

Family Planning Perspectives
Volume 29, Number 2, March/April 1997

Age Differences Between Minors Who Give Birth and Their Adult Partners

By Laura Duberstein Lindberg, Freya L. Sonenstein, Leighton Ku and Gladys Martinez

The role of adult men in adolescent childbearing has received heightened attention in recent years, and new policy efforts have focused on statutory rape laws as a way to reduce adolescent childbearing. Analyses of the 1988 National Maternal and Infant Health Survey indicate, however, that these policies would not apply to most teenage births. Among mothers aged 15-17 who had a child in 1988, 27% had a partner at least five years older than themselves. In addition, since 23% of minors with older partners were married at the time of the infant's birth, 21% of babies born to unmarried minors were fathered by substantially older men. While births to young mothers and older men raise social concerns, these births make up a small share of all teenage childbearing: Only 8% of all births to 15-19-year-olds are to unmarried minors with a partner five or more years older.

(Family Planning Perspectives, 29:61-66, 1997)

During the last decade, researchers began questioning the assumption that the sexual partners of teenage mothers were necessarily teenagers themselves.¹ Recently, studies have indicated that a majority of babies born to teenage girls were fathered by adult men.² Public attention has become focused on the role of "predatory" adult men in teenage childbearing. This view has led some states, such as California and Florida, to toughen and expand their statutory rape laws.³ In addition, the 1996 federal welfare reform laws specified, as a strategy to reduce teenage pregnancy, "that States and local jurisdictions should aggressively enforce statutory rape laws."⁴

While prior research made important contributions showing that adult males father many of the children of adolescent mothers, such studies have tended to treat teenage mothers and their adult partners as a homogenous group. Although Landry and Forrest provided a number of measures of age-gaps between fathers and mothers, often just one combination is cited—that of mothers aged 15-19 with partners aged 20 or older; in their study, 65% of 15-19-year-old mothers had a partner aged 20 or older.⁵ Males and Chew took a similar conceptual approach, identifying "school-aged" mothers (ages 10-18) and their non-school-aged partners (19 or older).⁶

Grouping together 15-19-year-olds and their partners ages 20 and older may misrepresent the issue of adolescents bearing children with older men. First, regardless

» [article in pdf](#)

» [table of contents](#)

» [search the FPP archive](#)

» [guidelines for authors](#)

of the mother's age, the pattern of fathers being slightly older than mothers fits squarely within societal norms. For example, in 1988, babies born to women aged 21-30 were fathered by men who were, on average, three years older than their partner.⁷ While a 25-year-old man fathering a child with a 15-year-old would probably meet with social disapproval, the same might not be true for a couple consisting of a 21-year-old and an 18-year-old, particularly if they were married.

Second, many relationships between men 20 or older and women 19 or younger do not violate any state's law, provided there is no forcible rape or incest. Although statutory rape laws vary from state to state, they always pertain only to minors—individuals younger than age 18, but the age threshold is lower in many states. Further, most states specify a minimum age that the "perpetrator" must be to be charged or specify a minimum age difference between the partners.

Table 1 (page 62) describes the statutory provisions prohibiting sexual intercourse between adults and minors aged 15-17 for five states with the greatest annual number of births. Only statutes that describe felony offenses are included.⁸ In three of the five states examined, the statutory provisions do not even apply to 17-year-old women, but to those 16 and younger. The minimum age difference required for a felony offense ranges from three to seven years, with Florida not specifying an age restriction for men who engage in sexual intercourse with women younger than 16. The median age difference appears to be five years.

Table 1. Age-related statutory provisions prohibiting sexual relationships between minors and adults, selected states, as of 1997

State	Age of minor	Age of adult	Minimum age difference
California	¾17	>=3 years older	3 years
Florida	16-17	>=24	7 years
	<16	Unspecified	None
Illinois	13-16	>=5 years older	5 years
New York	¾16	>=21	5 years
Texas	¾16	>=3 years older†	3 years

†This age difference is legislated as an affirmative defense"; the statute does not specify the age of the perpetrator. Sources: California, *Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Act, Penal Code* (1995), sec. 261.5; Florida Statutes (Page 2937), sec. 794.05; 720 Illinois Comp. Stat. Ann. § 5/12-15 (1993); NY Penal Law § 130.25 (McKinney 1987); and Texas Penal Code, sec. 21.11.

Statutory rape laws are not uniformly enforced, however. Although such laws have had a long history in the United States, they had fallen into disuse in the last few decades,⁸ and only recently have some states revived and expanded these laws as part of efforts to reduce teenage pregnancy and related public welfare costs. For example, California's Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Act of 1995 created harsh penalties for statutory rape that results in pregnancy. Furthermore, the act earmarks special state funds to expand the prosecution of adult men who father children with minors.

