Early Childbearing and Children's Achievement and Behavior over Time

When behavior-problem scores rise, the effect of a teenage birth is masked. The difference in the total behavior-problem scores of children of teenage and adult childbearers was small in the early 1980s, but was greater in the early 1990s (Figure 5). This change was due primarily to worsening externalizing problems; scores for internalizing problems changed little. Comparing the behavior-problems score of a child of an adult mother in the early 1990s with that of a child of a teenage mother in the late 1970s or early 1980s would lead to mistaken conclusions about the impact of a teenage birth. This comparison would show little difference in behavior problems, whereas children of teenage mothers consistently have worse behavior-problem scores than children of adult mothers when viewed period by period across the 1980s and into the early 1990s. Thus, such an analysis would find no difference or would even find that children of teenage mothers had fewer behavior problems, because scores for children of teenage mothers were low in the late 1970s but rose gradually thereafter, whereas those for adult childbearers remained about the same over the entire period.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

When following the children of a cohort of mothers, researchers face an unsolvable dilemma—the time period of data collection is confounded with the mother's age at the child's birth. Moreover, because period of first birth is likely to be associated with both maternal age at first birth and at least some children's outcomes, the effect of age at first birth on children's development is biased.

The importance of including period variables is shown in the PSID analyses. First, test scores for all children and behavior-problem scores for children of teenage mothers have changed over time. Second, when we control for period, the effects of maternal age at first birth on achievement test scores may be stronger or weaker than (or the same as) findings from a model without such a control.

We found less support for our hypothesis that the effect of early childbearing on children's development varies over time. Our analyses did show period variations in the effect of early childbearing on behavior-problem scores, but yielded no significant variations for cognitive achievement.

We conclude that when behavior or achievement scores or the effects of age at first birth change over time, the effect of birth timing is confounded with period changes and is impossible to separate without independent variation in first-birth age within period. Clearly, such period effects are fairly common and substantial. Although few researchers have pooled NLSY data for children born from the 1970s through the 1990s, more will do so. Those who do should consider an alternative explanation for their findings or take time trends into account, particularly if the outcome could be affected by the age of the mother at first birth.

REFERENCES