

‘Planned’ teenage pregnancy: Views and experiences of young people from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds

The Government has made reducing teenage conception rates a priority. This study, by Suzanne Cater and Lester Coleman of the Trust for the Study of Adolescence (TSA), looked at what influences young people’s decisions to ‘plan’ a pregnancy. Interviews were conducted with 41 young women and 10 young men who reported a ‘planned’ pregnancy:

- ‘Planning’ ranged from open discussion with partners and taking steps to ensure a positive and healthy pregnancy, to those who were more ambivalent and fatalistic about the prospects of pregnancy despite being aware of how to use contraception.
- Most ‘planned’ pregnancies were not directly related to the desire for a child, but to young people’s background or their current situation.
- An unsettled background and bad experiences at school provided an impetus to ‘change direction’ in life. Young people saw parenthood as an opportunity, within their own control, to change their life and to gain independence and a new identity.
- Neighbourhood characteristics influenced decisions, including limited employment and training opportunities and local acceptance of young parenthood.
- Mothers saw parenthood as providing an opportunity to create a loving family (often compensating for their own bad experiences of childhood), a new purpose, sense of capability and satisfaction. Motherhood was preferred to having a low-paid, ‘dead-end’ job.
- Many mothers spoke of their love of babies, often heightened by experience caring for other children. Several wanted to ‘get motherhood out of the way’, so as to be young enough to enjoy life once their child had grown up.
- Many said that their life would have been worse if they had not become a parent – through continued family disruption and unhappiness, a growing sense of worthlessness and lack of direction and, for some, worsening alcohol and drug use.
- Young fathers gave similar reasons for ‘planning’, but there were also differences, such as their own lack of a ‘father figure’ and wanting to be there for their child. They could have notably less input in the ‘planning’ stage than the mother and were also more likely to regret the decision.
- The study shows that ‘planned’ teenage pregnancy has different motivations. But, given their disadvantaged backgrounds, teenagers saw young parenthood as a reasonably rational choice and, unlike most alternative ways of changing their life, one within their own control.



Introduction

Rates of teenage births in the UK are the highest in Western Europe and the cost to the Government of pregnancy amongst those under 18 has been estimated at over £63 million a year. There is marked regional variation, with half of under-18 conceptions occurring in the fifth of census wards with the highest teenage pregnancy rates. There is a strong association between teenage pregnancy and poverty and disadvantage.

This qualitative study used in-depth interviews with a small sample of white young people from six different areas of high poverty and disadvantage across England, to explore their perceived reasons for 'planning' a pregnancy. (Ages cited are those at first 'planned' pregnancy.)

What was the influence of poverty and disadvantage?

The vast majority of the sample described their motivations for 'planning' a pregnancy in terms of their background and the situation they were in at the time, rather than reasons specifically relating to babies. Their responses split into two broad themes: childhood and background factors, and individual 'needs' and preferences for 'planned' pregnancy.

Childhood and background factors

Although not always stated explicitly, it was clear that the young people's childhood and background had, in some way, provided a foundation for their decision to become pregnant.

Choosing to become pregnant was perceived to 'correct' their deprived childhood and alter their lives for the better. The young women spoke candidly about their unsettled background, their dissatisfaction and various problems associated with school. This was in stark contrast to the sense of purpose and future associated with their child. This feeling of being unsettled was due to issues such as parental separation, difficult relationships with family (including violence), and moving location frequently.

"It was very confusing because my mum and dad split up when I was three-and-a-half, so I had the heartbreak from there and that screwed me up a bit – and that's how I became with J [father of baby] – 'cos I was so screwed up, I didn't know where I was going, really." (Mother, 16)

Mothers often reported bad experiences at school. Three key issues were frequently mentioned: dissatisfaction with work and teachers, bullying and truancy and poor educational attainment and direction.

"I just didn't like school ... I didn't like the people there ... I just hated that environment – I hated being there ... it was horrible. I would just rather have been out doing other things! Working even or doing stuff at home... I just didn't like going to school... Like, one: I didn't want to go to school, and two: I was just determined to have a baby. I was just going to have one – it was going to happen." (Mother, 13)

Their childhood and background experiences within the local neighbourhood and immediate family had also impressed upon young people that teenage pregnancy was very 'normal'. Teenage parents were highly visible in these environments and local people tended to support young people's decisions over pregnancy. Being brought up themselves by teenage parent(s) was also an influence.

"I always wanted to do just what my mum did – it worked for her! She never wanted anything else, and that was the same for me. It's hard, but [daughter's] a good baby and I'd rather do this all day than work – well, it's still working but you know what I mean." (Mother, 15)

"Most people I know, they got a kid. It's not like I'm the only one my age – it's fine. It's normal. My mum was the one asking when we were going to have one, but I was like 'whoa, wait a bit!', but then we had [baby daughter]. But, round here, it's not young – I don't think it's young." (Father, 18)

However, there was an apparent contradiction; many young people hid the fact they were ‘planning’ a child, despite this perceived normality.