In this article, we present data that examine closely the role of older men in teenage

childbearing. To more accurately reflect the policy issues, we limit our analysis to mothers aged 15-17. (Comparable data for mothers aged 14 and younger were unavailable.[‡]) In addition, we focus on young women whose partner was at least five years older; such men are referred to as "older" partners throughout. This five-year age difference approximates the typical legal criterion for statutory rape in the five largest states, although other states may use stricter or looser criteria.

Using this five-year definition of age differences between 15-17-year-olds and their partners, we examine three related questions: What is the frequency with which children of 15-17-year-olds are fathered by older men? Second, what are the characteristics of these minors and of their relationships? Finally, how do the socioeconomic characteristics of the older men who father children with minors differ from those of other adult fathers, and from those of younger fathers?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our analysis uses data from the National Maternal and Infant Health Survey (NMIHS), which was conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics from 1988 to 1991. (The analysis by Landry and Forrest used the same data set.⁹) The NMIHS is a nationally representative follow-back survey of women aged 15-49 who had had a live birth, fetal death or infant death in 1988. Information was collected from both the infant's birth certificate and a questionnaire either mailed or administered over the telephone 6-30 months after the birth.

In the live birth sample, the response rate for the questionnaire was 71% among women aged 15-17 at the time of delivery, similar to the 74% response rate for the overall sample. We excluded six of these young mothers because of missing information on key variables, which resulted in a final sample of 673 15-17-year-olds. In all of the results presented, we weighted the data to adjust for the NMIHS sampling design and nonresponse. After weighting, 34% of these young women were black, 18% were Hispanic and 48% were white or of "other" races (Asian, Aleutian Islander and American Indian). Almost equal proportions lived in households with an annual income of less than \$10,000 and in households with an income of more than \$10,000 (51% vs. 49%); 88% were first-time mothers.

The NMIHS data were also used to identify 5,040 22-30-year-old males who fathered a child in 1988. Within this group, we examine differences between men who fathered a child with a minor and men who had a child with an adult partner.

We set the lower age boundary for these men at 22 years so that they would be at least five years older than a 15-17-year-old partner. We limited the upper boundary to age 30 to avoid comparing increasingly dissimilar men. (A wider age interval would not capture appreciably more men with teenage partners.)

The NMIHS is unique because information about the partners is available for a large share of the sample. Birth certificates often contain incomplete information on fathers, and the data on the partners of teenage mothers are especially unlikely to be entered. For example, among women interviewed for the NMIHS, 62% of those aged 15-17 at delivery did not report their partner's age on the birth certificate, compared with only 27% among women aged 18-30.

The NMIHS questionnaire corrected for this underreporting by directly asking mothers about the father's age, education, race and employment. Thus, the mother's interview, and not the infant's birth certificate, served as the source for the father's age at the infant's birth. Respondents were asked to give the father's current age in whole years; we calculated his age at the time of the birth. To obtain the parents' age difference, we subtracted the mother's age from the father's, and rounded to the nearest whole year. Finally, we added six months to each parent's whole-year age, to adjust for not knowing when in the year they were born. Data on the age of the baby's father were available for 95% of the 15-17-year-old respondents; the NMIHS imputed the remaining missing values using a "hot deck" procedure based on maternal age and race.¹⁰

We present descriptive measures of the characteristics of each parent and their relationship. Although we estimated multivariate models, the small sample sizes and high intercorrelation between the measures made the models very unstable, so in this article we present descriptive results only.

