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Teenage Mothers Today: What We Know and How It Matters

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, births to U.S. teenagers have fallen and no longer follow overall fertility patterns. Yet the unique challenges faced by teenage mothers and their families justify continued research. Across disciplines, newer work has furthered our understanding of teenage motherhood today. In this article, I highlight four areas of progress: processes of selection into teenage motherhood, the broader consequences of teenage childbearing beyond the socioeconomic realm, heterogeneity of effects, and the application of life course principles. Emerging societal trends such as complex family structures, a stalled recovery from the recession for families of low socioeconomic status, and a rapidly evolving political environment for reproductive health care continue to challenge the lives of teenage mothers. Given that the consequences for teenagers of becoming mothers may change, continued research is needed. Shifts in policy to favor supporting teenage mothers and addressing the causes of both teenage pregnancy and social disadvantage may help improve the lives of these mothers and their families.

Keywords

teenage motherhood; teenage childbearing; life course; adolescence; socioeconomic disadvantage

Teenage motherhood continues to capture attention as a social problem in the United States, despite recent declines in the teenage birth rate. In this article, I discuss some of the recent innovative, cross-disciplinary research on the predictors and consequences of teenage childbearing. My review focuses on the United States because of the relatively high prevalence of childbearing among U.S. teenagers (1) and the many studies on this topic. Reflecting most of the literature, in this review, I focus primarily on teenage mothers, then on their children, examining the children's fathers only in terms of their interactions with the teenage mothers. I incorporate recent research from several disciplines, including sociology, economics, public health, nursing, and developmental psychology, but especially demography. The research reviewed here uses a variety of methods, including statistical analyses of national and local samples using cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys and in-depth ethnographic observational and interview studies.

Teenage Motherhood Today

Today, births to U.S. teenagers have fallen to historic lows. At 27 births per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 in 2013 (see Figure 1), the U.S. teenage birth rate has dropped by half since 1995. During this period, teenage birth rates have also declined in many European countries (1). The highest teenage birth rate since 1940 was in 1957, when it was more than triple today's rate. Yet because most teenage births at that time occurred within the context of marriage, teenage motherhood did not become a major social problem until later (2). As teenage birth rates began to fall in the 1960s and 1970s, the proportion of those births outside of marriage rose steadily, resulting in a public perception that teenage childbearing was a social problem (see Figure 1). In 2004, 79% of adults in a national poll judged teenage pregnancy a “very serious” or “important” problem for the United States (3). But until quite recently, the teenage birth rate has closely followed trends in the overall birth rate for U.S. women (see Figure 2). Only in the past 20 years has the teenage birth rate decoupled from overall fertility trends, becoming a distinct phenomenon by falling while the overall birth rate remained fairly steady. This policy success has been attributed largely to proximal predictors—decreased levels of sexual activity but especially increased use of contraception among youth (4)—yet increases in overall age at first birth and rising female educational attainment may also be distal predictors.

The United States has higher teenage pregnancy and teenage birth rates than other developed countries, as well as a higher teenage abortion rate (1). The U.S. teenage birth rate resembles more closely those of some former Soviet republics or other less developed countries than those of more developed countries (1). Researchers attribute this to less consistent contraceptive use by U.S. teenagers rather than more sexual activity (4).

Teenage birth rates within the United States are considerably variable, so the likelihood of becoming a teenage mother is much greater for some girls than for others. The 10 states with the highest teenage birth rates are in the South and Southwest, and the 10 with the lowest rates are in the Northeast and Midwest (5). Birth rates for Latina and African American teenagers are roughly double what they are for White teenagers, with the rate for Native Americans/Alaska Native teenagers falling in between and the rate for Asian American/Pacific Islander teenagers considerably lower than for White teenagers. Teenage motherhood and poverty are closely intertwined: In 2001-2002, nearly half of families with teenage mothers who had infants lived below the federal poverty line (compared to about one fifth of families with older mothers who had infants; 6). At the same time, 56% of infants in poverty lived with a mother who had been a teenager at either their own or an older sibling's birth (7). These statistics are important for social policy because efforts to help teenage mothers could improve the lives of many poor families.

