

# SPARKS for Young People’s Mobility out of Poverty

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To achieve mobility from poverty, young people must have resources to develop their identities and avoid unintended pregnancy. We propose expanding programs that help young people find their “why” —their personal reasons for making thoughtful decisions during adolescence. We call these programs SPARKS, Supported Pathways in Adolescence through Recreation, Knowledge, and Schools. We recommend these programs include access to birth control and family planning information—tools that allow young people to act on their “why”s.

## The Problem

Adolescence 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 challenges, especially for young people living in poverty.

**Children of disadvantaged parents are far more likely to experience family instability and complexity early in life.** Family complexity refers to the introduction of new adults and half-siblings as parents form new relationships. Family instability has been associated with behavior challenges in young school-age children, poor academic outcomes in adolescence, and higher levels of substance use and early sexual initiation.

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**In the US, 82 percent of conceptions to women age 15 to 19 are unplanned**

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Ambivalence about pregnancy can lead to unplanned pregnancy. Among disadvantaged young people,

children are a key source of meaning and identity.

While many young people are ambivalent about having children, in the absence of other opportunities to define themselves and their future, their ambivalence can lead to unintended pregnancy.

**Early, unintended pregnancies have lasting effects.**

Children born to mothers who say they were not ready for parenthood often experience lower cognitive scores, lower high school and college graduation rates, lower lifetime incomes, and higher teen pregnancy rates.

## The Solution

Young people who have a strong sense of meaning and identity are more likely to avoid unintended early childbearing. Combining SPARKS programs with ready access to contraception has the potential to reduce unplanned pregnancies. We propose the following:

1. **Strengthen the research base** on the efficacy of SPARKS interventions and the potential enhanced efficacy of combining SPARKS and highly effective birth control methods (including long-acting reversible contraceptives) with a goal of scaling

effective program models.

2. **Change the popular narrative** that casts adolescents as burdens to one that casts them as assets. A communications campaign could strengthen public support for adolescent opportunities, recognizing the transition to adulthood as a critical time when key investments can alter the later life course.
3. **Build the capacity of current and future leaders** within the youth development field, including program participants. Expanding SPARKS programs and incorporating better birth control requires building current leaders' capacity to understand and implement evidence-based models. Engaging young participants as leaders and peer counselors builds their leadership capacity while promoting positive outcomes for other young people served by the program.

#### WHAT PHILANTHROPY CAN DO

Philanthropy can support the development of a national campaign that positions youth as assets and encourages young people to be intentional about family formation.

Philanthropy can also increase the capacity of SPARKS programs and youth-serving organization staff to address intentional family formation and fund research into how youth organizations can effectively combine SPARKS and better birth control.

#### WHAT GOVERNMENT CAN DO

Government support is also needed to increase the leadership-development capacity of SPARKS programs and fund research into the combined use of SPARKS and better birth control.

#### WHAT DOES "MOBILITY" FROM POVERTY MEAN?

The US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty's definition of mobility has three core principles: economic success, power and autonomy, and being valued in community. These principles drive five mutually reinforcing strategies:

- Change the narrative
- Create access to good jobs
- Ensure zip code is not destiny
- Provide support that empowers
- Transform data use

SPARKS are part of the strategy to provide support that empowers.

#### HOW SPARKS CAN IMPROVE MOBILITY

- **Economic success:** SPARKS may improve labor force participation and lead to higher earnings. Every \$1 spent on contraceptive services saves almost \$6 in public medical expenditures.
- **Power and autonomy:** SPARKS participants may experience fewer unintended pregnancies and lower criminal justice involvement rates.
- **Being valued in community:** Communities may see youth as resources, and youth may envision new roles for themselves.

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This brief summarizes the paper *SPARKS for Young People's Mobility out of Poverty*. The paper lists sources for the research summarized here.