone in his sister's apartment, and they have sex. She

³⁸¹ Judy Blume, *Forever...* (Scarsdale, N.Y.: Bradbury Press, 1975). 1

³⁸² *Ibid.* 75-77

admits that she is “scared out of her mind” before they begin and that she “can’t help feeling let down” by the experience when it is over.³⁸³

The next day Katherine’s mom follows up on their previous conversation by giving her daughter a newspaper article titled “What about the right to say ‘no’?” Although Katherine is no longer a virgin, one of the questions in the article stands out to her. The article’s author reminds adolescents that they must think about how the relationship will end and what the consequences may be. The question makes Katherine angry since she believes that her relationship will last forever.

Before she has sex again, Katherine visits a Planned Parenthood clinic and begins taking birth control pills.³⁸⁴ When she does not fear pregnancy, she is able to relax and learn to enjoy making love with her boyfriend. The rest of the sexual encounters between Katherine and Michael are now pleasurable for both. The relationship continues with its teenaged mix of passion and romance until Michael and Katherine separate for their summer jobs. Vowing to stay together forever, they write long letters to one another. However, Katherine grows attracted to one of the other staff members at the camp where she works. She struggles with her emotions, wondering how or whether she can be attracted to two boys at the same time. When she and Michael reunite for a visit, she learns that he has encountered a similar situation. They break up amicably, realizing that they are “just not ready for forever.”³⁸⁵

In addition to teenage intercourse, the book features discussions about homosexuality, suicide, and contraception, Artie, Michael’s best friend, is unable to sustain a sexual

³⁸³ Ibid.94-98

³⁸⁴ In the 2003 edition of *Forever...* Blume includes an introduction noting that this book was written before the AIDS crisis, when venereal disease was perceived as less of a threat. Thus, she encourages young women to ask for STD testing as well as contraception when visiting their doctors.

³⁸⁵ Blume, *Forever...* .192

relationship with Katherine's friend Erica and discovers he is gay. This revelation leads to his attempted suicide, which forces all four teens to confront depression, sexuality, and death. Additionally, Sybil (the genius from the opening page) gets pregnant, has a baby, and relinquishes it through adoption. Her storyline is played out in the background, providing a foil for the relationship between the two main characters. By including Sybil's story, however briefly, Blume suggested that teenage sexual activity could have life-changing consequences, even if that was not the case for her main characters.

Youth and adult reactions to *Forever* differed drastically. Young people, including her daughter, thanked Blume for writing a story about "two nice kids who fall in love, do it, and nothing terrible happens," while many parents and teachers reacted to the sexual nature of the novel with open hostility.³⁸⁶ Fans shared their own sexual experiences in letters to Blume, hoping for advice and sympathy from the author who created characters like them. One girl told Blume that reading the book with her fiancé "made it easier for us to talk about sex." Many others shared their decisions to not have sex or their struggles to decide when they were ready for that step.³⁸⁷ At least one of Blume's fans decided to reconsider their decisions about becoming sexually active after reading *Forever*. Seventeen-year-old Kim wrote

Dear Judy,
After reading *Forever* I can really see that my relationship with Adam may not be like it is now, forever. That book can really make you think. I only wish I had read it sooner. Maybe I would have held off when it came to sex with Adam.³⁸⁸

³⁸⁶ Blume, *What Kids Wish They Could Tell You: Letters to Judy*; Blume, ed. *Places I Never Meant to Be: Original Stories by Censored Writers*.

³⁸⁷ Blume, *What Kids Wish They Could Tell You: Letters to Judy*. 215

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 216

In this case, the book helped a reader realize that her teenage romance might not have the longevity she hoped. It also caused her to question the idea of having sex at a young age, both themes that the New Right critics may have embraced.

The majority of the letters in Winship's files also focus on sexual intercourse and pregnancy. Many young people wrote asking the same questions that Blume's characters struggle with: "how will I know it's the right time to have sex with my girlfriend or boyfriend?" Others about how to avoid being pressured into activities they were not ready for. One young man echoed the characters in *Forever* in his letter asking "I've heard people say if you have sex with a girl before you're married most of the time it does not work out and now I hear if you do have sex you become closer with your mate I don't want to lose her I've never had sex before her and I love her very much and would like to marry her. So what is true and what is false. What shall I do?"³⁸⁹ This conflict between the desire to have sex as an act of love and the fear that having sex will ruin a relationship is exactly the tension that Blume's characters Michael and Katherine experience as they decide to move into a sexual relationship. Michael asks "how does a person get mentally ready" for sex, prompting a discussion between the teenage couple that ends in an agreement to be honest about their comfort levels before engaging in sex. Blume's characters and Winship's readers struggled with knowing when to "go all the way" and when to set limits.

Forever simultaneously topped the most read and most banned book lists in the years following its publication.³⁹⁰ Reviewers called Blume the "Jacqueline Susann of children's literature," invoking the author of adult romance novels widely criticized for immoral sexual

³⁸⁹ "'Ask Beth' Letters," n.d. Elizabeth Winship Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University. No additional information regarding date or location was noted on this letter

³⁹⁰ Dillin, "Judy Blume: Children's Author in a Grown-up Controversy."

content.³⁹¹ Librarians found themselves at the center of this battle. In 1987 Susan Vaughn, a librarian at West Hernando Middle School in Spring Hill, Florida, regretted her school's decision to remove *Forever* from its shelves. She told a local newspaper, "I'm really saddened to see this recommendation," noting that the book appeared on the suggested reading list in the Junior High School Catalog just two years before it was banned.³⁹² Most librarians quoted in the local paper disagreed with Vaughn. Instead, they sided with Powell Middle School librarian Cecelia Solomon's opinion that "the subject matter in that book is inappropriate for the middle-school-aged child." West Hernando father Bill Carroll supported Solomon's decision, calling the book's focus on sexual relationships "disturbing" and believed "the manner in which the theme was dealt with was kind of slangy" making it "inappropriate for sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders."³⁹³ Similar scenes played out across the country as Blume's work remained at the top of what one reviewer labeled the "Moral Majority hit list."³⁹⁴ While most criticism occurred through quiet lobbies or demands on librarians to remove the books, some activists used more dramatic methods. Stories circulated of parents who checked out the offending books "with fanfare at the front desk with a loud vow never to return them" in order to protect children from the book's contents.³⁹⁵ One family in University City, Missouri, tore up its library cards in public protest against the library's decision to keep *Forever* on open shelves.³⁹⁶

³⁹¹ Ibid.

