

Teenage pregnancy doesn't have to mean catastrophe—research shows it can be an opportunity

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Credit: shutterstock

The idea of having a baby as a teenager often is viewed as both a personal catastrophe and a social problem. This is probably why the continuing decline in teenage births in Britain – which is now at the [lowest level since records began](#) – is presented as a [policy triumph](#). But research tells a different story.

This is because having a baby as a teenager seems to have little effect on future social outcomes. Teenage [mothers](#) and fathers usually express positive attitudes about parenting and many transform their behaviour. As one teenage mother, interviewed as part of a [research study](#), put it: "Just because you've got a baby doesn't mean to say your life has ended at all. Me getting pregnant and me having a baby now has actually given me a bigger incentive to go and do something with my life instead of just getting a dead end job."

Disadvantage and teenage parents

Statistically speaking, teenage motherhood correlates with low educational achievement, poor employment, low income, poor health and [social](#)

[disadvantage](#). This is the message in many "official" [accounts](#). But the reality is that rather than young motherhood causing poor outcomes, these outcomes are largely caused by preexisting social disadvantage.

This is an example of the "selection effect" so often found in social statistics. In this sense, social disadvantage has "selected" particular young women to become [teenage mothers](#). And if statistical studies do not control for these selection effects, then they come to misleading conclusions about cause and effect.

In the US, a number of pioneering statistical studies attempted to control such selection effects. Researchers devised "natural experiments", such as comparisons between twin sisters, where only one was a teenage mother, or between teenage mothers and other women who had conceived as a teenager but miscarried (who presumably would have gone on to become mothers). They found that mother's age at birth had little effect on social outcome. As researcher Saul Hoffman put it in his systematic review, the effects of teenage parenthood were "[often essentially zero](#)".

[One study](#) found that teenage mothers in the US did better than miscarrying teenagers in employment and income by their mid- to late-20s. This implies that teenage parenting means lower state expenditure over the longer term. [British studies](#) took up this "natural experiment" approach later, and came to similar conclusions.

Using large longitudinal data sets like the [British Cohort Study](#), the [British Household Panel](#), and the [Millennium Cohort Study](#), researchers found that teen birth had little impact upon qualifications, employment or earnings for women by the age of 30. Similarly, having a teenage mother did not in

itself significantly affect the chances of a preschool child experiencing [poor health](#) or doing poorly on cognitive tests.

Perhaps there can never be a completely accurate measurement of the effect of teenage motherhood. Nonetheless, these studies show that teenage childbearing can be seen as only a minor social problem in terms of economic outcomes.

A positive experience

[Previous research](#), that focuses on teenage parents' actual experiences, helps to explain these statistics. It shows how many teenage parents react positively and transform their behaviour for the better. Indeed, [a review of studies](#) from around the world concluded that teenage mothers often experience motherhood as "positively transforming" and the baby to be a "stabilising influence".

[A groundbreaking US study](#) that followed teenage mothers for over 12 years, found that for the most disadvantaged and alienated teens in the study, having a baby epitomised the hope of escaping a desolate past, but this proved illusory and eventually confirmed their pre-pregnancy despair.

At the other end of the spectrum, the more advantaged teens – with substantial family and social resources – found that their pre-pregnancy plans for education and employment were complicated by having a baby, but were also strengthened. For a "middle group", motherhood provided a corrective experience. These mothers reported getting off drugs, returning to education, distancing themselves from risky friendships, and reevaluating earlier destructive behaviour.

[Later British studies](#) came to similar conclusions: teenage motherhood increased self-esteem and provided a sense of security and stability. Mothers had "grown up", they had found an added impetus in their lives, and were planning or embarking upon further education and employment. Far from a catastrophe, teenage pregnancy was more the turning point to maturity and developing a career. It provided resilience in the face of constraints and stigma – based on a belief in the moral worth of being a mother.

This shows how teenage parenting is more a part of social disadvantage, rather than its cause. And for some young people, it may even provide a way through and out of disadvantage. So rather than assuming the inadequacies of teenage parents, society would be better off supporting parents as a whole – while working to address wider issues of social injustice that make teenage pregnancy more likely to happen in the first place.

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