



5 of 9 DOCUMENTS

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WHILE WE SHAKE OUR HEADS IN DESPAIR OVER GIRLS GETTING PREGNANT, THERE'S LITTLE
DISCUSSION OF THE ADULTS WHO ARE FATHERING MANY OF THEIR BABIES.

SERIES: 1 in 8. Who's to Blame for Teen Pregnancy

BYLINE: By SHARI ROAN, TIMES HEALTH WRITER

BODY:

She is 15 and pregnant. The father of her child is 25, a high school dropout working a minimum-wage job.

What's wrong with this picture? That is the question facing health, social services and government experts as they begin to grapple with one of the most troubling aspects of the teen pregnancy problem: the role of adult men.

According to the state Senate Office of Research, two-thirds of the children born to teen mothers are fathered by men 20 or older. Similar trends are seen nationwide, thus shattering the notion that teen boys play a significant role in teen pregnancy .

While 18% of sexually active 15- to 17-year-old girls become pregnant each year, only 4% of sexually active boys 15 to 17 are making their partners pregnant, according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute.

"Looking at the male's age really transforms this whole issue of teen pregnancy," says Mike Males, a student at the University of California, Irvine's Graduate School of Social Ecology who has studied the state statistics. "One teen pregnancy is not like another teen pregnancy, but we've been treating them as if they were all alike."

Moreover, these relationships portend another disturbing phenomenon. New survey data show that as many as 62% of pregnant teen-agers are victims of past sexual abuse -- most often at the hands of adult men such as fathers, stepfathers, mothers' boyfriends, stepmothers' sons or other male family acquaintances.

This trend is so newly discovered that its meaning and impact on teen pregnancy can only be surmised, says David

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Fine, a researcher for the state of Washington who found high rates of sexual abuse in teen mothers. While only a small percentage of teens become pregnant as a result of rape, it's clear that many more who are victims of sexual abuse become pregnant later, and at very young ages.

"There is real concern about how much young women have to say about their sexuality," says Dr. Helen Rodriguez-Trias, a Brookdale, Calif., pediatrician. "In teen women's lives there is often an element of coercion and pressure . . . an element of violence. This has to be looked at."

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Historical data show there is nothing new about adult men fathering the babies of teens, according to Males' analysis of state birth records dating to 1921. It is perhaps only due to the sharp rise in teen birth rates nationwide that officials have begun to look at the characteristics of the fathers.

But Males suggests other reasons that the phenomenon has been long ignored. For example, most sex education and family planning services are not set up to deal with disparate age groups.

"It's in no one's interest to deal with this," says Males, whose analysis of state births from 1990 to 1993 showed that 74% of the fathers of teen-agers babies were adults. "When you start mixing age groups, you really mess things up from a program or policy perspective. . . . There is a real strong effort to separate adult behavior from children's behavior."

When it comes to teen pregnancy, it's simply been easier to blame teen-agers, who are no one's political constituents.

"There is a psychological factor for avoiding this topic. Teens are scapegoats," Males says. "They become scapegoats for our not dealing with a lot of issues pertaining to adults,"

And teen-age girls, in particular, bear the blame along with their children, Rodriguez-Trias says.

"The role of boys and men in family planning has been tremendously underplayed. But they are half of the equation," she says.

While school sex education programs sometimes connect with teen-age males, the adult men who are fathering most teen-agers' babies have frustrated health officials with their invisibility.

One of the few studies on these fathers showed many are school dropouts or have had troubles with the law. That view was supported at a recent conference in Sacramento that discussed why these men seek to date much younger girls, says Males.

"The consensus seemed to be that these were fairly troubled guys with emotional problems. A lot go to prison. These guys need to have a sense of power and control," he says.

Virtually no sex education programs or family planning clinics in California are styled to attract males 20 to 30 years of age.

"We haven't been able to isolate that age group," says Julie Linderman, a health education consultant for the state Office of Family Planning. "There isn't a great deal of knowledge about what works to help men be responsible sexual partners."

That may be changing, however. Gov. Pete Wilson has proposed additional state services to prevent teen pregnancy with an emphasis on the behavior of men, as has State Sen. Bill Lockyer (D-Hayward). And although the legislation has foundered in committee, Rep. Louis Caldera (D-Los Angeles) has proposed strengthening statutory rape laws. Under current state law, unlawful sexual intercourse occurs when the male is 18 or older and the female is under 18.