³⁹² Collins Conner, "2 Books Shouldn't Be in Library, School Decides," *St. Petersburg Times*, November 26, 1987 1987.

³⁹³ Ibid.

³⁹⁴ Rovner, "Talking It Out: The Writer's Controversial Message Gets Her Popular Books Banned."

³⁹⁵ Mouat, "Public Library's New Target of Right Wing's Book Censorship Campaign."

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

Culture Clash: Conservative Critics and Blume's Novels

Blume repeatedly pointed out that though her books were published in 1973 and 1975, it was not until after the 1980 election that she received such dramatic protest. She often blamed the attacks on the powerful conservative organization the Moral Majority. In 1981 Cal Thomas, the vice president of communication for the Moral Majority, denied that the group organized a national campaign against Blume's books. He complained that "too often the Moral Majority is used generically to mean any group that is considered right-wing or conservative."³⁹⁷ Although the Moral Majority leaders claimed they did not organize a specific campaign against Blume, they did target her work directly. The group's political activities coordinator Karl Moor did acknowledge that the organization considered censorship "a reasonable approach within the limits of the First Amendment."³⁹⁸

Blume directly confronted censorship from conservative groups. Members of the Moral Majority participated in several public debates with Blume in 1981, criticizing her use of sexuality in novels for young people. Cal Thomas called Blume's argument that she was writing about topics that met young people's needs "intellectually indefensible."³⁹⁹ He argued that it was inappropriate for authors "to say that everyone is talking about sex, and we're only writing about it, when it's the writers and advertisers who are the ones putting it before us every day."⁴⁰⁰ After her opponent attacked her for writing books that "teach morals" inappropriate for young people, she explained to the audience "what he means, of course, is

³⁹⁷ Dillin, "Judy Blume: Children's Author in a Grown-up Controversy."

³⁹⁸ Mouat, "Public Library's New Target of Right Wing's Book Censorship Campaign."

³⁹⁹ Dillin, "Judy Blume: Children's Author in a Grown-up Controversy."

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

you don't want to give children the idea that they can think...so the best thing to do is prevent them from reading these books.”⁴⁰¹

The rise in attacks on Blume’s work coincided with the rise of conservative politicians on all levels of government. The American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom office director, Judith Krug, admitted to “some concern that conservative censors may see the recent election results as a mandate for their views” though she stressed “censorship attempts tend to come from members of single-interest groups representing the full political spectrum.”⁴⁰² The American Library Association continued to draw connections between the Reagan administration, the Moral Majority, and the growing censorship movement. In 1980 the ALA reported 300 cases of censorship. By September of 1982 the case load had risen to more than 900 with the “great majority” involving “school and public libraries pressured to remove books from library shelves” accessible to young people.⁴⁰³ Krug claimed an “atmosphere conducive to censorship hovers over the country” due to the “present administration's tolerance of such censorial groups as the Moral Majority.”⁴⁰⁴

Although the Moral Majority continued to claim that it did not support censorship campaigns, in 1981 leader Jerry Falwell sent out a letter “suggesting that certain books might be inappropriate for some students to check out of libraries.”⁴⁰⁵ In doing so, Falwell avoided direct responsibility for censorship but created a climate that, in the ALA’s view, encouraged “vigilantism.”⁴⁰⁶ In addition to *Forever*, Falwell’s letter suggested banning books such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, published by Boston’s Women’s Health Collective, and J. D. Salinger’s

⁴⁰¹ Rovner, "Talking It Out: The Writer's Controversial Message Gets Her Popular Books Banned."

⁴⁰² Mouat, "Public Library's New Target of Right Wing's Book Censorship Campaign."

⁴⁰³ Herbert Mitgang, "Groups Aim to Counter Book Bans," *The New York Times*, September 7 1982.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

Catcher in the Rye. Shortly after the letter went out, librarians across the country reported what they perceived as “coordinated protests” against the listed books, belying the Moral Majority’s disclaimer.⁴⁰⁷

As the coalition of conservative groups rallied to ban *Forever* and other similar books, Winship received an influx of letters from young people begging for more information about sex. The increasingly limited sex education curriculum combined with a national turn towards abstinence-only education and silence on issues of sexuality deprived teens of information about sex. Winship’s readers in the late 1970s and early 1980s seem to have been less informed about sex than the Project Girl participants of the early 1970s. Unlike the girls interviewed in the early 1970s who overwhelmingly stated that they had learned about sex in school, at home, or both, Winship’s readers wrote with increasing ignorance about sexuality. An increasing number of letters including variations on the phrase “my parents never told me” appear in Winship’s files throughout the late 1970s and into the 1980s, reflecting the turn against open sex education in schools and homes. One university student wrote “my problem is I don’t know what to say no to or when. Right now I think I may be pregnant and I don’t know who the father is.”⁴⁰⁸ Several young women asked for advice on obtaining contraception, noting that they could not approach their parents for this information but they wanted to do everything possible to prevent pregnancy while sexually active.

Adults reacted to Winship’s column with surprising honesty. Rather than the anger that surrounded Blume’s books, their letters show a genuine struggle between wanting to support their children and a desire to impart the values of a morally conservative upbringing. Others hoped to shield their children from issues of sexuality. One parent wrote of being

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁸ “‘Ask Beth’ Letters,” Elizabeth Winship Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

“shocked” upon reading Winship’s advice that a 14-year-old pregnant student should visit Planned Parenthood, recommending that Winship send the student to a pro-life clinic instead. While criticizing Winship’s suggestion, the author affirmed Winship’s belief that “we really need adequate sex education” to prevent teenage pregnancy. Another mother wrote that she felt Winship needed to refrain from “telling us how we should or should not feel, how we are supposed to behave, when our hearts are broken, and when our children prefer to do what they want simply because it feels good.”⁴⁰⁹ This confession seems to be at the heart of the reactions to teenage sex in fiction and reality. Parents worried about the consequences of teenage sexual relationships while their adolescent children argued that premarital sex was safe in a committed relationship.

