

Children

having children

The economic consequences are not what you think

By Kevin Lang

In an era in which social issues bitterly divide the nation, everyone from Bill Clinton to George W. Bush can still agree that teenage childbearing is a scourge on the mothers, their children and society as a whole. Both political parties supported incentives built into the pathbreaking 1996 welfare reform law that were aimed at reducing teenage motherhood. Indeed, the only real ideological division was about how to get from here to there. Conservatives generally support abstinence programs, while liberals favor sex education and access to contraception.

It is ironic, then, that the evidence from social science research does not support the view that teenage motherhood is disastrous for either the mother or her children. Instead, it suggests that the negative consequences for the mother are modest and mostly temporary. And,



TEENAGE MOTHERHOOD

although the evidence here is less conclusive, it points to the conclusion that teenage mothers would not improve their children's life chances by delaying motherhood.

This unintuitive finding is more than a tool for trumping righteous social conservatives and smug liberals at (presumably separate) dinner parties. Teenage motherhood is, indeed, an integral part of America's culture of poverty. But the research implies that the way to reduce both teenage motherhood and teenage poverty is to increase the economic incentives to wait.

CONFUSING THINGS WITH THE FACTS

Many people believe that teenage motherhood has been increasing in the United States. In fact, with the exception of a brief upward tick in the late 1980s, the birth rate among teenagers has been declining steadily since the late 1950s. The birth rate among women aged 15 to 19 is currently less than half its peak level. Note, too, that when people talk about teenage mothers, they often mean women who gave birth when they are under 18, and thus had not reached the age of majority and probably had not finished high school. The numbers say different: the birth rate among 18- to 19-year-olds is about three times the rate among 15- to 17-year-olds.

Moreover, births among younger teenagers have been falling faster than among older teenagers. Between 1991 and 2004, the birth rate among 10- to 14-year-olds was cut in half from an already low level. Among 15- to 17-year-olds, it fell by 43 percent, compared to 26 percent among 18- to 19-year-olds. And note that in the 15-to-17 group, the sharpest de-

cline (57 percent) has been among non-Hispanic blacks, the group widely viewed as at greatest risk of slipping into chronic poverty.

Of course, the political issue is less teenage childbearing than childbearing among unmarried teenagers. And today, childbearing among teenagers is overwhelmingly – 80 percent – to singles. This figure is even higher for younger teenagers. Birth rates for unmarried teenagers rose steadily until 1994, just before President Clinton made teenage births a focus of welfare reform. But the trends in older and younger unmarried teenagers are also somewhat different. Over the last quarter-century, the birth rate among unmarried 15- to 17-year-olds first rose and then fell, so that today it stands at just about the same level as in 1980. The rise was more rapid and the recent decline less rapid among older unmarried teenagers, so that the birth rate for this group has not yet returned to its 1980 level.

Among blacks, the birth rate for unmarried 15- to 17-year-olds is lower than it was in 1969, the earliest year for which we have data. But among girls of all races, the rate over the same period rose from 15 to 20 per thousand. Much of this change probably reflects a decline in shotgun marriages. In 1967, over half of 15- to 29-year-old women who conceived outside marriage and carried their babies to term were married before they gave birth. By 1992, this fraction had slipped below one-quarter. If these figures apply to 15- to 17-year-olds (no breakdown is available), then the entire change in nonmarital childbearing among these teenagers can be explained by the decline in post-conception marriage.

In sum, nothing suggests an epidemic of pregnancy among unmarried 15- to 17-year-olds. They are probably about as likely to conceive and give birth as they were four decades ago. They are less likely to get married between conception and birth, but it is not clear

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that this change is bad for either the mother or the child.

Of course, even if teenage motherhood is not an epidemic, it is still troubling. The United States has changed considerably in the last four decades, and what was not a problem then may be a problem now. Overall, mothers today are older than they were 40 years ago. In part, this reflects improved medical care and technology that permit mothers to give birth later in life. But to a large degree it reflects women's decisions to delay childbearing. And that decision reflects important changes in the economy.

Forty years ago, a 16-year-old might plausibly have anticipated that her high-school-graduate husband would get a job that paid the family's bills and that she would stay home and take care of the children. Even at

the minimum wage, a full-time job would have allowed him to keep the three of them above the poverty line. Today, the demand for the labor of unskilled high school graduates is weak, and worse for high school dropouts. But to generate enough income to escape poverty within an intact family, young mothers have to work – and their ability to get decent jobs without high school diplomas is, to say the least, limited.

EFFECTS ON MOM

In what follows, I will focus on teenagers who first conceived before the age of 18. As discussed above, this is the group about which there is the greatest concern, because they will

TEENAGE MOTHERHOOD

generally not have completed high school before giving birth.

