

crossroads connections

connecting research across communities

● volume 2, issue 1

Teenage Pregnancy and Motherhood

"People just automatically assume 'oh, well, you know, their life is screwed.' They don't think, 'well, they're trying to get a good life.' They don't recognize that [young mothers] are trying." - Maranda, MPSP Participant

Our society – including much academic research and popular media – frames teenage pregnancy as a problem for mothers, children, and society. This way of thinking leads to pervasive negative assumptions about teens who are pregnant or parenting. Perhaps we imagine that they are ruining their life by having children so young. Perhaps we see them as victims of a lack of education or support.

But other researchers – and many young moms - point out that we can't understand pregnancy outcomes fully without



also understanding disadvantages that many people face – including sexism, racism, and poverty. Health scholar Geronimus (1987) explains that in early (and some current) research, scholars did not control for important variables, such as poverty, when studying pregnancy and parenting outcomes. In fact, nursing scholar SmithBattle (2007) points out that many researchers only studied girls from disadvantaged communities and generalized from their pregnancy outcomes “problems with teenage pregnancy.”

In her early work, Geronimus called for more multivariate, cross-sectional, and long-term research studies. Many of these more careful studies refute common assumptions. Here are some “myth busting” research findings that will hopefully get you to think critically about your own beliefs about pregnant or parenting teens. ●

"Contrary to what fear-based sex education classes, lovely couples and wonderful counselors had led me to believe in the past. . . . I am not garbage . . . I am an excellent mother." -Allison Crews, "When I Was Garbage," from Girl-Mom



We, the Crossroads Collaborative, believe that youth have the right to information that helps them experience and achieve both healthy sexuality and sexual health. Comprehensive, well-researched information about youth, sexuality, health, and rights has been scarce and not widely distributed to youth, families, and policymakers. We want to change that.



Confronting assumptions about teenage pregnancy and motherhood.

Pregnancy and motherhood have advantages and disadvantages at any age.

“I think a lot of [the reality television shows about teenage pregnancy] are dramatized whether they want to admit it or not. They make it look like it’s so horrible to be a teen mom. It’s not the best thing to be a teen mom, but it’s not horrible.” - Toni, MPSP Participant

People frequently assume that pregnant or parenting teens have made a mistake by having their pregnancies or children at the “wrong” time, but research shows that there are advantages and disadvantages to having children at any age, in any circumstance. For example, feminist researchers have shown that women across lines of difference—that is, women of different classes, races, ages, and sexual orientations—face challenges. Many mothers struggle to sustain healthy pregnancies and balance the demands of motherhood with

the demands of work, school, or other life obligations (see the work of Davis (1998), Rich (1986), and O’Reilly (2006)). These researchers often point to a lack of structural support for people with caretaking responsibilities and call for improvements in healthcare, childcare, domestic assistance, and paid work leaves. Furthermore, some young mothers and researchers point to advantages for women who have children when they are young such as extra family support and more energy for raising children (Males, 2010; Girl-mom, 2011).

“Many people raise their kids and they’re 25 and they like work somewhere where teens work and they make same amount of money and they raise their kids like. Or even older, 30s, 40s. . . They raise their kids completely fine. It’s just about the love you are willing to give them and like the morals you want to teach them and that’s all that matters to raise kids.” - Mia, MPSP Participant



MY PREGNANCY STORY PROJECT (MPSP)

The My Pregnancy Story Project (MPSP) is a mixed-methods research project that draws on local young women’s perspectives to provide the community with a better understanding of their lived experiences with pregnancy and motherhood. Participants completed a brief questionnaire and participated in focus group discussions where researchers asked about their

- feelings about being pregnant and how those feelings changed over time,
- levels of family and social support including support from systems of care (i.e., medical, social, institutional, educational, professional) and how support/care might be improved,
- understanding of sexual health/pregnancy prior to pregnancy and what information they would like to know about now as mothers,
- levels of confidence in making their own decisions about their bodies, sexuality, and pregnancy,
- views on how teen pregnancy is portrayed in the media, and
- perceptions of other people’s reactions to their pregnancy.

