

Adolescent Mothers: The Impact of Living Arrangements on Long-term Economic Outcomes

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Abstract

Adolescent fertility raises issues that touch on important social values and more practical concerns. Among the latter are the living arrangements that develop in the first months after a birth. Analyses of data that cover nearly eight years of a longitudinal prospective study trace the implications of early living arrangements for events related to education, employment, subsequent childbearing, and the longer term socioeconomic well being of 213 very young mothers. Educational attainments and income in young adulthood suggest the advantages of living with parents rather than entering into an early marriage, cohabiting, or living alone after an adolescent birth. However, problematic relationships and abusive behaviour experienced in childhood and early adolescence suggest that remaining in the family household is not a viable option for a significant number of very young mothers.

Résumé

La fécondité des adolescentes soulève des questions liées à des valeurs sociales importantes et à des préoccupations pratiques. Dans cette deuxième catégorie, se trouvent les conditions de logement dans les premiers mois qui suivent une naissance. Des analyses de données portant sur près de huit années d'une étude prospective longitudinale relèvent les implications de ces conditions en ce qui touche notamment l'éducation, l'emploi, la procréation subséquente et le bien-être socio-économique à long terme de 213 très jeunes mères. À en juger par leur niveau de scolarité et leur revenu, il semblerait que les jeunes adultes aient intérêt à vivre avec leurs parents plutôt qu'à contracter un mariage précoce, à cohabiter ou à vivre seules après une naissance. Néanmoins, des relations difficiles et la violence vécues pendant l'enfance et la jeune adolescence sembleraient exclure la possibilité de rester au domicile familial pour un nombre important de très jeunes mères.

Key Words: adolescent fertility, living arrangements, economic well-being, educational attainment

Introduction

In his widely quoted commentary on teenage childbearing and poverty, Arthur Campbell (1968) asserted that:

The girl who has an illegitimate child at the age of 16 suddenly has 90% of her life's script written for her. She will probably drop out of school ..., not be able to find a steady job...; she may feel impelled to marry someone she might not have otherwise chosen. Her life choices are few, and most of them are bad. Had she been able to delay the first child, her prospects might have been quite different, *assuming that she would have had opportunities* to continue her education, improve her vocational skills, find a job, marry someone she wanted to marry (emphasis added, p. 238).

Campbell's observations from the 1960's have been supported by cross-sectional studies that document the pattern of lower educational attainment, income, and occupational status, and the higher rates of fertility, divorce, and welfare dependence that are associated with adolescent fertility.

More recently, the independent role of early childbearing in the development of these social and economic disadvantages has been reassessed in light of major longitudinal studies showing that teenage mothers were disproportionately drawn from families with significant social and economic disadvantages of their own as indicated by such variables as parental education and income, family structure, and sibship size.¹ These are, of course, the same background characteristics that would predict many of the outcomes described by Campbell, regardless of an early first birth. Campbell's own words, "assuming that she had the opportunities" seem to anticipate the substantial reductions in observed differences between teenage mothers and those who delayed childbearing that are obtained when statistical controls for prior differences in family background are introduced (see for example, Haggstrom, Kanouse, and Morrison, 1986; Butler, 1992; Furstenberg, 1991 or for a somewhat different approach: Hoffman, Foster, and Furstenberg, 1993; Geronimus and Korenman, 1992).²

Campbell's suggestion that the consequences of early childbearing are inevitable has also been challenged. A longitudinal study that followed

pregnant adolescents into adulthood concludes that:

...the variability in the life course of early childbearers was tremendous. Some mothers had a history of welfare dependence, while others managed to escape it; some married before the birth of the child, some soon after, and some never; some mothers obtained additional schooling and others dropped out; some had many children, while others had few (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, and Morgan, 1987, p. 106).

In spite of their common experience of early childbearing, the young women studied by Furstenberg and his colleagues were "almost evenly divided into four distinct economic subgroups: those on welfare, the working poor, those with moderate incomes, and the economically secure whose current family incomes placed them clearly in the middle class" by their late 20's (p. 132).

