

The Success Sequence: Rethinking Poverty Prevention

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It is well known that a confluence of factors contributes to poverty levels challenging many well-intentioned anti-poverty efforts for decades. Clearly, there is no silver bullet for this complex societal problem. And yet, sharing with youth the researched-based factors that can help mitigate the likelihood of living in poverty is an important conversation in the SRA approach. The Success Sequence offers a solutions-oriented approach that addresses causes vs. effects.¹

What is the Success Sequence?

If youth adopt these behaviors, in sequence, as a millennial, they risk only a 3% chance of living in poverty as adults, versus a 53% chance if they adopt none of these:²

- Graduate
- Work full-time
- Marry before having children

It Works Regardless of Race and Socioeconomic Privilege

Following this sequence overwhelming results in poverty prevention regardless of race and socioeconomic privilege.

- “Only 9% of young men and women from lower-income families who follow the sequence are poor in their late twenties and early thirties compared to 31% who do not follow this sequence.”³

Marriage Matters

- “Those who marry before having kids are about twice as likely to avoid poverty as those who have a baby first. Additionally, studies have shown that cohabitating couples are 3 times more likely to break up than were married parents.”⁴

- Bearing children within marriage is associated with a variety of improved physical, social, educational, and economic outcomes.
- Children living with never married mothers are 143% more likely to be poor than those living with married parents.⁵

SRA Programs Encouraging the Success Sequence

Two federally funded SRA programs focus on empowering youth with skills that lead to achieving future goals, avoiding risk and achieving the benefits of the success sequence. Beginning early with skill-based programs that set high expectations, these programs increase the opportunity for healthier outcomes that can impact poverty prevention efforts.

Title V Sexual Risk Avoidance Program within the Welfare Reform Act 1996

- Preventing poverty by teaching self-regulation skills to youth and focusing on education, self-sufficiency and delaying sex until marriage.

Sexual Risk Avoidance Education (SRAE) grant program

- “...teach the benefits associated with self-regulation, success sequencing for poverty prevention, healthy relationships, goal setting, and resisting sexual coercion, dating violence, and other youth risk behaviors such as underage drinking or illicit drug use without normalizing teen sexual activity.”

SRA is a Realistic Goal for Youth

- Most teens have not had sex, and about half of those who have, wish they had waited.⁶
- Over the past 25 years, there has been a 28% decrease of teens who have had sex showing that the SRA approach is realistic and increasingly resonates with youth.⁷
- Nearly 70% of 15–17 year olds (the age typically targeted for sex education) have never had sex.⁸

It is time to reinforce this positive trend among youth. Every student deserves the opportunity to succeed.

References

¹ Murray, C. (1984). *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980*. NY: Basic Books.

² Wang, W., Wilcox, B., (2017). *The Millennial Success Sequence*. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute.

³ Ibid

⁴ Wang, W., Wilcox, B., (2017). *Marriage Matters*. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute.

⁵ Department of Health and Human Services (2014). *Welfare Indicators and Risk factors: 13th report to Congress, 2014*. P.1-2, iii-2, 13, 14.

⁶ CDC (2016) *Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2015*. Atlanta: Author Barna Group (2025). *Teens speak out survey*. Ventura: Author.

⁷ CDC (2016) *Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2015*. Atlanta: Author Paquette, D, Cai, W. (2015, July 22). *Why American Teenagers are Having Much Less Sex*. Washington Post. Accessed January 30, 2016.

⁸ National Center for Health Statistics. (2015). *Key statistics from the NSFG – T listing*. National Survey of Family Growth. National Health Statistics Reports 2011–2013