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# **Teenage births**

**Jonathan Bradshaw**

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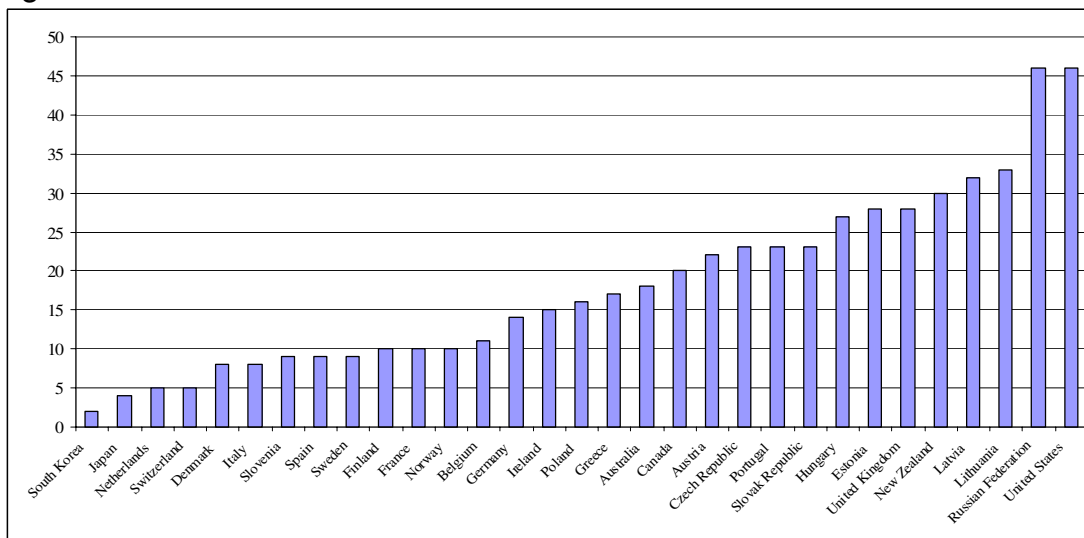
## Background

The purpose of this note is to examine the contribution to ending child poverty that might be made by reducing teenage births.

UNICEF<sup>1</sup> found that the under-20 birth rate in the UK was the second highest out of 28 OECD countries, lower only than in the United States; and even in affluent areas, the teenage birth rate in the UK was higher than the average for the Netherlands or France. Chart 1 gives more recent data on the teenage fertility rate and shows that the UK comes fifth from highest out of 31 countries.

Chart 1

Teenage pregnancy (adolescent fertility rate), births per 1000 women aged 15 -19 – 2003



Source: World Development Indicators (WDI) (2005). WDI Data Query. Accessed at <http://devdata.worldbank.org/data-query/>, August, 2005.

There is a host of evidence that teenage births are associated with poor outcomes for the teenage mother and her child, both in the short and long term. This evidence was reviewed in the Social Exclusion Unit report *Teenage Pregnancy*.<sup>2</sup> Teenage pregnancies are more likely to result in low birth weight babies, infant and child mortality, hospital admissions of children, postnatal depression and low rates of breastfeeding. New analysis of the Millennium Cohort (MC) survey finds that teenage mothers were over three times more likely to be poor than mothers in their 30s, the odds of a low birth weight baby was 40 per cent higher for a teenage conception, teenage mothers were 50 per cent

<sup>1</sup> UNICEF. *A League Table of Teenage Births in Rich Nations*, Innocenti Report Card 3. Florence: Innocenti Centre, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Social Exclusion Unit, *Teenage Pregnancy*, 1999.

more likely to be depressed and 100 per cent less likely to breastfeed.<sup>3</sup> We also know that teenage mothers are less likely to complete their education and more likely to be out of employment and to live in poverty.<sup>4</sup> The children of teenage mothers are more likely to experience these disadvantages and twice as likely to become teenage parents in their turn.<sup>5</sup> The Millennium Cohort found that having had an experience of one's own parents separating in childhood was associated with double the likelihood of becoming a young mother oneself after controlling for other factors.<sup>6</sup> Also the MC found that only 15 per cent of teenage mothers planned their pregnancy and 28 per cent of the teenage mothers were unhappy or very unhappy about the pregnancy nine months after the birth of their child (and of course these data do not include those conceptions that did not end in births).

