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## Limited socioeconomic opportunities and Latina teen childbearing: a qualitative study of family and structural factors affecting future expectations

Alexandra M. Minnis<sup>a,b</sup>, Kristen Marchi<sup>c</sup>, Lauren Ralph<sup>b,d</sup>, M. Antonia Biggs<sup>d</sup>, Sarah Schwartz<sup>d</sup>, Abigail Arons<sup>d</sup>, Claire D. Brindis<sup>d</sup>, and Paula Braveman<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Women's Global Health Imperative, RTI International, San Francisco, California

<sup>b</sup>School of Public Health, University of California, Berkeley

<sup>c</sup>Department of Family and Community Medicine, Center on Social Disparities in Health, University of California, San Francisco

<sup>d</sup>Bixby Center for Global Reproductive Health, Philip R. Lee Institute for Health Policy Studies, University of California, San Francisco

### Abstract

**Background**—The decrease in adolescent birth rates in the United States has been slower among Latinas than among other ethnic/racial groups. Limited research has explored how socioeconomic opportunities influence childbearing among Latina adolescents.

**Methods**—We conducted in-depth interviews with 65 pregnant foreign- and U.S.-born Latina women (31 adolescents; 34 adults) in two California counties. We assessed perceived socioeconomic opportunities and examined how family, immigration and acculturation affected the relationships between socioeconomic opportunities and adolescent childbearing.

**Results**—Compared with women who delayed childbearing into adulthood, pregnant adolescents described having few resources for educational and career development and experiencing numerous socioeconomic and social barriers to achieving their goals. Socioeconomic instability and policies limiting access to education influenced childbearing for immigrant adolescents. In contrast, family disintegration tied to poverty figured prominently in U.S.-born adolescents' childbearing.

**Conclusion**—Limited socioeconomic opportunities may play a large role in persistently high pregnancy rates among Latina adolescents.

### Keywords

Hispanic Americans; Pregnancy; Unplanned; Acculturation; Immigration; Socioeconomic Factors

## INTRODUCTION

During the last 15 years, adolescent birth rates have decreased dramatically in the United States (1). Despite declines, since the mid-1990s Latina teens have maintained higher birth rates than Black and White teens (2). In 2009, although California's Latina teen birth rate (50.8 per 1000 females aged 15 to 19 years) was below the national average for Latina teens

(70.1 per 1000), it was nearly two times higher than the average teen birth rate in the state (32.1 per 1000) (3, 4). That same year, 72 percent of all teen births in California were to Latina adolescents (5).

Numerous factors have been identified as influences on adolescent childbearing (6), including contraceptive access (7) and method choice (8, 9); sexual partnership characteristics (10); social and cultural norms regarding teen childbearing; and parent-child communication (11) and parental monitoring (12). Socioeconomic disparities and poverty at the individual, household, and neighborhood levels consistently have been found to be associated with teen pregnancy and sexual decision-making (13–15). The weathering hypothesis, which attributes adverse health outcomes to cumulative exposure to socioeconomic and political inequities, offers one theoretical explanation that may underlie these associations (16); adolescents' future discount rates affected by perceived life chances has been hypothesized an alternative explanation of health behaviors (17). Likewise, acculturation, the process whereby immigrants and children of immigrants adapt to multiple cultural and social norms in their home and community environments, may be a particularly influential factor for Latina youth. Such findings suggest the potential importance of addressing structural factors that shape the environment in which youth make decisions about their futures, including decisions around childbearing.