At first blush, the data seems to support the view that teenage parenthood is extremely damaging to the mother. Among 20- to 44-year-olds, only about 40 percent of women who first gave birth as teenagers have high school diplomas – compared with more than twice that proportion among those who delayed motherhood. This is only partially offset by the higher fraction of teenage mothers who have obtained high school equivalency diplomas – an achievement that, by the way, has far less impact on earning capacity than does a diploma.

Teenage mothers have, on average, almost three fewer years of education. Not surprisingly, they also have much lower incomes than other women when they become adults. They are about 20 percent less likely to be working, and those who do work earn about 25 percent less.

In addition, adult women who were teenage mothers are substantially less likely to be married, and more likely to be divorced or separated. If they do have husbands or cohabiting boyfriends, the men's earnings are about 30 percent less on average than the husbands of women who were not teenage mothers earn.

Putting all this together with the fact that, because they started earlier, the women who first gave birth as teenagers have more children, it is

not surprising that they are much more likely to be poor. Family incomes of teenage mothers are about one-third lower than those of other women, and their poverty rate is almost three times as high.

But all this tells us very little about what would have happened to the teenage mothers had they delayed childbearing. Teenage mothers differ from other women in many ways other than just the age at which they first gave birth. They are much more likely to be black or Hispanic. They are less likely to have a father figure in their lives, and if they do, those fathers are substantially more likely to be high school dropouts. Their mothers, too, are much more likely to be high school dropouts. We are also confident that they differ on dimensions that we do not typically measure: teenagers who have sex more frequently, do not use or use ineffective methods of birth control and would not have an abortion are more likely to give birth.

Is teenage motherhood one of the means by which poverty is passed from generation to generation, or are both teenage motherhood and adult poverty consequences of the same childhood disadvantages? There are no conclusive answers. But there are better answers and worse ones, and the better answers point in the same direction: *Preventing a teenager who would otherwise give birth from becoming pregnant and having a child has at most a very small beneficial effect on her future.*

Before reviewing the evidence, it is important to examine the statement carefully and to understand why it is phrased this way. Imagine a god-like social scientist



who wanted to measure the effect of teenage motherhood on the mothers' adult outcomes. He or she (you're not getting me into that one) would select a sample of teenage girls and randomly assign half to give birth as teenagers and half to delay childbearing. For the sake of the thought experiment, we will assume that the researcher can design the experiment in such a way that the participants suffer no harm or benefit from being in the experiment other than having, or not having, a child.

If the experiment were designed correctly, the researcher would be able to measure the effect of being a mother on the average teenager. If the sample size were sufficiently large, he or she would be able to measure this average effect for subgroups: blacks, Asians, children from wealthy families and so on.

Fortunately, we are unable to perform this experiment. More important, it is not really an interesting experiment from a policy perspective. No one is proposing to convince teenage girls to get pregnant and have children. Therefore, there is no reason, other than intellectual curiosity, to care what the effect of having children would be on such girls.

The question to which we would really like an answer is "what is the effect of giving birth on the teenagers who do actually give birth?"

To answer this question, we require a sample of women who gave birth as teenagers and an otherwise identical sample of women who did not. Nature comes close to offering this comparison. Miscarriage is common in pregnancy, and most miscarriages are unrelated to the mother's demographic characteristics. Most important, miscarriage does not seem to be strongly related to the characteristics that predict adult outcomes in terms of poverty, education and the like. Therefore, if there were no abortion, we could simply compare women who became pregnant as

teenagers and miscarried with those who gave birth.

The availability of abortion means that there is a third group of women who neither give birth nor have a miscarriage, and this group is not selected randomly from the set of all women who conceive. There is good evidence that teenagers who have abortions come from more-advantaged backgrounds than do others who conceive as teenagers. Some women who miscarry would otherwise

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have had an abortion and therefore are drawn from this more-favored group. But, by definition, women who give birth are not. Therefore, if we compare teenagers who miscarry with teenagers who give birth, we compare a more advantaged group (because it includes some who would otherwise have had an abortion) with a less advantaged group. This comparison will thus exaggerate the adverse effects of teenage motherhood.

We can also compare outcomes for teenagers who miscarry with those who either give birth or miscarry. Of course, although we are combining outcomes for the birth and abortion groups, women who have abortions do not give birth and therefore do not suffer any adverse effects of birth. We will have to adjust for the difference between the two groups to take this into account. There are well-known statistical techniques for making

TEENAGE MOTHERHOOD

this adjustment. However, this method also misses the mark a bit: women who would choose to have an abortion are at risk of miscarrying for a shorter period than those who plan to give birth. Thus teenagers who would abort are underrepresented among teenagers who miscarry, and therefore the group of teenagers who miscarry is less advantaged than the group that either aborts or gives birth. The bottom line: comparing outcomes for teenagers who miscarry with those who either give birth or abort underestimates the adverse affects of giving birth.