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"One of the changes that needs to occur is a community awareness of this sort of predatory sexual behavior," says Lockyer, whose program is contained in SB 1169. "Somehow, we need to persuade (adult men) that their behavior is irresponsible and have it be a matter of social disapproval."

Lockyer advocates a media campaign modeled after a highly praised program in Maryland that raised the specter of 18 years of child support payments for adult men who are irresponsible about sex. A media campaign aimed at young adult men is also the centerpiece of Wilson's proposed \$12-million initiative on teen pregnancy. He also advocates developing a new male education curriculum and a range of new counseling and clinical services for adolescent and adult men.

Efforts to establish paternity and demand child support from fathers of babies born out of wedlock are also becoming a favored platform in welfare reform proposals nationwide. But there is no evidence that these attempts will prevent pregnancy, says William Marsiglio, a sociologist at the University of Florida who has studied paternity issues.

"I don't think there is any clear evidence that fears of child support enforcement have hit home with young men. It hasn't been institutionalized to any great extent, so the experiment isn't complete."

Moreover, Marsiglio suggests that strong-arm tactics to make men pay for their progeny may backfire. Many of these men -- the majority of whom are in their 20s -- have poor job skills and dismal earning potential. According to a recent report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation of Greenwich, Conn., median income of men 25 to 34 has fallen 26% after inflation since 1972.

Mandatory child support "oftentimes distances fathers from their young children by making them feel inferior," Marsiglio says.

Other lawmakers favor enforced-paternity programs in combination with increased health services that provide contraceptives to men and programs that help them return to school or enter a work training program.

Still others say a get-tough approach is necessary. Caldera's plan is to implement a pilot program called the Underage Sex Offenses Unit, under the purview of the attorney general's office, that would investigate and prosecute statutory rape when the minor becomes pregnant. Seth Raffkin, a consultant to Caldera, says the bill is aimed at cases in which the girl is 16 or younger and the man is 20 or older.

"This would provide a deterrent to stay away from these young girls. Secondly, it would offer prosecutors a tool to establish paternity and child support," Raffkin says. "You don't want to scare the father out of town. But you want to establish paternity. At some point, if he does have some resources . . . you can go after him later."

The bill failed to pass the Public Safety Committee and was granted reconsideration in next year's session. But people are very leery about prosecuting private sexual behavior even when minors are involved, Raffkin notes.

"People have said, 'Do you want to crack down on consensual sex?' But according to the law, it is not consensual sex," he says.

Adds Randall Ramirez, a member of the March of Dimes Health Professional Advisory Council: "We do have a lot of younger teens consenting to sex, but what kind of 12-year-old can make an informed consent?"

Indeed, statistics show a considerable age gap between pregnant teens and the babies' fathers. Statewide analysis by UCI's Males shows that young teen-agers tend to become pregnant by men who are six years older, while high school-age mothers become pregnant by men an average of 4.8 years older.

Teen-age girls may be less successful in negotiating contraceptive use with an older partner and may be more swayed by his promises that he loves her and will stand by her, according to a study by University of Pennsylvania

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researcher Elijah Anderson. Moreover, pregnant teen-agers are much less likely to seek abortion if the baby's father is an adult: 61% have abortions if the father is younger than 18, but the figure drops to 33% if the father is 20 or older, according to the Guttmacher Institute.

Men who are several years older than their teen-age partners have "an authoritative edge" that, in the eyes of the girl, makes him seem more credible and capable of bearing the responsibilities of fatherhood, Anderson found. The men, meanwhile, have no concept of themselves as responsible fathers.

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The "authoritative" edge wielded by adult men may also be abusive, according to new studies that suggest a high rate of sexual victimization among teen mothers.

At St. Anne's Maternity Home in Los Angeles -- where pregnant girls "in trouble" used to be sent by their embarrassed families until the baby was born and could be placed for adoption -- two-thirds of the residents are now placed there by county Social Services because of neglect or abuse, says administrator Carol Lee Thorpe.

"To me, the most profound aspect of teen pregnancy is that adults aren't protecting these girls," Thorpe says. "These girls have never had the experience of developing boundaries. They have no sense of being empowered in their own lives. It's not surprising that they can't say no to sex."

