

14. Project Prevention

Project Prevention is a North Carolina-based nonprofit that attempts to prevent people with addictions from having children.¹ To do this, Project Prevention pays people with drug addictions \$300 to volunteer for long-term or permanent birth control. Ultimately, approximately two-thirds of participants agree to use forms of long-term birth control, such as 5-year IUDs, with the remaining third opting for sterilization.² According to Barbara Harris, who founded the controversial organization, the goals are to stop people from having children that they are not in a position to adequately care for, and to reduce the number of babies born with drug-related defects. Ultimately, according to Harris, this program helps people with addictions get their lives back on track while protecting innocent children from the various harms associated with parents' drug use or from being caught up in the foster care system.

Critics say Project Prevention is manipulative, taking advantage of people who are not in a position to make rational, informed decisions about what reproductive choices they may want to make in the future. For this reason, it seems problematic to encourage them to undergo sterilization. Moreover, according to critics, despite Harris's claim about wanting to help these individuals, this program doesn't do anything to address the real problem: their addiction. Additionally, critics argue, this program is based on and reinforces problematic stereotypes about people suffering from drug addiction. According to National Advocates for Pregnant Women, Project Prevention "perpetuates the myth that drug-using parents have a disproportionate number of children."³ Harris's language reinforces this perception, as she routinely describes addicted women as "having litters of children". Critics also argue that Project Prevention's rhetoric—such as the motto "Don't let pregnancy get in the way of your crack habit"⁴—increases the stigmatization of drug use and addiction, and conveys the message that women who use drugs do not deserve to have children.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Does a sexually-active person who uses drugs have a special moral obligation that a non-drug use does not have to use effective birth control? Why or why not?
2. What are the ethical considerations that may count for, and against, offering people with addiction financial incentives not to have children?
3. Suppose that a doctor learns that their patient is being paid by Project Prevention to undergo sterilization. Does that give the doctor a reason not to perform the procedure? Why or why not? If it depends, what does it depend on?

¹ <http://content.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1981916,00.html>

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/06/nyregion/sterilization-offer-to-addicts-reopens-ethics-issue.html>

³ <http://www.advocatesforpregnantwomen.org/issues/crackconcerns.htm>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_Prevention