This is not to suggest that teenage childbearing is not a social concern. Even though the rates of adolescent fertility in Canada have declined, relatively large teenage cohorts mean that the number of teen pregnancies remains high. As more young women choose to raise their children, often as single parents, the importance of identifying coping strategies that lead to relatively successful adaptations should be apparent. Decisions made by these young mothers, their families, and perhaps their partners before or soon after the birth may limit or encourage successful transitions into adulthood. In the present paper, we consider the implications of one such decision—a young woman's living arrangements in the first months after giving birth.

Data and Methods

Our data are from a longitudinal prospective study of adolescent fertility that began in the mid-1980's with a sample of teenagers drawn from the caseloads of physicians practicing in southwestern Ontario (Turner, Sorenson, and Grindstaff, 1994). The first interview took place as soon as possible after medical confirmation of pregnancy (Time 1) with a second interview four to eight weeks after delivery (Time 2). In 1992, approximately seven years after the first interview, 85% of the respondents were located and interviewed for a third time (N at Time 3 = 213).

The Time 3 interview was designed to replicate many of the measures of personal characteristics, social support and socioeconomic resources that were used in earlier interviews. A life history calendar was added to facilitate the recall and recording of household composition, marital and

the Time 1 age or educational attainment of teens who would live with a parent, cohabit, or live alone, although the young mothers who lived alone after giving birth were more likely to have been employed before their babies were born.

These similarities among the unmarried teens at Time 1 would not predict the pattern of advantage in young adulthood that is associated with initially living with a parent. These young mothers made the greatest educational gains of any group and were as likely as the married teens (the advantaged group at Time 1) to have finished Grade 12 by Time 3. Incomes at Time 3 reflect these educational attainments. The group who started out with parents reported personal incomes averaging \$15,592, compared to just over \$13,000 for those who were cohabiting or living alone. The per capita household incomes that followed from living with parents averaged nearly \$3,000 more than the household incomes associated with any other type of early arrangement.

Living Arrangements, Life Events, and Educational Gains

In spite of nearly everyone's good intentions, the roles and responsibilities implied by different living arrangements may have had important consequences for the longer term educational gains of our respondents. If cohabiting is "just like" being married, starting out in either circumstance probably meant contributing to the household income and even planning more children. While working outside the home and continued childbearing are not uncommon for a new wife or partner, these activities could significantly conflict with a teenage mother's educational goals.

The circumstances of young mothers who were living in households without a husband or partner would have been somewhat different. The immediate plans of young mothers living alone or with a parent were unlikely to have included more children, but their financial responsibilities were perhaps quite different. For young women who were on their own, maintaining an independent household could have made employment a priority, while those who were living with parents could delay taking full responsibility for the economic, domestic and even childcare demands that could interfere with educational goals. Although the roles and responsibilities of young mothers living with their parents may not have always been well defined, this arrangement seems more promising for those intending to go back to school.

The consequences of early living arrangements for events like having another child, obtaining employment, and going back to school are suggested

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by the data in Table 2. As expected, over half of both married and cohabiting teens worked outside the home within a year of the study child's birth (WORK12MN). One-third of those who married had another child within two years (BABY24MN), and nearly two-thirds had a second child within three years (BABY36MN). Given their employment and subsequent fertility, it is not surprising that only about 10% of the married respondents had returned to school in the first year (SCH12MN). Contrary to our expectations, the fertility of cohabitants did not match their married counterparts. Cohabitants were less likely to have another child, but 25% were back in school soon after the study child was born.

Table 2. Early Fertility, Work and Educational Activity by Early Post-Birth Living Arrangements.

	LIVING ARRANGEMENTS				
	Married	Cohabiting	Alone	Parents	Total
WORK12MN	54.8%	52.9%	32.4%	48.8%	8.1%
BABY24MN	33.3%	13.7%	16.2%	3.8%	14.3%
BABY36MN	61.9%	37.3%	24.3%	12.5%	30.5%
SCH12MN	9.5%	25.5%	16.2%	41.3%	26.7%
WORK12MN	Working at a job within 12 months after study child's birth.				
BABY24MN	Next birth within 24 months after study child's birth.				
BABY36MN	Next birth within 36 months after study child's birth.				
SCH12MN	In school within 12 months after study child's birth;				

The popularized image of teenage mothers is most closely matched by the experience of young mothers who started out on their own. They were the least likely to have been employed and fewer than 20% were back in school in that first year. Compared to the group who had lived with parents, the fertility of teens who were on their own was strikingly high.