Research

What We Know

Research on teenage fertility has yielded two important insights. First, the life outcomes of young mothers and their children are compromised—but those negative consequences are driven largely by the social disadvantage experienced before the pregnancy by teenagers

who become mothers (see 8 for a review of older literature). Second, those consequences are more severe in the short term than in the long term (9, 10). New research has used innovative statistical approaches (e.g., propensity score matching, instrumental variables) to support these two conclusions for teenage mothers (11, 12) and their children (13). Regarding the first conclusion, in one study (12), the negative effect of teenage childbearing on women's educational attainment in young adulthood was initially estimated at almost 2 years less education, but improved statistical estimation suggests that the experience of teenage motherhood was responsible for less than 1 of those years. These small average effects may be a result of heterogeneity in the effect of teenage childbearing across subpopulations, a topic I address later. Regarding the second conclusion, modest negative effects of teenage childbearing have been identified for some outcomes later in adulthood but not for others (14-16). Longitudinal research has emphasized that teenage mothers and their children have tightly interwoven lives, with important consequences not only for mothers but also for the next generation (17).

Trends in Recent Research

Recent research on teenage motherhood has made important strides. In this article, I focus on four areas of knowledge in which advances have occurred: processes of selection into teenage motherhood, the nonsocioeconomic consequences of teenage childbearing, the heterogeneity of effects, and the application of life course principles.

Processes of selection into teenage motherhood—We now understand more fully the complex processes through which girls become teenage mothers, processes that may also lead to heterogeneity in the consequences of teenage childbearing. Teenage mothers are not average Americans; rather, they tend to come from more disadvantaged segments of the population in terms of social class, race and ethnicity, geographic location, and other characteristics (2). Understanding the effects of chronic exposure to disadvantage over time is key to understanding teenage motherhood. Chronic exposure to neighborhood poverty when growing up, especially in adolescence, increases the likelihood of teenage parenthood (18). In the United States, chronic exposure to poverty depends heavily on race. Beyond neighborhood poverty, other features of girls' localities—higher unemployment, lower religiosity, and expanded access to family planning—are associated with lower levels of teenage births (19, 20). Media influences may also matter because they can communicate cultural messages about the prevalence of behaviors and their consequences. Exposure to a reality show that emphasized the downsides of teenage motherhood was associated with reductions in teenage births and increased online interest in contraceptive use and abortion in the local area (21).

Individual-level processes of selection into teenage motherhood are also important. Previous research had focused on the effects of teenage childbearing on educational outcomes (22), but newer research indicates that educational disengagement affects teenage childbearing. Young women who will soon become pregnant are already changing their educational trajectories in negative ways that cannot be the result of teenage motherhood. In interviews with teenage mothers (23), violence, abuse, risky neighborhoods, and inequalities shaped their lives—in many cases by creating *life worlds of chaos*—in ways that led simultaneously

to teenage motherhood and other risks. Understanding girls' personal narratives and the systems of inequalities in which they are embedded is crucial to understanding how they become teenage mothers.

Nonsocioeconomic consequences of teenage motherhood—A second strand of new research moves beyond the socioeconomic realm to articulate the psychological, interactional, and emotional consequences of teenage motherhood, finding some positives and some negatives in the experience. Like the research mentioned earlier (23), one study (24) identified the limited options that precede teenage motherhood, and in that context, becoming a mother can motivate young women to succeed for the child. Becoming a good caregiver is one kind of success many young mothers seek (25), and getting an education is another (24). But severe demands on the time, energy, and resources of teenagers who try to be both mothers and students make this motivation difficult to translate into reality (26). As socioeconomic pressures encumber young mothers' futures, their child's birth disrupts their social and emotional attachments, making social support complicated and often unreliable (27). Yet many teenage mothers say they experience positive personal growth from the stigma and obstacles they have faced (28). Rather than presenting an unrelentingly negative view of the consequences of teenage motherhood, new research has identified complexities that suggest we need to look for differences among teenage mothers' experiences. Researchers should apply these ideas more broadly using nationally representative samples to document the nonsocioeconomic consequences of teenage motherhood.

