

**Who Becomes a  
Single Teenage Mother?**

**A Summary of  
Research Results**

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## WHO BECOMES A SINGLE TEENAGE MOTHER?

**R-3489-HHS/NICHD, *Beyond Stereotypes: Who Becomes a Single Teenage Mother?* by Allan F. Abrahamse, Peter A. Morrison, Linda J. Waite, January 1988, ISBN 0-8330-0832-2, 88 pp., \$7.50.**

The image conjured up by the phrase “teenage mother” has been drummed into the public consciousness by countless stories in the popular media. She is unmarried, from an impoverished home where the father is absent, and is either doing poorly in school or has dropped out. Frequently, she is black.

But the stereotype of the teenager most at risk of becoming an unwed mother conceals a surprising anomaly: The individual teenager’s own awareness of what she would stand to lose by becoming a single mother is a strong “tempering” influence, according to RAND report R-3489. “Where personal motivations exist for *not* getting involved with early unwed childbearing, young women manage not to.” This inhibiting effect, the authors add, is apparent at all rungs of the social ladder and across race and ethnicity, but it is particularly strong among blacks. Young black women who hope to go to college have dramatically lower nonmarital birth rates than their peers.

Hence, the study suggests, one strategy for reducing rates of single childbearing is to heighten teenagers’ awareness and perceptions of what is at stake—their future “opportunity costs.” Another is to broaden those opportunities.

Failure to understand the importance of such an immunizing attitude and how its influence varies across racial and ethnic lines can lead to social policies that miss the mark. Girls who believe they have little to lose may see benefits to becoming mothers on their own. Sex education and the availability of contraceptives won’t alter their calculus of costs and benefits within their world.

Rather than blanket strategies that treat all teenagers alike, the problem of “children having children”

needs to be attacked with customized programs “tailored to specific groups of girls,” says the report.

Teens become unwed mothers at a higher rate in the United States than in almost any other industrialized nation. In 1985, 32 of every 1,000 unmarried women aged 15 to 19 gave birth. The infants born to these 271,000 teenagers accounted for one of every 14 births nationwide and one of every three births to single women.

An analysis of data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics in its ongoing “High School and Beyond” survey confirmed the importance of background factors in predisposing a young woman to bear a child outside marriage. The study tracked 13,000 high school sophomore women for two years, comparing the ones who became single mothers with those who did not. Rates varied from as low as one in a thousand for white girls with high academic ability from upper-income, intact families to as high as one in four for low academic ability black girls from poor, female-headed families.

But the young women’s responses to one survey question set the stage for an examination of another factor. To the question, “Would you consider having a child if you weren’t married?,” 23 percent of the white, 29 percent of the Hispanic, and 41 percent of the black respondents said “yes” or “maybe.”

The follow-up survey, taken two years later, found that these responses often amounted to self-fulfilling prophecies. Girls willing to entertain the notion of single motherhood were two to three times more likely than their reluctant peers to become mothers on their own.

In addition to personal rejection of childbearing outside of marriage, the report identified other characteristics that, for better or worse, influence youngsters whose backgrounds place them at high risk. These include college plans, the school peer milieu, “problem behavior,” and degrees of religious commitment, parental supervision, and parent-child communication.

The report cautions, however, that “the strength of these influences varies enough across racial and

ethnic groups to make generalizations about the nature of single teen mothers very questionable grounds for developing preventive efforts.” Some examples: As per the stereotype, black teenagers are at the highest risk for single childbearing. But conscious rejection is a more powerful prophylactic for this than for any other group. It is less strong for whites, weakest for Hispanics. The effectiveness of various social restraints on single childbearing differs from group to group. For Hispanics the strongest influence is religious commitment; for blacks, close parental supervision; for whites, a high-quality relationship with parents. A clear connection between school peer milieu and childbearing appears only among whites. However, the researchers caution that the school environment may shape attitudes for blacks or Hispanics in ways the study could not detect. Whites and Hispanics displaying “problem behavior”—a psychological syndrome measured here by disciplinary problems in school, cutting classes, and absenteeism—have higher rates than those who do not. Childbearing is evidently one of many forms of “risk taking” in which these young women engage. The effect is almost undetectable among blacks. Blacks and Hispanics are at sharply higher risk if they come from female-headed or other nontraditional families, but whites are not. Families’ low socioeconomic status substantially increases the risk for blacks, less so for Hispanics, not at all for whites.

The study’s conclusions strongly suggest that we need to change teenagers’ *thinking* if we want to influence their behavior. For some, that means addressing the antecedents of “problem behavior”; for others, it means offering them more to hope for in life.

R-3489 may be obtained directly from the Publications Department, The RAND Corporation, 1700 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, or by telephoning (213) 393-0411, extension 6686. A journal article based on the report, “Teenagers Willing to Consider Single Parenthood: Who Is at Greatest Risk?” appeared in *Family Planning Perspectives*, January-February 1988, and is available as N-2707-HHS in the RAND reprint series.

#### **RELATED PUBLICATIONS**

##### **from RAND's Population Research Center**

C. Goldscheider and F. K. Goldscheider, "Moving Out and Marriage: What Do Young Adults Expect?" *American Sociological Review*, 1987.

F. K. Goldscheider and L. J. Waite, "Nestleaving Patterns and the Transition to Marriage for Young Men and Women," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 1987.

G. W. Haggstrom, D. E. Kanouse, and P. A. Morrison, "Accounting for the Educational Shortfalls of Mothers," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 1986.

*Reprints of journal articles  
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