“He [baby son] was planned, but we didn’t tell people that it was planned! ... people just assumed really that it’s an accident anyway ... you’re afraid of how people react, you know.” (Mother, 18)

The lack of other opportunities locally was also a factor:

“I see being a mum as a job ... if I wasn’t a mum I don’t think I’d even have a job so it was probably a good decision for me personally.” (Mother, 18)

Individual ‘needs’ and preferences

Some young women strongly felt a ‘need’ to change their lives and viewed having a child as a way to do so. This was normally related to escaping negative situations or insecurities. Becoming a mother was seen as providing this new identity and purpose. Reasons for wanting to change their lifestyle included escaping a difficult home life, a need for a ‘proper’ and loving family of one’s own, gaining a purpose to their life, and a desire to prove their capability.

“I had a really, really bad childhood – I was in care and my parents aren’t very good parents so I just thought a baby would give me that stability and also give me something that would love me unconditionally – never thought it would leave me and – ‘cos it’d be mine – nobody could take it away ... I was the only kid at the age of 9, planning to have a baby... I was desperate for [baby son] and I’ve enjoyed him so much ... [He] gave me my purpose and my place in life, and my goal.” (Mother, 13)

Some young people had a real love of babies, and experience of caring for them, and this was a strong motivation for ‘planning’. Being involved and surrounded by babies led them to want a child of their own, perhaps earlier than their peers, partly because they felt comfortable in the maternal role. Others wanted to ‘get it (motherhood) over with young’ to ensure they were a young parent and still able to enjoy life after their children had grown up.

“I baby-sat all the time ... everybody said I’d be a good mum, the amount of children I’d looked after, and I knew exactly what I was doing when I got pregnant.” (Mother, 18)

“It sounds really awful, but so that I can get on with my life. You know – in a way, if you like, get them out of the way!” (Mother, 16)

Specific issues for concern

The study raises a number of issues worthy of further deliberation:

- There are several different types of ‘planning’, which included situations where the father was not fully involved in the decision.

“We just talked about it, she wanted one, and then we had one. It was simple really. I couldn’t tell you why. It just happened, and it was good, but it wasn’t, like, anything deep.” (Father, 16)

“She just said ‘why don’t we have one?’, and then at first I thought ‘nah, it’s too soon’, but then I thought it’d be quite good, and I thought it wouldn’t happen for ages ... But, it was like, two months and she was like ‘I’m pregnant’, which was cool, ‘cos I really wanted to be a dad by then.” (Father, 18)

“It was probably more me – than my partner – it was totally unplanned for my partner – but for me it was probably more, well, we’ll see what happens, really.” (Mother, 18)

- Stopping the use of contraception was often seen as placing the prospect of pregnancy in the ‘lap of the Gods’. Although all the interviewees were aware of the purpose of contraception, many did not fully recognise the possibility of pregnancy if they stopped using it. There was also a lack of awareness of issues surrounding fertility.
- Those ‘planning’ their pregnancy may have specific support needs, different to those becoming pregnant unintentionally; they may have a ‘head-start’ in preparing for parenthood. Nonetheless, some young people who become pregnant intentionally may have unrealistic expectation of the realities and responsibilities of parenthood.

- Several young women mentioned an earlier miscarriage as a significant factor in their subsequent choice to 'plan' a pregnancy. This was commonly due to a belief that they may not be able to have children and may mark a need for improved support after miscarriage.
- A minority of the sample openly regretted the decision to become pregnant. Worse finances and housing, isolation and the sheer hard work were overwhelming for some. Sharing these experiences may help other young people make better-informed decisions.

"There's only a few very young people who say no, I'm not having a child until I'm 25, but a lot of people do get into a relationship and speak about children – I mean, I look back and I think, I was 14 – why were we talking about marriage and children?" (Mother, 15)

Conclusions

This study shows that 'planned' teenage pregnancy has different motivating factors. It is clear that many of the young parents thought that they had effectively improved their lives, by becoming independent, gaining a sense of purpose, escaping poor family circumstances, and seizing a chance to right the 'wrongs' of their own childhood. However, this research also acknowledges young people's accounts of the challenges involved.

As a final point, given the disadvantaged childhood and background circumstances common to the majority of the sample, the decisions to become a teenage parent were seen by them to be reasonably rational. Pregnancy and parenthood offer these young women a chance to change their life for the better. Unlike most alternative ways of changing their life, such as education, training or employment, pregnancy is seen as an option totally within their own control. When asked to reflect, the vast majority were most adamant that pregnancy had been the right decision at this time in their life.

About the project

This study looked at how poverty and disadvantage influences young people's decisions to 'plan' a pregnancy. In-depth interviews with 51 white young people aged 13-22 were completed in areas of high poverty and disadvantage, in six different areas across England. Most had been in stable relationships or married when they conceived, though some relationships had since broken down. 'Planning' was assessed using a questionnaire, and only those reporting that they 'planned' their pregnancy were interviewed.

For more information

The full report, **'Planned' teenage pregnancy: Views and experiences of young people from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds** by Suzanne Cater and Dr Lester Coleman, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press.

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