



SPARKS for Young People's Mobility out of Poverty: Supporting Intentional Family Formation and Positive Youth Development

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The ideas in this paper were shaped by discussions within the Partnership but do not necessarily represent the views of all members.

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ABOUT THE US PARTNERSHIP ON MOBILITY FROM POVERTY

With funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Urban Institute is supporting the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty. Led by chair David Ellwood and executive director Nisha Patel, the Partnership consists of 24 leading voices representing academia, practice, the faith community, philanthropy, and the private sector.

The Partnership's definition of mobility has three core principles: economic success, power and autonomy, and being valued in community. Our collective aspiration is that all people achieve a reasonable standard of living with the dignity that comes from having power over their lives and being engaged in and valued by their community.

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Executive Summary

All young people should have the chance to make plans for their future, to imagine the life they want for themselves, and to act upon those aspirations in order to realize their potential. However, for most of the more than 200,000 adolescents who gave birth last year and the other young women parenting children they had in their teens, opportunities to gain education, develop skills, establish a stable career, and forge stable family lives can be thwarted by the more immediate need to care and provide for a child.

Although the teen birth rate has dropped by more than half over the past two decades, rates remain much higher in the United States than in many other developed countries; in the US, 21 women in 1,000 ages 15 to 19 gave birth in 2015, while only about 6 in 1,000 in Sweden, 9 in 1,000 in Canada, and 14 in 1,000 in Great Britain did so.¹

Most pregnancies among teens are unintended. Surveys show that among teens younger than 15, 98 percent of pregnancies are characterized as unplanned as are 82 percent of conceptions to those age 15 to 19.² In 2011, American women reported 2.8 million unintended pregnancies—45 percent of all conceptions.³ The rate is significantly higher among those with less education and income.⁴ Hispanic, Native American, and non-Hispanic black teens are disproportionately at risk of an unplanned pregnancy compared with non-Hispanic white teens.⁵ About 1 out of every 6 white teens will become pregnant at least once during her teen years, compared with 1 in 3 Hispanic teens and 4 in 10 black teens.⁶

Yet hundreds of in-depth qualitative interviews with mothers living in poverty across the country have revealed that while few explicitly plan to have a child in their teens, young women living in poverty experience considerable ambivalence about pregnancy. Among disadvantaged female teens, children are seen a key source of meaning and identity. Given the scarcity of alternative sources of meaning and identity they are exposed to in their adolescent years, this ambivalence often leads to pregnancy.⁷ In-depth interviews with low-income fathers across a variety of locales revealed that they often hold similar views: they too are ambivalent about pregnancy and see fatherhood as a key opportunity to forge a sense of purpose, and fulfill a vital role, especially given the void of other perceived pathways to doing so.⁸ Consistent with the claims of qualitative work, observational and intervention research shows that youth who have a strong sense of meaning and identity are less likely to become parents as teens.⁹

The bottom line is that adolescents living in poverty often lack a strong enough motivation to avoid early pregnancy. Absent a tangible vision for the future, and separated from the supportive institutions and adult mentors who could provide a bridge between their current circumstances and their life goals, young people living in poverty often make the transition to parenthood without clear intention, and while they are unprepared. Brain science shows that adolescents have an enhanced drive for reward that is not fully

countered by their regulatory systems. Though they can foresee the risks associated with various courses of action, they give more weight to rewards than risks, especially in the presence of peers.¹⁰ Thus, adolescence is a developmental stage in which young people are especially prone to a variety of highly consequential choices, decisions that can cast a long shadow over their lives. These include failure to complete school, entanglement with the criminal justice system, and early and unplanned parenthood. We argue that providing young people with the motivation and the tools to avoid these risks is a critical ingredient in truly moving the needle on mobility from poverty, not only for the young people themselves but for the children they raise.

Our society currently invests little in low-income youth during this critical phase of their lives.¹¹ There is evidence that opportunities for nonaffluent youth to engage in their communities has declined over time, at least among white people, relative to middle class youth.¹² Similarly, access to positive youth development activities we call SPARKS—Supportive Pathways through Adolescence through Recreation, Knowledge, and Schools¹³—shows a strong class gradient. This is in part because of participation costs and a lack of safe, reliable transportation, despite the higher demand for such programs among low-income households.¹⁴ We believe that investing in youth through SPARKS is vital to moving the needle on mobility from poverty. SPARKS can help youth (people ages 10 through 24) find meaning and identity at a critical point in their lives, forge long-term goals, and envision their future. SPARKS can provide crucial opportunities for youth living in poverty to explore interests and passions, hone skills, and forge relationships with skilled, caring mentors. In doing so, SPARKS empower adolescents to develop the motivation—the “why”—to make deliberate, thoughtful decisions during this critical time, when so much of their future hangs in the balance.

Research on the efficacy of SPARKS is still nascent. SPARKS programs can be expensive and difficult to sustain. While some evaluations have yielded positive results, positive impacts are often difficult to replicate. Yet some evidence suggests that investing in SPARKS can shield youth against risk while they form plans and develop a vision for their future. We do not yet know what the magnitude of the impact of involving a greater share of young people in evidence-based SPARKS might be, or what approaches work best for whom and in what context. Thus, we propose an evidence-building and implementation agenda for SPARKS, with the goal of scaling and spreading evidence-based models.

If SPARKS empower young people to find their “why,” access to the full range of effective birth control methods is one tool that can empower them to act on that motivation. Access to better birth control offers young people a chance to choose whether and when to become parents and, by extension, whether and when to prioritize other goals. All else equal, research shows that women earn 3 percent more for each year they delay childbearing.¹⁵ We fully acknowledge that pregnancy prevention alone is unlikely to move the needle for teens living in poverty; in fact, studies that disaggregate earnings gains by socioeconomic status suggest that given all the other factors stacked against disadvantaged youth, those who wait may see none

of these gains.¹⁶ Accordingly, helping teens avoid early and unplanned pregnancy is only one goal of SPARKS. Evaluations of SPARKS programs reveal various positive outcomes, including high school completion and college attendance, lower rates of involvement with the criminal justice system, and increased labor force participation and earnings in young adulthood.¹⁷ Additionally, SPARKS is only a piece of the larger youth investment strategy our nation must adopt if these young people are to reach their full potential.

In this paper, we review the extant evidence about the impact of SPARKS programs and initiatives that have broadened access to the full range of effective contraceptive options, including long-acting reversible contraceptives, or LARCs. While each has some evidence base, only a few programs have combined them. Those that have done so have yielded a range of impacts, some large and significant, but others null. In short, more experimentation and evaluation are needed. We propose developing and evaluating a model for studying SPARKS programs that incorporate better birth control, or BBC. This involves offering age-appropriate information about, and access to, the full range of contraceptive options available. Specifically, we recommend the following:

1. Identifying and evaluating SPARKS programs that incorporate BBC, either directly or through referral, to understand what programs work, with what populations in which settings, with a goal of spreading and scaling effective program models.
2. Developing and implementing a communications strategy that changes the narrative from young people as liabilities to young people as assets.
3. Building the capacity of current and future leaders in the field of positive youth development, both among SPARKS practitioners and the young people they serve.

