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Truth-Telling on Teen Pregnancy

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg (I) is at it again — this time on an issue even more explosive than infringing the right to a Big Gulp. Bloomberg's latest target is teen pregnancy, with a sharp-edged advertising campaign that features pictures of crying babies and warns prospective teenage parents of the difficult path ahead.

You might think that — unlike the soda ban — this message, displayed in subways and at bus stops, would be unobjectionable. After all, no one argues that having a baby as a teenager is a good idea.

"I'm twice as likely not to graduate high school because you had me as a teen," says one poster, featuring a picture of a crying baby.

"If you finish high school, get a job, and get married before having children, you have a 98 percent chance of not being in poverty," says another.

"Honestly Mom ... chances are he won't stay with you. What happens to me?" asks a third. Good question. The answer is: You are more likely to be born prematurely and at low birth weight, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. More likely to be abused or neglected; less likely to complete high school.

If you are a boy, you are twice as likely to end up in prison as are the sons of mothers ages 20 and 21. If you are a girl, you are three times as likely to become a teen mother yourself compared with daughters born to mothers ages 20 and 21.

Statistics for teenage mothers themselves are similarly daunting. Only half obtain a high school diploma by age 22, compared with 89 percent of women who did not give birth as teenagers. Less than 2 percent of mothers who give birth before age 18 obtain college degrees by age 30. Half live below the poverty line — and as their children grow older, the family's chances of living in poverty increase.

But pointing out these facts apparently transgresses the boundaries of political correctness. "This campaign seems laser-focused on shaming already struggling teen parents or, ludicrously, convincing teens not to get pregnant because really bad things will happen," said state Sen. Liz Krueger (D). Teenage mothers across the city, lamented city councilwoman Annabel Palma (D), herself once a teen mother, will feel "shamed and stigmatized."

Most disappointing was the griping from Planned Parenthood of New York City, where vice president Haydee Morales complained that the ad campaign "creates stigma, hostility and negative public opinions about teen pregnancy and parenthood."

Excuse me, but we're not supposed to have a negative opinion about teen pregnancy and parenthood? Isn't that the planned part of Planned Parenthood?

I'm not arguing for 21st-century Hester Prynnes equipped with iPhones and Snugglis. Teenagers who become pregnant and choose to have the baby need support, not finger-pointing.

But to say that we shouldn't shame pregnant teenagers is different from saying that it's a shame anytime a teenager gets pregnant. It is, and the squeamishness about saying so does teenagers no favor.

In fact, we suffer from undue squeamishness about criticizing out-of-wedlock births in general. As detailed in a new report, "Knot Yet: The Benefits and Costs of Delayed Marriage in America," the country "is at a tipping point ... into a new demographic reality where the majority of first births in the United States precede marriage."

There are many devoted single parents but, overall, this is an unhealthy development. On average, the report noted, children of unmarried mothers "suffer more school failure, behavioral problems, drug use, and a greater likelihood of becoming single parents themselves."

For me, then, the question about the New York program is whether it will work. The city has an aggressive anti-pregnancy campaign that includes making the Plan B emergency contraceptive available in some schools. Teen pregnancies have dropped by 27 percent over the past decade but remain higher than the national rate.

Meanwhile, in Milwaukee, which once had the second-highest teen pregnancy rate in the country, teen pregnancies have dropped five years in a row — and faster than the national average — since the city instituted a program that used similar "shock advertising."

"Cultural messages do matter, whether it's smoking or drunk driving or obesity," Robert Doar, head of New York City's Human Resources Administration, told me. "Teen pregnancy is a problematic thing, for the teenager and the child. ... I don't think that's stigmatizing. I think that's the truth."

What better role for the nanny state than to help young girls with scant prospect of ever being able to hire one.

