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## To Curb Welfare Use, Make It Uncomfortable (Letter to the Editor)

By Douglas J. Besharov

In her April 13 letter, Prof. Laurie Schwab Zabin criticizes my assertion that, for many disadvantaged teenagers, having a baby out of wedlock is not “inconvenient” and that, to address this reality, welfare programs should require all recipients to “do something constructive every day.” To bolster her argument, Prof. Zabin claims I misquoted her data when I wrote that only 31% of the unwed teen mothers in her survey said that they “believed a baby would present a problem.” According to her, the correct number is 75%.

I based my statement on the following passage Prof. Zabin wrote (with two colleagues) in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*: “In a sample of inner-city Black teens presenting for pregnancy tests, we reported that more than 31% of those who elected to carry their pregnancies to term told us, before their pregnancies were diagnosed, that they believed a baby would present a problem and an abortion would not.”

From a telephone conversation with Prof. Zabin, I gather that the 75% figure (which, by the way, is an unpublished statistic) refers to all teens seeking a pregnancy test, presumably including those who tested negative or who had an abortion, whereas the 31% figure I cited relates only to those who decided to become unwed mothers.

Why the difference? Many more of the teens who had an abortion, fully 78%, said that having a baby “would present a problem.” And that, of course, is my point: the more inconvenient unwed parenthood seems to a teenager, the less likely it is that she will become a mother.

Feelings about abortion also affect decision making, however. Another 26% of the teens who went to term apparently said that both having an abortion and having a baby would be a problem. But the larger point remains: Many inner-city teens do not view unwed parenthood and time on welfare as a serious disruption to their lives.

(Many other studies have made the same point. For example, in the late 1970s, Ellen Freeman and her colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania surveyed black, never-pregnant females aged 17 or younger. Only 40% thought that a pregnancy in the next year would “make their situation worse”; 38% said they didn’t know.)

Prof. Zabin may not like the implications of her findings, but she should not deny the data in order to attack my conclusion: Discouraging unwed parenthood requires increasing both the life prospects of disadvantaged teens and the inconvenience of being on welfare.