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We therefore have one way of estimating the effect that is too high and one that is too low. The truth lies somewhere in the middle. It is possible to use the two sets of statistical estimates to get a single best estimate, but fortunately, the two sets of estimates are similar. The adverse effects of teenage motherhood on the women who become pregnant and would choose to give birth prove to be small. For example, a birth reduces her probability of graduating from high school by just 2 percentage points.

Since the effects are small, it is not surprising that they do not vary much over the mother's life. The one exception is what hap-

pens to family income relative to the poverty line. Teenage mothers have their children earlier and have larger families when they are young. Their incomes are therefore lower relative to the poverty line when they are young. However, by the time they are in their late 30s or early 40s, they have smaller families than those of women who delayed childbearing. As a result, they have higher incomes relative to the poverty line.

EFFECTS ON THE CHILDREN

Of course, even if the mothers themselves do not suffer adverse effects from teenage childbearing, their children may suffer. Even teenage mothers' earnings tend to rise rapidly in their first years in the labor market. They are more likely to marry as they get older. Therefore, if the teenagers can delay childbearing, they will have more resources to devote to their children. And we know that children who grow up in poverty will fare worse than those who do not. In particular, they are more likely to be poor themselves. Hence, the argument goes, preventing teenage childbearing weakens the poverty cycle by giving more children a better chance in life.

This argument is not compelling. Throughout history, grandmothers have played an important role in child rearing. Indeed, some evolutionary biologists theorize that menopause gave women an evolutionary advantage by having them contribute to the survival of their grandchildren. A woman who gives birth as a teenager is more likely to have a healthy mother of her own who can contribute to her child's upbringing, especially when the child reaches adolescence.

For the most part, although children of teenage mothers do worse than those with older mothers, the evidence does not support the view that this relation is a matter of cause and effect. As always, our problem is that we

cannot observe the same child born to a teenage mother and born to an older mother. Instead we compare a child born to a teenage mother with another, arguably similar child born to an older mother.

But if the two children are not really similar, our results may be biased. When we use sociodemographic variables to determine who is similar, we find that the differences in outcomes between children with teenage mothers and children with older mothers are substantially smaller than appears to be the case based on simple averages. In general, the results still suggest that children with teenage mothers suffer some disadvantages compared to other similar children. This may reflect either real adverse effects of having a teenage mother or our inability to capture many sources of differences between those mothers and other mothers.

Three professors – Arline Geronimus at the University of Michigan, Sanders Korenman at Baruch College and Marianne Hillemeier at Penn State – have compared measures of early-childhood development, like test scores and behavior problems, of cousins, one of whom had a teenage mother and one of whom did not. The differences are small and do not consistently favor one group or the other. One researcher, Dr. Charles Mullin (now with Bates White Consulting) has compared outcomes for children born to teenage mothers or born to mothers who had an abortion as a teenager with those born to mothers who miscarried. He finds that, among nonblack children, children with teenage mothers did better on a variety of early-

childhood outcomes. For reasons discussed above, Mullin’s approach is biased toward finding that the effect of teenage childbearing is benign, but the results for mothers’ outcomes above suggest that it is not badly biased.

All told, then, it is unlikely that giving birth as a teenager has a large adverse effect on children’s early outcomes. Unfortunately, there is little persuasive evidence, one way or the other, regarding long-term effects. But in light of what we know about the persistence of early- childhood outcomes into adulthood,



it is unlikely that a women who gives birth as a teenager severely damages her child’s future.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR POLICY

Often, when I explain to someone that the social science findings do not support the conventional assessment of teenage childbearing, my interlocutor looks at me and, in best Michael Moore fashion, asks, “Would you want your 16-year-old daughter to have a child?”

The answer, of course, is that I would not. But that’s beside the point. The implication of

TEENAGE MOTHERHOOD

the research is not that it would be just fine and dandy if girls, such as my daughter, who expect to graduate from high school, go to college and get good jobs, instead became teenage mothers. What the research does tell us is that girls with poor educational and economic prospects are more likely to become teenage mothers and that, on average, they and their children suffer little, if any, adverse effect from their doing so.

If nothing else, the study of the effects of teenage pregnancy should teach us the dangers of assuming that what is “obvious” is also right.

