

Pregnancy, Poverty, School and Employment

Teenage childbearing is associated with adverse consequences for young mothers and their children, many of which can be attributed to the economically and socially disadvantaged situations in which most adolescent mothers live before becoming pregnant. Often, the disadvantaged backgrounds of young women contribute to poor school performance, weak social skills and low earnings potential, and also increase the likelihood that a young woman will become pregnant as a teen. Teenage childbearing tends to exacerbate the problems of poverty and family instability many young women already face. Early childbearing contributes to lower levels of educational attainment for the adolescent mother and her child, high rates of single parenthood, larger family sizes and increased reliance on public assistance.

Connections like these too often are overlooked in efforts to prevent teen pregnancy. A deeper examination of the external influences on adolescents who become involved in a pregnancy is required in order to fully comprehend and effectively respond to the complexity of teen pregnancy.

The Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention and Parenting developed this series of fact sheets to draw the links between adolescent pregnancy and other social issues that are relevant to the lives of Minnesota teens. These fact sheets are based on published research and reports, and data available from state agencies. Data is national or, where noted, specific to Minnesota. References are listed at the end of this document.

Poverty

Poverty is the factor most strongly related to teen pregnancy. State comparisons show that states with higher poverty rates also have higher proportions of non-marital births to adolescents (Moore 1995). In addition, some researchers have suggested that high poverty rates in the United States account for the fact that US teen birth rates are the highest of any industrialized nation (MacFarlane 1997; Males 1994).

High rates of youth poverty precede high rates of teenage childbearing. Teens residing in communities with high rates of poverty, welfare use, and single-mother households are at higher risk for early pregnancy. Teen parents are therefore disproportionately concentrated in poor communities characterized by inferior housing, high crime, poor schools and limited health services (Maynard 1996; Wilson 1996).

- Sixty percent of teenagers who become pregnant are living in poverty at the time of the birth (Alan Guttmacher Institute 1994). More than 40 percent of teenage mothers report living in poverty by age 27 (Moore 1995).
- Young women with below average academic skills coming from families with below poverty incomes are about five times more likely to become teenage mothers than those with solid skills and above average family incomes (Brindis 1997).
- Among all unwed teenage mothers, less than one third receive any financial support from the nonresident fathers of their children (Congressional Budget Office 1990).
- Poverty status is one of the strongest predictors of low birth weight, especially among teenage mothers (Alan Guttmacher Institute 1994).

Welfare

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 replaces Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a single cash welfare block grant. Because of the well-documented association between teen pregnancy and welfare, much of the recent welfare reform debate and many aspects of the new law focus on teen pregnancy. The Act contains a number of provisions, which require states to come up with goals, plans and actions to reduce out of wedlock births, and teen pregnancy (Tullman 1996). The Statewide Minnesota Family Investment Program is Minnesota's version of the national TANF program. It includes a five year time limit on benefits and a mandatory work/education requirement.

- Overall, studies have found that larger AFDC payments in states are weakly associated with higher rates of out-of-wedlock teen childbearing among whites, but this association does not hold for African American or Latino teens. No correlation has been found between the level of welfare benefits and additional births to teen mothers (Moore 1995).
- In 1995, women under the age of 20 made up only seven percent of AFDC cases; however, over time, the role of teen parents is significant. Forty-two to fifty-five percent of AFDC households are headed by women who started families as a teenager (HHS/ACF/OFA 1996, GAO/HEHS 1994).
- More than 70% of unmarried adolescent mothers will receive cash assistance within five years of giving birth and 40% will remain dependent on the welfare system for 5 years or longer (Maynard 1996).
- In Minnesota in 1997, 53% of AFDC cases began with a birth to a teen, and 55% of all children on AFDC were in families that began with a teen birth (MDHS 1997).
- Based on the average cost per case, approximately \$8.6 million in public assistance (AFDC and MFIP) was spent in March 1997 on families that began with a teen birth. This amount accounts for 43% of the total public assistance provided to all Minnesota families (MDHS 1997).