Investing in these strategies can help empower disadvantaged young people as they move through adolescence and into adulthood, allowing them to pursue the human capital investments and vocational opportunities and other meaningful goals that can offer the “escape velocity” necessary for them to succeed and their children to thrive.¹⁸ Box 1 summarizes the expected impacts of these investments.

Impact on Three Dimensions of Mobility

The Partnership's definition of mobility has three core principles: economic success, power and autonomy, and being valued in community.

Investment: Develop and evaluate a model for studying SPARKS programs, with the goal of identifying what works and bringing successful approaches to scale. The nascent research on SPARKS suggests they may be key to providing adolescents living in poverty with the motivation to avoid choices in their teen years that will limit their life trajectories. Augment these programs with one critical tool: age-appropriate information about, and access to, the full range of effective contraceptives available to better enable them to choose if or when to become parents. Because the brain is especially susceptible to risk during adolescence, engaging adolescents in SPARKS may be especially critical. Adolescence is the perfect time to intervene because the brain is so sensitive and susceptible to molding during this period.^a Current programs viewed as state-of-the-art typically cost around \$3,000 per participant per year. The upfront cost of long-acting reversible contraceptives—the most expensive option—ranges from \$400 to \$1,000.

Impact:

- **Economic Success:** SPARKS may raise high school and college completion rates and reduce criminal justice involvement, improve labor force participation, and lead to higher earnings among participants, according to extant research.^b Every dollar spent on contraceptive services saves almost \$6 in public medical expenditures.^c
- **Power and Autonomy:** Participants may experience fewer early, unintended pregnancies and lower rates of criminal justice involvement, both of which limit power and autonomy. We expect that participants will also be more self-confident and enjoy a greater sense of self-efficacy.
- **Being Valued in Community:** Participants in SPARKS programs will gain mentors and relationships with peers. Youth will envision roles for themselves that extend beyond parenthood. Communities will see youth as resources.^d

^a Laurence Steinberg, *Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 18–45.

^b Emily Blumenthal, Steven Martin, and Erika C. Poethig, *Social Genome Model Analysis of the Bridgespan Group's Billion-Dollar Bets to Improve Social Mobility* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2016); James J. Kemple and Cynthia J. Willner, *Career Academies: Long-Term Impacts on Labor Market Outcomes, Educational Attainment, and Transitions to Adulthood* (New York: MDRC, 2008); Akiva M. Liberman, David S. Kirk, and Kideuk Kim, "Labeling Effects of First Juvenile Arrests: Secondary Deviance and Secondary Sanctioning," *Criminology* 52, no. 3 (2014): 345–70; Steinberg, *Age of Opportunity*.

^c Jennifer J. Frost, Mia R. Zolna and Lori Frohworth, *Contraceptive Needs and Services, 2010* (New York: Guttmacher Institute, 2013); Kelleen Kaye, Jennifer Appleton Gootman, Alison Stewart Ng, and Cara Finley, *The Benefits of Birth Control in America: Getting the Facts Straight* (Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2014).

^d Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016); Melody L. Boyd, Jason Martin, and Kathryn Edin, "Pathways to Participation: Class Disparities in Youth Civic Engagement," *American Sociological Association* 15, no. 4 (2016): 400–22.

The Challenge: Adolescent Pregnancies Make It Harder to Avoid Poverty

Adolescence is a crucial period that can profoundly shape a young person's life. All adolescents face a critical developmental task: finding a compelling answer to the question, "Who am I?" But adolescence is also a period of extraordinary vulnerability; simply by virtue of their brain development, young people tend to weigh rewards, especially in the short term, more highly than risks.¹⁹ For those living in poverty, the quest for meaning and identity is often thwarted by a lack of exposure to varied life paths and by excessive exposure to risk within their families and communities.²⁰ Consequently, young people in general, and economically disadvantaged adolescents in particular, may engage in behaviors that bring rewards in the short term but without full consideration of longer-term consequences. As a result, actions may be taken that constrain future life chances.

Finishing school, side-stepping entanglement with the criminal justice system,²¹ and avoiding early and unplanned parenthood are three key ingredients to maximizing future opportunity. Failing to complete high school is correlated with lower earnings in young adulthood; among adults age 25 or older who did not complete high school, median weekly earnings in 2014 were \$488, compared with \$668 for graduates without any college and \$1,193 for people with a bachelor's degree or more.²² Research shows that teenagers involved in the justice system are more likely to have repeated involvement,²³ and estimates using the Social Genome Model indicate that teens who acquire a criminal record will have lower lifetime family incomes than they otherwise would.²⁴

In this paper, we focus on the third outcome, early and unplanned childbearing. Though evidence regarding the benefits of postponing childbearing among youth with low socioeconomic status are mixed, given the plethora of other challenges these young people face,²⁵ a simulation by Isabel Sawhill using the Social Genome Model found that avoiding "mistimed" births (those that occur before mothers are ready to have a child) had remarkable intergenerational effects. In the excerpt below, Sawhill explains the simulation results showing how children's outcomes would be better if their mothers had delayed childbearing.

During adolescence and in the transition to adulthood, success rates for mistimed children are between 7 and 8 percentage points higher as a result of delayed childbearing. We also found improvements in cognitive scores in childhood, high school graduation rates, rates of teen pregnancy, college graduation rates, and lifetime income. The increases in early and middle childhood social and cognitive development are small on their own, but the effects build such that, by adolescence, the previously mistimed children are 7 percentage points more likely to graduate high school and 3 percentage points less likely to be teen parents. Most striking is the effect on college graduation

rates: delaying childbearing boosts college graduation rates from 22 percent to about 30 percent (an increase of 36 percent). In sum, we estimate that preventing all mistimed births would increase lifetime income for mistimed children by around \$52,000.²⁶

As indicated above, we acknowledge that avoiding a teen birth alone will not be sufficient to help disadvantaged youth escape poverty. Such young people often face multiple, correlated risks; simply avoiding one can merely leave youth vulnerable to another. Research suggests that SPARKS may shield youth against a broad array of risks, not just early and mistimed family formation. Yet even so, the nation must undertake a much broader youth development strategy and ensure that for the youth who pursue them, postsecondary options are of high quality, and the employment opportunities they lead to must provide a living wage.

Surveys reveal that few births to low-income teens are characterized as planned.²⁷ Yet hundreds of in-depth interviews with low-income mothers and fathers across the country suggest that they are not entirely accidental either. These interviews reveal that many disadvantaged youth are deeply ambivalent about pregnancy. Most see children as a key source of meaning and identity, even while recognizing that having a child as a teen is not ideal.²⁸ Youth living in poverty are often exposed to few alternative sources of meaning and identity during adolescence, such as a path through postsecondary education to a stable, meaningful career. Thus, in the face of this ambivalence, early and unplanned pregnancies may occur.²⁹ Research shows that over time, young people from low-income backgrounds have lost access to opportunities to be involved in their communities.³⁰ The documented socioeconomic gap in access to SPARKS programs robs low-income youth of opportunities to explore their interests, find their passions, and hone their skills. It also limits access to skilled, caring mentors who can act as bridges to future opportunities.³¹ Absent SPARKS and the sense of purpose they can engender, vulnerable youth may lack the motivation needed to avoid parenthood.

