

'On Becoming a Teen Mom' examines life events that lead to teen pregnancy

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If Diane could reverse time, she never would have slammed the door—an act of teen frustration and ongoing family conflict that finally got her kicked out of her mother's house.

Thus began a cascade of events that, a few years later, led to her pregnancy at age 19.

Diane is one of 108 teenage moms interviewed about their lives and pregnancies in *On Becoming a Teen Mom: Life Before Pregnancy* (University of California Press, 2015), a new book by Case Western Reserve University sociologists Mary Patrice Erdmans and Timothy Black that focuses on life events resulting in [teen](#) motherhood, revealing some realities behind the statistics.

The general perception is that teen pregnancy is a social problem, like drug addiction and crime, and that it is on the rise, said Erdmans, associate professor of sociology.

In fact, the number of births to teen moms has dropped 44 percent between 1991 and 2010, and down another 10 percent in 2012-13 from the previous year (the most recent reporting years) for moms age 15 to 19, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Erdmans and Black, also an associate professor of sociology, along with a team of interviewers, traveled throughout Connecticut over two years, collecting the life stories of first-time mothers, 108 of whom were teen

moms. The mothers discussed what it was like in their families, neighborhoods and school while they were growing up. They talked about their relationships, the pregnancy and the decision to have a child.

"We now have a picture of what's happened in these mothers' lives before they became pregnant," Erdmans said, "portrait that differs from general perceptions about teen pregnancy that tend to focus on the consequences of early childbearing."

The authors address several myths about teen births:

- Teen births are a cause of poverty. They found most [teen mothers](#) were living in poverty before they became pregnant.
- Teen mothers will drop out of school. They found many teen mothers had dropped out or disengaged from school long before they became pregnant, while those doing well in school tended to stay and graduate.

One-fourth of the teen mothers from all socio-economic levels told stories of sexual abuse when they were young.

Others spoke of wanting to be accepted by peers, rebelling from extremely strict parents and a lack of knowledge about conception and contraceptives.

The researchers found that many of the youngest teen mothers didn't want to have sex with the fathers, but did anyway because they did not know how or didn't feel they could say "no." They kept and raised their babies, even in cases where the pregnancy resulted from rape.

Their stories call attention to preventing pregnancies by improving unsafe neighborhoods, lowering high rates of urban poverty and overcoming systematic gender inequalities that rob women of their

ability to say "no" at any point in a relationship, the researchers conclude.

Erdmans points out that many [teen pregnancies](#) could be prevented, beyond using birth control and abortions, by having better schools from first grade on.

Many teen moms, especially from inner cities, were unprepared for the academic and social challenges of [high school](#). They reported getting pregnant within two years after quitting high school.

"It debunks the myth that teen pregnancies will lead to dropping out and living in poverty," Erdmans said. "Many of these girls were already there."

But socioeconomic factors did impact what happens after they gave birth. Mothers from more stable families (about 20 percent of those interviewed) were still in high school when they got pregnant, graduated and went on to college.

For some young mothers in poverty, having a baby had a positive effect. Some kicked drug habits, returned to school and graduated and worked hard to make a better life for their babies.

The sociologists also found that the responsibilities of adulthood were more quickly thrust upon the poorest teen moms, compared to teens from stable backgrounds, who followed the more traditional path of college and marriage.

The baby did not cause the negative consequences that are assumed to happen when a young woman becomes a teen mom, Erdmans said, but these women do need resources to build better lives.

Provided by Case Western Reserve University

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