So there are short term and long term child poverty reduction prizes to be won in reducing teenage births.

Following the Social Exclusion Unit Report this was recognised in the government establishing a Teenage Pregnancy Strategy with the following targets:

- reduce by 50% the 1998 England under-18 conception rates by 2010, with an intermediate target of a 15% reduction by 2004;
- achieve a well-established downward trend in the under-16 conception rate by 2010;
- reduce the inequality in rates between the fifth of wards with the highest under-18 conception rate and the average ward rate by at least 25% by 2010; and
- increase to 60 per cent the participation of teenage parents in education, training or employment to reduce their risk of long term social exclusion by 2010.

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<sup>3</sup> Mayhew, E. and Bradshaw, J. (2005) Mothers, babies and the risks of poverty. *Poverty*, 121, 13-16.

<sup>4</sup> However a recent IFS study using the 1970 birth cohort has found that compared with women who have a miscarriage in teenage years there are no significant differences in the economic outcomes with women who have a teenage birth. The suggestion is that it is not the birth but the childhood experiences that explain the differences. However the authors are quite worried about biases which may be influencing their results. Goodman, A., Kaplan, G. and Walker, I. (2004) *Understanding the effects of early motherhood in Britain: The effects on the mothers*. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies <http://www.ifs.org.uk/docs/teenage.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Rendall, M. (2003) How important are intergenerational cycles of teenage motherhood in England and Wales? A comparison with France. *Population Trends*, 111, Spring 2003, pp27-33.

<sup>6</sup> Dex, S. and Joshi, H. (2006) *Children of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: from birth to nine month*. Bristol: Policy Press.

The first and fourth of these statistics are also used to monitor the anti-poverty strategy in *Opportunity for All*.

## The prevalence of teenage births

There were 98,500 teenage conceptions<sup>7</sup> in England and Wales in 2003, that is 12.2 per cent of all conceptions. However 40.2 per cent of all teenage conceptions are terminated by abortion and in 2004 there were only 45,000 teenage births in England and Wales and they accounted for only 7 per cent of all live births.<sup>8</sup> So if we were to reduce or even abolish teenage births it may have beneficial outcomes but it would not result in a dramatic reduction in the 3.5 million children (in 2003/4) living in households with income below 60 per cent of the median after housing costs. To illustrate the point another way – while the risk of poverty for children with mothers under 25 is 52 per cent compared with 28 per cent on average, children with a mother under 25 constitute only 10 per cent of poor children.<sup>9</sup>

There are very substantial variations in teenage conceptions and abortions by area. For example between 1997–99 the teenage (15 -17) conception rates varied between 15 per 1,000 in Uttlesford and 86 per 1,000 in Southwark. The proportion of teenage conceptions which end in abortion varied between 26 per cent in Derwentside and 68 per cent in Kensington and Chelsea. These variations have been shown to be very closely associated with the level of deprivation of an area – the conception rate is higher in deprived areas<sup>10</sup> and the proportion that end in abortion is lower in deprived areas. The result is that the teenage birth rate is closely associated with deprivation.<sup>11</sup>

Berthoud<sup>12</sup> found that teenage motherhood was associated with ethnicity: Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women had much higher rates

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<sup>7</sup> Data on teenage conceptions are produced by combining birth registrations and notifications of legal abortions, so exclude miscarriages and illegal abortions.

<sup>8</sup> There is an argument that we should be as concerned with births to mothers in their early 20s. They amount to 20 per cent of all births. The odds of a child being born poor are about a third higher for mothers in their 20s than they are in their 30s but they are two thirds lower than teenage mothers..