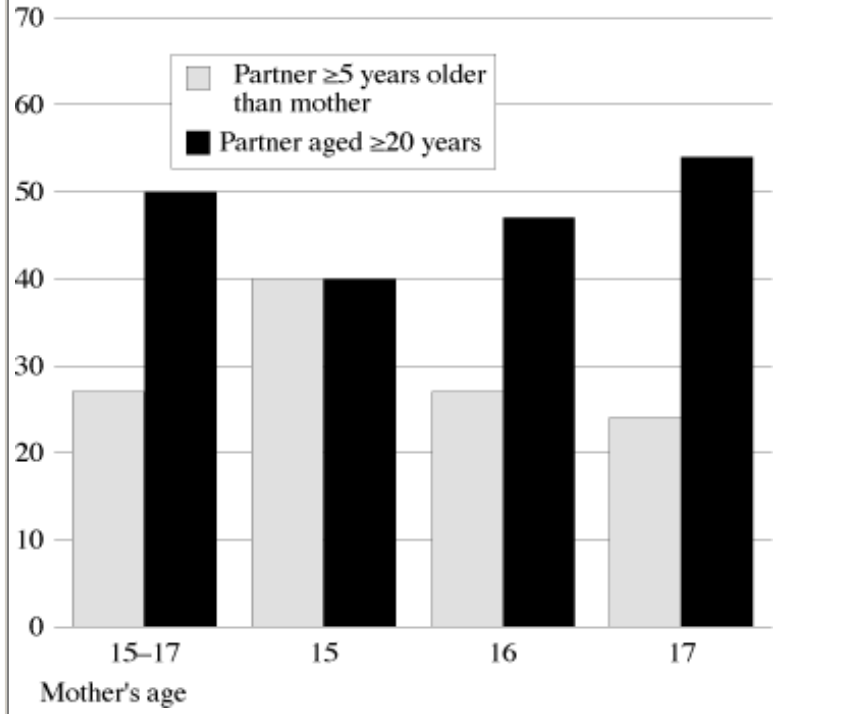
The NMIHS data have at least three important limitations. First, they represent only the experience with older men of minors who gave birth; as such, they do not indicate the overall incidence of sexual relations with older men, since not all sexual activity results in a pregnancy and not all pregnancies result in a birth. Second, the NMIHS provides no direct information about the quality of the relationship between the teenage mother and her partner. For example, we do not know if the sexual relationship was voluntary. Finally, data about the male partner is limited by the female respondent's recollections and by the accuracy of what she was told (i.e., she might be unsure about the father's age or employment status, or may report this information incorrectly).⁵ This uncertainty may add some bias to the measures, but the direction of that bias is unknown.

RESULTS

HOW MANY MINORS?

As expected, conclusions about the role of adult men in adolescent childbearing are sensitive to how the behavior is defined; much of the discussion on the issue has been framed in terms of partners who are at least 20 years old. However, as Figure 1 illustrates, the proportion of 15-17-year-old mothers in 1988 whose partner was at least five years older was substantially lower than the proportion whose partner was at least age 20 (27% vs. 50%). The proportion with at least a five-year age difference among these younger women is not significantly different from that among women aged 18-30 (27% vs. 26%, not shown).

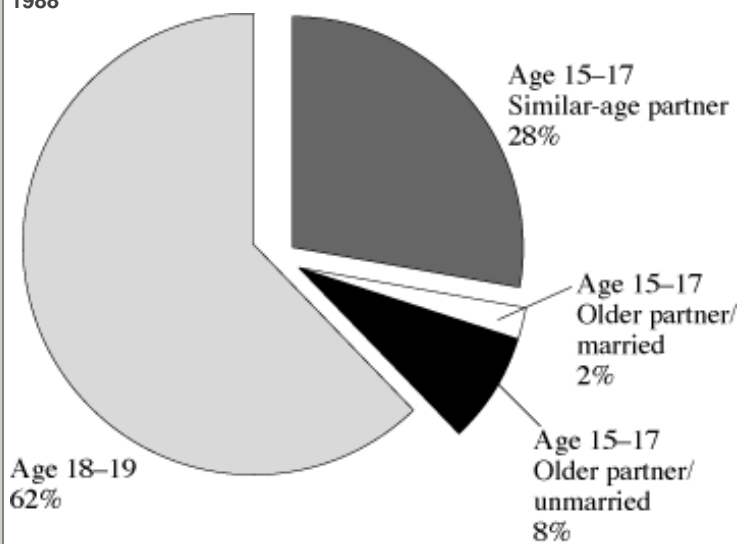
Figure 1. Percentage of young mothers whose partner was five or more years older than the mother and aged 20 or older, by mother's age, National Maternal and Infant Health Survey, 1988



The youngest mothers in the sample were the most likely to have a partner five or more years older (40%) (By definition, the same proportion had a partner at least 20 years of age.) This proportion dropped to 27% and 24% among 16- and 17-year-olds, respectively. Thus, births to the youngest mothers were disproportionately fathered by much older men who had engaged in sex nine months earlier with 14- and 15-year-olds. On the other hand, births to 15-year-olds made up only 13% of all births to 15-17-year-old women. They thus contribute relatively little to the overall incidence of minors having children fathered by older men.

Births to minors and older men constitute a relatively small proportion of all teenage childbearing. Births to women aged 15-19 can be categorized by the mother's age, the relative age of her partner, and her marital status at the child's birth (see Figure 2). The majority of births to women aged 15-19 were to mothers aged 18 or 19 (62%). Births to 15-17-year-olds thus made up only about one-third of all teenage childbearing. Relatively few of these minors were unmarried and had a substantially older male partner: Overall, among all births to 15-19-year-olds in 1988, only 8% involved unmarried women aged 15-17 and men who were at least five years older.

Figure 2. Percentage distribution of births to 15-19-year-olds, by relative age of partner and marital status, according to mother's age, 1988



WHICH MINORS?