Consistent with this research, brain science shows that while young people perceive the risks inherent in various courses of action, a shift in the brain's structure and function during the adolescent years results in an increased reward drive. This shift may cause young people to place more emphasis on the short-term gains, such as the powerful sense of meaning and identity that can come from parenting a child, and less emphasis on longer-term consequences for their own life chances and for those of the children they raise.³² These processes may result in decisions made during adolescence that significantly alter future trajectories and inhibit mobility from poverty.

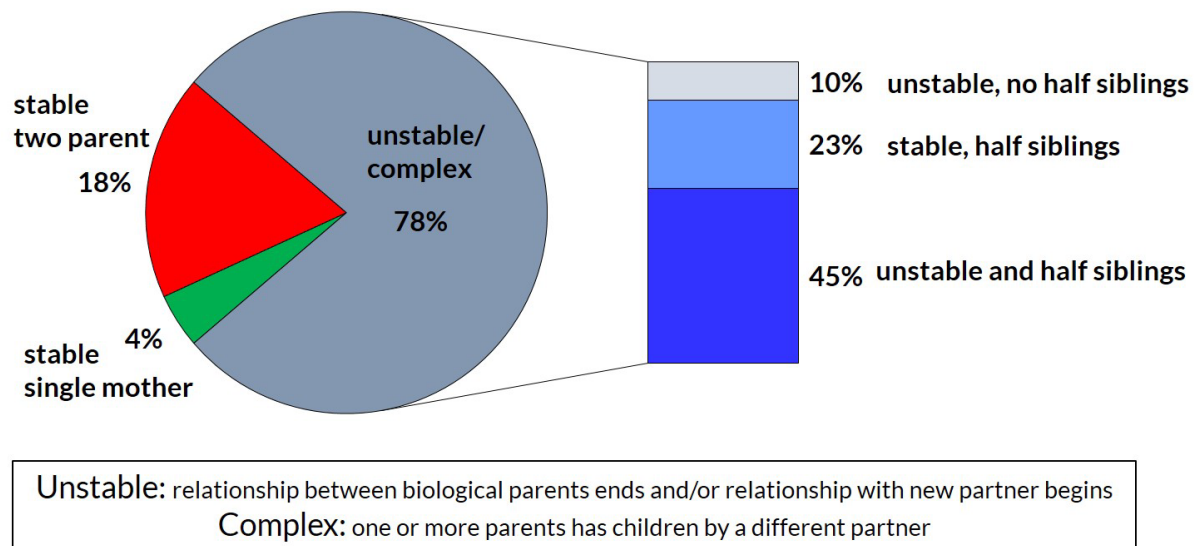
To offer one example, due to class differences in family formation, children of disadvantaged parents are far more likely to experience family instability and complexity early in life than their more privileged counterparts. Such children are typically born within short-lived, fragile unions that are highly prone to dissolution. Rapid subsequent re-partnering means that parents living in poverty have a greater chance of having children with multiple partners. Thus, their children experience high rates of family complexity

during the first five years of life. Sixty-eight percent of children born to disadvantaged parents (e.g. those with a nonmarital birth) will have at least one half-sibling by the age of five, and nearly one-quarter will have three or more.³³

Taken together, 78 percent of all children born to an unmarried mother—a reasonable proxy for disadvantage in the American context—will experience both instability and complexity by the time they reach age 5 (figure 1), a figure that is both historically unique within the US³⁴ and singular among rich nations.³⁵ High rates of instability and complexity early in life create challenging family environments for children. While generally children are remarkably resilient,³⁶ new research has shown that the rate of change among disadvantaged families may simply be too rapid for children to absorb.³⁷ Family instability has been associated with behavior challenges in young school-age children,³⁸ poor academic outcomes in adolescence,³⁹ and higher levels of substance use and early sexual initiation.⁴⁰ Among white children, family instability is also associated with poorer cognitive outcomes.⁴¹ Likewise, instability and complexity within the family can also negatively impact parenting. Some evidence suggests that these dynamics negatively affect parents’ ability to coparent⁴² and may threaten father-child bonds.⁴³

FIGURE 1

Children’s Combined Experiences of Instability and Complexity in by 5th Birthday for Children Born to Unmarried Mothers (percent)



Source: Tabulated by Dr. Laura Tach from Waves 1–4 of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey (Princeton University and Columbia University, <https://fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/>)

Notes: The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey employed a nationally representative sample of children born in the late 1990s in cities with populations of 200,000 or more. *Fragile families* are defined as those having unmarried biological parents at the time of the child’s birth.

In sum, this research suggests that patterns of family formation among low-income youth have led to high rates of family instability and complexity among children born to disadvantaged parents, which poses a threat to their well-being. Meanwhile, increasing rates of family stability for children born to advantaged parents may have fueled an unprecedented rise in middle-class parents' investments in their children in recent decades.⁴⁴ This widening class chasm reinforces social and economic inequalities.

The Solution: Empower Young People to Act with Motivation and Intention

One critical tool for helping young people avoid mistimed births is information about, and access to, the full range of proven birth control options, including long-acting reversible contraceptives, or LARCs. Yet it is our contention that to reach full efficacy, this tool must be embedded within programs that offer a powerful sense of meaning and identity, and therefore a reason to plan. The adolescent brain has heightened plasticity, and its regulatory systems can be molded and trained by experiences, particularly through relationships with others and opportunities for self-reflection. As such, adolescence and young adulthood is the ideal time to provide young people with environments that help them develop a sense of purpose and identify and plan for a broad range of life goals. Young people benefit from environments where they can channel the risk-taking nature of adolescence in a supportive, nurturing environment. There, they can have a chance to explore their interests and passions, hone skills, forge meaningful relationships with skilled, caring mentors, and glean information, all of which can aid in critical decision making and provide other tools essential to success in adulthood. We call these interventions SPARKS—Supported Pathways in Adolescence through Recreation, Knowledge, and Schools.

Although we believe SPARKS are critical for motivation, providing age-appropriate information about, and access to, the full range of proven contraceptive methods, including, though not limited to, long-acting reversible contraceptives (intrauterine device and the birth control implant), can provide a critical means. Only 5 percent of all unplanned pregnancies occur among women who are using birth control consistently. Those using no form of contraception account for 52 percent, while those who are using contraception inconsistently account for 43 percent of unplanned pregnancies.⁴⁵

Evidence from several programs suggests that providing high-quality contraceptive counseling and removing cost and other barriers to all effective methods of contraception could be associated with substantial reductions in teen pregnancy. Other program evaluations show mixed or null results, indicating that implementing these programs can be challenging. Below we describe some of the more successful programs, but inconsistency in the results across programs indicate that more experimentation and evaluation are needed.

