AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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UPDATED: MARCH 2020

Pregnant and Postpartum Adolescent Girls and Women with Substance-Related Disorders

Prenatal care significantly improves birth outcomes for all pregnant adolescent girls, women, and their babies. Within our nationwide opioid epidemic, pregnant and postpartum women and girls are a group that is at particularly high risk for poor outcomes. The National Institute on Drug Abuse Report on Women and Substance Use (NIDA, 2018) notes that pregnant women who try to stop using drugs on their own increase the risk of harm to their fetus.

Key issues:

Treatment outcomes: Substance abuse treatment programming for women that includes childcare, prenatal care, parenting classes and job training are associated with women's decreased use of substances and improved birth outcomes.

- Outcomes for infants are better when women obtain substance use treatment during pregnancy, including medical treatments (NIDA, 2018).
- Opioid prescriptions for pain in pregnant women doubled between 1995 and 2009 (NIDA, 2018). Methadone or buprenorphine treatment during pregnancy is the recommended standard of care for pregnant women with opioid use disorder and improves neonatal outcomes for opioid abuse. Untreated opioid disorder in pregnant women places the infant at high risk of abstinence syndrome, stunted growth, preterm labor, and fetal death.

Criminalization: Research suggests that criminalizing substance use by pregnant women and girls deters pregnant women and girls from seeking treatment, and is associated with higher risks to fetuses, increased rates of neonatal abstinence syndrome (Faherty et al., 2019).

- Eighteen states consider substance use during pregnancy to be child abuse and require health care professionals to report suspected prenatal substance abuse as child abuse. Four states require testing for prenatal drug exposure if they suspect abuse. States also may charge child endangerment or neglect, but in a recent review of 24 such cases, 86% were dismissed or overturned (Angelotta & Appelbaum, 2017).

Recommendations and Policy Implications:

- Punitive approaches result in women being significantly less likely to seek substance use treatment and prenatal care due to fear of prosecution and fear of the removal of children from their custody (Faherty et al., 2019). This places both the mother and her children at greater risk of harm.
- Federal laws require that pregnant women be given priority admission into public substance use disorder treatment program and make programs aware of such legislation (NIDA, 2018).
- Legislatures should decriminalize substance use during pregnancy and support more funding and programs that offer specialized substance use treatment to pregnant women and girls.

See also, *Resolution on Pregnant and Postpartum Adolescent Girls and Women with Substance-Related Disorders* at apa.org/about/policy/pregnant-postpartum

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