

Study: Heavy viewers of 'Teen Mom' and '16 and Pregnant' have unrealistic views of teen pregnancy

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This is Indiana University Professor Nicole Martins. Credit: Indiana University

The creator of MTV's "16 and Pregnant" and "Teen Mom" said the shows have been called "[one of the best public service campaigns to prevent teen pregnancy](#)." A new Indiana University research study finds the opposite to be true.

The paper accepted for publication in the journal *Mass Communication and Society* presents findings that such teen mom shows actually lead heavy viewers to believe that [teen mothers](#) have an enviable quality of life, a high income and involved fathers.

Teens who perceived reality television as realistic were most likely to hold these perceptions.

The paper's authors are Nicole Martins, an assistant professor of telecommunications in the College of Arts and Sciences at IU Bloomington, and Robin Jensen, an assistant professor of communication at the University of Utah.

"Heavy viewers of teen mom reality programs were more likely to think that teen moms have a lot of time to themselves, can easily find child care so that they can go to work or school and can complete high school than were lighter viewers of such shows," Martins and Jensen wrote.

Frequent viewers of the programs also were more likely to believe that teen moms have affordable access to health care, finished college and lived on their own.

"Our data call into question the content of teen mom reality programming," they added. "Heavy viewing of teen mom reality programming positively predicted unrealistic perceptions of what it is like to be a teen mother."

Martins, the lead author, and Jensen were unable to ask the 185 high

school students surveyed about sexual behavior. But they were able to ask about their perceptions of reality TV and [teen pregnancy](#).

"The fact that teens in the study seemed to think that being a teen parent was easy might increase the likelihood that they'll engage in unsafe sexual practices," Martins said, "because that's not a real consequence to them."

MTV recently announced that "Teen Mom 3" will not be renewed for next season. However, the more successful franchise sequel, "Teen Mom 2," will return with a fifth season Jan. 20. Both programs spun off from an earlier series, "16 and Pregnant." They have been among the network's highest rated shows.

"As you study reality television with younger populations, you're going to find that younger children are going to have a harder time understanding that this is something that is scripted, edited and put together in a purposeful way to create a narrative and a drama," Martins said.

"Indeed, there are some individuals who believe that this reality TV show is like real life. For them, they were the most likely ones to hold unrealistic perception about teen parenthood."

The professors were somewhat surprised by the findings. Martins said the initial program, "16 and Pregnant," seemed to do a better job of focusing on the harsh realities faced by the teen moms. But the subsequent series, "Teen Mom," turned some of the young women into celebrities who end up on the cover of tabloid magazines.

"Maybe that's what's drawing viewers' attention: the fact that one of the teen moms, Farrah Abraham, repeatedly is on the cover of Us Weekly for all the plastic surgery that she's had. Well, a teen mom living in this

country can't afford that; most unmarried teen mothers are on welfare," Martins said.

It is possible that teens desire the celebrity status afforded to the shows' teen mothers, which makes a larger impression on their perceptions of the teen mom experience than does the real-life narratives being broadcast.

"In other words, the attention and opportunities seemingly thrown at these teen parents may appear so appealing to viewers that no amount of horror stories from the reality shows themselves can override them," the professors wrote.

Industry estimates have suggested that the primary stars of "Teen Mom" received more than \$60,000, as well as other commercial considerations. In contrast, nearly half of all teen mothers fail to earn a high school diploma and earn an average of \$6,500 annually over their first 15 years of parenthood.

Students in the study attended schools that were chosen because demographically, the median annual household income and racial makeup of each school was consistent with the national average: \$52,000 and 80 percent white. Participants ranged in age from 14 to 18. There were nearly even numbers of boys and girls.

Eighty percent of the young men said they never watched "16 and Pregnant" or "Teen Mom," but 58 percent of the young women reported they sometimes or always watched the shows.

Interestingly, the impact of exposure to these programs affected young men and women similarly. Even though more young women than men watched the shows, the effect between exposure and perceptions remained significant when gender was statistically controlled.

"This study makes a valuable contribution because it links exposure to specific content—teen mom reality programming—to teens' perceptions of teen motherhood," the professors concluded. "While it would be inappropriate to suggest that viewing these programs is the cause of teen pregnancy, one might consider it a contributing factor."

Provided by Indiana University

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