If births to teenagers result from older men "preying" on young women, then we would expect the most vulnerable among them to be more likely to bear a child with an older man. For example, poverty or other negative home situations may lead young women to look to an adult man for rescue or escape.¹¹ An alternative explanation, based on problem behavior theory,¹² suggests that minors who engage in risky behavior are more likely to have an older partner, since problem behavior can indicate underlying psychosocial problems and, thus, increased vulnerability. In addition, having sexual relations and a child with an older partner can itself be defined as problem behavior, and problem behaviors often occur together or are correlated with one another.

Two small, nonrepresentative studies found some evidence of a correlation between economic vulnerability and older partners, and between problem behavior and older partners. A study of 300 couples found that teenage mothers who were involved with older men (at least three and one-half years older) were more likely than their peers with similar-age partners to come from poor households, and were more likely to engage in problem behavior.¹³ Boyer and Fine found that teenage mothers who reported having been sexually abused—and who, on average, had older partners—were more likely than nonabused teenage mothers to report a problem behavior, including alcohol and drug use and dropping out of school.¹⁴

Contrary to our expectations, the NMIHS data show that having an older partner was not strongly associated with the minor's race or household income (see Table 2, page 64). Mothers aged 15-17 who lived in the poorest households during their pregnancy (those with a yearly household income of less than \$10,000) were marginally less likely than teenage mothers living in higher income households to have had an older partner ($p < .08$). One possible confounding factor is that older partners were more likely than similar-age partners to be cohabiting with the mother during the pregnancy, which could raise her household income.

Table 2. Percentage distribution of 15-17-year old mothers, by age difference between woman and partner, according to selected characteristics, National Maternal and Infant Health Survey, 1988 (unweighted N=673)

Characteristic	Father's age		
	Older†	Similar‡	Total
All	27.0	73.0	100.0
Race			
Black	26.1	73.9	100.0
Hispanic	33.8	66.3	100.0
White/other§	25.2	74.8	100.0
Household income			
<\$10,000	24.0	76.0	100.0
>\$10,000	30.2	69.8	100.0
Parity			
First birth	24.9	75.1***	100.0
Higher-order birth	41.9	58.2	100.0
Used alcohol 3 mos. before pregnancy			

Yes	43.3	56.8***	100.0
No	22.2	77.8	100.0

***Difference is statistically significant, based on chi-square tests, at p \leq .001. †In this and subsequent tables, older signifies male partner is 5 years older than female partner. ‡In this and subsequent tables, similar denotes couples in which the male partner is <5 years older than the female partner or younger than she. §Other race includes Asian, Aleutian Islander and American Indian.

Involvement in problem behavior, however, strongly differentiated minors with older partners from those with similar-age partners. For example, teenage mothers who had already had a child were more likely than those with a first birth to have had an older partner (42% vs. 25%). Furthermore, mothers aged 15-17 who had used alcohol in the three months before the pregnancy were nearly twice as likely to have had an older partner as were those who did not use alcohol (43% vs. 22%).

WHAT KIND OF RELATIONSHIPS?

If the relationships between older men and minors are predatory, they might be more casual or transient than those between similar-age partners. In the most extreme cases, babies fathered by older men may be the result of involuntary sexual activity.

Alternatively, if older men are viewed as providing a way out of poverty or other undesirable home situations, adolescents may be more likely to establish close relationships with these older men, who potentially have more economic resources available to them than younger men.

Our data indicate that childbearing occurs within the context of ongoing close relationships for an important proportion of 15-17-year-old mothers who have older partners (see Table 3, page 64). First, 23% of these young mothers were married at the time they delivered their baby.** Thus, overall, 21% of births to unmarried minors were fathered by a much older man. Moreover, 35% of minors with an older partner had been cohabiting during the pregnancy,*† and 49% were living with their partner at the time of the interview (held up to 30 months after the birth).

Characteristic	Father's age	
	Older	Similar
Married at delivery	23.3	20.3
Lived with partner during pregnancy	35.4	22.7***
Lived with partner at interview	48.6	28.1***
Lived with parents during pregnancy	38.4	56.0***
Lived with parents and partner during pregnancy	12.0	12.2
Wanted pregnancy	27.0	20.2

***Difference is statistically significant, based on chi-square tests, at p \leq .001.

The relationships between 15-17-year-old mothers and their older partners appear to be closer than those their peers have with similar-age partners. Although the likelihood of being married at delivery was not significantly different between young mothers with older and similar-age partners, the living arrangements of these young women differed significantly by the age of their partner. Mothers with an older partner were significantly more likely than those with a similar-age partner to have cohabitated during the pregnancy and to be doing so at the time of the interview.