The intention of going back to school was most frequently realized by respondents who lived with their parents, as more than 40% were back in school within a year after giving birth. This is consistent with their extremely low fertility but inconsistent with the notion that working conflicts

with educational goals. Although many young mothers who lived at home cited economic security as the major advantage of this arrangement, they were at least as likely as those who were married, cohabiting, or living alone to have been working soon after giving birth.

In that first year, the young women in our study were negotiating a number of new adult roles, even though most did not have as much education as would be expected of younger adolescents. A negative correlation between prenatal educational attainment (GRADE1 in Table 3) and educational gains after the birth (MOREED) suggests that those with the greatest deficiencies made the greatest effort to catch up, but most young mothers in this study completed less than a year of schooling over a seven-year period. The remaining correlations in Table 3 suggest the importance of the timing of role-related events for subsequent educational gains. The first event—going back to school within 12 months of giving birth—is the strongest correlate of longer-term educational gains. The negative correlation between educational gains and the birth of a second child within two years suggests the conflicting nature of childbearing and educational goals. There is actually a positive association between working and going to school in the first year, and no association between working soon after the study child's birth and longer-term educational gains. These are unexpected findings that suggest further examination of factors related to employment and educational opportunities.

Table 3. Zero-order correlations between Time 1 Education, Early Activities, and Educational Gains by Time 3

	GRADE1	SCH12MN	WORK12MN	BABY36MN
MOREED	-.24 (.00)	.41 (.00)	.05 (.46)	-.13 (.05)
GRADE1	--	-.07 (.31)	.21 (.00)	.06 (.35)
SCH12MN	--	--	.24 (.00)	-.12 (.09)
WORK12MN	--	--	--	-.02 (.82)

MOREED	Additional years of schooling completed following study child's birth.
GRADE1	Years of schooling completed at Time 1.

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Table 4. Estimated Effects of Living Arrangements and Subsequent Events on the Educational Gains of Very Young Mothers, 1992. London, Ontario. N = 210.^a

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Intercept	1.25	3.63	2.85	2.98
Living Arrangements ^b				
MARRIED	-.65 *** (.24)	-.54 ** (.24)	—	-.12 (.25)
COHAB&ALONE	-.33 * (.19)	-.40 ** (.19)	—	-.15 (.18)
Subsequent Events				
JOB12MN ^c	—	—	.00 (.17)	.01 (.17)
BABY3Yr ^d	—	—	-.21 (.18)	-.17 (.19)
SCH12MN ^e	—	—	1.12*** (.19)	1.09*** (.20)
GRADET1	—	-.23*** (.07)	-.20*** (.06)	-.21*** (.06)
R ²	.03493	.08766	.21635	.21881

^a OLS regression estimates with standard errors in parenthesis

^b If married, MARRIED = 1, 0 otherwise
If cohabiting or living alone, COHAB&ALONE = 1, 0 otherwise
Living with Parents is the omitted category

^c If employed within first year, JOB12MN = 1, 0 otherwise

^d If next birth within 36 months, BABY3YR = 1, 0 otherwise

^e If in school within first year, SCHOOL12MN = 1, 0 otherwise

* p < .10 ** p < .05 *** p < .01

Returning to school soon after giving birth seems to be an important first step that is associated with starting out in the parental home. A multivariate analysis of the combined effects of living arrangements and role related events on educational gains supports this interpretation. The negative regression coefficients that compare the effect of being married or of cohabiting or living alone to living with parents (Model 1 in Table 4) simply

restate our earlier observations.⁴ Leaving the parental household has negative consequences for long-term educational gains. This pattern persists even with the introduction of Time 1 educational attainment as a control variable (Model 2). In Model 3, returning to school soon after giving birth is the only significant predictor of long-term educational gains in a regression equation that includes entering the workforce or additional childbearing soon after the study child's birth. Model 4, which combines the effects of early living arrangements and the events that followed, suggests that the greater educational gains of young women who started out with their parents are largely due to the effect of going back to school within the first year, perhaps before educational goals lose priority to other adult roles and responsibilities.