- The Delaware Contraceptive Access Now (Delaware CAN) program, introduced statewide by Upstream USA in December 2014, provides training, technical assistance, and quality improvement activities to health care providers with the goal of ensuring all women can conveniently access the birth control method of their choice. A recent evaluation found that among clients of federally funded (Title X) family planning clinics in Delaware, LARC use has increased substantially and there

has been a small decrease in the use of no method since the implementation of Delaware CAN. Using the FamilyScape microsimulation model, the study estimated that these changes in contraceptive use resulted in a 15 percent decrease in unintended pregnancy among Title X patients in Delaware between 2014 and 2016, compared with a 1.3 percent decrease in unintended pregnancy for this population nationwide.⁴⁶

- The St. Louis CHOICE project provided those seeking a LARC with contraceptive counseling and free access to the contraceptive method of her choice. The birth rate among CHOICE participants ages 15 to 19 was 6.3 per 1,000 a fraction of the nationwide average of 34.1 per 1,000. In the following year, the abortion rate of CHOICE participants was one-third to one-half that of nonparticipants in the same geographic area and roughly one-quarter the national rate.⁴⁷ Further research should evaluate if these outcomes are replicable among a population of women who are not attracted to the program specifically because they are seeking LARCs. This research is suggestive; it cannot discern whether, or to what degree, CHOICE was responsible for these differences.
- The Colorado Family Planning Initiative provided LARCs free to low-income women who requested them. Subsequently, the state saw 50 percent fewer teen births and abortions in Colorado relative to other states. A difference of this magnitude is associated with nearly \$70 million lower public costs for health care and other services.⁴⁸ While the initiative was implemented during a nationwide downward trend in teen births, Colorado's decline was more marked than in any other state. Again, this research is suggestive; such research cannot distinguish whether, or to what degree, the program could account for these differences.
- Another rigorously evaluated initiative provided staff at participating reproductive health clinics with evidence-based training on contraceptive counseling and on inserting LARC. Though the results should be viewed as exploratory and not confirmatory, women who visited these clinics were significantly less likely to become pregnant—by nearly half—than women who visited clinics whose staff had not received the training.⁴⁹
- The expansion of federal funding for local family planning programs from 1964 to 1973 coincided with a reduction in childbearing among women living in poverty by between 19 to 30 percent over a decade.⁵⁰ These reductions greatly diminished socioeconomic gaps in total lifetime fertility. Research finds that women living in regions of the country with easier and earlier access to oral contraceptives were 10 to 20 percent more likely to be enrolled in college at age 21 than women in areas with less access. They were also one-third less likely to drop out in the first year. 10 years later, these regions experienced a 6 percent decline in child poverty and a 15 percent decline in receipt of public assistance, holding all else constant.⁵¹

Walking the Line between Access and Coercion

Efforts to ensure access to the full range of effective contraception, including LARC, must acknowledge the long history of coercive practices regarding contraception and reproduction, most often applied to women living in poverty and women of color. The history of such practices—from forced sterilization to financial incentives—understandably leads some to be wary of advocating for LARC in particular. Efforts to offer full access to all contraceptive methods proven effective must also ensure that young people are fully informed and their choices are completely voluntary. Providers and practitioners must consider how best to communicate the evidence regarding the effectiveness of the various contraceptive methods while respecting each woman’s right to freely choose.⁵²

Reproductive coercion is not just a thing of the distant past. For example, in 1990, after the FDA approved Norplant, the arm implant, it was lauded by some legislators and judges as a way to limit reproduction, as it cannot be removed without the assistance of a medical professional. In the early 1990s, more than a dozen states introduced measures that would have required women convicted of child abuse or drug use during pregnancy to choose between inserting Norplant or serving time in jail. Other proposed legislation would have offered women financial incentives to use Norplant or require welfare recipients to do so or face losing their benefits.⁵³ More recently, in 2005 and 2013, some women in California state prisons were unlawfully sterilized without their informed consent.⁵⁴

The ongoing use of coercive practices understandably continues to discourage some women from pursuing LARC.

Adding to the challenge of ensuring unencumbered access to the full range of contraceptive methods are institutional obstacles to accessing LARC. These obstacles include Federally Qualified Health Center protocols and lack of device stocking, impartial counseling, insertion training, same-day insertion, and access to medical advice after insertion.⁵⁵

What Are SPARKS, and How Do They Promote Positive Youth Actions?

SPARKS are public and private initiatives that offer young people a chance to explore their talents and develop their passions, hone skills, forge meaningful relationships with skilled, caring mentors, and glean guidance and information—all of which promote critical decision making and provide other tools necessary to succeed as adults. They are individual, group, or institutional resources that offer meaning and identity for young people at a critical point in their lives: adolescence.⁵⁶ The importance of meaning and identity in

adolescents' lives cannot be underestimated. Stefanie DeLuca and colleagues' book *Coming of Age in the Other America* provides powerful ethnographic portraits of 150 highly disadvantaged young people as they move from early adolescence to young adulthood. They find that having what they call "identity projects" as teens—everything from intense engagement in hobbies to participation in institutional settings with recreational or arts content, service learning opportunities, and vocational themes—was the strongest single predictor of whether youth remained "on track" by the study's end.⁵⁷

When kids threw rocks at our house, to me the kids just need something to do. ...We want to help kids find an interest to move forward so they can get involved in that versus things that are destructive.

—Middle-aged white mother and Detroit resident, during the Partnership's site visit to Detroit, October 2017

SPARKS may use various methods to help young people find meaning and identity, but a long and established literature on positive youth development identifies two essential components. First, successful programs employ an "assets-based" approach that emphasizes adolescents' inherent value and potential. This is in opposition to narratives that frame adolescents as burdensome or troublemakers. Second, effective programs incorporate SAFE features, as well as features of "positive developmental settings," described below.

- SAFE features:⁵⁸
 - » sequenced activities aimed at skill development
 - » active forms of learning
 - » focus on personal and social skills in at least one program component
 - » explicit targeting of specific personal or social skills

- Positive developmental settings:⁵⁹
 - » high-quality mentoring by an adult
 - » skill-building activities that support mastery
 - » opportunities for youth to participate in and lead valued family, school, or community activities
 - » physical and psychological safety of the program setting

These approaches identify and build up participants' strengths; they also provide participants with opportunities to explore new areas of interest that could lead to career paths, civic engagement, and opportunities to exercise leadership. In the course of these activities, they develop decision-making skills and widen their networks of caring adults.⁶⁰

Among the nation's largest SPARKS programs are the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, which serves nearly 4 million children and seeks to "promote and enhance the development of boys and girls by instilling a sense of competence, usefulness, belonging, and influence";⁶¹ and 4-H programs that serve 6 million young

people nationwide, encouraging young people to be true leaders with a focus on four values: “head, heart, hands, and health.”⁶² Unfortunately, none of the formal evaluations of these programs to date has been a randomized control trial.

While research on the impact of SPARKS is in its infancy, some evidence suggests the potential for wide-ranging positive outcomes for young people. For example, YouthBuild provides construction-related and other vocational training, educational services, counseling, and leadership development opportunities to low-income young people ages 16 to 24 without high school diplomas at more than 250 organizations nationwide. A randomized controlled trial found the program increased participation in education and training; increased the rate at which participants earned high school equivalency credentials, enrolled in college, and participated in vocational training; led to a small increase in wages and earnings at 30 months; and increased civic engagement, particularly volunteering.⁶³ We do not yet know whether YouthBuild’s achievements will translate into a lifetime advantage in earnings.

