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Obama's Fight for Rigor and Results in Social Policy

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Show Me the Evidence: Why Can't We Solve Social Problems?

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Overview of the Territory

- Social programs are mostly ineffective
- Peter Orszag: We know the impacts of less than 1% of all federal spending
- Jim Manzi (Uncontrolled, 2012): 80-90 percent of social, medical, and business programs do not work
- Jon Baron & Isabel Sawhill (2010): 10 vaunted federal social programs evaluated by gold-standard designs; 9 of the 10 evaluations found weak or no positive impacts (e.g., Upward Bound, 21st Century Learning Centers, Head Start failed or produced modest impacts; Early Head Start succeeded, but gains short-lived)

Along Comes Obama: Selling the Approach

- Using and developing expertise within the administration
- Using political appointees (especially Robert Gordon)
- Use of Office of Management and Budget
- Meeting individually with agency leaders (especially HHS, Labor, Education) to gain support within the administration
- Relentless action on the floor of congress and with members and staff in congress
- Most legislation enacted in 2009 and 2010 during big spending days of the Great Recession (huge bills “hide” the evidence-based provisions)

Obama Programs (about \$.5 billion over 5 years)

- Teen Pregnancy Prevention
- Home Visiting
- Investing in Innovation
- Social Innovation Fund
- Workforce Innovation Fund
- Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training Initiative

Mechanisms of Obama Evidence-Based Approach

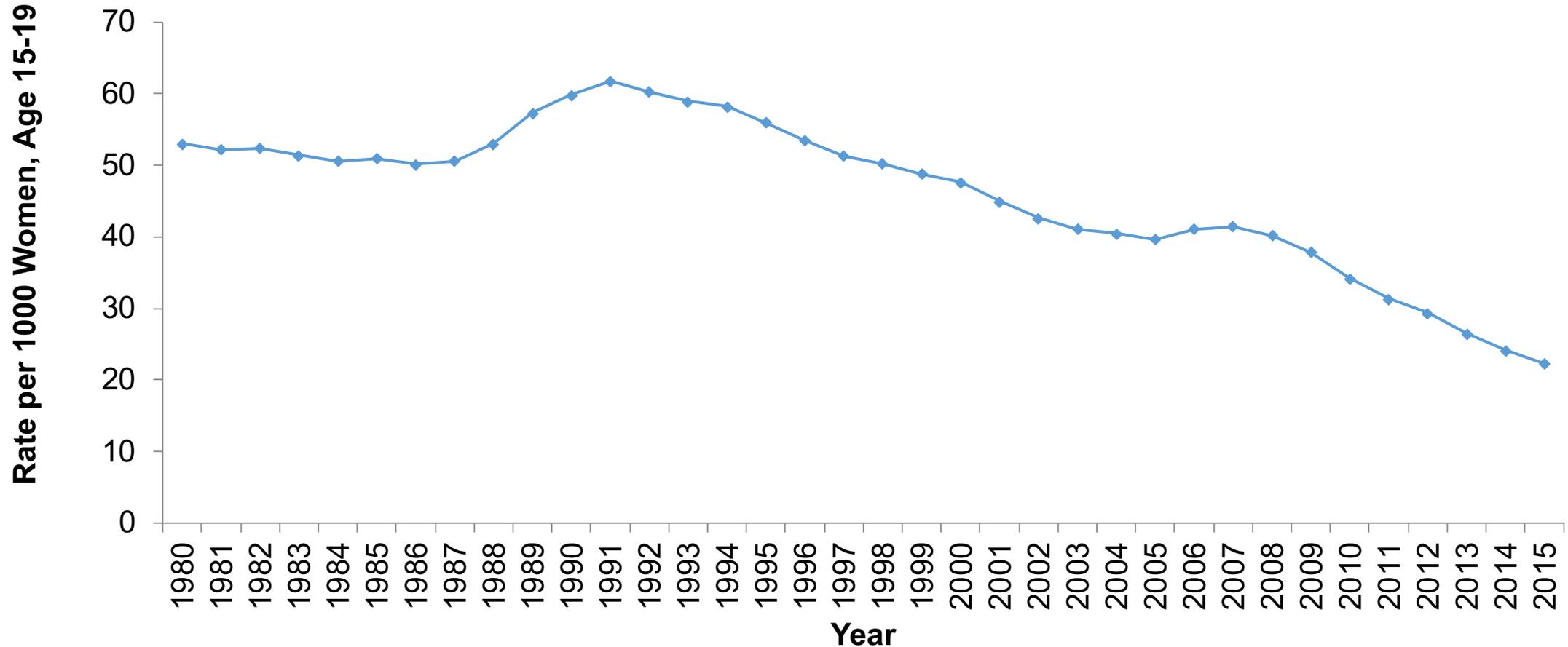
- Method of identifying evidence-based programs:
 - Administration identify the programs
 - Let grant applicants review literature and identify the programs
- Major issue; identifying weak programs as evidence-based
- Continuous evaluation
- Specified outcomes
- Must fail to succeed; giving second chances