<sup>9</sup> DWP (2005) *Households below average income 1994/95-2003/04*, Leeds: Corporate Document Services.

<sup>10</sup> Bradshaw, J. Finch, N, and Miles, J.N.V. (2005) Deprivation and variations in teenage conceptions and abortions in England. *J Fam Plann Reprod Health Care* 31 (1) 15-19.

<sup>11</sup> Lee, E., Clements, S., Ingham, R. and Stone, N. (2004) *A matter of choice? Explaining national variations in teenage abortion and motherhood*. York: JRF.

<sup>12</sup> Berthoud, R. (2001) Teenage births to ethnic minority women. *Population Trends* 104. London: The Stationery Office.

than white women, but Indian women much lower rates than white women.

## The teenage pregnancy strategy

Teenage conceptions and child birth are also proving a very hard nut to crack. It does not look as though the government targets are going to be met. Table 1 gives the England and Wales conception rates. The under 18 conception rate did fall after 1998 but there was little reduction in 2002 and 2003, and there will be a need for an intensified effort to strengthen the delivery of the strategy to meet the 2004 and 2010 targets. It is arguable whether the under-16 conception rate downward trend is yet 'well established'. The percentage of teenage parents in education is currently only 37 per cent and that proportion fell between 2002-04 and 2003-05 – although there have been some innovative practices in the Sure Start Plus pilots focused on teenage parents intended to reduce their social exclusion.<sup>13</sup>

Table 1  
Conception rates per 1000 women in age group in England and Wales

<b>Age at conception</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>
Under 16	8.9	9.5	9.0	9.0	8.3	8.3	8.0	7.9	8.0	
Under 18	44.6	46.3	46.4	47.1	45.1	43.9	42.7	42.8	42.3	41.7
Under 20	64.1	63.2	62.8	65.1	63.1	62.5	60.8	60.3	59.7	

Source: Population Trends 120 Table 4.1 Summer 2005

The number of teenage births is a function of the proportion of conceptions that end in abortion. Table 2 gives the proportion of conceptions aborted by age. Nearly half of all under 18 conceptions are ended by abortion and the proportion is higher for under 16 conceptions and lower for under 20 conceptions. The proportion of conceptions that end in abortion has been increasing slowly since the mid 1990s for all groups.

<sup>13</sup> Wiggins, M. et al. (2005). *Reaching out to pregnant teenagers and teenage parents: innovative practice from Sure Start Plus Pilot Programmes*. London: Institute of Education, University of London.

Table 2  
Percentage of teenage conceptions terminated by abortion in England and Wales

<b>Age at conception</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>
Under 16	51.1	49.2	49.7	52.4	52.6	54.0	55.8	55.6	57.0	
Under 18	39.9	40.0	40.6	42.0	43.0	44.2	45.7	45.3	45.6	45.6
Under 20	34.5	36.2	36.8	37.8	38.6	39.3	40.4	39.9	40.2	

Source: Population Trends 120 Table 4.1 Summer 2005

## Conclusion

Children born to teenage mothers are one of the groups at greatest risk<sup>14</sup> of living in poverty. The prevalence of teenage births in the UK is high internationally and the Government aspires to reduce it. Teenagers who become pregnant have high rates of termination and many of those who carry their pregnancies to term regret having done so. It is clear that a strategy to end child poverty should try to reduce teenage births through:

- sex education
- making contraceptive services and abortion services accessible
- providing financial and other support through pregnancy
- encouraging and supporting young mothers to remain in education.

Cash benefits, tax benefits, childcare services also all have a part to play.

However even if these policies could be more successful than they are at present they will not make a substantial impact on child poverty because the children of teenage mothers are such a small proportion of the total.

<sup>14</sup> Though they did not feature in Preston, G. (2005) *At greatest risk; the children most likely to be poor*. London: CPAG.