Interest in discerning “what works” in positive youth development is growing nationwide. National groups have formed to promote best practices and policies to maximize the effectiveness of out-of-school time programs, including the Afterschool Alliance, the National Afterschool Association, the National Institute on Out-of-School Time, MENTOR The National Mentoring Partnership, and others.⁶⁴ Research centers like the National Institute for Out-of-School Time Research and the Harvard Family Research Project’s Out-of-School Time program conduct and synthesize research on out-of-school time activities and programs. The knowledge base about best practices in after-school programs has expanded,⁶⁵ and the methods for evaluating programs have become more sophisticated, with new ways to log and assess the processes and outcomes of effective programs.⁶⁶ In particular, there are new research and analysis techniques for modeling the impact of out-of-school time programs on individual youth.⁶⁷ The field has improved links between developmental theory and empirical evidence and practice.

SPARKS Can Encourage Positive Family Formations

To date, few SPARKS programs have sought to measure their effects on intentional family formation or on other family outcomes, such as relationship stability, custodial parenthood, or whether a young adult establishes an independent household with a partner and child. Yet the half-dozen programs that have measured such outcomes have shown significant impacts. Exemplars include the Latin American Youth Center’s Promotor Pathway[®] program and Career Academies.

- The **Latin American Youth Center’s Promotor Pathway[®] program** aims to help youth make successful transitions to adulthood by connecting high-risk youth who are neither working nor in school with a caring adult, called a promotor, through a long-term relationship. Promotors are full-

time employees of the organization who offer an array of services and referrals to outside resources, including reproductive health services. At their Washington, DC location, LAYC operates a Counseling, Treatment, Referral and Linkage program that provides on-site weekly birth control consultations and risk reduction counseling with a nurse practitioner, available free of charge to youth ages 11 to 24.⁶⁸ The design and delivery of Promotor Pathway® intentionally focus on cultural competence, working with older youth and young adults of color experiencing multiple challenges, reaching young men as well as young women, and explicitly addressing pregnancy prevention, sexual health, and relationships within a broader youth development approach. To evaluate the program, 476 youth were randomly assigned to a treatment or control group. The experiment revealed positive outcomes across multiple domains. Of particular relevance to this paper, youth in the experimental group were 7 percentage points less likely to have a child during the last year of the study period compared with those in the control group. Results were not robust for all subgroups, but were significant for Latino youth and young men. The model is now being replicated in several states, with lessons emerging about how it might be adapted to other populations and settings.⁶⁹

- Young men who won a lottery to attend one of nine **Career Academies** in the 1990s—small theme-based high schools closely partnered with industry—were one-third more likely to be married, 46 percent more likely to be a custodial parent, and 30 percent more likely to live independently with their partner and child eight years later.⁷⁰ While not formally a positive youth development program, Career Academies include many aspects of such programs, most notably a strong vocational theme and a small, caring community where youth feel known and valued.⁷¹ Beyond the size of the impacts, what is remarkable about these results is that family formation was not a goal of the intervention; the intervention did not provide any programming in this regard. Innovations like Career Academies could benefit the next generation by reducing instability and complexity. One possible mechanism underlying this result is that the intervention substantially improved the labor market participation and earnings of the young men in the experimental group. Thus, the Career Academies model has the potential to spur mobility from poverty both indirectly, through its impact on family formation, and directly, through improved employment and earnings.
- Additional examples of SPARKS programs that measure effects on family formation were included in a meta-analysis of high-quality after-school programs for adolescents, conducted by Isabel Sawhill and Andrea Kane.⁷² These out-of-school time learning programs are especially relevant to this paper because they engaged teens in both SPARKS activities, including recreation and tutoring—and reproductive health care. The meta-analysis included four programs—all rigorously evaluated using randomized controlled trials—that included family effects as outcome measures. All four showed significant impacts on teen pregnancy with reductions ranging from 15 to 50 percent.

Sawhill and Kane note that the most effective programs shared one characteristic, a strong service-learning component, a hint at the special relevance of activities that provided a sense of purpose.⁷³ In the years since this meta-analysis was conducted, further evaluations of these programs have yielded mixed results. Nonetheless, in a meta-analysis of over 100 teen pregnancy prevention programs, service learning/community service components, which offer teens opportunities to find meaning and identity through service, were frequently found effective.⁷⁴ Thus further experimentation and evaluation are needed.⁷⁵

SPARKS Can Help Young People Find Meaning and Identity and Overcome Barriers by Building on Race, Gender, or Immigrant Identities

SPARKS programs often aim to serve adolescents and young adults in under-resourced and low-income communities, where youth of color and those with immigrant backgrounds are overrepresented.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the role of race, ethnicity, and immigrant identities in youth development is under-researched, and there are concerns about the ability to appropriately measure how youth development programs build on such identities.⁷⁷ One program that explicitly attends to the role of identity is the **Preventing Long-Term Anger and Aggression in Youth (PLAAY) project**, which engages African American boys from urban neighborhoods in a program that recognizes how the young men are systematically “missed, dissed, and pissed.”⁷⁸ PLAAY program content was informed by the community’s cultural norms and traditions, and youth perspectives were explicitly sought and given special weight. PLAAY programming includes martial arts, basketball, and culturally relevant group therapy, which engages boys to discuss and debate topics including racism, police interactions and future goals and aspirations. A key goal is reinforcing cultural pride.⁷⁹ Though this program has not been evaluated, research suggests that exploring ethnic-racial identity can lead adolescents to have a clearer sense of their general identity, which can promote positive outcomes such as higher self-esteem, fewer mental health challenges, and better academic adjustment.⁸⁰

While the availability of out-of-school time programs has increased overall, tremendous unmet need still remains, especially among low-income families and families of color who have less access than their more affluent counterparts.⁸¹ Even programs that focus on disadvantaged youth still have difficulty reaching those most marginalized or in need, including homeless youth, those who are gang-involved, and those who are not in school. However, here are two exceptions.

- **The Door** in New York City serves 10,000 young people annually through its comprehensive, community-based youth development program that strives to meet the complex needs of NYC’s disconnected youth—defined as those neither employed or in school. Through its diverse program offerings, ranging from supportive housing to job training and placement to recreational activities,

The Door aims to provide wraparound services with integrated staff collaboration that create strong bonds of support to empower youth. The Door also operates a federally qualified health center that offers confidential sexual and reproductive health care, including the full range of contraceptive options, to all participants regardless of their ability to pay. This program has yet to be evaluated.

- The Lowell, Massachusetts-based **United Teen Equality Center** is a youth development agency established by young people in 1999 in response to gang violence. Despite the fact that the program has not been formally evaluated, UTEC is nationally recognized as a leader in its promise to “ignite and nurture the ambition of proven-risk youth to trade violence and poverty for social and economic success.” UTEC sees itself as a family and as a catalyst for positive change. It assumes that everyone acts with good intentions and encourages participants to relentlessly pursue positive change. UTEC participants experienced less recidivism, greater employment prospects two years after completing the program, and higher educational attainment compared with nonparticipant peers, though without a formal control group we cannot ascertain whether, or to what degree, this difference was due to the program.⁸²

Proposal: SPARKS and Access to Birth Control

If SPARKS empower young people to find their “why”—that is, their motivation for making long-term plans and thoughtful decisions—BBC is one tool that allows them to act on that motivation. Better birth control gives young people a chance to choose whether and when to start a family, and, by extension, whether and when to prioritize other goals and dreams. Together, these approaches can help ensure that young women and men are free to choose their own goals and the power to achieve them. Those who choose to delay parenting should have access to the full range of proven contraceptive options available. If and when they choose to become parents, they should have the resources and skills to be the best possible parents they can be.