Teen Pregnancy Prevention as Example

Historical Overview of the Teen Pregnancy Program

- Long standing dispute between liberals and conservatives about birth control vs. abstinence education (sexual risk avoidance)
- Development of programs and curriculums to reduce nonmarital births; more than birth control and abstinence; includes sex education, community-based constructive activities
- 1996 welfare reform bill included funds for states to spend on abstinence education
- 2009 Legislation establishing evidence-based teen pregnancy prevention program after colorful battle in the Senate (especially on the Finance Committee); about 100 programs established around the nation
- So both sides have own programs at state and local levels with federal \$
- Teen Pregnancy Prevention going more or less as scheduled until the arrival of President Trump

Teen Birth Rate Declines



Source: National Vital Statistics Reports, Vol. 66, No. 1, January 5, 2017. Available at https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr66/nvsr66_01.pdf.

Table 4. Birth rates, by age of mother: United States, 1970-2013, and by age and race of mother: United States, 1980-2015.

Obama Tiered Evidence Approach to Reducing Teen Pregnancy

- HHS group working with Mathematica Policy Research to Identify programs that have had at least one statistically significant impact in reducing sexual behavior or pregnancy
- Conduct federal grant competition that awards funds based on amount of evidence supporting the program; 32 program models tested in first round of grants
- Role of randomized controlled trials
- Obama administration awards 75 Tier 1 and 19 Tier 2 TPP grants in 2010
- Office of Adolescent Health oversees implementation of programs.
- In July 2016, Obama administration releases the results of the 41 projects they judge to meet their standards
- In 2015, Obama administration funds 81 new TPP projects and urges them to draw on the successful projects from the first round of grants
- In July 2017, the Trump administration withdraws all funding as of June 2018 for the 81 projects funded in round 2

Summary of Results for the Teen Pregnancy Prevention Program that Met Standards

| Category | Tier 1 | Tier 2 |
|--|------------|------------|
| Projects producing one or more impacts | | |
| Evaluations that met standards | 12 | 16 |
| At least one impact | 4 | 8 |
| As a share of all evaluations | 21% | 36% |
| As a share of all evaluations that met OAH standards | 33% | 50% |
| Impacts on sex-related behaviors | | |
| Impact on | | |
| Sexually transmitted infection | 0/1 (0%) | 0/1 (0%) |
| Frequency of sexual activity | 0/2 (0%) | 0/0 (0%) |
| Number of sexual partners | 0/1 (0%) | 0/5 (0%) |
| Recent sexual activity | 1/7 (14%) | 1/11 (9%) |
| Sexual initiation/abstinence | 2/13 (15%) | 3/15 (20%) |
| Contraceptive use (including condoms) and/or consistency | 1/14 (7%) | 6/18 (33%) |
| Impacts on teen pregnancy | | |
| Pregnancy | 1/4 (25%) | 4/8 (50%) |

Sources: "Grantees FY 2010-2014," US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Adolescent Health, last modified December 8, 2016, <https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/oah-initiatives/evaluation/grantee-led-evaluation/grantees-2010-2014.html>; "Federal-Led Evaluation," US Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Adolescent Health, last modified December 8, 2016, <https://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/oah-initiatives/evaluation/federal-led-evaluation/index.html>.

Note: This table simplifies the results of the Teen Pregnancy program evaluation by dropping evaluations that did not meet standards developed by the OAH agency.

Status of Programs Now

- TPP program funding status; likely gone in June 2018 (\$101,000); several associated programs already defunded
- Role of Office of Adolescent Health (the administering agency of the TPP program) changed dramatically to implement new programs
- New programs (as of fall 2017): Working with Mathematica Policy Research and RTI International, HHS aims to develop research & evaluation programs “to improve teen pregnancy prevention and sexual risk avoidance programs”

Ideology vs. Evidence

In this episode of ideology vs. evidence in the nation's capital, evidence dominated in the beginning under Democratic leadership with ample support from congressional Republicans (but an ideological fight in the background). Then a new Republican administration turned the tables and defunded the evidence-based programs and now appears to be substituting new abstinence-based programs.

But . . .

The Growing Evidence-Based Movement

- Obama Tiered-Evidence Initiatives
- Leadership from OMB
- Institute of Education Sciences
- White House Social and Behavioral Sciences Team
- Evaluation by Federal Agencies
- Research and Evaluation Companies
- J-Pal
- Pay for Success Programs
- Results First
- Clearinghouses
- Foundation Support
- Evidence-Based Policymaking Commission