

## **Tattletale: Teenage Pregnancy and the Parental Notification Controversy During the Reagan Administration**

In 1982, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) proposed a requirement that parents be notified whenever a minor child (under the age of 18) received contraception at a federal clinic. This regulation, dubbed the "squeal rule" by the popular press, was the Reagan administration's response to the epidemic of teenage pregnancy stoking panic nationwide. The furor over the "squeal rule" was the first national debate over the issue of parental notification, and it revealed a deep divide between the left and right on the question of teenage pregnancy prevention. Over the course of eight months, DHHS received over 120,000 letters from citizens who were either wildly enthusiastic or diametrically opposed to the regulation. When it came to the issue of parental notification and birth control, there was very little middle ground.

My project presents a historical case study of the DHHS parental notification controversy, seeking to understand how teenage pregnancy prevention became one of the most polarizing social issues in contemporary American politics. In theory, teenage pregnancy is the perfect bipartisan issue. No lawmaker on either side of the aisle believes that high teenage pregnancy and abortion rates are a good thing. But beginning in the late 1970s, liberals and conservatives began to diverge sharply on their preferred approach to teenage pregnancy prevention. During the 1970s, liberal physicians, activists, and lawmakers fought to have the constitutional right to privacy extended to sexually active minors, thus establishing their right to access contraceptive care without parental consent. Within this framework, the reproductive rights of sexually active teenagers and adults were considered to be equal under the law. This legal framework, however, clashed with conservative models of the traditional family, in which parental authority over moral and medical matters trumped the desire of the minor child (including teenagers) to make their own medical decisions. Moreover, social conservatives understood liberal approaches to teenage pregnancy prevention – including comprehensive sex education and access to contraception – as *causes*, not solutions, to the problem of teenage pregnancy.

By examining newspapers, letters to the DHHS, and archival documents from the Reagan Administration, my research suggests why both citizens and lawmakers disagreed so vehemently over the parental notification policy. A central finding is that despite popular accusations of conservative irrationality, social scientific expertise was actually deployed strategically by those on both sides of the debate. In fact, using data from Planned Parenthood or the Alan Guttmacher Institute became a popular strategy of conservative activists looking to undermine the credibility of their opponents. The case study also suggests that the conflict over parental notification was rooted in a much deeper cultural division over issues of family, gender, and sexuality, a divide that is not easily overcome using social scientific expertise alone. My project suggests that lawmakers should attempt to understand and respect the divergent worldviews animating partisan approaches to teen pregnancy prevention. And while legislative attempts to block minor's access to contraception and abortion are ongoing (and need to be addressed), the project also points to eliminating economic barriers to contraceptive access as a productive approach to further lowering rates of teenage pregnancy in the United States.