Our intuition, backed by a small but encouraging body of research, suggests that offering SPARKS in combination with BBC has the potential to dramatically increase intentional family formation, increase family stability, supportive parenting, and build stronger father-child bonds. It also might foster other positive outcomes, such as helping youth to avoid criminal justice involvement, boost high school and college completion, increase labor force attachment, and earnings, and produce better job and career outcomes.⁸³ Therefore, we call for investments in SPARKS that deliberately promote intentional family formation by incorporating BBC, or providing information, referral, and connection to community health providers who can do so.

The extant research we review here, though nascent and often exploratory, nonetheless justifies investments in three interconnected strategies. The primary strategy is to further build the evidence base regarding SPARKS programs that incorporate BBC, either directly or through referral, and to facilitate the scale and spread of evidence-based SPARKS/BBC programs. To support this strategy, we call also for a communications campaign to create a narrative about young people as assets, not liabilities, and for building the capacity of current and future leaders in the positive youth development field to understand and act on the SPARKS/BBC model. Below, we describe each of these strategies in greater detail.

1. **Strengthen the research base** on the efficacy of SPARKS interventions, as well as on the enhanced efficacy of combining SPARKS and BBC—providing both the “why” and the “how.” This strategy should be coupled with investments to **facilitate the scale and spread of evidence-based youth development programs** that also boost academic achievement, reduce incarceration, boost labor market entry, improve career trajectories, and facilitate mobility from poverty for young people themselves and the generation that will follow.

2. **Change the popular narrative that casts adolescents as burdensome to an image of young people as assets ripe with potential.** We propose a communications campaign to strengthen public support for adolescent opportunities, recognizing the transition to adulthood as a critical time when key investments can alter later life. The communications campaign should emphasize “adolescents as assets” and highlight youth sharing their stories to answer “why” they chose whether and when to have a child.
3. **Build the capacity of current and future leaders within the youth development field, including young program participants themselves.** Expanding SPARKS programs and incorporating BBC requires building current leaders’ capacity to understand and implement evidence-based models. Engaging young participants themselves in leadership and peer counseling roles builds their leadership capacity while also promoting positive outcomes for other young people served by the program.

Current evidence suggests that this three-part strategy will do the following:

1. **Provide adolescents with access to sources of meaning, identity, and a sense of purpose** at a critical time in their lives through programs and activities that help them develop the necessary motivation and skills to align their actions with their goals;
2. **Encourage young people to be intentional** about whether and when to have a child by ensuring they have knowledge about and access to the full range of proven birth control options when not seeking to become pregnant, and resources to be healthy and successful parents when they are.
3. **Transform the popular narrative** surrounding underserved youth in ways that spur strategic investments in young people, with the aim of shaping their early lives to align with their own goals.

The success of the strategy will require strong connections among national, state, and local investors and organizations working on efforts related to SPARKS and access to BBC, whether implemented separately or together, to promote intentional family formation. Thus, the investment ideas we propose call for public sector, private foundation, and social impact investors to work together and co-invest in evidence-based demonstrations (described in more detail below). The ideas detailed in this paper were developed by experts in SPARKS and birth control, including those with lived experiences in poverty, who gathered for a design lab⁸⁴ focused on promoting mobility from poverty through youth development and intentional family formation.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen the Research Base on SPARKS Programs and Facilitate the Spread and Scale of Evidence-Based Programs

Multiple evidence-based youth development programs and unplanned pregnancy interventions exist, but research on other programs has yielded mixed results. Additional evaluations of promising programs could identify a broader set of approaches that would reach a diverse audience, allowing youth-serving organizations to select programs that best meet the unique contextual and cultural needs of their youth population. Despite the availability of evidence-based programs in some parts of the country, there are two key challenges: (1) these programs have not been adequately spread and scaled and, consequently, reach a limited number of youth; and (2) in the vast majority of cases, evidence-based youth development programs are not delivered together with programs providing birth control information and access. As a result, youth are not receiving both programs or, if they are, connections are not being made between gaining sufficient motivation to make long term and thoughtful plans, and sufficient tools for realizing them.

To address these challenges, we suggest a concerted initiative to enhance the research base and to spread and scale evidence-based youth development and access to the full range of effective contraceptive methods as a package that combines these two strategies into a single intervention. We suggest that public and private investors offer grants to youth-serving agencies and organizations that commit to delivering both a youth development program *and* access to the full range of effective contraceptive methods to the same youth population while rigorously measuring the impact. These could be public or private sector investments at the national, state, or regional level and may be of interest to funders who want to reach youth in an easily quantifiable way. Our proposal to combine SPARKS and access to contraception complements a recent proposal by sociologists Lawrence L. Wu and Nicholas D. E. Mark for a federal policy to “provide all women with information about, and free access to, a range of contraceptive services, including long-acting reversible contraceptives.”⁸⁵ They, too, emphasize the need for rigorous evaluations to test whether their proposed policy would reduce poverty and increase well-being.

Private and public sector actors who expand and evaluate combined SPARKS and birth control information/access programs might also explore the impact of incorporating coach-navigator models that help empower people to set goals and work toward them.⁸⁶ They might also explore whether connecting with community colleges’ efforts to provide supported pathways to education and work can further improve youth outcomes and increase economic mobility.⁸⁷

Evidence and Evaluation

As discussed earlier, a small and growing number of high-quality programs for adolescents blend SPARKS and birth control access within a single program, including the Promotor Pathway[®] program, The Door in New York City,⁸⁸ and others. The Latin American Youth Center's (LAYC) Promotor Pathway[®] program was highlighted at the design lab as a bright spot—an evidence-based model with the potential to connect SPARKS and access to birth control. The model is now being replicated in several states, with lessons emerging about how to adapt it to other settings.⁸⁹

The federal Personal Responsibility Education Program (PREP), administered by the US Department of Health and Human Services, offers a promising example of connecting intentional family formation and youth development on a large scale. Through 113 grants to states, communities, and tribes, PREP supports evidence-based approaches to reduce teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections among some of the most vulnerable youth and communities while also incorporating adulthood preparation subjects such as educational and career success, financial management, and healthy relationships. Eighty-three percent of youth reported feeling more prepared for adulthood after participating in the program than they had beforehand.⁹⁰ The Department of Health and Human Services has provided training, technical assistance, and dissemination of best practices for grantees and is currently assessing whether and how adding adulthood preparation subjects to the core focus on sexual health enhances or expands outcomes for youth.⁹¹

Research⁹² indicates that programs are best scaled up as part of a well-developed process that begins with the identification of evidence-based programs as well as an understanding of how such programs can be tailored to meet the needs of varied populations and communities while maintaining effectiveness.⁹³ These initial steps have now been greatly informed as the result of unprecedented investment in the evidence base for social policy and programs, particularly for adolescents.⁹⁴ One model for such investment is that used by the Office of Adolescent Health to identify evidence-based teenage pregnancy prevention programs.⁹⁵ These collective efforts have identified programs shown through rigorous evaluation to be effective in pregnancy prevention and youth development.⁹⁶ These studies have also yielded results that will help inform how programs are tailored and adapted, including extensive replication studies showing the settings for which programs did and did not have impacts.⁹⁷ In addition, forthcoming secondary data analyses and meta-analysis related to these programs are currently exploring mediators and moderators of program effectiveness.⁹⁸