Socioeconomic opportunities, measured as educational and career aspirations and expectations as well as by poverty indicators, have been shown to affect the reproductive health of U.S. adolescents (18–22). Adolescent girls with low educational expectations are more likely to become pregnant and to give birth than girls with high expectations (18, 19). Youth with aspirations for the future are more likely to abstain from or delay intercourse and to use contraception if sexually active (23). Parents' educational expectations for their daughters are associated with adolescent sexual behavior and pregnancy occurrence, with national data documenting that low parental expectations are tied to higher likelihood of teen pregnancy and childbearing (20, 21). One qualitative study conducted with Latino parents concluded that although parents preferred that their children defer childbearing to permit greater educational opportunities, the value placed on the role of motherhood and the attention given to teen mothers sent conflicting messages to their daughters (24). Other research suggests that Latina teens may view childbearing as motivation to achieve educational and occupational success (25) or as a way to develop in a social environment that offers few alternative opportunities for the transition to adulthood (26, 27). However, few studies have focused on how socioeconomic opportunities influence Latino teen childbearing, a relationship that may be uniquely shaped by immigration and acculturation, family environment and cultural norms (28–30).

In response to the persistently high rates of teen births among Latinas and a need for improved understanding of socioeconomic and racial/ethnic disparities in teen childbearing, we conducted a qualitative study examining contextual influences on pregnancy and childbearing among pregnant foreign- and U.S.-born Latina adolescents in two California counties. We included a comparison group of young Latina adult women in the same communities who had delayed childbearing until adulthood. Our primary objective was to explore how individual and family educational and employment aspirations and expectations affected teen childbearing among young Latina women. Further, we assessed how contextual factors – family, immigration and subsequent acculturation shaped these relationships.

## METHODS

Sixty-five pregnant foreign- and U.S.-born Latina women ages 15 to 19 or 22 to 35 were recruited at eleven community-based clinics or health education programs in Los Angeles and Fresno, two California counties with high teen birth rates. All participants were pregnant with the first child they planned to carry to term and were in their second or third trimester of pregnancy. All research activities were approved by the California Health and Human Services Agency Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects and by the Committee for Human Research at the University of California, San Francisco.

A detailed description of the study's methodology and analytic approach has been published elsewhere (31). Briefly, participants completed one semi-structured, 2-hour face-to-face interview with a trained bilingual, bicultural interviewer. Interviews consisted of approximately forty open-ended questions exploring a range of topics related to teen childbearing, preceded by a quantitative survey on demographic information about the participant, her family, and the baby's father, as well as her access to health services. Audio recordings of all interviews were transcribed and translated (for those conducted in Spanish) and entered into QSR NVivo software. The qualitative analytic work was organized first by structural codes corresponding to study questions; subsequently a list of emerging thematic codes was identified and refined through iterative reviews of study transcripts, structural coded sections, and memos produced by the research team.

For this paper, the research team analyzed text corresponding to two thematic codes: 1) educational and employment aspirations and expectations, including sub-themes related to school commitment and participation, childbearing and socioeconomic aspirations and expectations, and barriers to education and 2) influences on aspirations and expectations.

## RESULTS

### Study population characteristics

The 65 study participants (31 teens; 34 adults) were evenly distributed between Fresno and Los Angeles, and between U.S.- and foreign-born women (Table 1).

### Expectations for education and employment: influences on teen childbearing

Nearly half of teen respondents experienced a common trajectory during their early teenage years that involved a gradual disengagement from and disinterest in school. Prior to their pregnancy, a handful of teens had already left high school to complete educational requirements through home study or continuation school. For U.S.-born teens and youth who immigrated to the U.S. prior to adolescence, this trajectory was influenced by environments largely void of economic opportunities. A number of teens described pregnancy as a motivation to focus on education and career and as presenting them with an opportunity for maturation. One teen described her pregnancy as a positive influence on her development: "I feel that I'll actually have a life now. Cause before, it was just fun and games. Now I'll have a responsibility."

Adult respondents, in contrast, were more likely to describe high school as an enjoyable place where their ability and intelligence were recognized and as a critical step in achieving future educational goals. Furthermore, they tended to describe teen pregnancy as an event that would have interfered with their educational and career development: "I had goals way before I was even thinking about kids....I would think if I had a kid right now I wouldn't be able to go to school. I won't be able to become a doctor that I wanted to be." Some adults recognized that, as teens, childbearing constituted an important goal; however, they noted that their own education was critical to their success as a mother. As one respondent stated:

“My main goal was the family, but I thought if I didn’t educate myself first, how was I going to educate my children?”

