

Rudd, N.M., McKenry, P.C., & Nah, M. (1990, September). "Welfare receipt among black and white adolescent mothers". *Journal of Family Issues*, 11(3), 334-351.

This study sought to identify predictors, including early childbearing, of young women's cumulative contact with the welfare system over an eight-year period. Data came from a large, national longitudinal survey.

This article briefly describes results of previous studies of education, marriage, employment status, income, and financial dependence of adolescent mothers. According to research, "An adolescent mother is at high risk for truncated education, excess fertility, low-paying employment, sporadic employment, or unemployment, welfare dependency, forced marriage and marital instability, and children with special needs..."

FINDINGS

Mayfield (1986) found that "black adolescent mothers are not as educationally handicapped by their parenting status as whites..." Marriage seems to hinder educational attainment more than help. "Dropping out of school was more closely associated with early marriage than with pregnancy." (Chilman, 1980). The Alan Guttmacher Institute (1981) and Furstenberg (1976) noted that families are more likely to assist adolescent mothers if they are single than if they married. Mayfield (1986) found that blacks receive more help from their families than do whites—regardless of marital status.

According to the U.S. Department of Commerce (1987), "Of youth-headed families, 30% had incomes below the official poverty line in 1985...the poverty rate for young black families was more than twice as high." Also, "Approximately 50% of Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) budget is provided to households in which the mother was an adolescent at the time her first child was born (Burt, 1986)."

The data for this research came from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. Initiated in 1979 and including about 5,800 women ages 14 to 21, complete data for 1,894 women originally surveyed was available in 1986. The researchers hypothesized the following predictors of welfare receipt:

- * Family background, whether the mother had lived in an intact family at age 14, and the cultural index of her family of origin.
- * Whether the mother had a child before age 18.
- * Whether she had ever been married or completed education.
- * The number of years she spent as a single parent.
- * The number of children she had.
- * The number of weeks worked over the relevant time period.

The data indicate:

- * Black mothers completed more education than white mothers.
- * 30% Of white mothers did not experience single parenthood.
- * 76% Of the black mothers were still single in 1986, compared to 15% of the white mothers, but 39% of the white mothers had experienced marital disruption compared to only 15% of black mothers.

"Having lived in an intact family at age 14 significantly reduced the time that white women spent as a single parent...The variable was not significant for black women." Summary findings note that "decreased educational attainment directly increases contact with the welfare system and indirectly increases that contact by increasing the amount of time spent as a single parent...which increases contact with the welfare system."

For white women, having lived in an intact family at age 14 reduced the amount of time that women received welfare and "indirectly reduces that time through its positive association with educational attainment and its negative association with time spent as a single parent." For black women, having ever been married decreased their contact with the welfare system "more than three times as much as it did for white women."

CONCLUSION

The study indicated that programs should strive to prevent adolescent births and help teen moms help themselves by providing better opportunities for them to complete more education and acquire work experience in upwardly mobile jobs. Yet, "this study serves as a reminder that a more general attack on the problems of families that are unable to provide a supportive environment for the development of human capital is a better defense against the risk of welfare dependency of future generations than an attack on adolescent parenting per se."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What are adolescent mother's needs?
2. Who can best help adolescent mothers?
3. How can a nation best help adolescent mothers?
4. Is adolescent childbearing serious enough to warrant national attention? Church attention? Who is responsible? Who should address this issue?
5. If adolescent childbearing is serious enough to garner attention, then what resources should be implemented to prevent or reduce the incidence of adolescent childbearing?
6. How does adolescent childbearing affect young people in your youth group? Are they affected by this problem? What is your response to them?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Children are raising children. Adolescents are still growing and developing. Because they have not completed their own growth, they do not have the skills or maturity necessary to raise a child in a healthy, stable environment.
2. Adolescent childbearing should encourage institutions to seek preventive methods.
3. Young people need encouragement and support from parents, teachers, and youth workers to abstain from sexual relationships.
4. Youth workers also need to provide support and education in parenting and marital relationships. A healthy, intact family is the most effective weapon against adolescent childbearing.

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