Different effects for different women—New research is articulating differences in teenage mothers' experiences by investigating heterogeneity in the effects of teenage motherhood. The tendency for statistical methods to focus on average effects has obscured potential differences in how teenage motherhood shapes young people's lives. For example, the emotional and mental health consequences of teenage motherhood depend in part on whether the pregnancy was intended or wanted (29). Teenage mothers' emotional and mental health after childbearing can also depend on social location (e.g., the negative impact of discrimination and the protective role of affirmation of ethnic identity among Mexican-origin teenage mothers; 30). In other research on the heterogeneity of effects that examined the effects of teenage childbearing on education and earnings in young adulthood (31), young women judged the least likely to become teenage mothers (based on pre-existing characteristics such as delinquency, educational expectations, and self-worth) experienced the largest negative effects of teenage childbearing on college completion and earnings. Moreover, girls who were most likely to become teenage mothers may have experienced positive effects of childbearing. Rather than an overall propensity to become a teenage mother, another study focused on race and ethnicity (32): For Black women (but not White or Latina women), a teenage birth had negative implications for self-rated health at midlife compared to giving birth after age 25—yet delaying that birth into the early 20s was not associated with improved health. In the United States, as women's ages at first birth have risen into the late 20s on average, women in their early 20s are becoming more similar to teenage mothers in their exposure to social disadvantages (33). Taken together, these studies suggest complex patterns in which more advantaged groups sometimes experience greater and sometimes lesser effects of teenage fertility. By focusing on different domains of

outcomes, these studies support systematic investigations of many life experiences among teenage mothers, which could help us understand more fully how the effects of teenage childbearing vary across subpopulations.

Qualitative research provides exploratory evidence that can be used to guide research that aims to generalize to broader populations. Increasingly, qualitative research differentiates teenage mothers in exploring consequences, finding differences among them that are not reducible to single factors (23). For instance, one study (26) identified three categories of teenage coparents whose lives and socioeconomic prospects differed in terms of partnership status; involvement in school, work, and parenting; and resources provided by extended family. Uncoupled coparents usually started out partnered but the relationship ended, leaving the mother with most or all of the parenting and breadwinning responsibilities but more extended family support. Traditional coparents typically remained partnered, with a female homemaker and a male breadwinner, resulting in short-term stability but less extended family support and bleak prospects for educational gains. Nontraditional coparents remained partnered but shared parenting responsibilities as well as schooling or breadwinning. These coparents' complicated schedules were particularly vulnerable to disruptions in extended family support, but their longer-term prospects were promising if they persisted in their educational and career plans. Thus, we may improve our understanding of the lives of teenage mothers by examining the complicated interactions among factors and analyzing heterogeneity in women's experiences.

Life course dynamics—Finally, new research is incorporating principles from the life course theoretical perspective (34)—such as social convoys, intergenerational transmission, and cumulative disadvantage—in its investigations of teenage motherhood. The life course perspective is inherently longitudinal, and new studies are leveraging longitudinal U.S. data to measure complicated dynamics such as chronicity of social factors, concurrent phenomena across different domains, simultaneous experiences of multiple people, and instability in social environments over time. Recent work has documented the implications of teenage mothers' social convoys (including their coparents, multigenerational extended family members, and peers) for their families' lives. For example, in one study, grandparents' education levels mattered independently of mothers' in understanding variation in readiness for kindergarten among children of teenage mothers (35). In other studies, grandparents also mattered because they could provide material resources and because of the complex intergenerational, interactional dynamics that play out among grandparents, mothers, and fathers (36, 37). Because both mothers' and extended family members' relationships with fathers are important for fathers' involvement and children's development and health (38), interactional dynamics like these matter.

Another life course principle—accumulating disadvantages—helps us understand teenage motherhood. Beyond work on the effects of chronic poverty at the neighborhood level described earlier (18), persistent socioeconomic disadvantage over time—in income, education, and assets—explains why children of teenage parents lose developmental ground in early childhood compared to their peers (39). These declines among the children of teenage parents happen while parents gain socioeconomic ground. But those gains are not large enough to raise the family out of a disadvantaged social position, resulting in persistent

disadvantage that translates into compromised school readiness for the children. Although previous research pinpointed material resources as important for the futures of the families of teenage mothers (9), these newer dynamic conceptualizations of resources have improved our understanding of their importance for the lives of teenage mothers and their families.