Future aspirations of several recent immigrant teens were shaped by traditional gender norms that aligned their education and childbearing trajectories with those of teens in their communities of origin. These respondents articulated low employment expectations resulting in reduced emphasis on schooling. This was sometimes directed by their male partners who supported them in completing high school but had stated clearly that they could not work and develop professionally. Furthermore, for some recent immigrant youth, early childbearing was regarded as typical in their home country and the later teen years (ages 17–19) were considered an appropriate life stage for pregnancy; educational goals, as a consequence, were sidelined.

### **Family expectations for education and employment: influences on teen childbearing**

Most respondents stated that education was important to their families; however, expectations for the level of educational attainment and the support provided by parents varied between teen and adult respondents. Whereas about half of teens noted that their parents’ expected them to complete high school, adults commonly reported that high school graduation was considered by their parents to be a given rather than a goal and most families supported education beyond high school. Adult respondents generally reported they had more familial support available to them during their teenage years than did teen respondents and related specific examples of how their parents provided emotional and tangible support in school. Emotional support included encouraging school attendance, vocalizing the desire to see their child succeed, and warning teenage daughters about the challenges of finding employment without a good education. Tangible support included assistance with homework, meeting with teachers and school staff, and helping with school paperwork and applications. One U.S.-born adult commented how her father contributed quite substantively to her learning: “I remember my father always showing interest in my schoolwork. He always wanted to read my writing assignments...He looked so forward to when it was time to do projects because it got his creative mind going...he’d sit down with me and we’d come up with incredible ideas.” Though some teens remarked that their parents advocated education: “[My mom and dad] always push me to go to school and tell me that if I want to have a good life that I will have to go to school,” others, all U.S.-born, commented explicitly that their parents expressed little interest in their life or future. As stated by one U.S.-born teen: “My dad was abusive...he couldn’t take care of us ‘cause he had like three or four other jobs. He was never there for us. I was basically taking care of my brothers and sisters. He would be out in the streets until one, 2:00 in the morning.”

Foreign-born adult and teen respondents, particularly those who had immigrated to the U.S. prior to adolescence, articulated a strong influence from parents to attain a college education and to take advantage of opportunities presented to them by their having immigrated to the U.S. Among teens, for example, nearly two-thirds of foreign-born compared with one-third of U.S.-born respondents indicated expectations from their parents to obtain higher education. A foreign-born adult reflected on how her parents encouraged education as a way to achieve a more secure future: “when I was a teenager, my parents took me to the fields to see how you earn money...to work in the fields. I didn’t like it, and that kind of encouraged me more to go to school and have a better future.” However, having a parent place tremendous value on education was insufficient, alone, in ensuring teens achieved their educational goals and delayed childbearing. Immigration- and acculturation-related barriers presented obstacles for some to actualize these goals, which ultimately affected childbearing.

### **Immigration influences on education: effects on childbearing**

Legal and linguistic barriers were cited by many pregnant foreign-born teens as inhibiting educational attainment and perceived professional opportunities. For teens who immigrated during adolescence, immigration-related factors constituted a primary influence on shifts in educational expectations and attitudes toward school. Motherhood, therefore, constituted a viable alternative. Immigration laws that limit access to financial aid and higher education also presented constraints.

As one foreign-born teen who had lived in the U.S. since childhood stated, it is “really hard...for Latinos...especially people that don’t have papers, you know. You do want to finish high school, but going to university or college...it’s difficult cause you don’t got papers, you [don’t] got money to pay the college.” Language barriers constituted a second challenge for participants who immigrated to the U.S. during their teenage years. An 18-year-old participant who moved to the U.S. at age 15 highlighted the challenge presented by linguistic barriers: “I didn’t want to [go to school] anymore. I was embarrassed because I’m an adult already and I didn’t speak any English.” For some youth who immigrated as teens, immigration itself disrupted their schooling. These youth described difficulties in acculturating to a new social environment, coupled with lack of English comprehension and language skills in the classroom, ultimately limiting their ability to sustain previously high educational performance. Finally, reasons for immigration (namely perceived deviant behavior in Mexico, including poor school performance, use of drugs, and “falling in love” with a boyfriend) were noted by several teen participants as contributing to low educational expectations upon arrival in the U.S. and likely affected early childbearing.