Success in School

Recent research examining the relationship between educational attainment and teenage pregnancy has addressed background factors like individual, family, and neighborhood characteristics to better explain the relationship. These studies have confirmed that teenage pregnancy adversely affects level of educational attainment. However, it has been found that young women and men often drop out of high school before they become parents, and that school attendance and achievement before conception are the best predictors of school attendance and achievement after delivery of the child (Stevens-Simon 1995). In terms of educational achievement, dropping out, rather than having a baby, appears to be the key factor that sets adolescent mothers behind their peers. Adolescent mothers who stay in school are almost as likely to graduate (73%) as women who do not become mothers while in high school (77%) (The Alan Guttmacher Institute 1994).

- Thirty-two percent of adolescent mothers complete high school by the time they reach their late 20s, compared with nearly 73% of women who delay childbearing until after age 20 or 21 (Maynard 1996).
- About 40% of all adolescent mothers who drop out of high school attain a GED certificate by age 30 (Maynard 1996).
- Among whites, African Americans, and Latinos, childbearing before age 20 significantly reduces schooling attained by almost three years (Klepinger 1995).
- Young women who begin childbearing after age 20 are much more likely than teenage mothers to attend college (Klepinger 1995).
- The more years of education a mother completes, the older her daughter is likely to be at first sexual intercourse (Postrado 1997).
- Teens with high educational expectations are less likely than their peers with lower expectations to initiate sexual intercourse (Postrado 1997).
- Adolescent fathers are less likely to graduate from high school than older fathers (Maynard 1996).
- Children of teen parents perform worse in school than children of older parents. They are 50% more likely to repeat a grade, perform significantly worse on developmental tests, and are more likely to drop out of school (Maynard 1996).

Employment

Failure to complete high school prevents young mothers from going on to post-secondary education and from participating in many vocational training programs (Stevens-Simon 1995). Limited educational achievement combined with low basic skills and limited job experience means fewer employment opportunities and lower wages for teenage mothers (Maynard 1996; Zill and Nord 1994). In addition, teenage mothers have more children on average and are less likely to be married than women who delay childbearing. As a result, they must stretch their limited incomes to support more children (The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy 1997).

Over the last two decades, the US economy has lost most of its low-skill, high-paying manufacturing jobs, restricting career opportunities for low-income youths, the population most likely to be involved in early pregnancies (Wilson 1996; Males 1994). As the qualifications for good jobs rise, teenage mothers who fail to finish school have more difficulty finding gainful employment (The Alan Guttmacher Institute 1994).

- Higher levels of income and employment for women are related to lower rates of non-marital childbearing (Moore 1995).
- From 1960 to 1990, the percentage of teen births outside of marriage increased from 15% to 68%. This 68% of young mothers assume primary responsibility for their families' financial support (Maynard 1996).
- Fifteen to twenty percent of never married teens have child support awards. Of those, only about three-fourths receive any payments and the payments they do receive are only about one-third of the payments due (Congressional Budget Office 1990).
- Although the incomes of teen mothers are lower during their first 13 years of parenthood compared to those who delay childbearing (until age 20 or 21), they make up for this through increased employment and earnings by the time they reach their mid to late 20s (Hotz 1997).
- Among whites, one-fourth of teenage mothers had family incomes below the poverty level, compared with less than 1 in 10 of those who delayed childbearing (Brown and Eisenberg 1995).
- Adolescent fathers earn, on average, \$4,732 less annually than those who delay fathering until age 20 or 21 and are therefore not as prepared to contribute financially to the well-being of their families (Maynard 1996).
- Nearly 30 % of children born to adolescent mothers are neither working nor looking for work nor attending school by the time they are 24 years old, in contrast to 17% of children born to mothers who have delayed childbearing (Maynard 1996).

In summary, adolescent pregnancy results in significant challenges for the teen mother, father and their child. It is important to understand the connections between issues like poverty, welfare reliance, low educational achievement and employment options in the life of an adolescent parent. These factors are often part of the lives of young women before they have a child and are further compounded by the birth of a child. Understanding these connections can provide insight when developing teen pregnancy prevention programs or when seeking out better ways to support teen parents.

MOAPPP can help by providing the resources that you need to help Minnesota teens. Contact the MOAPPP InfoExchange at (612) 644-1447 or toll-free in Minnesota at (800) 657-3697.

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