

**The Educational Trajectories of Pregnant Adolescents in South Africa**  
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South Africa has one of the highest rates of adolescent pregnancy in the world. More than 35 percent of South African adolescents became pregnant before the age of 20 and more than 30 percent have given birth at least once (Republic of South Africa 1998); these figures are even higher for black and colored adolescents. While there is some indication that the rate of adolescent pregnancy has declined in recent years (Jewkes et al. 2001), these rates have stayed remarkably stable over time (Kaufman et al. 2000; Preston-Whyte et al. 1990; Republic of South Africa 1998).

The “problematic” nature of adolescent pregnancy has been the subject of considerable debate in the social science research and policy circles. A vast number of studies have attempted to document the significant social and economic disadvantages facing adolescent mothers and their children, mainly in the United States (see Alan Guttmacher Institute 1996 for a review of this literature) but also in South Africa (Cunningham and Boulton 1996; Nash 1990; Preston-Whyte et al. 1990). However, at least in the United States, researchers have long debated whether an adolescent birth causes disadvantage or whether adolescents and their children would be disadvantaged regardless of birth timing because pregnant adolescents tend to come from disadvantaged backgrounds already (Geronimus and Korenman 1992; Geronimus et al. 1994; Hoffman 1996). To date, this remains an open question. Because of significant cultural differences between South Africa and the United States, it is not clear that these reputed negative consequences of adolescent pregnancy would be as significant in South Africa as they might be in the US. For one thing, nonmarital childbearing is very common and widely accepted in South Africa (Makiwane 1998). Family members are frequently available to provide childcare and the children of adolescent mothers are usually absorbed into the mother’s (or grandmother’s) household and given the protection of her ancestors (Jewkes et al. 2001; Kaufman et al. 2000; Tanga and Uys 1996). Some researchers have noted that adolescent childbearing has become institutionalized and is a “fairly typical stage in the domestic lifecycle of families” (Jewkes et al. 2001).

Moreover, given the central role that fertility plays in a South African woman’s identity (Preston-Whyte 1988), an adolescent pregnancy may be a far more welcome prospect in South Africa than it would elsewhere, with an attendant reduction in the potential negative consequences. For example, many teenagers are encouraged to become pregnant by their partners and grandmothers (Preston-Whyte et al. 1990; Richter 1996; Varga and Makubalo 1996; Wood et al. 1997), are encouraged to ‘prove’ their fertility (Richter 1996), and are often told by their mothers that pregnancy during adolescence is far more preferable than the prospect of infertility caused by contraceptive use (Wood et al. 1997).

Furthermore, unlike most other developing countries, girls who become pregnant in South Africa are not expelled nor are they forbidden from returning to school after giving birth. This fact, in combination with the often readily available childcare noted above, may make adolescent parenthood less disruptive and less harmful to a girl’s life chances in South Africa than it might be elsewhere. Researchers have already suggested that this education policy may explain why girls in South Africa who start childbearing during adolescence end up with relatively small completed families, unlike those in many other countries (where girls who start childbearing early end up with large families) (Kaufman et al. 2000).

Limited attention has been given, however, to the consequences of adolescent pregnancy for girls in South Africa. There has been some attention to the potential for obstetrical risk, but in general, these studies have found no evidence that young maternal age confers any risk on adolescent mothers or their children in South Africa (Ncayiyana and ter Haar 1989; Varga 1998). Other potential consequences, such as those for educational outcomes or socioeconomic prospects, have been largely ignored.

There have been two studies that have given a cursory examination of the educational attainment of adolescent mothers within analyses of other issues (Fuller and Liang 1998; Maharaj et al. 2000). In their study of girls' education in South Africa, Fuller and Liang found that many girls appear to return to school after giving birth and Maharaj and colleagues (2000) found that about 35 percent of black girls aged 19 and younger who had given birth at least once were currently attending school.

However, these studies have lacked the year-by-year data on girls' progress through school that would enable further insights into the influence of adolescent pregnancy on educational trajectories. Furthermore, they have not investigated what factors may prevent girls from returning to school or encourage them to return. And finally, both of these studies were conducted on data collected in the early 1990s, before the end of apartheid and the transition to democracy. Significant changes may have occurred in educational and economic opportunities and incentives in the past decade that may have changed the way adolescent pregnancy shapes educational trajectories.

This study examines associations between adolescent pregnancy and educational attainment among South African young people to determine whether adolescent mothers are at a disadvantage compared to other adolescents. It will also investigate which girls return to school after giving birth and which do not to learn more about what structural barriers might exist for girls wanting to return to school after a birth.

I use data from Wave I of the 2002 Cape Area Panel Study, a survey conducted on a regionally representative sample of approximately 5,000 adolescents ages 14-22 in the Western Cape area, to examine these issues. This dataset, released in June 2004, contains extensive information on respondents' entire schooling history, family socioeconomic background and context, and birth history. The wide array of background variables available in this dataset will enable me to control for important factors like household size and the presence of young children in the household, socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, and school performance and enable me to parse out the factors that may influence a girl's return to school following a birth.

The results of this study have important implications for both policy and programs that could help to ameliorate the potentially negative consequences—or at least make things easier—for adolescent girls who become pregnant in South Africa and elsewhere in the developing world.

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