Prior Characteristics and Living Arrangements

The development of public policy on adolescent fertility raises issues that touch on important social values as well as more practical concerns. Among the practical concerns is the simple question of living arrangements where and with whom should young mothers be encouraged to live in those first months after giving birth? But to some, options that include marriage, cohabiting, living with parents, or alone as a single adult (often with significant public support) represent part of a larger debate about personal responsibility, the role of families, and government assistance. With budgetary constraints at all levels of government, the suggestion that simply remaining in the parental household is the option that could actually be the most beneficial for young mothers is especially attractive. Under this arrangement, a greater share of the immediate costs of teenage childbearing would likely be shifted from publicly funded programs back to the immediate family.

But just as earlier research overstated the independent effect of adolescent fertility on subsequent status attainment, the real advantage of living with parents may be overstated if we fail to account for the prior effects of personal characteristics and family background. The same factors that generally predict the social and economic attainments of young adults may have influenced decisions about the first living arrangements of young mothers as well. For example, young mothers with more ability or commitment to their educational goals also may have been more willing to postpone other adult roles and relationships in favour of living with their parents. If this were the case, subsequent educational achievement could result from characteristics like ability and commitment rather than any particular support or assistance gained by living at home.

Likewise, the apparent benefits of living at home could be explained by family background. Our sample was disproportionately drawn from families with fewer social and economic resources, but the experience of early disadvantage was certainly not uniform. At Time 1, over half of our teenage respondents reported that their parents' marriage was intact. Nearly 40% of their mothers and 40% of fathers had completed Grade 12, and about three-quarters grew up in families with no significant experience of unemployment or welfare.

If families experiencing significant marital discord or economic difficulty are less able to accommodate the needs of a new mother, the option of living with parents may have been more readily available to respondents who had already experienced a more advantaged childhood and adolescence. Since these earlier advantages are linked to the attainments of young adults, the prior effects of family socioeconomic status could have contributed more to the educational gains of young women who lived with their parents than the actual experience of support in the family household just after giving birth.

None of our questionnaire items clearly measured ability or commitment to academic goals, but Time 1 data included parents' education and occupational status as well as the family's welfare status. Simple bivariate analyses suggest that living arrangements in the first months after the study child's birth were independent of these variables. None of the living arrangements we have described differ with respect to mother's educational attainment, father's education, or the main wage earner's occupational status. Not even the very limited resources of families that had received welfare appear to have influenced early living arrangements. It seems unlikely, therefore, that the apparent benefits of living at home are due to selection into this arrangement on the basis of prior socioeconomic advantage.

Although the decision to live at home seems quite independent of socioeconomic status, family background is not entirely irrelevant to the question of where and with whom the young mother should live. For example, teens whose parents experienced a stable marriage were the most likely to marry before or soon after giving birth, establishing a two-parent household for their own children. Less positive background variables seem to have led other women to negotiate the first months after giving birth alone. In the Time 1 interview, respondents recounted their earlier relationships with mothers and fathers using items from the Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker, Tuplin and Brown, 1979). While about 40% of teens who chose to marry, cohabit, or live with parents described a very close, confiding relationship with their mothers while growing up, only about 20% of those who started out on their own could have characterized their relationship in this

way. A very similar pattern is apparent with respect to fathers. Again, there were no significant differences among those who lived with parents, were married or cohabiting, but young women who lived alone were less likely to recall a close relationship with their fathers.

At Time 3, respondents were asked additional questions about childhood and early adolescence. These included references to problem drinking and the use of illegal drugs by a parent as well as physical and sexual abuse. The same pattern that is associated with parental relationships was observed for these more traumatic events and experiences. Young women who chose to live alone after giving birth were more likely to recall problem drinking or illegal drug use by one or both parents. These same young mothers were also more likely to report sexual abuse in childhood or adolescence.⁵

Conclusions

By Time 3, the educational attainment and economic resources of young women who lived with a parent were at least equal to the circumstances of those who were married before or very soon after their babies were born. Women who were on their own or cohabiting were much less secure as young adults. At least as far as education and income are concerned, starting out in a cohabiting relationship seems to offer no long-term advantage over living alone.

