

Housing and young parents

Young parents: the role of housing in understanding social inequality

Dr Debbie Smith and **Dr Ron Roberts** present research suggesting that current policies on supportive housing for young parents are adversely affecting relationships between the parents and between the father and the child

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In this study, all the young mothers interviewed mentioned housing as a cause of stress after the birth. Restrictive housing policies appear to have a harmful effect on the parents' relationship and on the father's relationship with the child

ABSTRACT

Background Since publication of the Social Exclusion Report in 1999, the adverse outcomes associated with young pregnancy have been a focus for Government policy. The ensuing Teenage Pregnancy Strategy sought to reduce social exclusion of young parents and their children.

Method In this exploratory study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with young mothers (n=16) and fathers (n=5) from a variety of socioeconomic environments, to explore their experience of being a young parent and some of the influences on their sexual and reproductive behaviours. They were recruited from two "more deprived" and two "more affluent" areas (Index of Multiple Deprivation classification). Their personal deprivation was measured by their parents' occupation. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview transcripts and identified themes were explored.

Findings Although housing was not included as a topic in the interview guide, responses indicated that housing is a cause of stress for young parents throughout and beyond pregnancy. Findings suggest that existing policies on supportive housing units adversely affect the relationship between young parents and between young fathers and their children.

Conclusions It is suggested that existing policies on supportive housing units should be reviewed to produce more supportive environments for parents and child. It was noted that the semi-structured interview method was successful in enabling the researchers to more fully understand the world as experienced by these young parents, and the researchers suggest that this research method may be particularly useful for use with vulnerable groups to suggest effective interventions.

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Key words: young pregnancy; social inequality; housing; relationships

Key points

- Housing is a cause of stress for young parents throughout pregnancy and into parenthood, especially those from more deprived families living in more deprived areas
- Housing status had a huge impact on the young people's relationships with the co-parent of their baby
- Existing policies on supportive housing units can exert an adverse influence on the relationship between young parents and their children and needs reviewing
- Relationship breakdown is greater in more deprived areas
- More research is needed to explore the role of housing in relationship breakdown. This will help to identify ways of offering support to young parents and for fathers to maintain contact with their children

Introduction

Young pregnancy in England

The issue of conceptions to under-18 year olds has been high on the Government's priorities since the Social Exclusion Report in 1999 highlighted the numerous adverse outcomes associated with young pregnancy¹. The report led to the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (TPS) and to the birth of the Teenage Pregnancy Unit. The TPS had two targets: to lower rates of under-18 conceptions by 50% by 2010 and to prevent social exclusion for young parents and their children – this by getting 60% of young mothers back into education, training or work. Provisional data for 2008 (2010 data will be available in 2012) suggests that the under-18 conception rate has decreased from 46.6 per 1,000 girls in 1998 to 40.4 per 1,000 girls in 2008 (see *Figure 1*), a decline of 13%², a figure which is substantially below the targeted decrease of 50%.

