

WHAT TEEN MOTHERS KNOW

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In the United States, low-income or minority populations tend toward earlier births than the more advantaged. In disadvantaged populations, one factor that may put pressure toward early births is "weathering," or being uncertain about future health. Are an individual's personal opinions of health related to when they choose to have a first baby? Drawing on a small sample of intensive interviews with teenage mothers-to-be, I suggest that low-income African American teenagers may expect uncertain health and short lifespans. Where money and caretaking for a baby are based on relationships with relatives, individual opinions of future health may support the decision to become a young mother. I explore the differences between the experiences of poor African American interviewees, working class white interviewees, and middle-class teens who typically postpone childbearing.

KEYWORDS: African Americans; Culture; First birth timing; Mortality; Reproduction; Risk taking; Socioeconomic status; Teenage pregnancy.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, I am suggesting that teens from different sociocultural groups are more or less likely to take risks that result in pregnancies and, when pregnant, decide whether or not to carry their pregnancies to term based on the values and realities of their environment: their social, economic, and family relationships. But those from populations where teen childbearing is common who themselves become teen mothers only do so after carefully considering the consequences. Today, they are exposed to strong messages that teenage childbearing is unacceptable and destructive behavior which they should be ashamed of and punished for. Their own experience and that of their elders sometimes contradicts this societal belief. For many, their experiences and those of their elders are more "real" to

them than the messages they receive from other sources.

For the majority of Americans who take for granted that they will have a predictable long life, the ability to wait to have children - while not without its own set of risks and challenges for middle-class women - is sensible. But for those who face not simply a shorter, but a far more uncertain life, one that is even more uncertain because their family members and relationships also face daily risks, it is much more difficult to plan for childbirth later in life. Theories about early fertility that suggest teen mothers cannot plan for the future may be mistaken. By deciding to become teen mothers, young women in poorer populations may be planning for the kind of future they have every reason to expect. Long life and the freedom to postpone cherished goals are not guarantees for everyone. This is not to say that poor populations simply believe they have no chances or that they are low-delayers who seek immediate gratification, which are sometimes suggested in discussions of cultures of poverty. Nor should it be taken to suggest that, as a society, we abandon attempts to promote reproductive freedom for all women. However, as a matter of social policy, focusing on teen pregnancy prevention as the solution to persistent poverty may be the modern-day equivalent to suggesting that those without bread can eat cake. Instead or in addition, policy approaches that offer poor women and men real reasons to expect to live predictable, long lives should be first on the policy agenda. Until then, building social and cultural power through having a child may be a perceptive and caring investment for young women facing truly uncertain and highly restricted futures. And such a project may be life affirming amidst death all around; it offers the challenge and structure of work that develops, rather than denies, human dignity.