

**Interview with Rebecca Maynard**  
by Tony Norris



*Rebecca Maynard is University Trustee Professor of Education and Social Policy at the University of Pennsylvania and visiting fellow at the Office of Population Research, Princeton University. She earned her B.A. in economics at the University of Connecticut and her Ph.D. in economics at the University of Wisconsin. After completing her graduate studies, she spent eighteen years at Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., where she served as senior vice president and director of Princeton research. During her years at Mathematica, she also served as consultant to the General Accounting Office and the Rockefeller Foundation on various social welfare policy projects. Shortly after joining the University of Pennsylvania faculty, she served on the Welfare Reform Work Group at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.*

*Currently, Dr. Maynard is principal investigator for a national evaluation of abstinence-only education programs, for a study of volunteer tutoring in the West Philadelphia public schools and for an impact study of an after-school recreation program in West Philadelphia. She recently completed a major multi-site demonstration evaluation of home visitor services for teenage parent welfare recipients. She serves on numerous advisory boards, including the National Academy of Sciences Panel on Data and Methods for Measuring the Effects of Changes in Social Welfare Programs, the U.S. Census Advisory Committee of Professional Associations (American Economics Association representative) and the Center for the Future of Children's editorial board.*

*Dr. Maynard has published on a variety of topics and in a wide range of journals and books, including *Kids Having Kids: The Costs and Consequences of Teenage Pregnancy*. She has given expert testimony before Congress on abstinence education, childcare, teenage pregnancy and parenting, poverty and welfare, and employment training policy. She has also conducted numerous briefings of senior policy makers including congressional staff, presidential task forces, the Secretaries of Labor and Health and Human Services, and state welfare, health and employment training directors.*

*Rebecca Maynard was interviewed for the Connecticut Teen Pregnancy Prevention Web site from her home in Princeton, New Jersey.*

**Norris:** Economics and statistics seem like a non-traditional career choice for a woman. What led you to these fields and how did you transition to conducting evaluations of social service programs in general and, specifically, teen pregnancy and its prevention?

**Maynard:** My interest in economics was, strangely, a random event. I was attending the University of Connecticut at Storrs and took a course in economics taught by a professor named Steve Welch. He was truly an inspirational teacher who convinced me at age 19 that economics was the key to understanding the world. Looking back, it was pretty naïve to have believed that a single discipline could be key to understanding the world, but this naiveté gave me my start in economics and social policy research.

**Norris:** and the transition...

**Maynard:** As part of my graduate training at the University of Wisconsin, I worked on one of

the first social welfare experiments, the Rural Negative Income Tax Experiment. This was my introduction to applied research. The concept of the negative income tax came out of the "Great Society" school of thought. The idea was simply that if your income was low enough, you should get a payment from the government, rather than paying positive taxes. That was in the early 1970s. This work led me to work more directly looking at relationships among family well-being, poverty and improvements in the welfare system. The outcomes of poverty and welfare for children were of particular interest to me. I was perplexed as to why some children succeeded and others didn't. I was perplexed as to why I succeeded and some of my peers didn't. Over the years, I saw mounting evidence, as we peeled away the layers, that a common factor in much of the poverty and poor outcomes for children was their having been born to a teenage, usually single, mother.

**Norris:** Where did you grow up, and were there childhood experiences that led you to your present career?

**Maynard:** I grew up in Dover-Foxcroft, Maine, which is located dead center in the state. I was one of six children in a poor, working-class family. I was the first in my family to attend college. I had one cousin who had gone to college before me. But, there was no strong expectation that I should go to college. I worked hard in school and got accepted on scholarship to the University of Connecticut.

**Norris:** Did you have friends who were dealing with the issues of teen pregnancy and its prevention?

**Maynard:** In my era, if someone in school got pregnant, they did one of two things. Either they dropped out of school and married the father of the child, or they disappeared for months and gave up the child for adoption.

**Norris:** What were your initial perspectives on the teen pregnancy problem and its prevention when you first began your studies?

**Maynard:** Initially, I thought that we could solve this problem by providing kids with information about and access to contraception. I thought, "if we could just talk to these kids and tell them about the better life they would have if they delayed or avoided pregnancy, we could solve this problem." But even with information and access to contraception, the problem wasn't going away. Kids simply weren't taking advantage of this information and resources available to them.

**Norris:** You are the principal investigator for a federal evaluation on the effectiveness of "abstinence-only" teen pregnancy prevention programs. What can you tell us about the scope of the study? In your opinion, when the evaluation is completed, will we definitively know if abstinence-only "works" or will more study be required?

