close relationships than minors and similar-age partners, as measured by the likelihood of cohabitation during the pregnancy and of marriage by the time of delivery. However, the long-term stability of these relationships is unknown; research indicates that cohabitation and early age at marriage are associated with less stable partnerships than marriages occurring 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 little social concern; in contrast, large age differences between male partners and mothers younger than 18 are of greater concern, because they could signify developmental 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 proportion of all U.S. adolescent births belies the popular perception that preventing sexual involvement between older men and young adolescents will substantially reduce rates of teenage pregnancy. New state and federal 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 covered 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 policies. Policies that improve young women’s current lives and expand their future options might better address the issues that lead some to prematurely engage in childbearing and other adult behaviors.

Finally, those few adult men who become involved with considerably younger women may respond to incentives and disincentives to fathering a child with a minor. The disincentives, such as expanding the reach and increasing the penalties of statutory rape laws, have already been advanced; improving access to economic opportunities and achievement for disadvantaged men may be an equally important avenue to try to discourage adult sexual involvement and childbearing with minors.

References


7. Authors’ tabulations of data from the 1988 National Maternal and Infant Health Survey.