Looked at in this fashion, the findings are not so surprising. Many of the skills low-wage employers look for come more with maturity than with work experience. Will the employee show up for work, and if she does, will she arrive on time? Will she accept direction from superiors and put up with difficult customers? And if she rises a little in the hierarchy, can she supervise other workers effectively?

To the extent that her wage will depend on her age rather than her experience, the low-skill worker loses little by delaying her entry into the labor market or by working only part time. And it is less costly for her to stop working or to cut back on hours in order to take care of a child when her wage is low than it will be when she is older. If she has poor medical care or bad nutrition, it may be physically better for both her and her baby if she gives birth when she is younger.

In this environment, teenage-pregnancy-prevention programs that focus on teaching teenagers that it is costly for them to have children are unlikely to be successful because what they teach conflicts both with reality and with the teenagers' own understanding of the world. In their interviews with single mothers in poor neighborhoods in Philadelphia, two academic researchers, Kathryn Edin of Penn and Maria Kefalas of St. Joseph's College, found that the poor women are convinced that delaying childbearing is a bad idea. Moreover, in many cases, while the women were “not exactly trying to get pregnant,” they were also “not exactly trying not to get pregnant.” This suggests that while knowledge of contraception may be necessary, it is not sufficient. Many of the women knew how to prevent pregnancy; they simply didn't act on the knowledge.

To prevent teenage pregnancy, then, we must change reality. We must improve the educational and economic prospects of potential teenage mothers. Strikingly, one of the most effective teenage-pregnancy-prevention programs, at the Wyman Center, a youth development organization in Eureka, Mo., does not focus on sex education or teenage pregnancy. Instead, it combines community service with classroom discussions about the students' community service experiences and with discussions and activities centered on adolescent development. Mentoring programs are effective in promoting school attendance, reducing behavior problems and increasing college enrollment. Not surprisingly, programs focused on academic achievement tend to improve academic performance in at least some dimensions.

While no one has found a magic bullet, we are beginning to develop a sense of what works. The most effective programs will combine strong adult-child relations with aca-

demographic support and some form of community service. They must be sufficiently engaging that the children the programs are aimed at will participate voluntarily and regularly, and the staffing must be sufficiently stable that the children can develop effective long-term relationships with the adults running the program.

Beginning in fourth grade, my school district invites students living in public housing to participate in a program that provides these elements as well as an outreach program to parents. We have been fortunate to have stable leadership of the program during its six-year life.

Since the program began, the proportion of students in public housing who are in honors and advanced-placement classes has increased noticeably, and a very high fraction of the students who entered the program (in seventh grade) have gone on to college. Even if the program had no effect on the students' attitudes and expectations, it would reduce sexual activity among teenagers simply by keeping them engaged and involved in other activities during the afternoon, when they might otherwise be unsupervised.

This does not imply that there is no place for programs that focus narrowly on teenage pregnancy prevention. Even if the average adverse effect of teenage childbearing is small, it is likely that the effect is not small on everyone. To the extent that it is possible to focus on such teenagers, education about the effects of teenage motherhood on them may be effective, especially if it is combined with programs that improve their future prospects so that the "opportunity cost" of giving up the alternatives to teenage motherhood goes up.

It is also important to note that we have focused on preventing births among teenage girls who are at risk of getting pregnant and who would choose to give birth if they became pregnant. This does not tell us the ef-

fects of trends like increased sexual activity or policies like reduced access to effective contraception or abortion that would increase the likelihood of teenage childbearing among girls who currently would not give birth as teenagers.

In a series of controversial studies, John Donohue of Yale and Steven Levitt of the University of Chicago have concluded that the increased availability of abortion in the 1970s largely accounted for the decline in the crime rate in the early 1990s. This is consistent with an argument that unplanned children are more likely to engage in criminal activity, but does not directly address whether preventing abortions has an adverse effect on the outcomes for the mothers.

Still, if there is variation in the effect of teen motherhood on mothers, as is probable, and if teenagers for whom a birth would be more costly are more likely to avoid a birth, then any policy increasing births among teenagers who do not currently give birth is likely to be costly to them and to lead to worse outcomes for their children.

The debates over limiting teenagers' access to abortion and contraception extend way beyond the issues addressed here, but it is important to recognize that nothing in this article suggests that such policies have no cost to teenagers. If nothing else, the study of the effects of teenage pregnancy should teach us the dangers of assuming that what is "obvious" is also right.

I do not deny the value of moral suasion, but even moral suasion is more effective if it is supported by the self-interest of the person being persuaded. Currently, teenage motherhood is effectively costless for many teenagers – a rational alternative to poorly paid dead-end jobs. Policies that increase this cost by brightening the horizons of at-risk teenagers will be the ones that are most effective. **M**