**Maynard:** This study is being funded through monies tied to the welfare reform legislation of 1996, which allocated \$50 million a year for five years to states for the purpose of supporting programs that promote abstinence until marriage. Over seven hundred programs are funded nationwide under these funds. The theory is that non-marital births, including the many nonmarital births to teenagers, cause much of the child poverty and welfare dependence in this country.

We're looking at the strongest and most promising abstinence-only programs out there. We want to learn about their successes in delaying sex, preventing STD's, and avoiding pregnancies. We also want to find ways to strengthen these programs. In many parts of the country, schools don't offer comprehensive sex education and family planning services are

not available to underage youths without parental consent. In such places, it's abstinence-only or nothing when it comes to family life and sex education. Here, in particular, we need strong abstinence education programs to keep youths safe from the health, economic, and emotional risks in non-marital sex. Indeed, these same models of abstinence education may prove to be more effective in lowering youths' sexual activity and related risks than are the more common comprehensive sex education programs.

When the study is completed, we will know whether the kids enrolled in these abstinence-only programs made better choices for their lives as a result of their having been in these programs. We won't know whether other types of programs, such as programs promoting comprehensive sex education, would have led to better or worse outcomes than did the abstinence-only programs.

**Norris:** Based on your research, can you tell us about some of the costs associated with adolescent childbearing that society must pay? Do you think that there are analyses that local communities – individual cities and towns – can conduct that could be used to convincingly argue that doing nothing about adolescent childbearing is more expensive than prevention programs?

**Maynard:** The costs are numerous. There are public assistance costs; costs of health care for the children; foster care costs, since children of teenage parents are at increased risk of entering foster care; and criminal justice costs, because children of teen parents are more likely to enter the criminal justice system. The vast majority of these costs of teen childbearing are related to the negative outcomes for the children of these teenage parents. They are not costs arising from low productivity on the part of the parents, or lower earnings that need to be supplemented through welfare. It's the outcomes for the children that really cost society and the children, themselves.

Concerning studies of the costs to local communities, I would advise communities not to spend a lot of time and money looking at the costs of teenage childbearing – spend that time and money on prevention programs. Look at the study funded by the Robin Hood Foundation; there are costs per teen parent figures in that study. If communities need local costs estimates, use these unit cost data to estimate local costs. It's both less costly and more powerful to draw on estimates from larger samples, such as those we generated in the Robin Hood Foundation study\*. That study took account of the fact that we have a backlog of these children of teenage mothers growing up right now and the costs are going to be with us for some time to come.

**Norris:** Based on your research, what factors do you believe contribute to teen pregnancy and what factors are contributing to the current national decline in teen birth rates?

**Maynard:** Norms and values have contributed to both. From the 1970's through the early 1990's, there were minimal sanctions for and stigma associated with teen childbearing. Moreover, the negative impacts on the teenage parents were minimized through social policies and programs. Teenage parents and their children were treated with compassion. There was limited talk about responsibility.

In my judgment, the decline in the teen pregnancy and birth rates is strongly related to the change in the message we are sending these kids. The message now is that welfare is not an entitlement and that there will be consequences for men who help create teenage pregnancies. We need to continue and expand our messages about the seriousness of sexually transmitted diseases-- not just HIV/AIDS, but all the sexually transmitted diseases. The message began to change with the Clinton Administration. I saw the transformation in my work with teenage mothers. There was no longer a guarantee that welfare was going to

be around forever. There was more talk about these kids needing to take responsibility for their reproductive health. The messages were clearer and they were heard.

Repeat births to teenage mothers are still high, but they too are declining. Prevention of the second birth needs to be a priority as well as prevention of first births. Years ago, there were programs for teenage mothers that made the second birth a celebratory event. There were some programs that even held showers for teenage mothers expecting their second child. Some of these programs actually increased the incidence of near-term second births.

I was working in the field when the 1996 welfare reforms were under development and realized that the public conversation about welfare and responsibilities was causing a dramatic change in the beliefs and attitudes of teenage mothers. Teen mothers were shaken into the reality that they were going to be responsible for their children that the support they had taken for granted was going to evaporate. We started to see behavior change. The message now is (and should be) that having a child is not a wise decision until you can support that child and yourself. And having a second child just compounds the problem, putting the mother and the first child at even greater risk.

Today, one third of all babies in this country are being born out of wedlock. We need strong and clear messages that this is not good for parents or their children. The most successful prevention programs to date have been using medical practitioners and social service professionals that reinforce the message that this is not a good idea.

Welfare reform has contributed to changing the messages youths hear, but I believe that the messages we send our children, and the messages children hear from their communities have important, long-term effects. They must be clear and strong that having a child when you're still a child can only create problems for you, your child and society, both long and short term.

*\*Maynard, R. (editor). 1996. Kids Having Kids. New York, NY: The Robin Hood Foundation.*