



# MARYLAND

## FAMILY POLICY IMPACT SEMINAR

### Social Support: Key to Educational Outcomes Among Rural, Low-Income, Teenage Mothers

*Teenage childbearing is a prominent issue in family policy. Legislation such as the 1996 welfare reform has attempted to target and reduce levels of teen pregnancy in the U.S. This policy brief presents findings from a national study of rural, low-income families, with particular emphasis on factors that might help or hinder a teenage mother's ability to obtain further education after the birth of her first child.*

#### **Background**

For several decades, research on teenage pregnancy has linked teenage childbearing with numerous negative outcomes, including reduced educational attainment. Studies have shown that women who have their first child as a teenager complete fewer years of schooling than women who wait until later to begin childbearing, and that fewer teenage mothers ever complete high school than non-teen mothers.<sup>1</sup> Teenage childbearing is also linked with a number of other factors that can further impede educational attainment, such as a higher likelihood of being a single parent and a greater number of subsequent children than non-teenage mothers.<sup>2</sup>

Teenagers in rural areas are at particularly high risk for negative consequences of childbearing on education, as they have lower average levels of achievement and higher high school dropout rates than teenagers in nonrural areas.<sup>3</sup> Since rural teenagers tend to be younger at first marriage and at first birth than nonrural teenagers, the teen birthrate is generally higher in rural versus metropolitan areas.<sup>4</sup> Research suggests that rural teen parents may also face different obstacles than urban teenagers, such as social isolation, lack of

<sup>1</sup> Geronimus & Korenman, 1992; Hotz et al., 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Hotz et al., 1998, Moore et al., 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Roscigno & Crowley, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Bennett et al., 1997; Heaton et al., 1989.

#### **Rural Mothers Interviewed**

**Average age:** 32      **Average # of children:** 3  
**Married or living with partner:** 61%  
**Race/Ethnicity**    White, Non-Hispanic: 65%  
                                 Hispanic/Latina: 22% African American: 7%  
                                 Other: 6%  
**Average years of education:** 12  
**Annual household income:** \$17,376

educational and economic opportunities, and limited access to health services,<sup>5</sup> which could further compromise their outcomes.

#### **Recent Findings**

An ongoing study of rural, low-income families yields information about some of the differences that exist between women who were teenage mothers and those who were not. The multi-state study tracks mothers living in rural areas for five consecutive years, gathering information ranging from family life to health to income and job experience. A recent analysis of 275 of those mothers explored how teenage mothering impacted educational outcomes.<sup>6</sup> Key findings revealed:

- Rural mothers who had their first child as a teenager completed fewer total years of schooling than mothers who waited to have children.
- Teenage mothers completed more years of additional schooling after their first birth than non-teenage mothers.
- Teenage mothers who reported high levels of social support were more likely to complete additional years of schooling than women who reported low levels of social support.

<sup>5</sup> Skatrud et al., 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Rudd, 2003

## Implications

These findings provide important information about a group of women often overlooked in the research on teenage pregnancy and childbearing. While teenage childbearing negatively impacted educational outcomes overall for this group of rural women, these women did go on and complete further schooling after the birth of their first child. However, they still completed less schooling overall when compared to the women who waited to have children. While the negative impact of teenage childbearing remains, it is clear that rural teenage mothers are able to go on and complete minimum educational milestones, such as a high school degree or G.E.D.

Social support played an important role in helping these teenage mothers to complete further schooling. The finding that teenage childbearers with high social support were more likely than teenage childbearers with low social support to complete further schooling after their first birth suggests that the presence of social networks and support systems can help to alleviate the increased demands placed on young mothers. This finding is a critical starting-point in the discussion of how best to help rural teenage mothers in challenging circumstances.

## Suggestions for Policy and Programming

- Efforts to prevent teenage pregnancy should be sustained and supported in rural areas in order to maximize educational outcomes for women.
- Policymakers should seek to reinforce and strengthen informal support networks through policies that reward informal contacts for in-kind assistance, such as child care.
- Policymakers and program planners should consider ways to enhance social support in various spheres of rural women's lives, including the school, the family, and the community. Examples include parenting support groups with other young mothers and mentoring programs.

Social support does not replace more formal forms of support for low-income women, such as cash and food assistance or job training. However, as this study found: ***Social support is a key to the continued education of rural, low-income teenage mothers after the birth of their first child.***

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Data for this research come from the USDA multi-state, longitudinal research study NC223: "Tracking the Well-being of Rural Low-Income Families in the Context of Welfare Reform." For more information, please contact [ea8@umail.umd.edu](mailto:ea8@umail.umd.edu) or [bb157@umail.umd.edu](mailto:bb157@umail.umd.edu).

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