Beyond Blume: Other Teen Fiction Authors and Censorship

Blume was not alone in addressing adolescent sexuality in her books or in her fight against censorship. Norma Klein’s *It’s Not What You Expect* was also banned in libraries and schools across the country. *It’s Not What You Expect* tells the story of fourteen-year-old twins, Carla and Oliver, who decide to open a restaurant to escape their house for the summer. Their father has recently moved to New York, leaving the twins and their older brother Tom with their mother, who supports the family with odd jobs. Most of the story centers on the twins’ coming of age, their reaction to their parents’ strained relationship, and the restaurant project. Critics focused on a side plot in which the twins offer to use their restaurant money to finance an abortion for their older brother’s girlfriend.

When Tom’s girlfriend gets pregnant, the twins offer to share the profits from their restaurant to help her get an abortion. Sara Lee goes to the city, sees a doctor and has a safe,

⁴⁰⁹ “‘Ask Beth’ Letters,” Elizabeth Winship Papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University *Teacher Letter June 1983*

legal abortion with no complications. The day after the procedure, Carla is surprised by how easily things go back to normal, reflecting that if her brother and his girlfriend get married and have kids “no one will even remember this or care about it.”⁴¹⁰ When Carla finally confesses the situation to her mother, she is amazed to discover that her mother had an illegal abortion before marrying her father. Her mother explains, “it’s not easy to have an abortion...even for me, believing in it, still I think there are always mixed feelings.” Carla comes to understand that while her older brother had seemed calm, he likely experienced mixed emotions about the decision.⁴¹¹ Throughout the discussion, abortion is treated as a “perfectly simple operation” rather than a dramatic, life-changing event.⁴¹² Klein’s characters refrain from passing judgment on the issue; they take the situation in stride and life continues as before. In much the same way that *Forever* tells the story of two kids who have sex with no dire consequences, *It’s Not What You’d Expect* is a tale of two teenagers who have sex, get pregnant, seek an abortion, and go on with their lives. Klein embraces the ambiguity of the situation, never condemning abortion but also making it clear that though neither Sara Lee or Carla’s mother made their choice lightly or without emotional scars, they were confident in their decisions.

Numerous school committees declared abortion an “inappropriate” subject for students and banned the book, a decade after *Roe v. Wade* had legalized abortion. The vocal anti-abortion movement encouraged public criticism of Klein’s book. In a 1984 debate, Connaught Marshner, director of the Child and Family Protection Institute in Washington, attacked Klein’s books arguing that they pushed a “liberal view of education.” The national chairman

⁴¹⁰ Norma Klein, *It’s Not What You Expect* (New York: Avon Books, 1973). 113

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.* 117

⁴¹² *Ibid.* 94

for education of the conservative Eagle Forum, a group founded by Phyllis Schlafly, alleged that Klein's work "encouraged children to break the law by treating such subjects as 'homosexuality, fornication and abortion.'" None of these were actually illegal. Klein replied by criticizing "needlessly anxious parents" who attempted to control their children by limiting their access to books.⁴¹³

A somewhat earlier novel, Ann Head's *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones* (1968), highlights the features that made Blume and Klein's work controversial. In this story high school students July and Bo Jo fall into a whirlwind teen romance that results in a pregnancy. With pressure from their parents, the couple gets married and sets up house in a garage apartment. July is forced to drop out of school and learns to be a housewife while Bo Jo juggles school and a job to support his family. Together they negotiate adult decisions although neither is eighteen. When July goes into premature labor and their baby dies from complications, both are devastated. Their parents, hoping to salvage their hopes for their children, arrange for an annulment and separate July and Bo Jo. The teenagers, drawn together through their loss that no one acknowledges, reunite and go to college together after graduation.

Several features of *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones* helped keep it off the banned book rolls. Unlike Blume and Klein, Head does not describe the act of sex. The scenes shift quietly from kissing on the beach to July's feelings after losing her virginity. In Head's book sex is not pleasurable; it leaves the girl feeling "deeply humiliated" and results in pregnancy.⁴¹⁴ The pregnancy forces both teens to give up their dreams of college and pushes them into adult situations for which they are not ready. The shotgun marriage results in a series of dramatic

⁴¹³ Walter Goodman, "School Libraries at the Center of Debate on Society's Values," *The New York Times*, 25 June, 1984, Section D; Page 13, Column 1; Metropolitan Desk

⁴¹⁴ Ann Head, *Mr. And Mrs. Bo Jo Jones* (New York,: Putnam, 1967), 9

fights during July's pregnancy. Together these scenes make it clear that sex has consequences and those consequences have the potential to ruin the dreams of both people involved. *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones* is exactly the kind of book Blume hoped to avoid when she wrote *Forever*. It is a cautionary tale of what happens when a good girl from a reputable family has sex with a boy from the wrong side of town.

When July and Bo Jo lose their baby after his premature birth, their families pretend the whole experience never happened, teaching their children that mistakes can be covered up if there is no physical evidence. July and Bo Jo know better. In an emotional reaction to the situation, Bo Jo asks, "how do you go about scrapping as big a chunk of life as that? How do you go about it?"⁴¹⁵ In his plea for understanding, Bo Jo echoes the cries of women sent to maternity homes throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. It is notable that this cry comes from the baby's father, a voice often entirely silenced in stories of teen pregnancy.

Winship's real-life readers often wrote of situations similar to July and Bo Jo's unplanned pregnancy, wondering if they should get married to provide a traditional family for their baby. One college student wrote,

Beth,

I am a 6-month pregnant, 21 yr old unwed mother. I have been living with the father for the past three years. He still says he is not ready to marry yet (he's 27). I have never pressured him into marrying me. I know he loves me and I love him.