Another key step for successful spread and scale is building the capacity of providers, consistent with the training activities we propose here. The capacity of providers to implement programs with fidelity has long been identified as critical to program success,⁹⁹ and the recent investment in evaluation of adolescent

programs mentioned above has yielded a valuable array of lessons on how to best support capacity-building and implementation.¹⁰⁰

The final step for successful spread and scale is to monitor and assess program activities and outcomes.¹⁰¹ In this regard, we suggest modeling the approach set forth by the Office of Adolescent Health, whose evaluation efforts focused not only on program effectiveness but also program implementation and fidelity as well as training and technical assistance efforts.¹⁰² To measure impact, we envision a randomized controlled trial that tests each of four scenarios: youth receive a combination of youth development and intentional family formation services; youth receive only one service in isolation; and youth receive an alternative intervention considered the normal standard of care for their area. This design will enable evaluators to understand the impact of each intervention by itself as well as the added benefit of conducting both interventions together (box 2).¹⁰³

BOX 2

A Combined National Framework (Blueprint) for Evaluating an Integrated Approach to SPARKS and Access to Birth Control to Promote Intentional Family Formation

One idea for investment developed at the design lab was to create a demonstration framework (a “blueprint”) for assessing the efficacy of SPARKS on intentional family formation and the potential combined effects of interventions that blend SPARKS and access to the full range of effective contraceptive methods. The framework would create a standard set of measures of family formation outcomes that could be deployed in evaluations of existing SPARKS programs and in new demonstrations that blend SPARKS with access to birth control.

Recommendation 2: Develop and Implement a Communications Campaign Focused on “Why” and “Adolescents as Assets”

Members of the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty believe it is vital to change the narrative about poverty, the false, negative assumptions many Americans make about people in poverty that become embedded in policies and programs. Likewise, we need to change the narrative around youth opportunity. To create an environment in which SPARKS can grow and thrive, we must change the narrative around youth opportunity in the United States—for young people themselves as well as among those who support and influence young people. Broad consensus emerged among design lab participants that a national

communications campaign is essential to transforming the way in which we, as a society, view young people. Such a campaign can also help young people understand that they have opportunities—regardless of their zip code. Key themes that surfaced during the design lab include the importance of adults viewing young people as assets (“resources to be developed rather than ... problems to be managed”¹⁰⁴), catalyzing young people to find their passions and interests, encouraging young people to realize that delaying childbearing facilitates a successful transition to adulthood, and providing adolescents with access to the full range of effective birth control to facilitate the delay. One concrete communications idea is for young people to use “why” statements to share their stories about why they chose to delay childbearing—and what alternative source of meaning and identity they embraced. While these themes should drive the vision of the ultimate communications campaign, the final messaging and structure should be determined by rigorous audience research conducted by a reputable firm with experience in youth-focused campaigns. We suggest the following guiding tenets for this campaign:

- Simultaneously reach young people and those who support and influence young people, such as parents and youth service providers.
- Engage youth (from ages 10 through 24) at every stage of development and implementation of the campaign.
- Include a multichannel media platform as well as activation opportunities for local markets and in local organizations.
- Include both universal and culturally and contextually specific messaging and activation opportunities.
- Reinforce the overall principles driving the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty’s definition of mobility: economic success, power and autonomy, and being valued in community.

We suggest that the campaign be a private investment to reduce limitations on its messaging, design, and voice elements. To be effective, it is essential that the audience research findings drive the tenor and tone of campaign and activation strategies. This will require a level of creative license that can sometimes be limited in the public sector. Box 3 provides an example of an especially effective marketing campaign targeting young people, which could serve as a model for our proposed campaign.

BOX 3

The VERB Campaign

The VERB campaign was a national, multicultural social marketing campaign coordinated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to encourage children ages 9 to 13 to be physically active every day. The VERB campaign used a well-funded, sophisticated, multilevel social marketing approach to deliver positive messages through a combination of paid advertising, marketing strategies, and national and local partnerships. In addition to reaching a distinct target audience (tweens), it reached other key audiences, including parents and adult influencers (teachers, youth leaders, physical education and health professionals, pediatricians, and other health care providers). VERB also offered materials for different audiences, from tweens themselves to parents, adult influencers, and community partners.^a The campaign positively influenced children's physical activity outcomes, and these effects persisted as children grew into their adolescent years.

^a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Youth Media Campaign," US Department of Health and Human Services, March 18, 2010, <https://www.cdc.gov/youthcampaign/>.

Evidence and Evaluation

Ample evidence shows that well-designed communication campaigns can change social norms and individual behavior on health issues.¹⁰⁵ For example, the American Legacy Foundation's truth® campaign has been credited with changing attitudes about tobacco and with contributing to approximately 22 percent of the decline in youth smoking over three years.¹⁰⁶ A powerful approach to change social norms is to embed messages in popular television shows and other media consumed by the target audience.

Experience with other large-scale, multilevel campaigns suggests measures for this campaign should include formative research to ensure the message content and delivery resonate with the target audience. In addition, the campaign should research its impact on attitude shifts among youth and adults, as well as its impact on outcomes outlined in the framework for evaluating combined SPARKS and BBC approaches. For example, the VERB campaign integrated formative, process, and outcome evaluations from the outset to provide ongoing feedback.¹⁰⁷

Recommendation 3: Build the Capacity of Current and Future Leaders

If the SPARKS model is to be effective, current and future professionals from various disciplines must understand, embrace, and act upon it, incorporating information about and access to the full range of effective methods of birth control. To accelerate that process, we suggest investments to support cross-training for youth leaders and educators as well as investments that build the capacity and leadership skills of future and mid-career professionals (see box 4 for one example). Participants in the design lab recognized that one way to improve connection between SPARKS and access to birth control is to increase the capacity of SPARKS programs and youth-serving organization staff to address birth control as a part of their leadership roles. In addition to cross-training staff, they identified an opportunity for well-trained lay educators and counselors who could address intentional family formation in culturally competent and resonant ways.

We suggest that training and supporting youth health educators is one investment strategy that would fulfill the concurrent goals of (1) expanding the capacity of SPARKS programs to address birth control as a part of future planning, providing information on effective contraception and where to access it; and (2) embedding well-trained young people who can discuss these issues in relevant ways with other youth and serve as navigators,¹⁰⁸ directing program participants to relevant health and social services; and (3) providing meaningful career training and experience for the youth educators. Efforts to train young people as health educators could emulate best practices from existing models, such as Career Academies or youth corps programs like AmeriCorps.

In addition to building leadership programs for young people to lead these efforts, SPARKS programs will need to build capacity in the current youth-serving workforce and transform training for future professionals. Leadership training and fellowship programs could be patterned after well-established initiatives such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Health Policy Fellows¹⁰⁹ and should be designed to equip emerging and current professionals to

- transition from narrowly focused roles to a broader youth advocate role;
- hone their skills in working across sectors and understanding complex local health challenges;
- develop leadership skills to support more integrated programming; and
- conduct research that provides additional evidence on a more interconnected approach to SPARKS and access to the full range of effective birth control methods.

