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.

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”3 adult men in teenage childbearing. This view has led some states, such as California and Florida, to toughen and expand their statutory rape laws.4 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 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 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.

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,3 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 issue of adolescents bearing children with older men.

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.
Minors Who Give Birth and Their Adult Partners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Age of minor</th>
<th>Age of adult</th>
<th>Minimum age difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>≤17</td>
<td>≥3 years older</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>16–17</td>
<td>≥24</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>13–16</td>
<td>≥5 years older</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>≤16</td>
<td>≥27</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>≤16</td>
<td>≥33 years older†</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*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 .47 correlation with the age calculated from the maternal report.

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

minutesthe typical legal criterion for statutory rape in the five largest states, although other states may use stricter or loosers 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.) 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 birth’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 father’s age from the mother’s age entered on the birth certificate 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 paternal age and race.

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).* 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).

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 consti-
stitute 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.

**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. An alternative explanation, based on problem behavior theory, 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. 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.

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.

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 used alcohol in the three months before the pregnancy were nearly twice as likely to have had an older partner as 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

---

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

---

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

---

*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.)
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 child-bearing 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. 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 Wilson’s theories, more “marriageable”—than those 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.

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.

Are Older Men Better Partners?

Young women’s economic vulnerability suggests that for some, older men may be more desirable partners than teenage men.

Are Older Partners Different?

Do adult men who father children with minors differ from men who enter into child-bearing 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 parents 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.

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%).

Table 3. Percentage of 15–17-year-old mothers, by characteristics describing relationship with male partner, according to age difference between woman and partner

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Father’s age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Older ᵃ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married at delivery</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lived with partner during pregnancy</td>
<td>35.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lived with partner at interview</td>
<td>48.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lived with parents during pregnancy</td>
<td>38.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lived with parents and partner during pregnancy</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanted pregnancy</td>
<td>27.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***Difference is statistically significant, based on chi-square tests, at p<0.001.
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)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Father’s age</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Older</td>
<td>Similar</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed in year before pregnancy</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>88.9</td>
<td>73.7***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>26.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation†</td>
<td>Professional/managerial</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>14.3*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Service sector</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>60.7</td>
<td>69.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School status‡</td>
<td>Behind for age</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appropriate for age</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td>74.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>35.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>22.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White/other</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>41.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*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.

Table 5. Percentage distribution of men aged 22–30 who fathered a child in 1988, by selected characteristics, according to age of mother (unweighted N=5,040)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Mother’s age</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15–17</td>
<td>≥18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school degree</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>72.4</td>
<td>81.7*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed in year before delivery</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>90.1</td>
<td>93.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation‡</td>
<td>Professional/managerial</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>32.1*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Service sector</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>58.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>16.3***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>13.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>69.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p≤.05. **p≤.001. †Among those employed the year before the delivery.

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 56) shows, 76% of adult couples were married at the 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.

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. 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 birthsrates 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 teen-aged 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

*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.
close relationships than minors and simi-
lar-age partners, as measured by the like-
lihood of cohabitation during the preg-
nancy and of marriage by the time of de-
delivery. However, the long-term sta-
stility of these relationships is unknown; re-
search indicates that cohabitation and early age at marriage are associated with less stable partnerships than marriages oc-
curring 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 lit-
tle social concern; in contrast, large age dif-
ferences between male partners and moth-
ers younger than 18 are of greater concern, be-
cause they could signify developmen-
tal 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 propor-
tion 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. Interven-
tions that would prevent very young adolescents from becoming sexually in-
volved with much older men are clearly war-
anted.

Although these findings about the youngest mothers raise questions about sexual abuse, that issue cannot be ad-
dressed 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 sexual-
ly active women aged 17 and younger re-
port having been forced to have sex at least once.19 While these data point to dra-
matic 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 ac-
tivity is consensual.

That births to unmarried minors who have substantially older partners rep-
resent a relatively small portion of all U.S. adolescent births belies the popular per-
ception that preventing sexual involve-
ment between older men and young ado-
lescents will substantially reduce rates of teenage pregnancy. New state and fed-
eral 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 cov-
ered 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 pre-
maturely engage in childbearing and other adult behaviors.

Finally, those few adult men who be-
come involved with considerably younger women may respond to incentives and disincentives to fathering a child with a minor. The disincentives, such as ex-
ceeding the reach and increasing the penalties of statutory rape laws, have al-
ready been advanced; improving access to economic opportunities and achieve-
ment for disadvantaged men may be an equally important avenue to try to dis-
courage adult sexual involvement and childbearing with minors.

References
2. D. J. Landry and J. D. Forrest, “How Old are U.S. Fa-
thers?” Family Planning Perspectives, 27:159–165, 1995; and M. Males and K. S. Y. Chew, “The Ages of Fathers in Cal-
ifornia Adolescent Births, 1993,” American Journal of Pub-

### Table 6. Among couples in which a man aged 22-30 fathered a child in 1986, percentage with selected characteristics, by age of mother (un-
weighted N=5,040)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Mother’s age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15–17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother married at delivery</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lived together during pregnancy</td>
<td>54.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman wanted pregnancy</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woman wanted pregnancy/</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p<.001.

5. D. J. Landry and J. D. Forrest, 1995, op. cit. (see refer-
ence 2).
7. Authors’ tabulations of data from the 1988 National Maternal and Infant Health Survey.
8. C. A. Nathanson, Dangerous Passage: The Social Con-
trol of Sexuality in Women’s Adolescence, Temple Univer-
9. D. J. Landry and J. D. Forrest, 1995, op. cit. (see refer-
ence 2).
11. M. Males, “School-Age Pregnancy: Why Hasn’t Pre-
12. R. Jessor and S. L. Jessor, Problem Behavior and Psy-
chosocial Development: A Longitudinal Study of Youth, Aca-
14. D. Boyer and D. Fine, “Sexual Abuse as a Factor in Adoles-
15. M. E. Lamb, A. B. Elster and J. Travave, 1996, op. cit. (see reference 13); and J. B. Hardy et al., “Fathers of Chil-
dren Born to Young Urban Mothers,” Family Planning Per-
17. T. C. Martin and L. Bumpass, “Recent Trends in Mar-
tial Disruption,” Demography, 26:37–52, 1989; L. Lillard, M. Brien and L. Waite, “Pre-Martial Cohabitation and Subsequent Marital Dissolution: Is It Self-Selection?” De-
18. D. Boyer and D. Fine, 1992, op. cit. (see reference 14); and E. Swenson, “A Profile of Young Adolescents At-
19. K. A. Moore, C. W. Nord and J. L. Peterson, “Non-