I don't want my baby to be illegitimate. ...I would really like to marry this man. ... He wants to know if you think we should marry or keep holding off until he is positive.⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.185

⁴¹⁶ "'Ask Beth' Letters," Elizabeth Winship Papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University. This letter is in the folder marked 1983-1984 but does not include a date or location

Of course there is no way of knowing whether this young woman did marry the father of her baby or how their marriage turned out. By the time this letter was written, in 1983 or 1984, it was no longer unusual for young mothers to raise babies on their own. However, this author makes it clear that she had no other support system to fall back on, making marriage seem like the most attractive option. The Project Girl interviews show us that girls like this young mother often ended up in unhappy marriages, on government assistance, or both as they struggled to raise a child. July and Bo Jo Jones escaped this fate as Head eliminated the problem of parenthood for her characters. A critical reader must wonder what would have happened to the young Jones family had their baby survived. Perhaps they would have grown up to repeat the words of an unwed mother who wrote Winship's authors telling them "I'm 21 now and have a 3 year old son. I feel like my impatience stole so much of my 'teenage' young life away. Please don't make the same mistake. Believe me, I understand, but you have to realize there's NO reason to rush."⁴¹⁷

As sex education moved toward abstinence-centered methodology, teens turned to fiction as a safe way to explore their sexuality. The Winship letters highlight the discordance between youth looking for answers about sexuality and adults seeking to protect their children from fictional accounts of teenage sex. Blume, Klein, and Head created characters and storylines that answered teenage questions about menstruation, masturbation, sexual intercourse, pregnancy, abortion, and true love. Mothers and fathers felt torn between their desire to protect their children from the consequences of sex and their teenage children's

⁴¹⁷ "'Ask Beth' Letters," n.d. Elizabeth Winship Papers. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.

belief that premarital sex was acceptable within the bounds of a relationship. Columnists like Winship seemed to bridge the gap between teens and their parents by offering straightforward advice.

The letters from young fans attest to the value they find in the books and Blume's open approach. Through the words of young readers, it is clear that Blume's characters, while controversial, meet the needs of her audience by allowing them to ask questions and make "forbidden" conversations safe. In spite of this, conservative adults boycotted the books, removing them from shelves and urging others to do the same. Encouraged by the rise of the Moral Majority and the New Right, censors in the form of parents emerged to carefully edit their children's reading. Nonetheless, young people across the country found their way to the honest discussion of sexuality they craved.

Conclusion

There's a woman in Chicago ... She has 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards and is collecting veterans' benefits on four non-existing [sic] deceased husbands ... And she's collecting Social Security on her cards. She's got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free cash income alone is over \$150,000.⁴¹⁸

During the 1976 presidential primary campaign, Republican candidate Ronald Reagan repeated this story for audiences across the country. He coined the term “welfare queen,” thereby popularizing the image of a woman who committed dramatic welfare fraud. Reagan did not get his party's nomination that year, but the term quickly took hold of the American imagination, creating a false but popular caricature of welfare-dependent women. Journalists and political strategists immediately began looking for this fabled woman, searching the roles of Chicago's welfare offices. She was never found. According to Illinois welfare authorities, Reagan may have based his story on Linda Taylor, an African American Chicago resident who was under indictment for welfare fraud at the time.⁴¹⁹ The state alleged that Taylor used four (not 80) aliases to collect \$8,000 (not \$150,000) in welfare funds.⁴²⁰ This image permeated the culture and helped keep single mothers and teenage parents in the spotlight into the 1980s, even as social workers and educators began to implement changes based on the laws passed during the Carter administration.

By the time Reagan made his “welfare queen” speech, it was clear that public sentiment about teenage mothers had shifted dramatically from the 1950s maternity home era. As we have seen, there was a brief historical moment on the heels of the feminist movement

⁴¹⁸ “Welfare Queen Becomes Issue in Reagan Campaign,” *New York Times*, 15 February, 1976, pg. 51

⁴¹⁹ “The Chutzpa Queen,” *The Washington Post*, 13 March, 1977, p 3

⁴²⁰ “Welfare Queen Becomes Issue in Reagan Campaign,” *New York Times*, 15 February, 1976, pg. 51

that offered an alternative narrative: unwed pregnant teenage mothers who could be educated, supported, and equipped to handle their new lives as parents. This picture had fleeting popularity the early 1970s when liberal policymakers' view of pregnant teens was informed by a less moralistic view of premarital sex and a feminist understanding of how its consequences penalized girls more heavily than boys, but it took until 1978 to get federal law passed. Even before it could be codified in law, this more sympathetic view of pregnant teens was challenged by a new and harsh formulation from the Right. No longer were pregnant teens "problem girls" to be rescued from their sexual sins by the social workers who ran maternity homes, nor were they individuals who deserved help, instead they became "welfare queens" looking to take advantage of the federal government and taxpayers.

The Triumph of Welfare Queen Imagery

Social workers and others who hoped to create comprehensive programs for pregnant and parenting teens capitalized on the potential for change that came as several cultural and political changes coalesced at the beginning the 1970s. Faltering under the pressure from feminists and former residents, maternity homes closed their doors in rapid succession. Title IX of the 1972 Education Amendments guaranteed that girls could remain in public schools during and after their pregnancies. It did not, however, make provisions for childcare, which meant that girls continued to leave school due to the financial realities of raising a child. The Supreme Court ruling in *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion, making the procedure accessible to women of all economic and racial groups. Teenage girls, building on the feminist argument that girls deserved to make their own choices and should not suffer consequences that their male sexual partners did not, refused to relinquish their babies for adoption and became single mothers in larger numbers than before. At the same time, they attended sex education courses

that often included detailed information on contraception so they felt as if they could prevent pregnancies. When these girls made the decision to have sex outside of marriage, many did so after careful deliberation and within committed relationships that they believed were both emotionally and physically safe. Throughout this period teenage pregnancy rates declined (see Figure 12).