Abused adolescents suffer a series of losses that makes them unable to exert control over their bodies, experts say. They lose self-esteem and feel they are powerless to alter the events in their lives. They may also suffer developmental delay and sexual maladjustment.

"These women were socialized into their sexuality by abuse or incest, so by the time they are adolescents, they are primed to be very vulnerable to men and unable to assert themselves," says Judith S. Musick, the founder of the Ounce of Prevention Fund in Chicago, who reported one of the first associations between teen pregnancy and prior sexual abuse.

"Even the notion that you can use contraception is based on the notion that you have a body worth protecting. But that is based on adults first caring for and protecting you. These girls don't think they own their bodies."

Amy Marro was a starry-eyed 15-year-old living in Los Angeles when she fell in love with her first boyfriend, a 19-year-old who was charming and good-looking. But Marro was soon dealing with a situation that would have been challenging for an adult.

Her prince charming was manipulative and physically abusive, breaking her nose during one fistfight.

"I was so in fear of him," says Marro, now 24. "I wanted to get out of the relationship, but I thought it was a matter of him trying to kill me."

She wanted to have an abortion when she became pregnant at 16, and Marro even enlisted the help of her mother in making an appointment. But when the boyfriend objected with physical threats, Marro canceled the abortion. Five months into her pregnancy, the boyfriend went to prison, and Marro was able to free herself from him. She went on to get her degree and found a job as a legal secretary while raising her son.

"I never wanted to get pregnant; I wanted to break up with him. But he was so threatening."

University of Washington professor Debra Boyer, co-author of a Seattle study with Fine showing that 62% of pregnant and parenting teens were prior victims of sexual abuse, says that victims of sexual abuse often begin having voluntary intercourse younger than teens who are not abused, and are more likely to use drugs and alcohol and to not use contraceptives. These teen-agers, Boyer says, often talk about "leaving their bodies."

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"These young women have stopped feeling. They are not making decisions about sexuality. They have become very passive. They feel tainted and spoiled," says Boyer, whose study strictly defined abuse as "contact molestation, rape or attempted rape."

Teen birth rates are unlikely to be altered significantly unless child sexual abuse is recognized as a major contributing factor, Boyer charges. "Services won't work very well until we provide support and help them understand that the past abuse is related to their current behavior."

Despite attempts by California lawmakers to bring attention to the issue, there is little to suggest that Americans will have the courage to take on the issue of sex -- consensual or abusive -- with minor children.

"I'm very happy that people are starting to pick up on this and see its relevance," Males says. "But the more they get into this, the more they'll realize what a thorny issue it is. It's going to require us to rethink 20 years of policies and programs."

Forced Sex

The younger a sexually active teen-ager is, the more likely she is to have had involuntary sex.

Percentage of sexually active age group that has had forced sex:

13 and younger: 61%

14: 43%

15: 26%

16: 10%

17: 5%

18: 3%

19: 1%

Sources: Adapted by the Alan Guttmacher Institute from tabulations by K. A. Moore, C. W. Nord and J. L. Peterson from data from the 1987 National Survey of Children.

Younger Moms, Older Dads

Age of mother and age of father: Los Angeles County (1990)

* If the mother is 15 or younger, the father is:

Under 16: 7%

16 - 18: 40%

19 or older: 53%

* If the mother is 16, the father is:

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Under 16: 2%

16-18: 35%

19 or older: 63%

* If the mother is 17, the father is:

Under 16: 1%

16 - 18: 24%

19 or older: 75%

* If the mother is 18, the father is:

Under 16: 0%

16 - 18: 15%

19 or older: 85%

How Old is Daddy?

Ages of fathers of babies born to teenagers in California:

25 or older: 14.1%

20 - 24: 41.9%

18 - 19: 20.6%

Under 18: 9.0%

Unknown: 14.4%

Sources: State of California, Department of Health Services, Vital Statistics Section 1993.

The Series at a Glance

Sunday: High pregnancy rates among Latinas.

Today: The invisible fathers.

Tuesday: America's family planning problem.

Wednesday: The failure of sex education.

GRAPHIC: Chart, Forced Sex ; Chart, Younger Moms, Older Dads ; Chart, How Old is Daddy? ; Photo, COLOR,
Posters from a Maryland program take aim at young adult men who father children without taking responsibility.

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