### **Family influences on education: effects on childbearing**

Economic instability within the family, household disruption due to parental separation or divorce and family care taking responsibilities presented great stressors on teens; foreign-born teens in particular. These barriers were prompted frequently by immigration itself or by movement between relative’s households after arriving in the U.S. As one foreign-born teen commented after her move, “it was just my mom and myself. And when we got there she couldn’t find a job, and we didn’t have anyone else there who could help us out, and I tried to find a way to help her too in that way. So I looked for temporary jobs as a way to earn money.” Family reunification of adolescent children and their parents, highlighted by one teen who had been raised by her grandmother in Mexico and then moved to the U.S. to live with her mother at age 13, highlighted the potential complexity of reconciling a parent-child relationship alongside adapting to a new country of residence. Other immigrant teens had to assume substantial childcare responsibilities for extended family members, which interfered with their ability to stay in school. As an immigrant teen whose cousin had two children reported, “[My cousin] would watch one of the kids and I would watch the other one.” This directly inhibited her ability to attend school regularly.

In contrast, family instability due to illness, neglect, substance use and incarceration presented substantial challenges for U.S.-born teens in attaining their educational goals. These issues rarely surfaced as major educational barriers for adults. One U.S.-born teen commented on why her mother’s illness prompted her to drop out of high school: “I guess because my mom needed somebody to be with her at the house and she wouldn’t have nobody. And I would be like the only one that will help her around like to cook and stuff.” Another statement underscores the level of familial disruption faced by some U.S.-born teen respondents: “Well, my dad...he used drugs a lot. He’s in prison. He’s in there for life. My mom...we never got fed and she always had different guys over. And just, she wasn’t really a good mother.”

## DISCUSSION

Pregnant Latina teens in this study described few tangible socioeconomic opportunities. Thus, for many teens, pregnancy, even when unintended, offered an opportunity for a meaningful transition from adolescence to adulthood. Despite general family support for education, teens faced substantial socioeconomic and family barriers to achieving their educational goals. For foreign-born teens, legal and linguistic barriers predominated, with immigration itself prompting disruption in household and socioeconomic stability. For U.S.-born teens, lack of emotional and/or tangible support from family as well as instability within the household presented substantial challenges to educational attainment. Many of these factors reflect underlying household and neighborhood poverty that shaped the more proximal determinants of early childbearing, including pregnancy intentions and ambivalence and patterns of contraceptive use.

Many teens felt that while their family members generally supported their educational and career goals, they lacked the knowledge and skills to help them realize their goals. In contrast, relationships with engaged and communicative parents during the teen years helped many adult Latinas defer childbearing until adulthood. Previous literature underscores the importance of engaging parents in their child's education throughout adolescence (32), yet this study highlighted distinct barriers to achieving this goal. For U.S.-born teens in particular, such an approach would require consideration of family structure and neighborhood instability due to economic insecurity, substance use and community violence and the effects these environmental factors have on childbearing perceptions and desires within the life course. For foreign-born teens such efforts would need to address linguistic and legal barriers to education.

We found variability in the factors affecting educational attainment and childbearing outcomes within the foreign-born population represented in this study. Different acculturation trajectories appeared to account for some of this variation. Participants who had immigrated as young children tended to report receiving strong family support for their education, often because their families' migration to the U.S. was motivated by their parents' desire to improve their children's socioeconomic opportunities. In contrast, gender norms expressed by some more recent immigrants favored childbearing over education and career, particularly among teens and young women who were already married. Other recent immigrants articulated strong values for education, but noted financial and linguistic barriers that inhibited their ability to attend high school and/or continue career training they might have begun in Mexico. These findings highlight the importance of tailoring pregnancy prevention programs, including those that address socioeconomic opportunities, to the diverse range of norms and experiences reflected in the population of foreign-born adolescents. U.S. immigration policy also has an important effect on the educational experiences of Latinos residing in the U.S. The federal DREAM Act, which would permit states to provide in-state college tuition for students without regard to immigration status, grant conditional permanent residency and permit later naturalization, addresses a structural barrier to educational opportunities faced by immigrants without permanent resident status (33).