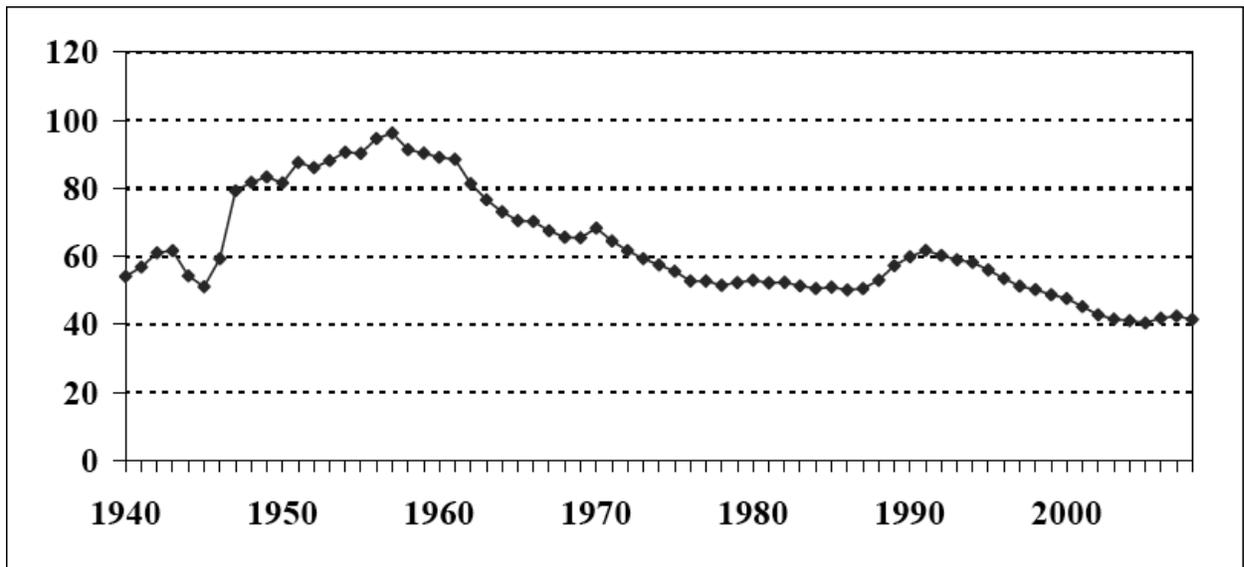


Figure 5: Teen Birth Rates in the United States 1940-2008. (Births per 1,000 teen girls aged 15-19 in the United States) *The teen birth rate increased until 1957 when it peaked at 78 percent. It then dropped steadily from the end of the 1950s to the early 1980s when teen birth rates began to rise. From 1983 to 1991, there was a sharp increase in births to teenage girls. Since then, the rates dropped, reaching a record low in 2005.*⁴²¹

The 1978 Adolescent Health, Service, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act was a short-lived victory for pregnant teens and their advocates. It promised to fund grants and organizations aimed at helping teen parents become “responsible parents and contributing members of society” with knowledge of family planning and contraception. It also established

⁴²¹ “Teen Birth Rates in the United States 1940-2008,” The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, accessed October 1, 2013

the Office of Adolescent Pregnancy Programs (OAPP) to oversee the grant programs.⁴²² The OAPP supported projects for education, job placement, and counseling services for teenage mothers. From its inception, the office was underfunded, and within four years, a new administration moved to change its mission. Candidate Reagan promised that he would cut welfare spending and champion “family values.” As president, one of his first steps in that direction was changing federal spending on teenage pregnancy, once again making the sexuality of teenage girls into a symbol of national morality. Using the now-familiar threat of the welfare queen who would take advantage of taxpayer money, the Reagan administration began to restrict the reach of the OAPP.

In the first year of the Reagan administration, the Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA) replaced the programs created by the 1978 Adolescent Health, Service, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act. Liberal and conservative politicians turned to the threat of welfare-dependent teenage mothers to collect enough votes to pass the 1978 bill, leaving the mothers and children to battle against a pervasive negative stereotype. Building on the rhetoric of the 1978, the AFLA further promoted the welfare queen ideology. Championed by opponents of family planning programs funded by Title X of the Public Health Service Act family, the AFLA inaugurated an era of “family centered” approaches to preventing teen pregnancy. In this case, “family-centered” was political speak for abstinence-only education. Senator Kennedy, the author of the original 1978 bill, attempted to limit the new law by insisting that only one third of the grants funded by the OAPP could support abstinence-only curriculums. The remaining money would continue to support “care services,” which included social services, education, and parenting classes for teenage parents.

⁴²² Congress, Committee on Human Resources, *Adolescent Health, Services, and Pregnancy Prevention and Care Act of 1978*, 95th Congress, 2nd session, 14 June and 12 July 1978

The AFLA quickly earned the name “the Chastity Act” for its emphasis on abstinence and explicit support of Catholic organizations.⁴²³ The AFLA system ruled that before providing direct access to contraception services, the OAPP first had to make maximum use of Title X funds and provide referrals to outside clinics. This set of limitations meant that it was almost impossible for the OAPP to provide contraception to teenagers, in spite of the office’s mandate to lower the rate of teen pregnancy. It also included wording that gave preference to Catholic pregnancy clinics, a rule that was upheld by the Supreme Court in 1988 in *Bowen v. Kendrick*. By 1983, teen pregnancy rates were climbing to record numbers once again, reversing the downward trend of the previous fifteen years (see Figure 1).⁴²⁴

Reagan’s welfare queen image prevailed partly due to popular bias against welfare but also because poverty experts began to classify welfare as a personal pathology rather than an unfortunate circumstance. A growing number of analysts experts began to argue that poverty⁴²⁵, previously believed to be transient state, was a lifestyle rooted in “household formation decisions” otherwise known as female-headed families. Similar studies showed that single motherhood would put children at “greater risk” for life-long poverty, welfare-dependency, repeat teen pregnancy, and a host of other negative consequences, particularly if the unwed mother was young or nonwhite.⁴²⁶ Feminist scholars challenged this dominant narrative by pointing out that the high number of women in poverty was not a product of behavior, but “rather a consequence of long-standing gender inequities in the welfare

⁴²³ Linda Gordon, *The Moral Property of Women: A History of Birth Control Politics in America*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002. Reprint, 4)

⁴²⁴ K. Kost, & S. Henshaw, “U.S. Teenage Pregnancies, Births and Abortions, 2008: State Trends by Age, Race and Ethnicity, Retrieved February 25, 2013

⁴²⁵ Alice O’Conner, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth Century U.S. History*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p253

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

state.”⁴²⁷ Women had always been at high risk for poverty because of issues such as unequal pay, lack of childcare, and job discrimination.