Consequently, adolescent mothers with an older partner were significantly less likely than those with a similar-age partner to have lived with their parents during the pregnancy. Teenage mothers with an older partner were also marginally more likely than those with a similar-age partner to report their pregnancy as wanted ($p=.06$), although clearly the majority of births to minors, regardless of their partners' age, were unwanted.

ARE OLDER MEN BETTER PARTNERS?

Young women's economic vulnerability suggests that for some, older men may be more desirable partners than teenage men. On the one hand, older men's age and experience suggest that their immediate earning potential may be greater than that of younger men. On the other hand, an older man involved in a sexual and childbearing relationship with a minor may possess developmental or psychosocial deficits that directly reduce his earning potential and other aspects of his attractiveness as a partner.

Research based on nonrepresentative samples supports both of these hypotheses. In one study, for example, older fathers reported more problem behavior than similar-age fathers, including more arrests and poorer academic performance; however, older fathers also reported higher incomes and employment rates than similar-age fathers.¹⁵ Overall, from the perspective of a teenage woman who is looking for a partner, men in their 20s may appear more "economically desirable"—or, according to William Julius Wilson's theories, more "marriageable"¹⁶—than males who are still teenagers.

Although the types of data collected in the NMIHS limit our ability to fully examine older men's desirability as partners, data on employment and occupational status suggest that older fathers have greater immediate earning potential than similar-age partners. As Table 4 shows, employment rates in the year prior to the pregnancy were significantly higher for the older fathers than for the similar-age fathers (89% vs. 74%). Although data on school attendance were not available, younger men's lower likelihood of employment (full-time or part-time) probably stemmed from their being in school; their jobs may have included more part-time work (such as after-school jobs) that pays lower wages. Among men who were employed, older fathers were more likely than similar-age fathers to be in professional or managerial occupations (24% vs. 14%), which imply higher wages.

Table 4. Percentage distribution of men who fathered a child with a woman aged 15-17, by selected characteristics, according to age difference with mother (unweighted N=673)

Characteristic	Father's age	
	Older	Similar
Employed in year before pregnancy		
Yes	88.9	73.7***
No	11.1	26.3
Occupation†		
Professional/managerial	23.7	14.3*
Service sector	15.6	15.8
Other	60.7	69.9
School status‡		

Behind for age	32.5	25.2
Appropriate for age	67.5	74.8
Race		
Black	34.7	35.9
Hispanic	26.5	22.6
White/other	38.8	41.5
Total	100.0	100.0
*p<.05. ***p<.001. †Among those who were employed the year before the pregnancy. ‡All men 19 and older were assumed to have attained an age-appropriate education if they had at least a high school degree.		

Although racial background may be related to lower wage-earning potential, older partners did not differ significantly from similar-age partners by race. However, older fathers were marginally more likely not to have finished high school ($p < .06$) than similar-age fathers were to be at least two years behind in school (33% vs. 25%). This finding supports the finding of other studies that older partners are more likely than similar-age partners to have engaged in problem behavior.

The apparent earning advantage of older men over teenage men may be short-term only. The cross-sectional nature of the NMIHS does not allow us to distinguish earning differences attributable to life-course stages from those due to skill and achievement. Older partners' later stage in the life course probably explains at least some of their observed earning advantage. However, the earning gap between low-skilled adult men and adolescents will likely diminish, and potentially switch direction, over time.

ARE OLDER PARTNERS DIFFERENT?

Do adult men who father children with minors differ from men who enter into childbearing relationships with adult women? The behavior of adult men who father children with minors is often looked at as "deviant" and representative of problem behavior and psychosocial deficits that may reduce their earning potential and personal stability, making such men less desirable partners to adult women. Adult men who become involved with a minor may be less able to compete successfully with other adult men for women of their own age.

Overall, a very small proportion of adult men father children with a minor partner. Among fathers aged 22-30 who had a child in 1988, 1.8% had a partner aged 15-17. Table 5 suggests that men aged 22-30 who fathered a child with a 15-17-year-old have less wage-earning potential than their peers who had a baby with an adult woman. Nearly 28% of men with a minor partner did not have a high school degree, compared with only 18% of those with an adult partner.

Characteristic	Mother's age†	
	15-17	>=18
High school degree		
Yes	72.4	81.7*
No	27.6	18.3
Employed in year before delivery		
Yes	90.1	93.3

No	9.9	6.7
Occupation†		
Professional/managerial	24.4	32.1*
Service sector	18.9	9.7
Other	56.7	58.2
Race		
Black	34.7	16.3***
Hispanic	27.0	13.8
Other	38.4	69.9
Total	100.0	100.0
*p<.05. ***p<.001. †Overall, 1.8% of merged 22-30 fathering a child in 1988 had a partner aged 15-17, and 98.2% had a partner who was 18 or older. ‡Among those employed the year before the delivery.		

