Psychological Correlates of Teenage Motherhood

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The social and economic consequences of adolescent motherhood are known, yet the psychological associates are largely unstudied. Clinical studies point to distressing reactions to adolescent pregnancy, and do not reflect changes in social attitudes about teenage parenting. In this study, adolescent mothers (n = 62), pregnant teenagers (n = 63), and non-pregnant and nonparenting (n = 60) adolescents enrolled in public high schools completed measures of socioeconomic status, depression, anxiety, loneliness, self-esteem, and social supports. Findings suggest that adolescent mothers and pregnant teenagers are less distressed by their situation than was once thought. Social supports and socioeconomic status predicted psychological well-being better than parenting status. Expanded school programs for teenage mothers and renewed efforts to enhance young mothers' social and socioeconomic resources are called recommended.

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INTRODUCTION

Teenage motherhood has social, educational, and economic disadvantages for parent and child (Card and Wise, 1978; Moore et al., 1979; Presser, 1980). Few data exist on the psychological correlates of teenage pregnancy or motherhood. The lack of recent findings about rates of depression, anxiety, and other psychological conditions leaves professionals without needed information for case and program planning. That teenage motherhood is increasingly more common (National Center for Health Statistics, 1982) suggests the need for more information on its psychological implications. Available research on teenage mothers, although dated, offers some perspective on psychological correlates of adolescent motherhood and is reviewed.

Conclusions that pregnant and parenting adolescents suffer major psychological distress arise from studies predating the current tolerance for sexual activity by adolescent and unmarried women and for single parenting. One often cited report finds a high suicide rate among pregnant adolescents (Gabrielson et al., 1970); its data were collected in 1963-1964, a time when young mothers were commonly sent away from home under a veil of secrecy and shame. A second study with data collected during the mid-1960s found that 30% of all unwed, and often teenage, mothers showed impaired mental health based on Langner's Psychiatric Symptom Screening (Sauber and Corrigan, 1970). As reviewed by Chilman (1981) and Quay (1981), many other studies on teenage parenthood also draw on a 1960s data base.

Because of recent social change, these studies bear reexamination and replication. Certainly, "out-of-wedlock" pregnancy and parenting do not arouse the stigmatizing of past decades and no longer mandate the cloistering of pregnant or parenting adolescents. Early reports on the psychological consequences of adolescent pregnancy focused on young White mothers who probably suffered more disapprobation than young Black mothers. Mores have changed for both groups, and the rate and acceptance of outside-of-marriage sexual activity and conception are rising (Lincoln, 1981). Community-based services for adolescent parents are also expanding as evidence of adolescent mothers' increase in liberty; the latter were more often in school, unmarried, and in the labor force in 1979 than 1968 (Mott and Maxwell, 1981). Such changes imply that adolescents' reactions to motherhood may also have changed, an argument that current research is unable to confirm or refute.

Other earlier efforts sought to identify psychological correlates of becoming a teenage mother. Most findings came from case studies and extrapolations of reports on characteristics of small samples of youth who became pregnant. These reports are also dated and lack control groups of