Teenage mothers were even more vulnerable due to their limited education, age, and limited support systems. Though Reagan’s character was not an adolescent, the fear of unwed mothers taking advantage of the welfare system spread to include mothers of all ages. Young, unwed mothers represented a greater threat than adult women in the same position because teens had fewer resources that would allow them to leave welfare-dependence behind them. Teenage parents were labeled lazy, promiscuous, greedy, and ignorant, a decidedly negative change from the 1970s representation of adolescent mothers as capable and empowered. The Project Girl respondents from the early 1970s and the letters to Judy Blume and Elizabeth Winship from the 1980s tell us that neither stereotype matched the actual experiences of teenage girls, though the earlier representation was a much closer fit. Liberal and conservative used both the welfare queen and the empowered teen images leaders to further their political goals. For the New Right, this meant re-defining “family-centered programs” to fit their agenda. While a liberal definition might have meant reducing stigma and educating parents to be supportive of pregnant teens, the New Right used the term to promote abstinence-only education and restrict access to contraception.

The AFLA steadily moved federal funding toward abstinence-only education programs and away from the supportive programs that teenage parents needed. Even as teen pregnancy rates began to climb, politicians made it more difficult for young people to access contraception. In 1983 the Reagan administration added a rule to the Title X family planning program that required clinics to notify the parents or legal guardians of minors after

⁴²⁷ Ibid 354

prescribing contraception. This order never went into effect, as it was immediately tied up in court appeals that the administration chose not to fight, but several states passed similar legislation.⁴²⁸ Though the parental reporting order did not become a nation-wide policy, the fact that the administration proposed it demonstrates a shift in how Reagan's administration perceived teenage sexuality. Unlike SIECUS reformers who led the sex education movement in the previous decades, the leaders of the New Right believed that teenagers should only have access to limited information. Contraception was frequently left out of the curriculum favored by New Right organizations like the John Birch Society. Conservative leaders believed that all information about sexuality should come from parents and guardians, not from schools, clinics, or other public venues.⁴²⁹

Welfare Reform and Abstinence-Only Education

In 1996, the Democratic Clinton administration and a Republican Congress introduced major changes to the welfare system by replacing the Aid for Dependent Mothers and Children (AFDC) program with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which remains in effect in 2013. In 1996, teenage pregnancy was at the forefront of the welfare debate. Young women who chose to keep their babies and relied on federal benefits were subjected to a specific set of rules for legal minors. The TANF law required that states provide cash benefits to unwed teens only if they lived at home with their parents. Thus, teenage mothers whose families did not support their decision were left without familial or welfare support unless they could find another adult guardian approved by government social workers. Under TANF, states earned cash bonuses for reductions in the rate of births to

⁴²⁸ Gordon, *Moral Property of Women*, p 351

⁴²⁹ Susan Kathleen Freeman, *Sex Goes to School: Girls and Sex Education before the 1960s*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008); Jeffrey P Moran, *Teaching Sex : The Shaping of Adolescence in the 20th Century*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000)

unwed mothers if those reductions occurred without an increase in the rate of abortions. By combining a reward for limiting teenage childbearing with a stipulation that includes also limiting abortions, the federal government imposed the judgment that abortion is an undesirable way for states to lower teen birth rates.⁴³⁰ These changes reflect both the continued influence of conservative leaders and the long-lasting stereotype of teenage parents as dependent upon government support.

TANF also did little to support teen moms who wanted to continue their education. While adhering to the spirit of Title IX, under TANF recipients were required to enroll in a school or training program. While this had great potential to encourage teenage mothers to finish high school, the law allowed states to decide what qualified as an educational program. This meant that teen mothers continued to be pushed into vocational training programs, night classes, and GED certificate courses that do not prepare students for higher education. The result is that even if a girl wanted to attend college and was able to work out the financial and childcare issues, she would enter the university behind many of her peers.⁴³¹

Congress increased funding for abstinence-only sex education programs under the Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Clinton administrations. By 1997, when TANF was implemented, funding for abstinence-only education reached \$64 million.⁴³² This money was designated specifically for curricula that did not include information about contraception. Clinging to the argument that sex education, particularly if it included information about contraception and abortion, gave teens a “license to have sex,” conservatives argued that the

⁴³⁰ “Office of Family Assistance Fact Sheet,” Administration of Children and Families Archives, accessed October 5, 2013 http://archive.acf.hhs.gov/opa/fact_sheets/tanf_factsheet.html

⁴³¹ Wanda S. Pillow *Unfit Subjects: Education Policy and the Teen Mother, 1972-2002*, (New York: Routledge, 2004)

⁴³² D. Daley, “Exclusive purpose: abstinence-only proponents create federal entitlement in welfare reform” SIECUS Rep. 1997 Apr-May; 25(4):3-7.

social epidemic to cure was not teen pregnancy, rather it was teenage sexual activity itself. The result was a generation of teens who did not fully understand the consequences of sexual intercourse or have access to methods to prevent pregnancy. It was only the AIDS panic of the late 1980s and early 1990s that forced sex education to include basic information about condoms, sexually transmitted diseases, and pregnancy rather than limit the conversation entirely to abstinence.⁴³³

Early outcomes of abstinence-only education were evident in the letters fans wrote to Judy Blume, Beth Winship and others in the early 1980s discussed in Chapter 5. In fact, the increase in abstinence-only education may have helped Blume's controversial books remain relevant for another generation of young readers. Random House re-released updated versions of *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* and *Forever* in 1986 and 2003 respectively.⁴³⁴ In the 2003 edition of *Forever* Blume added a foreword encouraging young women to ask for STD testing as well as contraception when visiting their doctors, explaining that this book was written before the AIDS crisis, when venereal disease was perceived as less of a threat.