Directions for Research and Policy

Modern Pressures on Teenage Mothers

Teenage mothers in the United States and worldwide face economic and social strains that put pressure on themselves and their families (see 40 for more discussion). With the exception of the Affordable Care Act, some aspects of the public safety net have shrunk through measures such as welfare reform (e.g., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF, replacing Aid to Families with Dependent Children, or AFDC). For example, in 2001-2002 after welfare reform, just 18% of teenage mothers with infants received any TANF benefits (6); before welfare reform in 1993, 26% of mothers aged 15 to 19 received AFDC support (41). The incomes of lower-income families have fallen over the past several decades, even as women have entered the work force in growing numbers. And teenage births have increasingly occurred outside of marriage (see Figure 1). Together, these trends mean that teenage mothers today may receive less support from the government, extended families (including both financial support and child care), and the fathers of their children (see 40 for a discussion). Perhaps because of the strain resulting from low resources available to teenage girls' extended families, norms discouraging teenage childbearing in lower-socioeconomic-status communities appear to have become stronger over time. Teenage mothers have become more rare in many communities as teenage birth rates have decreased, resulting in less support from peers and from the communities in which the teenagers live (40). These social and economic trends have resulted in a situation in which the basic needs of many families of teenage mothers are not being met. Beyond the United States, many developed countries are also experiencing cuts in social safety nets, rising socioeconomic inequalities, and increases in nonmarital births.

Other emerging societal trends may also begin to make teenage mothers' lives more difficult. Continued increases in the proportion of teenage births occurring outside of marriage have been linked to the rise of women having children with different partners over the course of their lives (42), with the possibility of increased difficulties for the families that result (43). Furthermore, as the age at which women typically first give birth rises (33), teenage mothers may become more isolated and stigmatized. Increased economic pressures on families with low socioeconomic status, whose recovery from the Great Recession has been lackluster (44), may continue to reduce the support extended families and coparents can give teenage mothers and their children. Finally, challenges to providing reproductive health may threaten progress in lowering the teenage birth rate. The removal of Planned Parenthood from the Texas Women's Health Program in 2013 was linked to increases in unintended births (45). In Colorado, the widespread provision of long-acting reversible contraceptives through a privately funded pilot program beginning in 2009 contributed to sharp decreases in the state's teenage birth rate (46); political opposition in a legislative committee initially blocked public funding to continue the program, but it has now been funded.

A Call for Continued Research and for Shifts in Policy

Because the context in which teenage motherhood occurs changes so quickly and in so many ways, continued research in the area is fundamental. Many of these trends—such as rising economic inequality and decreasing intergenerational mobility—point to the possibility that the negative short-term effects of teenage motherhood on women, men, and children could increase, resulting in as yet unknown changes to the longer-term implications. Researchers have linked teenage motherhood to broader trends among disadvantaged families such as nonmarital and multipartner fertility (42, 47). But others have argued that we cannot know what will happen to families of teenage mothers in particular by studying low-income families in general (48). Teenage mothers face unique disadvantages because of their youth, such as a lack of access to some public programs and the difficulties of getting an education while parenting. Thus, researchers need to focus on young mothers as well as on disadvantaged families more generally, even as teenage birth rates fall (48).

But as some have pointed out (9), this does not mean that policies to reduce teenage childbearing will be the most effective on which to focus. Because of modest evidence that teenage motherhood causes negative consequences, it is more promising to focus on remedying the precursors of both teenage birth and the negative outcomes that follow it (e.g., individual- and neighborhood-level poverty, inadequate education). Such an approach is likely to benefit teenage mothers and other disadvantaged members of society (9). Pairing this approach with policies that support teenage mothers and their families is promising. Because research suggests that most families in poverty have current or former teenage mothers (7), policies on teenage parenthood like these may also be effective anti-poverty policies. The lessons we have learned from research on teenage motherhood can help us build broader policies that continue to reduce teenage births and improve the lives of teenage mothers and their families.