Several study limitations should be noted. First, adult respondents were asked to report retrospectively on their educational experiences and parental attitudes/resources during their teenage years. Thus, we focused comparisons on issues that would be less subject to recall bias (e.g., general attitudes toward school; parental involvement and perceived parental attitudes toward their child's education; availability of supportive resources). Second, to protect participant confidentiality, we collected little information on the circumstances of migration and the reasons for immigrating to the United States, which likely influenced

individual acculturation as well as family structure and its effects on setting educational and career expectations. Third, study participants were volunteers from a clinic population predominantly, and we were not able to assess the representativeness of study participants compared to all pregnant women seeking prenatal services at the study sites. Therefore, results of this qualitative study should be considered descriptive and exploratory.

This study offers an in-depth examination of contextual factors that affected perceived socioeconomic opportunities and childbearing among Latina teens in two California counties. The study's results support a need to provide tangible future opportunities for Latina youth by promoting youth development strategies, strengthening educational resources for youth and their families, and encouraging youths' educational and career development as a strategy for reducing teen childbearing. Though immigration presented distinct structural and cultural barriers to education that appeared to influence teen childbearing, the fundamental lack of hope for educational achievement and professional development was profound. Comprehensive pregnancy prevention efforts that address youth's socioeconomic and family environments (16, 34), including factors affecting immigrant adaptation and acculturation, constitute a critical area for intervention.

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**Table 1**  
Sociodemographic characteristics of Latina Mothers Study participants Fresno and Los Angeles, California: 2006–2007

	Total N=65		Teen (15–19 years) N=31		Adult (22–35 years) N=34	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Location of interview						
Fresno	31	47.7	17	54.8	14	41.2
Los Angeles	34	52.3	14	45.2	20	58.8
Birthplace						
Mexico	30	46.1	13	41.9	17	50.0
El Salvador	2	3.1	0	-	2	5.9
Guatemala	2	3.1	1	3.2	1	2.9
United States	31	47.7	17	54.8	14	41.2
No. years resided in the United States (immigrants) <sup>a</sup>						
<2	12		5		7	
3–10	7		4		3	
>10	14		5		9	
Educational level						
Less than high school	31	47.7	27	87.1	4	11.8
High school	13	20.0	2	6.5	11	32.4
Some college	16	24.6	2	6.5	14	41.1
College graduate	5	7.7	0	-	5	14.7
Received public assistance within previous year	58	89.2	31	100	27	79.4
Birthplace of parents						
Mexico	45	69.2	21	67.7	24	70.6
El Salvador	3	4.6	0		3	8.8
Guatemala	3	4.6	1	3.2	2	5.9
United States	14	21.5	9	29.0	5	14.7
Maternal educational level <sup>b</sup>						
Less than high school	37	56.9	15	48.4	22	64.7
High school	14	21.5	8	25.8	6	17.7
Some college	5	7.7	3	9.7	2	5.9

	Total N=65		Teen (15–19 years) N=31		Adult (22–35 years) N=34	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
College graduate	3	4.6	0		3	8.8
Paternal educational level <sup>b</sup>						
Less than high school	35	53.9	15	48.4	20	58.8
High school	11	16.9	5	16.1	6	17.7
Some college	3	4.6	2	6.5	1	2.9
College graduate	4	6.2	2	6.5	2	5.9
Any family member attended college	35	61.4	12	41.3	23	82.1

<sup>a</sup>Data presented for immigrant women only (N=34).

<sup>b</sup>Parental educational attainment when the participant was 13–14 years old. Does not sum to 100% owing to participants who reported not knowing their parent(s)' educational attainment.