Two decades after the initial furor about her books, Blume remained in the spotlight for her continued advocacy of teaching teenagers about sex and contraception. In honor of Mother's Day 2009, Blume wrote a public letter urging readers to "Say thanks this Mother's Day with a gift that honors her courage by making a donation to Planned Parenthood in her name."⁴³⁵ Noting the increased number of women seeking Planned Parenthood's services as the economy worsened, Blume praised Planned Parenthood, writing that it "supports

⁴³³ Moran, *Teaching Sex*

⁴³⁴ The new version of *Margaret* included relatively innocuous changes including replacing references to sanitary napkin belts to descriptions of the sticky sanitary pads that became popular in the 1980s.

⁴³⁵ Judy Blume, "Are You There? It's Me, Judy," May 4 2009.

motherhood and all that it means.”⁴³⁶ In an immediate reaction to this letter, the pro-life newspaper *LifeNews* organized a campaign against Blume reminiscent of the way the New Right attacks in the 1980s. *LifeNews* encouraged their readers to “contact Judy Blume with your complaints” about her support for PPFA.⁴³⁷ In response, Planned Parenthood initiated an e-mail campaign that allowed Blume’s supporters to declare their support with a form letter. According to Planned Parenthood, “anti-choice extremists inundated [Blume] with hate mail and phone calls after the original letter made headlines, spurring their decision to create an easy way for people to show their support for both Blume and PPFA.”⁴³⁸ This event demonstrates the continued power of both sides of this ardent debate around the issues of reproductive rights and sexuality, particularly where young women are concerned.

Contemporary discussions of adolescent pregnancy take place in the shadow of previous characterizations of teenage mothers. From the maternity home leaders’ belief that white girls could be rescued, reformed, and sent back into the world cleansed of sexual transgression with no baby to burden them, to Reagan’s lazy or ignorant welfare queens taking advantage of government handouts, teenage pregnancy has remained part of public discourse. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the public image of teenage motherhood is changing once again. This time, the entertainment industry, not political leaders, is leading the conversation. The most recent faces of adolescent parenthood are the sensational stars of MTV’s *16 and Pregnant* (which premiered in 2009 and is under contract for a new season in 2014) and the melodramatic characters of ABC Family’s *The Secret Life*

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ Steven Ertelt, "Children's Author Judy Blume Seeks Donations to Planned Parenthood Abortion Biz," *LifeNews.com*, May 5 2009.

⁴³⁸ _____, "Planned Parenthood Begs for Response to Criticism of Judy Blume Abortion Plug," *LifeNews.com*, May 6 2009.

of an American Teenager (2008-2013). The MTV show follows a different pregnant teen in each episode, chronicling her pregnancy, birth, and the weeks immediately after she brings home the baby. With very few expectations, the girls choose unwed motherhood and some go on to star in the spin-off show *Teen Mom*. The girls are portrayed as selfish, immature, and irresponsible. *The Secret Life*'s fictional protagonist, Amy, gets pregnant in her sophomore year of high school after losing her virginity to the school's bad boy at band camp. Amy is whiny, entitled, and immature but she graduates high school with plans to attend college. The show follows her through pregnancy, childbirth, and her struggle to raise her son while completing high school. Each portrayal of teenage parents simply produces yet another caricature, rather than an accurate portrait of what pregnant and parenting teens experience.

From Problem Girls to Welfare Queens

As the public discourse moved from “problem girls” to “welfare queens,” the identity of individual girls was further obscured. Within the walls of a maternity home, girls often felt as if they were simply incubators, waiting to give a baby to a more deserving family. Their personalities, hopes, and internal conflict were downplayed in programs that focused on relinquishing the baby and preparing girls to return home. The shift away from maternity homes had the potential to give girls more agency. By staying at home, making their pregnancies and then their babies public, girls made a political statement. They asserted individual desires and became the objects of a new government support campaign. Well-meaning senators and Congressmen like Kennedy took up the mantle of teen pregnancy to address abortion, sex education, and welfare reform in a way that would appeal to feminist constituents without alienating conservative voters. They attempted to create a system that would have empowered pregnant teens to make informed choice about parenthood, abortion,

or adoption, finish their educations, and have help navigating government assistance programs. These services would have focused on the needs of individual girls rather than creating another overarching stereotype.

Instead, grappling with the political realities of Congress, they bent their ideals and an opportunity was lost. Rather than a system that provided comprehensive change in the way teenage parents received government support, liberals opened the door for the welfare queen rhetoric. While it is easy to blame conservative leaders for this rhetoric, Edward Kennedy and Joseph Califano helped open the door. They used the threat of welfare-dependent teenager parents as a method to get support for the 1978 bill, a tactic that worked where other arguments had failed in previous bills. The unintentional result was that within a few years, the public became firmly convinced that teenage mothers were likely to take advantage of the welfare system and cost taxpayers millions. The new stereotype, including the unspoken bias that incorrectly equates welfare with ethnic minorities, quickly overshadowed attempts to focus legislation on programs that would help girls. Instead, the debate turned to the best ways to save taxpayer money by limiting the welfare rolls. Lowering the rates of teen pregnancy, and therefore potential welfare recipients, became a top priority. OAPP administrators funneled more money into prevention programs, while also rendering these programs less effective by reducing them to abstinence only education despite accumulating evidence that this approach didn't work. The policy meant fewer federally funded services for girls who were actually pregnant or parenting at a young age, leaving teenage parents with less support than in previous decades.