Although there was no significant difference between these groups of men in the likelihood of employment in the year before the pregnancy, men with a minor partner were significantly less likely than those with an adult partner to be in a professional or managerial occupation (24% vs. 32%), and were nearly twice as likely to be in a service occupation (19% vs. 10%).^{*‡} Disproportionately high percentages of men with a minor partner were black and Hispanic; such differences in racial and ethnic background suggest that men with a minor partner are comparatively economically disadvantaged.

Although men who fathered a child with an adult woman were, on average, 2.3 years older than their peers with a minor partner (mean ages of 26.9 years and 24.6 years, respectively), additional analyses indicate that this age advantage did not account for the observed economic differences (not shown). However, the extent to which the younger men in these groups may eventually improve their wage-earning potential through increased education or labor-market experience is unknown.

The context of childbearing also differed significantly for the adult and adolescent mothers with a partner aged 22-30. As Table 6 (see page 66) shows, 76% of adult couples were married at time of the birth, compared with 28% of mixed-age couples. Adult-adolescent couples were significantly less likely to have lived together during the pregnancy than more age-matched adult couples. Adult women were also nearly twice as likely as minors to report that their pregnancy was wanted.

Table 6. Among couples in which a man aged 22-30 fathered a child in 1988, percentage with selected characteristics, by age of mother (unweighted N=5,040)

Characteristic	Mother's age	
	15-17	>=18
Mother married at delivery	27.5	76.2***
Lived together during pregnancy	54.1	82.5***
Woman wanted pregnancy	27.6	58.2***
Woman wanted pregnancy/ was unmarried at delivery	12.6	31.2***
***p<.001.		

A similar association persisted among couples who had not married by the time of delivery: The proportions who were both unmarried and wanted the pregnancy were 31% among the adult women and 13% among the adolescents involved in a relationship

with an adult man. Thus, for minors who had had a child with a man aged 22-30, their lower likelihood of living with their partner, being married and wanting the pregnancy strongly suggests that their relationship with the child's father is less well-established than that of older women.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

While much recent public attention has focused on the role of adult men in adolescent childbearing, our analyses suggest that this attention has overestimated the extent of the problem for a number of reasons. First, the problem is usually framed in terms of the two-thirds of 15-19-year-olds who have had a child with a man aged 20 and older; the problem is considerably smaller when only mothers who have not reached the age of majority are considered. Second, focusing on fathers who are substantially older than the 15-17-year-old mother—at least five years—also reduces the numbers involved. Third, nearly one-quarter (23%) of minors who have a child with a much older partner are married at the time of the infant's birth. Thus, 21% of births to unmarried minors are fathered by substantially older men.

These births make up a small share of all teenage childbearing. Only 8% of births to 15-19-year-olds in 1988 in the United States involved unmarried 15-17-year-olds and men who were at least five years older.⁸ Furthermore, births to unmarried minors and older fathers accounted for only 3% of all nonmarital births in that year. Thus, even if all of these births could be prevented, the net impact on teenage fertility and on nonmarital birthrates would be quite small.

The young mothers and their much older partners are distinctly different from more age-matched parents. For teenage mothers, older male partners appear to be more successful economically than teenage fathers. Minors also appear to be having closer and more ongoing relationships with older men than with their peers. Since we were able to examine only cross-sectional measures, however, the extent to which these differences are due solely to age and whether they will persist over the long term are both unknown. The apparent short-term advantages observed here in older men's wage-earning status, for example, may lessen over time as younger men "catch up".

However, when we compare older men who father children with minors to their peers who father children with adult women, the men having relationships with adolescents appear to be less desirable partners, since they have comparatively lower earning potential and less established relationships. This probably indicates their lack of success in the market for adult female partners, and might explain why they seek substantially younger partners.

The higher levels of prior childbearing and alcohol use among women younger than 18 who have an older partner suggest involvement in behavior generally associated with precocious adulthood. Further, the overall low marriage rates and high level of unwanted pregnancy suggest that most births to minors do not occur within the context of planned family formation, regardless of the father's age.

To the extent that cohabitation implies a close, long-term relationship, the NMIHS data help dispel the belief that all relationships between young mothers and much older fathers—at least five years older—are predatory; however, no data are available on involuntary sexual activity. Our data tend to support the hypothesis that young

mothers and their older partners are more likely to have close relationships than minors and similar-age partners, as measured by the likelihood of cohabitation during the pregnancy and of marriage by the time of delivery. However, the long-term stability of these relationships is unknown; research indicates that cohabitation and early age at marriage are associated with less stable partnerships than marriages occurring at older ages.¹⁷

Our findings suggest that these young mothers follow the same social rules of partner selection used by adult women. Virtually the same proportion of mothers aged 18-30 and mothers aged 15-17 had a partner who was five or more years older than themselves (26-27%). Among adult women, this age difference raises little social concern; in contrast, large age differences between male partners and mothers younger than 18 are of greater concern, because they could signify developmental differences that may not exist between adults of different ages.