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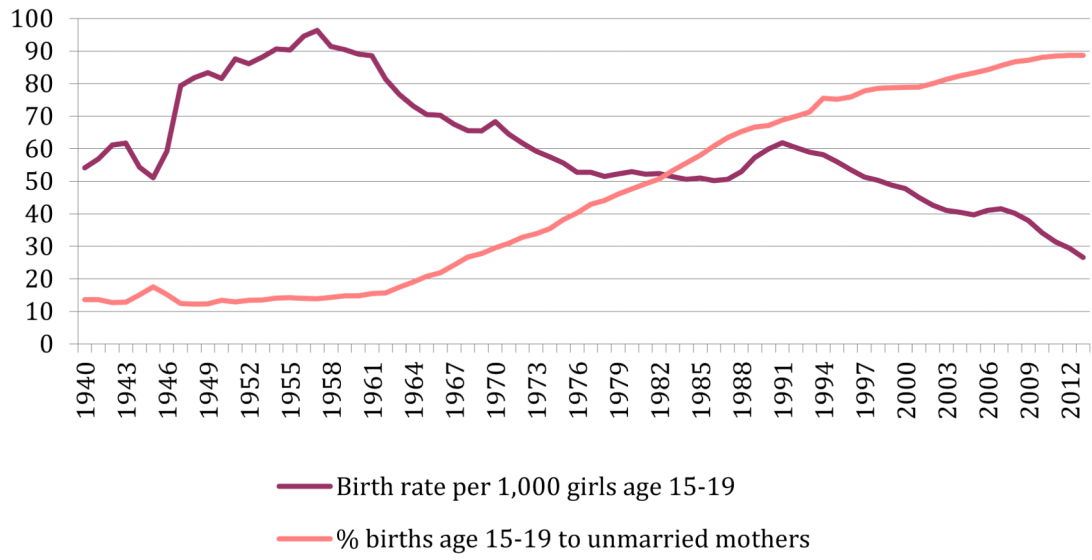


Figure 1.
U.S. birth rates for ages 15-19 and percent of nonmarital births.
Source: U.S. vital statistics data (5, 49)

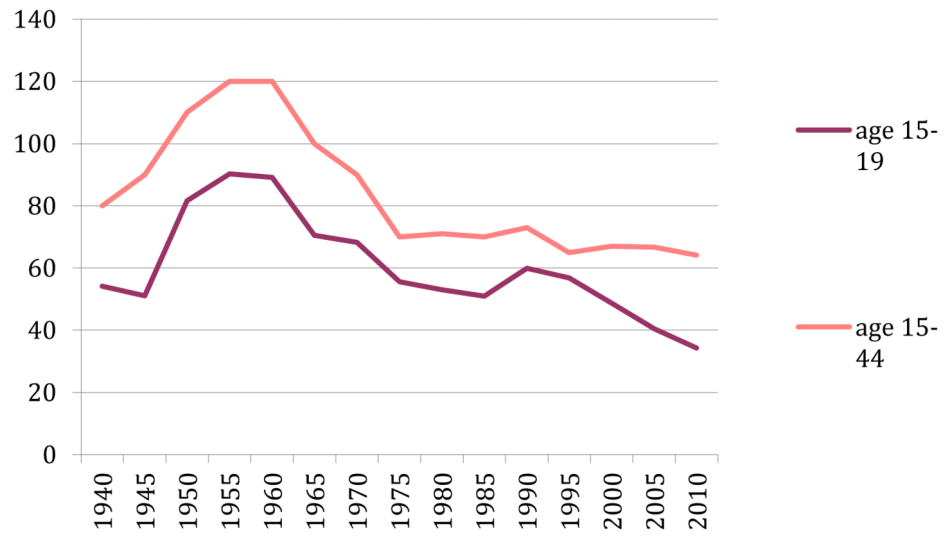


Figure 2.
U.S. birth rates for ages 15-19 compared to U.S. birth rates for ages 15-44.
Source: U.S. vital statistics data (5, 49, 50)