tute 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 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. 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.)