Both President George H.W. Bush and his son President George W. Bush, advocated strongly for abstinence-only education while watching teen pregnancy rates rise. Clinton's

TANF program included several limitations specifically for young recipients and praised states for keeping teens off the welfare rolls. Most recently, the 2009 Affordable Care Act includes an allocation of \$250 million for sex education aimed at preventing teen pregnancy as a way to save the government money in welfare spending.⁴³⁹ Thus, the work of supporting teenage parents continues to fall by the wayside as government leaders pour money into prevention programs instead. Prevention is central to lowering teen pregnancy rates, and comprehensive sex education that includes access to birth control and information about sexually transmitted diseases should be a key part of any prevention program. As the debates in Chapter 3 revealed, prevention is also a much more affordable option. However, supportive services like education and counseling must be part of the rubric for supporting teenage parents. Sex education, while important, will do nothing to help a teenage girl facing the life-changing proposition of becoming a parent for the first time. Her needs are great and should be a significant part of any program for teenage sexuality

When Phyllis Dusang, my grandmother, missed her period in 1957, she knew she would marry her baby's father and that they would raise a family together. Her shotgun marriage defied the odds as, despite her parents' initial rage, she and Eddie happily celebrated their 55th wedding anniversary this summer. Personal experience but also social change taught Phyllis to react differently in 1983 when her own daughter Anna came home pregnant and unmarried. The extreme shame that led families to hide their daughters in maternity homes

⁴³⁹ "\$250 Million for Abstinence Education Not Evidence-based, Groups Say - CNN.com." Accessed October 8, 2013. <http://www.cnn.com/2010/HEALTH/03/31/abstinence.education/index.html?hpt=T2>.

has disappeared from the conversation about teenage pregnancy. That shame was replaced by an accusation of criminality, the idea that teen mothers commit fraud by taking advantage of taxpayers. Neither of these caricatures accurately reflects the experiences of a pregnant and parenting teen. She is not an immoral girl to be rescued, nor is she a leech on society. In most cases, she is a young woman who is overwhelmed with the responsibility of parenting, looking for help and support regardless of the actions that led to her pregnancy.

The story of teen pregnancy from 1950-1980 is unresolved. It is undisputable that girls who discover they are pregnant today enjoy countless opportunities that were not available for Phyllis and girls like her. Pregnant teens can stay in school, are encouraged to take active roles in deciding their futures, and are not publically shamed with such vehemence as previous generations. However, there is much work to be done. As many as 70% of teenage moms still do not finish high school, leaving them with few employment options.⁴⁴⁰ The United States still has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in the western world.⁴⁴¹ The real girls behind those statistics do not fit into any one stereotype. They do not all need to be rescued and rehabilitated, nor do they all become dependent on welfare. They come from every ethnic, economic, regional, and educational background. Perhaps the only thing they all have in common is that they need access to education, affordable childcare for their children, sex education, access to contraception, and other support services. Until those things are provided in meaningful ways, teenage mothers will continue to struggle against the stereotypes created for them by political leaders, social scientists, and entertainment media.

⁴⁴⁰ “Get Tested Or Get Out: School Forces Pregnancy Tests on Girls, Kicks Out Students Who Refuse or Are Pregnant.” Accessed August 7, 2012. <http://www.aclu.org/blog/reproductive-freedom-womens-rights/get-tested-or-get-out-school-forces-pregnancy-tests-girls>.

⁴⁴¹ “U.S. Teen Pregnancy Rate Remains Highest in Developed World - Los Angeles Times.” Accessed October 11, 2013. <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jan/19/news/la-heb-teen-pregnancy-20120119>.

Appendix I: Sample McBee Card from Project Girl

The Project Girl researchers transcribed their interviews onto McBee cards which were organized thematically. For this project, I used all the McBee cards that Project Girl marked “sexuality” and catalogued the information typed on the card. A sample McBee card from Project Girl is included in Appendix

McBee cards are a paper data storage system that uses a system of punched holes to code data. In the system used for Project Girl, 5 x 8 inch cards made of heavy paper were punched around the edges to note demographic and other identifying factors for each interview. To sort the data, researchers would stack the cards and run a long, very thin needle through the stack. When the needle was lifted, any cards that were punched in that place would remain behind, giving the researcher a data set to work with. The center of the card was used to transcribe interviews. Computers made this method obsolete.

The image shows a single McBee card, a type of punch card used for data storage. The card is yellowed and has a grid of punch holes along the top and bottom edges. The text is handwritten in black ink. At the top, the word "SEXUALITY" is written on the left, and "TX-ML-46" is written on the right. The main body of the card contains several paragraphs of text, including: "Premarital sex: What I'm saying right now is that if you're really sure you love him, its right, but if you're not sure you love him, don't go into it.", "Do if girl were pregnant: Well, if the guy doesn't want to marry her and she wants the baby for her to have it, but if she doesn't want the baby and the guy doesn't want to marry her might as well have an abortion/", "Abortion: Well I had one myself and my opinion is that, I wouldn't have it again. I didn't like it.", "First period was at 11 years old.", "Had sex. Regret: Having an affair with a guy I didn't love. Because you see, I made love to the guy and I didn't love and I realize after it, I didn't love him.", "Is now sleeping with her fiance: All I know is that I love him and I'm pretty sure he loves me and well, just I enjoy being with him.", "How informed about sex: I learned about sex when I was 12 in our education class and had PE when I used to be in the 7th, 6th grade.", "Knows enough: I would like to learn more about it, but what I know right now is alright with me, but if I could learn something right now, I wouldn't mind going into a class.", "Attempt at molestation: I was at my sister's house, and there was my brother-in-law and I was only 13 and he tried to put his hands in my body and I just went ahead and told my sister, what he was trying to do and I didn't like it. (OVER)"

No rape.

Sex ed: In school, I have it in PE. Well what they teach us was on a week of a sex education class and told us what would we expect if we had affairs. It wasn't boring, it was very interesting cause we never know when you get into it.

Birth control: Birth control is alright, probably they say its good and say its bad. And my opinion is that they do work, if you try them and if you take them, so I think its a good idea if they gave me birth controls.

VD: It is a problem, the guy can give it to you and then you have to continue to go see the doctor and this and that, so it is a problem. VD I don't know much about it, I only know its a disease that comes from a man and a woman.

OK to be unwed mom? I wouldn't like that cause my sister had her baby girl without being married and the baby just grows up in the side of the grandparents and then she gets mad and she wants to take the baby, its not good for the baby.

TX, 16, Chicano, unemployed, urban , not affil.

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