

Like mother, like daughter: a general practice study of maternal influences on teenage pregnancy

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SUMMARY

This study confirmed the hypothesis that pregnant teenagers in the 1990s are more likely to have a mother who had a teenage pregnancy than non-pregnant teenagers. It also found that the daughters of teenage mothers are more likely to continue their own pregnancies.

Keywords: pregnancy in adolescence; mothers; parenthood; continuity.

Introduction

One of the targets of the *Health of the Nation* report is to reduce the 1989 conception rate in teenagers under 16 years of age by at least 50% by the year 2000.¹ Understanding familial patterns may help in detecting those more likely to become pregnant. This study sought to use general practice records to detect differences between pregnant and non-pregnant teenagers in relation to their mothers' experiences.

Methods

THE setting for the study was the Honiton Group Practice, which serves a population of 14 163 in the East Devon town and surrounding rural area. At the time of the study there were eight full-time male partners and one part-time female partner. The practice uses the Exeter Computer System and became fully computerized in 1990. An up-to-date database is maintained and all consultations are recorded. In addition, there are screens for contraceptive and obstetric episodes.

On 1 January 1994 there were 522 girls aged 13–19 years inclusive registered with the practice. There were 37 girls who had had at least one teenage pregnancy by 1 January 1996, and they were studied in detail (Seamark C. MPhil thesis. University of Exeter, 1996). A control group was established comprising one girl for each of the pregnant teenagers: the one who was nearest in age, who was registered with the same general practitioner (GP), and who had not had a teenage pregnancy by 1 January 1996.

The mothers of the girls in each group were sought using the computer records, the knowledge of the GPs and a directory of all households in the area. For 31 (84%) of the 37 girls in the study group, and for 34 (92%) of the 37 in the control group it was possible to establish whether the mother had had a teenage pregnancy.

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Results

The number of mothers in each group who had themselves had a teenage pregnancy is shown in Table 1. In the study group, one girl was adopted; and in the control group one mother had died. Five mothers in the study group and two in the control group were not registered in Honiton. Half the pregnant teenagers had a mother who had also had a teenage conception compared with only a quarter of the girls in the control group ($P < 0.05$; chi-square test).

Of the 16 girls whose mothers had had a teenage pregnancy, five had planned their pregnancies and five chose to continue the pregnancy though it was unplanned. Only six chose termination. Of the 15 whose mothers had not had teenage conceptions, only one pregnancy was planned; two others intended to continue the pregnancy and the remaining 12 opted for termination. The decision to continue or terminate the pregnancy was analysed using the chi-square test with Yates' correction and showed statistical significance ($P < 0.05$).

Discussion

Teenage pregnancy is not a new problem, nor one likely to disappear. Factors that appear to be associated with early childbearing are low socio-economic status, academic underachievement, being in trouble with the courts and having child guidance or psychiatric help.^{2,3} Several studies have detected the tendency towards early childbearing. Those from the United States have often been longitudinal or follow-up studies of the children of teenage parents.^{4,5} In the United Kingdom, teenagers attending for termination or antenatal booking have been asked about their mothers' experiences.^{2,3,6} These studies have found that the mothers may have been pregnant as teenagers and may have conceived out of wedlock.

This study is from a single general practice and the numbers are not large; however, it has some advantages over previous studies. All pregnancies, including those that miscarried, could be studied. Although a pregnancy to a mother may have been missed, the records could be more comprehensive than a daughter's knowledge of her mother's history. It is possible that the control group used is not ideal, but other researchers have had greater problems finding a control group, which has often been much smaller than the study group.^{3,6}

Table 1. Mothers of teenagers in study and control group who had had a teenage pregnancy.

Group	Mother had teenage pregnancy	Mother did not have teenage pregnancy	Total
Teenage pregnancy study group	16	15	31
Control group	8	26	34
Total	24	41	65

χ^2 (with Yates' correction and 1 df) = 4.35; $P < 0.05$.

This study confirms that pregnant teenagers today are more likely than their non-pregnant counterparts to have a mother who had a teenage pregnancy. However, those girls whose mothers did have a teenage pregnancy were more likely to continue their pregnancy and to have planned it in the first place. These findings may help to identify those at risk of teenage pregnancy, although for some teenagers pregnancy may be desired.

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