BOX 4

Families Talking Together

Families Talking Together,¹¹⁰ an evidence-based program developed by the Center for Latino Adolescent Family Health, equips Latino and African American parents to talk with their adolescent children about sex and childbearing to prevent or reduce risky sexual behavior. The Center for Latino Adolescent Family Health collaborated with Power to Decide (formerly the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy) to train *promotores* (community health workers) to teach parents in communities in California with large Latino populations and test whether this delivery approach was feasible. The project demonstrated that it was feasible, and pre- and postintervention survey results indicate significant changes in parents' communication intentions, comfort regarding communication, preparedness to communicate, and ease of communication. These two partners are now doing a federally funded randomized controlled trial in Texas to further test this approach.¹¹¹

Public and private investors at the local, state, and national levels are well positioned to support programs modeled on Families Talking Together. This could be a national or regional funding opportunity or a combination of both. For example, a national funder could support a national leadership program and provide matching funds to regional funders or organizations interested in replicating the model.

Evidence and Evaluation

Studies have long shown that young people can be effective as peer educators, in part because of their ability to be relatable and trusted sources of information.¹¹² The research also suggests that programs such as Career Academies and AmeriCorps can benefit the youth participants themselves, both by developing short-term skills and by encouraging long-term social and economic well-being. This is due, in part, to the specific training they receive¹¹³ and to the influence it may have on their long-term career prospects. For example, a recent evaluation found that participants in the AmeriCorps program experienced some positive impacts on civic engagement, connection to community, and employment outcomes as a result of the program, in addition to other benefits.¹¹⁴

One Key Question¹¹⁵ offers a promising tool that could be scaled and refined to cross-train youth-serving professionals to discuss intentional family formation in a variety of programs and settings. This simple tool originated in Oregon and is now employed in at least 20 states. Health care providers ask women of childbearing age, "Would you like to become pregnant in the next year?" Depending on their answer, the

provider guides women not actively seeking pregnancy toward the most appropriate forms of birth control and those hoping to become pregnant toward preconception and prenatal care.¹¹⁶

There is a body of evidence on the potential of community health workers or *promotores* to improve health outcomes, reduce health care costs, and create jobs, as well as recognition that more efforts are needed to support and scale this workforce approach.¹¹⁷ The National Peer Support Collaborative Learning Network, a joint initiative by Peers for Progress and the National Council of La Raza (now UnidosUS), offers evidence of the benefits of peer support to address health issues and is a valuable source of evaluation methods, best practices, and models of organizing peer support.¹¹⁸

As with all efforts proposed here, evaluation efforts are essential, and evaluation of investments in youth health educators or similar activities should include the process by which grantees are identified and supported as well as the ultimate outcomes associated with activities undertaken by the grantees. Such efforts could follow a framework similar to that laid out for the AmeriCorps program.¹¹⁹ Similarly, assessing the effectiveness of fellowship programs entails considering the impact on both individual fellows and the field they are meant to influence.

Private sector organizations, philanthropy, and government all have critical roles to play in promoting synergistic approaches to SPARKS and access to birth control, giving young people the tools to act with intention and motivation. Each can support the expansion of evidence-based SPARKS programs that include access to birth control and the evaluation of emerging models and programs. Private organizations and philanthropy can develop and support communications campaigns focused on “why” to delay parenthood and on building a new narrative of young people as assets. All entities can work to build the capacity of current and future leaders.

The combined efforts of philanthropy, government, and private sector organizations to offer young people both motivation and tools to achieve their goals can be expected to pay off both for young people themselves and society as a whole, as young people more successfully transition to adulthood.

Impact

Investments in expanded SPARKS programs that provide youth age-appropriate information on and access to the full range of effective birth control methods, coupled with enhanced staff training and public media campaigns, can be expected to pay off through more young people developing a strong sense of meaning and identity and avoiding early childbearing. Youth would likely see **improved economic success** (through reduced unintended pregnancies, increased high school and college graduation rates, increased employment, and higher wages), **increased power and autonomy** (through enhanced personal identity and ability to act on intentions, decreased criminal involvement and incarceration, greater civic engagement, and stronger leadership skills), and **enhanced value in the community** (through the bonds developed among the SPARKS program community and through mentor and peer relationships, as well as through gaining multiple avenues for community value beyond the role as a parent). Communities may also increasingly recognize youth as assets.

Notes

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- ² Lawrence B. Finer and Mia R. Zolna, “Unintended Pregnancy in the United States: Incidence and Disparities, 2006,” *Contraception* 84, no. 5 (2011): 478–85, https://sph.umd.edu/sites/default/files/files/j_contraception_2011_07_13.pdf.
- ³ Lawrence B. Finer and Mia R. Zolna, “Declines in Unintended Pregnancy in the United States, 2008–2011,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 374, no. 9 (2016): 843–52.
- ⁴ Lawrence B. Finer and Mia R. Zolna, “Shifts in Intended and Unintended Pregnancies in the United States, 2001–2008,” *American Journal of Public Health* 104, no. S1 (2014): S44–S48.
- ⁵ “National Data,” Power to Decide, accessed June 14, 2017, <https://powertodecide.org/what-we-do/information/national-state-data/national>.
- ⁶ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, “Teen Pregnancy in the United States” (Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, 2016), <https://powertodecide.org/what-we-do/information/resource-library/fast-facts-teen-pregnancy-united-states>.
- ⁷ Kathryn Edin and Maria J. Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood before Marriage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Sarah R. Hayford and Karen Benjamin Guzzo, “Racial and Ethnic Variation in Unmarried Young Adults’ Motivation to Avoid Pregnancy,” *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 45, no. 1 (2013): 41–51; Sharon Sessler and Amanda J. Miller, “‘We’re Very Careful ...’: The Fertility Desires and Contraceptive Behaviors of Cohabiting Couples,” *Family Relations* 63, no. 4 (2014): 538–53; Kathryn Edin, Paula England, Emily Fitzgibbons Shaefer, and Joanna Reed, “Forming Fragile Families: Was the Baby Planned, Unplanned, or In Between?” in *Unmarried Couples with Children*, edited by Kathryn Edin and Paula England, 25–54 (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009).
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- ⁹ Douglas Kirby and Gina Lepore, “Sexual Risk and Protective Factors” (Scotts Valley, CA: ETR Associates, 2007); and “Positive Youth Development Promoting Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health: A Review of Observational and Intervention Research,” *Journal of Adolescent Health* 46, no. 3 (2010): S1–S96.
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- ¹¹ Stefanie DeLuca, Susan Clampet-Lundquist, and Kathryn Edin, *Coming of Age in the Other America* (New York: Russell Sage, 2016), chap. 7.
- ¹² Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016); Melody L. Boyd, Jason Martin, and Kathryn Edin, “Pathways to Participation: Class Disparities in Youth Civic Engagement,” *American Sociological Association* 15, no. 4 (2016): 400–22.
- ¹³ Nisha G. Patel created the acronym SPARKS.
- ¹⁴ Afterschool Alliance, *America after 3PM: Afterschool Programs in Demand* (Washington, DC: Afterschool Alliance, 2014).
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- ¹⁸ DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin, *Coming of Age*.
- ¹⁹ Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 65.
- ²⁰ DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin, *Coming of Age*.
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