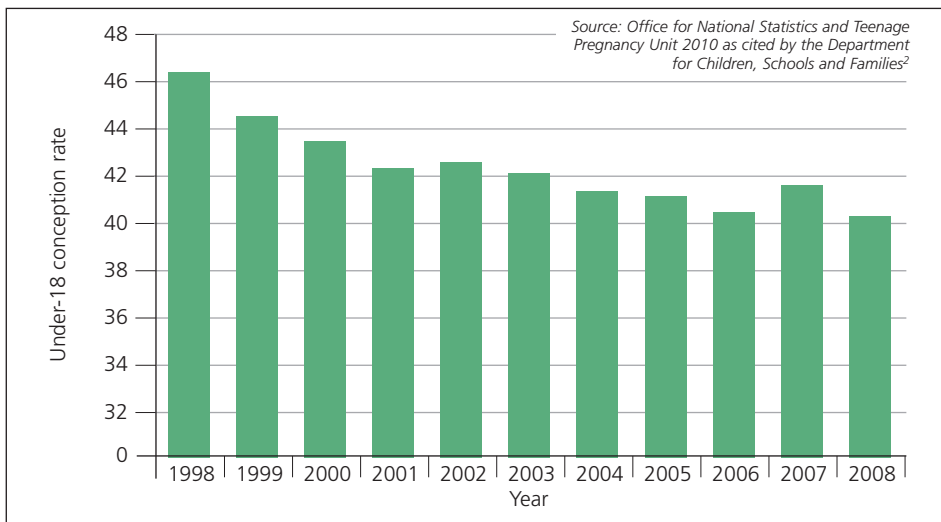


Figure 1: The under-18 conception rate (per 1,000) for England: 1998 to 2008

The current paper examines issues that relate to the second of the above TPS targets and draws from empirical work conducted by one of the authors (DS) as part of research for a PhD degree. Implications of this work for practice are considered.

Social inequality in young pregnancy rates

Recent figures released by the Department for Education indicate that young pregnancy rates are highest for those under-16 year olds who receive free school meals and whose parents had left school early³. Social inequality in young pregnancy is not a new phenomenon; it has been recognised for several years that more deprived areas tend to have higher conception rates and lower abortion rates, whereas the converse pattern of lower conception rates and higher abortion rates is found in more affluent areas⁴.

Although such findings are well accepted, the underlying reasons for the association between young pregnancy and the socioeconomic environment are poorly understood⁵. The lead author's (DS) PhD research focused on this association and utilised a critical psychological perspective in order to tap into the subjective worlds of young parents and allow comparison of the experiences and behaviours of young parents from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Exploratory research study

Methodology

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from Kingston University, where the research was conducted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with young mothers (n=16) and fathers (n=5) from a variety of socioeconomic environments. The young parents were recruited from four areas in London. The areas were classified using the Index of Multiple Deprivation⁹, a measure of area deprivation that ranks areas according to level of deprivation, 1 being the most deprived and 354 the most affluent. As a result, two areas were classified as "more deprived" (ranked 11th and 17th) and two were

"more affluent" (ranked 99th and 266th). The young parent's personal deprivation was measured by their parents' occupation (The National Statistics Socio-economic Classification [NS-SEC] measures social economic positioning).

The semi-structured interviews explored the experience of being a young parent, the sexual and reproductive behaviours that they engaged in and some of the influences on these behaviours. A topic guide was designed, based on influential factors highlighted in the literature, but the direction of the discussion was predominantly decided by the young parents themselves.

All interviews were conducted with the young parents after the female researcher (DS) had met with them several times. This enabled rapport to be built and provided the young parents with a comfortable environment in which to discuss their experiences. All the participants who were asked to take part in the study agreed to be interviewed. Pseudonyms were chosen by the young parents. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview transcripts and identified themes were explored within each interview and across the groups. A more detailed account of the findings from these interviews can be found in several other publications^{6,7,8}.

Findings

Housing and relationships

It became evident in the exploratory interviews that housing status had a huge impact on the young people's relationships with the co-parent of their baby. As housing had not been originally considered as a mediating factor in the relationship between social deprivation and young pregnancy, no direct questions about this were asked. However, following comments made by the young parents in the course of the interviews, a number of follow-up questions were asked to probe for further information. These findings will be presented here.

Housing was mentioned as a cause of stress after the birth by all the young mothers in the study, and particularly by those from more deprived families

and living in more deprived areas. Almost all (n=14) the young mothers were living in social housing at the time of interview. Nine were in supported housing units for young mothers, one was in a hostel (soon to be relocated because the hostel was considered unsuitable for a baby), two were in temporary flats and two were in permanent flats.

All the mothers reported being moved into their temporary council housing or supported housing unit after their baby was born and they reported this timing as stressful. The fewest problems relating to housing suitability and availability were reported by young mothers in the more affluent areas, while all the participants in the more deprived areas reported a shortage of housing, with the majority being placed in hostels or "bed and breakfast" accommodation while awaiting a temporary flat.

The timing of placement in temporary and permanent housing was described as highly stressful by the young mothers in council housing. In addition six young mothers in the more deprived areas reported being placed in housing that they considered unsuitable – either because it was unsafe, dirty, damp or outside the Borough – whereas only two of the mothers in the more affluent areas reported this.