Although the young mothers who married were somewhat older, with more education and work experience, the young women who started out living with parents had no particular advantage with respect to these characteristics. Similarly, there were no differences in family socioeconomic status that would predict the gains of the young women who did not leave their parents' household after giving birth.

Our analysis of various types of living arrangements and the events that followed indicate the importance of returning to school within the first year of an adolescent birth. We suggested that in leaving the parental home, young mothers were likely to assume other adult roles and responsibilities that would interfere with educational goals, but while our data clearly show that teens who were living at home were much less likely to have another child soon after the birth of the study child, they were no less likely than other young mothers to work. This is inconsistent with the view that employment conflicts with the educational goals of teenage mothers, but working may have a different impact in the context of the parental household. If the young mother's job was not regarded by her or her parents

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as making an essential contribution to the household income, she may have had greater flexibility in selecting jobs that did not conflict with academic schedules or educational goals. In addition, combining work and school may have been less daunting if other family members were available to help with household tasks and provide dependable child care.

While living with parents seems to convey important advantages for educational attainment and economic security in young adulthood, a significant number of very young mothers are unlikely to view this as an attractive, or even viable option. If decisions about living arrangements are somewhat akin to decisions about migration with "push" factors encouraging departure as well as "pull" factors that attract the migrant to a new destination, one can well imagine that the chance to be with the baby's father represented a significant attraction away from the parental household for many teens. Other young mothers who did not marry or cohabit may have been pushed toward leaving by circumstances within the parental household. Rather than being attracted away by notions of adult independence and freedom, some were unlikely to view their parents' home as a safe haven due to problems with drinking, the use of illegal drugs, physical abuse and even sexual abuse. Young mothers who lived on their own shortly after giving birth were the most likely to report these adverse experiences from childhood.

There is evidence of the benefits associated with remaining in the family household after an adolescent birth, but for some, this may not be a viable option. While prior socioeconomic adversity has been the focus of substantial debate on the consequences of adolescent fertility, our findings suggest that non-economic background variables also limit the options of very young mothers in important ways. For some, starting out in the parental household can set the stage for greater economic security and independence in young adulthood, but others will not likely experience the same opportunities without significant alternative sources of support and assistance in the first months after giving birth.

Footnotes

1. Among these are the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), a national survey of American families conducted since 1968, the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 (NLS), an American panel study that followed high school seniors into early adulthood, and the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), a nationally representative sample of U.S. men and women who were between the ages 14-21 when initially interviewed in 1979.

2. The independent effects of adolescent fertility have also been estimated by matching women who had a teen birth with a sister who did not. Differences in the attainments of sisters would improve estimates of the effects of a teen birth if siblings share both measured and unmeasured background characteristics. This approach has led Hoffman *et al.* to describe further reductions in estimates of the impact of adolescent fertility, while Geronimus and Korenman claim that no differences can be attributed to the independent effects of early childbearing.
3. All reported differences are statistically significant ($p < .05$) unless otherwise noted.
4. Categories for cohabiting and living alone were combined in this analysis. There are no significant differences between these groups in with respect to the prenatal characteristics we have examined or educational gains at Time 3. More importantly, there are no statistically significant differences between OLS equations that treat these as two distinct categories and those that combine living alone and cohabiting in a single category.
5. The pattern of association for physical abuse is somewhat different. Young mothers who lived alone, married, or started out cohabiting were equally likely to indicate that they were slapped, hit or punched by a parent when they were growing up. Those who lived at home were less likely to report such episodes, making physical abuse the only aspect of family life among those we examined to suggest that young women who stayed in the family home had also experienced a uniquely secure or advantaged childhood.

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This study was supported by a research grant from the National Health Research and Development Program (NHRDP) of Health and Welfare Canada to R. Jay Turner.

Received January, 1995; revised February, 1996.