Nine focus groups were conducted with 27 pregnant or mothering teens at 4 local sites—two high schools, one juvenile detention center, and one community-based teen support center. The focus groups were led by two facilitators: Dr. Sally Stevens and Jenna Vinson. Based on the stories of pregnant and parenting young women, the final MPSP Report describes key findings and recommendations to improve the experiences of teens in our community. The MPSP Report is available on the Crossroads Collaborative website.

Teens do not produce disadvantaged children.

Many studies refute that teenage mothers are more likely to have infants or children who are unhealthy (Geronimus, 1987, 1996a; Geronimus & Koreman, 1993; McCarthy & Hardy, 1993; Rozenweig & Wolipn, 1995 cited in Geronimus 2003). In fact, Geronimus' research has shown that, especially in poor African American communities, young women are less likely to have infants with health problems because the toll poverty takes on women's bodies as they age (Geronimus, 2003). Furthermore, Geronimus, Koreman, and Hillemeier found higher primary school achievement in the children of teen mothers compared to children of mothers who were older (1994; cited in Geronimus 2003, p. 883).

Teens are not more likely to abuse or neglect their children.

"They think teens are like crazy animals." - Megan, MPSP Participant

Common beliefs that teenagers are not able (or willing) to carefully attend to their children reflect stereotypes of teenagers as superficial people who are overly-emotional or immature (Lesko, 2001). Many youth and youth-allies would refute such stereotypes. Geronimus (1995) cites Massat's study which suggests that the popular assumption that teen mothers abuse or neglect their children may be a cultural myth.

Teen pregnancy and parenting does not always lead to "dropping out" of school.

"They just kicked my sister out recently cause she found out she's pregnant." - Sara, MPSP Participant

A study of the long-term education and economic outcomes of teen mothers (as compared to women who did not reproduce before 20) found no evidence for claims that teen mothers do not do as well. In fact, educational outcomes for mothers are only "slightly negative," "negligible" (no difference), or even "positive" (Hotz et al., 1996 cited in Geronimus 2003). Some studies show that teen mothers fare better economically and educationally

than their counterparts who postpone pregnancy (Furstenberg et al., 1987, Werners & Smith, 2001 cited in SmithBattle 2007).

When discussing teen mothers and education, it is important to point out that pregnant women—adults or teens—were not allowed on school grounds until the 1970s (Nathanson, 1991; Luker, 1996). Even now, many schools violate Title IX mandates and teen mothers are pressured to leave school (Kelly, 2000; Pillow, 2004). Finally, ethnographers Elaine Kaplan and Wanda Pillow also find that pregnancy can motivate women to return to problematic schools in order to "make it" for their children (Kaplan, 1997; Pillow, 2004; see also Russell & Lee, 2006).

Many people struggle with poverty --- whether they have children or not.

"I believe that girls that get pregnant at an early age - they have some issues in their family and stuff since we were little, and I um think that they need to be aware of like how we grew up and like stuff like that before their like, 'oh you just got pregnant.' No, there's a back story to it, you know?" - Sasha, MPSP Participant

Teenage pregnancy or motherhood does not cause poverty; it is important to note that many teenage mothers are poor to begin with (Luker, 1996; Males, 2010). This does not mean that poverty causes teenage pregnancy either (Kelly, 2000). While many parenting teens come from low-income families, not all people born in the context of poverty have children while they are young. What is important to understand is that high rates of teenage pregnancy correlate with communities that experience income disparities and racism (Males, 2010). Therefore, many of the societal ills identified as consequences of teenage pregnancy may actually be consequences of living in poverty. Comparatively, people living in poorer socioeconomic contexts have shorter life expectancies, unequal access to health resources, and fewer educational and career opportunities (Geronimus, 2003, p. 887). As SmithBattle maintains, the surest predictor of a teen's (or a teen mother's) life trajectory is the advantages or disadvantages the teen inherited as a child (2007). ●

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The Crossroads Collaborative, funded by the Ford Foundation, brings stories and number together through action-oriented research with academics, youth-serving organizations, and youth from the community to develop knowledge, increase understanding, amplify youth voice and share what we learn with the broader community.

For more information go to:
<http://mcclellandinstitute.arizona.edu/crossroads>

Crossroads Connections

Vinson, J. E. with the Crossroads Collaborative (in press). *Busting Myths: Confronting Assumptions about Teenage Pregnancy and Motherhood*. *Crossroads Connections*. 1-4. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona.

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