"It wasn't the kinda place that you could bring up a newborn ... the flat was disgusting, so that's why I got moved here."

(Cherielle, line 192-194)

"... there were drunks there ... I didn't feel safe there, cos I'm on my own."

(Kiyara, line 73-79)

In addition, housing was a factor in placing strains on the mother's relationship with the baby's father as well as between the father and the child. Half (eight) of the young mothers were in a relationship with the father of their baby at the time of interview. The status of the mother's relationship with the baby's father was associated with the level of area deprivation and family deprivation. All mothers from the more deprived families who lived in a more affluent area were still with the baby's father, whereas all the young mothers from the more deprived families who lived in a more deprived area had split up from the baby's father.

All the mothers who were still in a relationship with the baby's father highlighted the same issues. Those living in council flats stated that they could not apply for council housing with their partner as they would have to pay rent as a couple, and those in supported housing units raised the issue of the father only being able to visit three times a week (these were the rules of the supported housing unit).

"He hates being apart from his son and it does put a sort of barrier between them ... I think oh I have to tell him, but I'd feel like um, I wish he was here."

(Dominique, line 701-706)

Housing was regarded by two of the fathers (Sean and Dominic) as a barrier to seeing their

girlfriends and children. For Dominic, not being able to live with his child prevented him from fulfilling his responsibility as a father. Sean's girlfriend – still pregnant – has been placed in unsuitable hostels throughout her pregnancy, leading Sean to feel helpless, at the mercy of the council, and unable to protect his girlfriend and unborn child.

"I didn't feel safe with her like that, but I couldn't do nothing about it ... I wasn't allowed to stay there as well."

(Sean, lines 105-108)

Discussion

As previously indicated, housing was not originally included in the interview topic guide as a factor to explore; however, its relevance became apparent as it was repeatedly mentioned by the young parents as a constant stressor and a strain on the relationship with their baby's father. These findings support the view that housing constitutes a major source of stress and add further weight to existing literature¹⁰ that negative housing circumstances may cause adverse effects on the mother and child's health.

Although outside the remit of the present paper, the successful use of semi-structured interviews in this study was noteworthy, as it enabled researchers to gain a fuller understanding of the world as experienced by these young parents and to suggest effective interventions to support them and prevent them and their children from living in social isolation.

There is extensive research highlighting the deleterious effects of poor housing on physical¹¹ and mental health¹². In addition, the poor housing conditions experienced by working-class British families before 1950 are understood to have contributed to males avoiding family responsibilities.

For example, when housing conditions improved, males spent more of their leisure time in the house with their family¹³.

In the current study, the fathers' lack of involvement with the children of the more deprived young mothers could be viewed as partly due to the mothers' poor housing conditions. This suggests that if housing conditions for young mothers were to improve, changes in the involvement of the baby's father might ensue.

The Social Exclusion Unit¹ has previously called for changes in housing policy to address the needs of young mothers, specifically that young parents under the age of 18 should be placed in non-isolated housing such as supported housing units. Eight of the young mothers in this study lived in such units and the majority of them (n=6) spoke positively about their experiences there, despite the strains on relationships already mentioned. For example, they received help with complicated benefit forms.

These findings suggest that it would be prudent for local authorities to incorporate designated spaces for couples in the construction of supported housing units and to have more flexible house rules in existing units. Future research is needed to ascertain the long-term influence of living in supported housing units, particularly on children's development and the relationships between young mothers, fathers and their children. To date these have received little attention.

Housing policy appeared to influence relationships with the baby's father. Many mothers living in supported housing units reported strains in the relationship with their partner and between their partner and their child because of housing policy restrictions on the number of nights their partners could stay at the unit (three nights a week). Research into those factors which appear to influence young parents' relationship status – such as housing policy – is also needed if we are to

understand why relationship breakdown (and hence breakdown of contact between child and father) is greater in more deprived areas. It is also needed if we are to identify ways of offering further support to young parents and for fathers to maintain contact with their children.



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