This issue of developmental differences is particularly troubling for the youngest mothers in the NMIHS sample, who are most likely to have partners five or more years older. Forty percent of these 15-year-old mothers had a baby with a partner aged 20 or older. Although these youngest women account for a very small proportion of all adolescent births (2%), they are an extremely vulnerable population and their age raises serious concerns about their ability to give meaningful consent to sexual relations with older men. Interventions that would prevent very young adolescents from becoming sexually involved with much older men are clearly warranted.

Although these findings about the youngest mothers raise questions about sexual abuse, that issue cannot be addressed directly with these data. Other studies report a high incidence of sexual coercion or assault among sexually active adolescents, particularly among pregnant adolescents and those who have already had a child.¹⁸ According to the National Survey of Children, about 18% of sexually active women aged 17 and younger report having been forced to have sex at least once.¹⁹ While these data point to dramatic social problems, they do not support the conclusion that all young mothers who have older partners would report that they were forced to have sex. It would also be incorrect to conclude that having a partner of the same age assures that sexual activity is consensual.

That births to unmarried minors who have substantially older partners represent a relatively small portion of all U.S. adolescent births belies the popular perception that preventing sexual involvement between older men and young adolescents will substantially reduce rates of teenage pregnancy. New state and federal initiatives that emphasize the vigorous enforcement of statutory rape laws²⁰ are unlikely to be the magic bullet to reduce rates of adolescent childbearing, since the number of births that result from acts covered by such laws is small. Policymakers need to pay attention to broader means of reducing teenage childbearing, such as sexuality education, youth development and contraceptive services. Policies that improve young women's current lives and expand their future options might better address the issues that lead some to prematurely engage in childbearing and other adult behaviors.

Finally, those few adult men who become involved with considerably younger women may respond to incentives and disincentives to fathering a child with a minor. The

disincentives, such as expanding the reach and increasing the penalties of statutory rape laws, have already been advanced; improving access to economic opportunities and achievement for disadvantaged men may be an equally important avenue to try to discourage adult sexual involvement and childbearing with minors.

References

1. F. L. Sonenstein, "Risking Paternity: Sex and Contraception Among Adolescent Males," in A. Elster and M. Lamb, eds., *Adolescent Fatherhood*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Hillsdale, N.J., 1986, pp. 31-54; and J.G. Dryfoos, *Putting Boys in the Picture*, Network Publications, Santa Cruz, Calif., 1988, pp. 35-37.
2. D.J. Landry and J.D. Forrest, "How Old are U.S. Fathers?" *Family Planning Perspectives*, **27**:159-165, 1995; and M. Males and K.S.Y. Chew, "The Ages of Fathers in California Adolescent Births, 1993," *American Journal of Public Health*, **86**:565-568, 1996.
3. M. Navarro, "Teen-Age Mothers Viewed as Abused Prey of Older Men," *New York Times*, May 19, 1996, Section 1, pp.1 & 18; P. Edmonds, "Teen Pregnancy Revives Laws on Statutory Rape," *USA Today*, March 28, 1996, p. A1; K. Wexler, "California Cracks Down on Men to Curb Underage Pregnancies," *Washington Post*, April 6, 1996, p. A3; and P. Donovan, "Can Statutory Rape Laws Be Effective in Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy?" *Family Planning Perspectives*, **29**:30-34, 1997.
4. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, P.L. 104-354, section 906(a).
5. D.J. Landry and J.D. Forrest, 1995, op.cit. (see reference 2).
6. M. Males and K.S.Y. Chew, 1996, op. cit. (see reference 2).
7. Authors' tabulations of data from the 1988 National Maternal and Infant Health Survey.
8. C.A. Nathanson, *Dangerous Passage: The Social Control of Sexuality in Women's Adolescence*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 1991; and P. Donovan, 1997, op. cit. (see reference 3).
9. D.J. Landry and J.D. Forrest, 1995, op. cit. (see reference 2).
10. National Center for Health Statistics, *Public Use Data Tape Documentation—1988 National Maternal and Infant Health Survey*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Hyattsville, Md., 1991.
11. M. Males, "School-Age Pregnancy: Why Hasn't Prevention Worked?" *Journal of School Health*, **63**:429-432, 1993.
12. R. Jessor and S.L. Jessor, *Problem Behavior and Psychosocial Development: A Longitudinal Study of Youth*, Academic Press, New York, 1977.
13. M.E. Lamb, A.B. Elster and J. Travare, "Behavioral Profiles of Adolescent Mothers and Partners with Varying Intracouple Age Differences," *Journal of Adolescent Research*, **1**:399-408, 1986.
14. D. Boyer and D. Fine, "Sexual Abuse as a Factor in Adolescent Pregnancy and Child Maltreatment," *Family Planning Perspectives*, **24**:4-11 & 19, 1992.
15. M.E. Lamb, A.B. Elster and J. Travare, 1986, op. cit. (see reference 13); and J.B. Hardy et. al., "Fathers of Children Born to Young Urban Mothers," *Family Planning Perspectives*, **21**:159-163 & 187, 1989.
16. W.J. Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987.
17. T.C. Martin and L. Bumpass, "Recent Trends in Marital Disruption," *Demography*, **26**:37-52, 1989; L. Lillard, M. Brien and L. Waite, "Pre-Marital Cohabitation and Subsequent Marital Dissolution: Is It Self-Selection?" *Demography*, **32**:437-458, 1995; and W.G. Axinn and A. Thornton, "The Relationship Between Cohabitation and Divorce: Selectivity or Causal Influence?" *Demography*, **29**:357-374, 1992.
18. D. Boyer and D. Fine, 1992, op. cit. (see reference 14); and E. Swenson, "A Profile of Young Adolescents Attending a Teen Family Planning Clinic," *Adolescence*, **27**:647-654, 1992.
19. K.A. Moore, C.W. Nord and J.L. Peterson, "Nonvoluntary Sexual Activity Among Adolescents," *Family Planning Perspectives*, **21**:110-114, 1989.
20. P. Donovan, 1997, op. cit. (see reference 3).

