

Early Adolescents' Desires to Become Teen Parents: Social Ecological and Social Psychological Correlates

Adolescent childbearing is higher in the U.S. than in any other industrialized country. A large literature has examined antecedents of adolescent childbearing. Much focus has been placed on behaviors, including sexual activity, contraceptive use, pregnancy, and childbearing. In a review of more than 250 studies examining these behavioral outcomes, Kirby (2002) highlights dozens of individual, family, peer, partner, and neighborhood characteristics. However, he stresses that though research has identified many significant predictors of behaviors, we largely do not know *why* some antecedents affect behaviors, particularly among different groups. This suggests the need for a greater study of teens *before they become pregnant* in order to understand the high rates of adolescent pregnancy in the United States.

This study contributes to our understanding of adolescent childbearing by examining early adolescents' preferences regarding the ideal age for them to become parents. Research on variation in fertility aspirations and patterns typically includes women of childbearing years as intentions tend to predict fertility behavior in the near future (Schoen et al., 1999). Thus, asking young adolescents about their childbearing plans is typically not going to produce a strong predictor of fertility behavior years down the road. Of course, this would not be case if young adolescents actually desire to give birth in the near future.

Adolescent births are often implicitly assumed in research to be unintended, or perhaps occurring to youth who are ambivalent about getting pregnant. A few studies have examined adolescents' desires about pregnancy during adolescence, but they have included older adolescents, a focus on expectations rather than preferences, and/or predictors limited to individual and family characteristics. The present study extends the literature in several ways. First, it examines preferences for adolescent age at first childbirth for early adolescents—before they become pregnant. Second, it provides a rich conceptual framework that combines individual, family, peer, and school context and social-psychological perspectives. Third, the data have sufficient numbers of Black and Hispanic students (including Spanish-language only Hispanic students) to allow comparisons by race/ethnicity. Finally, the study will ultimately employ multi-level modeling to examine the effects of individual, familial, peer, and school characteristics on the probability of perceiving adolescent childbearing (age 18 and younger) as their desired age to become a parent among 7th grade students.

Social context and adolescent childbearing

Social ecological theory provides a useful contextual framework for understanding the effects of multiple levels of influence (e.g., individual, couple, family, and peer/community) on behavioral outcomes. Raneri and Wiemann (2007) applied the social ecological theory to assess how context predicts the likelihood of repeat adolescent pregnancy. This study utilizes some of the significant findings of the Raneri and Wiemann study as important contextual characteristics. For example, demographic characteristics, parental educational attainment, siblings and friends who became parents in adolescence, and knowing many peers who are parents are expected to affect ideal age of first birth.

Social psychological correlates

The opportunity costs theory suggests that valuing educational opportunity and attainment should affect desires regarding age at first birth. Adolescents who expect to be able to attend college and view educational attainment as very important to their futures are hypothesized to desire an older age at first birth. Adolescents who are able to self-regulate their emotions are also expected to desire an older age at first birth.

Data and Methods

Data for the present study are from the Pathways to Student Success project (PaSS), a school district-wide survey data collection study. The entire population of 7th grade students present the day of data collection in an urban school district of Oklahoma who opted to participate and whose parents did not object (RR = 98%) was surveyed in either English or Spanish using a self-report standardized instrument. Students with learning disabilities severe enough to be exempt from annual end of instruction exams were excluded from the study. Data was collected on a total of 1,694 students from 12 middle schools. Median age was 13, and 50.2% were female. Ethnically, 39% (n = 661) reported being of Hispanic descent, 29% (n = 491) Black, 20% (n = 337) Caucasian, American Indian, Asian, and other were each ~4% (n = 66, 72, and 67 respectively). Data for this sample include 1605 students who reported on their ideal age to have their first child; if students answered “never” or did not answer the question, they were omitted from the current study.

Preliminary Results

Means and standard deviations of study variables are included in Table 1. Approximately 9% of students in the school district viewed 18 or younger to be ideal for them to have their first child. We explored the relationship between individual, familial, peer, and school characteristics and ideal age of first birth using logistic regression analyses. Preliminary results are presented in Table 2. Preliminary results suggest that students who are Black, Hispanic, or in the “other race” category are more likely than White students to desire adolescent parenthood. Students with greater emotion regulation and those who view college as very important to them report a lower likelihood of desiring adolescent child bearing as ideal for them. Having parents with higher educational attainment is associated with a lower likelihood of viewing adolescent parenthood as ideal. Having a sibling or friends who are teen parents, and viewing pregnancy as common at one’s school are associated with a greater likelihood of desiring to have a child at age 18 or younger.

Discussion

The primary goal of the proposed project is to explore how context (individual, familial, peers, and school) and opportunity costs are associated with desiring adolescent parenthood among younger adolescents. Preliminary findings suggest the importance of modeling antecedents to desiring adolescent childbearing among younger adolescents in an effort to better understand adolescent childbearing. Since students are nested within schools, our next steps include multi-

level modeling and the inclusion of several school-level covariates to test for cross-level associations.

References

- Kirby, D. (2002). Antecedents of adolescent initiation of sex, contraceptive use and pregnancy. *American Journal of Health Behavior, 26*(6), 473-485.
- Raneri, L.G., & Wiemann, C.M. (2007). Social ecological predictors of repeat adolescent pregnancy. *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health, 39*, 39-47.
- Schoen, R., N.M. Astone, Y.J. Kim, C.A. Nathanson, & Fields, J.M. (1999). Do fertility intentions affect fertility behavior? *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 61*, 790-799.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations of Study Variables (N=1605).

<i>Variables</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Ideal age < 19	.09	.28
Individual characteristics		
Female	.50	.50
White	.19	.40
Black	.28	.45
Hispanic	.38	.49
Other race	.12	.32
Emotion regulation	10.41	2.38
College very important	.69	.46
Family characteristics		
Parents' education	1.54	1.15
Sibling is teen parent	.16	.37
Peer characteristics		
Friends are teen parents	.22	.41
School characteristics		
Teen pregnancy common	1.87	.96

Table 2. Logistic Regression Analysis of the Odds of Under 19 Ideal Age of First Birth by Individual, Family, Peer, and School Characteristics (N=1605).

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Model 1</i>			<i>Model 2</i>				
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Exp(B)</i>		
Individual characteristics								
Female	-.04	.19	.96	-.16	.20	.85		
White (reference)								
Black	1.32	***	.37	3.73	1.18	**	.38	3.24
Hispanic	1.03	**	.36	2.80	.97	**	.37	2.65
Other race	1.08	*	.43	2.96	.97	*	.44	2.64
Emotion regulation	-.16	***	.04	.85	-.10	*	.04	.91
College very important	-.85	***	.20	.43	-.80	***	.20	.45
Family characteristics								
Parents' education				-.22	*	.10	.80	
Sibling is teen parent				.69	**	.21	1.99	
Peer characteristics								
Friends are teen parents				.84	***	.20	2.31	
School characteristics								
Teen pregnancy common				.29	**	.10	1.34	
R2	0.11			0.17				

***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05.