Laura Duberstein Lindberg is research associate, Freya L. Sonenstein is director and Gladys Martinez is research associate, all at the Population Studies Center, The Urban Institute, and Leighton Ku is senior research associate, Health Policy Center, also at The Urban Institute, Washington, D.C. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 1996 annual meeting of the Population Association of America, New Orleans, May 9-11, 1996. The authors gratefully acknowledge the helpful comments of Christine Bachrach, Robert Lerman, Kristin Moore, Joseph Pleck and Elaine Sorenson. The article was prepared with support from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) and the Office of Population Affairs (OPA). All opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Urban Institute, NICHD or OPA.

*[L](#)anguage in the 1996 federal welfare reform bill describes men as "predatory" and as engaging in "predatory sexual practices." California's Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Act of 1995 refers to "adult sexual predators." (See: reference 7; and California, *Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Act*, Penal Code [1995], sec. 261.5)

[†](#)Many states have additional provisions for situations in which the perpetrator is a family member or in a position of authority over the minor. These are not included in Table 1. For a more detailed description of statutory provisions prohibiting sexual relationships between minors and adults in all 50 states, see reference 3, Table 1.

[‡](#)Vital statistics data for 1988 indicate that mothers aged 14 and younger contributed 5.6% of all births among minors, and 2.2% of all births to women aged 19 and younger. (See: National Center for Health Statistics, "Advance Report of Final Natality Statistics, 1988," *Monthly Vital Statistics Report*, Vol. 39, No. 4, Supplement, 1990.)

[§](#)Our approach differs from that used by Landry and Forrest (see reference 2), who referred to the maternal reports of the father's age only when birth certificate data were unavailable. Because birth certificates often are completed secondhand by hospital personnel, we chose to use the measures directly reported by the mother. Among mothers aged 15-17, the partner's age entered on the birth certificate had a .87 correlation with the age calculated from the maternal report.

[**](#)The proportion married was derived directly from the birth certificates for the majority of cases. However, for births occurring in eight states that do not report marital status on birth certificates, marital status was inferred in the NMIHS by comparing the surnames of the mother and father. This method should underestimate the number of marital births, making our estimate of marital births to minors with older fathers a conservative one. (See: K.C. Schoendorf et al., "Comparability of the Birth Certificate and 1988 Maternal and Infant Health Survey," *Vital and Health Statistics*, Vol. 2, No. 116, 1993.)

[*†](#)Women were asked, "Who lived with you during most of your pregnancy?"

[*‡](#)These differences persist when the sample is stratified by race. Because of the small sample sizes involved, however, these analyses are not shown.

[*§](#)We also determined the proportion of 15-17-year-old mothers in the NMIHS whose births were fathered by men four or more years older than themselves—44% overall, and 34% of those who were unmarried. In general, 13% of nonmarital childbearing to women aged 15-19 involved 15-17-year-olds and men four or more years older.