Who Feels Ready to Parent and Why?
An Examination of Young Women at Risk for Pregnancy

Caroline Sten Hartnett
University of Michigan
Population Studies Center
426 Thompson Street, Rm 2030
Ann Arbor, MI 48104
carohart@isr.umich.edu

March 15, 2013

Who Feels Ready to Parent and Why? An Examination of Young Women at Risk for Pregnancy

Abstract: Unintended pregnancy and early pregnancy are common in the U.S., and despite a large body of literature it is not well understood why these pregnancies occur. Qualitative research has suggested that part of the reason pregnancy is particularly common among young, disadvantaged women is that many of these women feel prepared to parent at an early age. Using data from a random sample of 18-19-year old women in a county in Michigan (the Relationship Dynamics and Social Life survey, N=992), I show that the belief that one could handle the responsibilities of parenting is most common among the most disadvantaged women, but it is fairly common across the socioeconomic distribution. Further, the belief that one could handle the responsibilities of parenting is strongly associated with an elevated risk of pregnancy among young women, even among those who say they don't desire a pregnancy. The belief that one could handle parenthood is associated with several factors, including not being in school, not living with one's mother, living with one's partner, and being in a more serious type of relationship.

BACKGROUND

Unintended pregnancy and early pregnancy are relatively common in the United States. Nearly half of pregnancies are unintended and the teenage pregnancy rate is substantially higher compared with most wealthy nations (Finer & Zolna 2011). These pregnancies are associated with a variety of negative outcomes for mothers and children, including poorer health and well-being and compromised financial prospects (Sable & Wilkinson 2000; Singh et al. 2003). It has long been a public health priority in the United States to reduce disparities in unintended pregnancy, as well as reducing the overall level (United States Department of Health and Human Services 2010).

Despite a large body of literature, we don't fully understand why these pregnancies occur. Early and unintended childbearing are most common among more disadvantaged women, which is in line with the predictions of the opportunity costs model. This model argues that women with relatively weak economic prospects have little to lose by investing time in early life in childrearing at the expense of education and work. Edin and Kefalas (2005) mostly echo this argument based on their in-depth interviews with young, disadvantaged women. Their interviewees generally reported that after their relationship has reached a certain level, contraceptive use was no longer worth the hassle, and these women felt confident that they could be good mothers and provide a baby with what it needed. This picture contrasts starkly with the pattern observed among young women from advantaged circumstances who tend to wait to have children until they are married, have completed their education and have established a career.

This prior research suggests that one factor that might contribute to early unintended pregnancies is women's belief that they could handle having a baby, should a pregnancy occur. However,

this research has mostly been conducted among disadvantaged women. One question that follows from this literature, is: to what extent to which there is variation in young women's beliefs about their ability to handle parenting, and more specifically, what factors constitute the minimum threshold for childrearing, for women across the socioeconomic spectrum?

This paper has three objectives. First, I examine the extent to which young women's beliefs about whether they could handle the responsibilities of pregnancy varies by socioeconomic status. Second, I examine whether the belief that one could handle parenthood is predictive of subsequent pregnancy in a diverse, random sample of women. Third, I explore what young women mean when they say they could handle parenting, focusing on schooling, work, partnership, living arrangements, and financial strain. Here, I employ both cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses. This paper uses a unique dataset of a random sample of women ages 18-19 in a county in Michigan, who were surveyed every week over a period of two years.

Data and Method

The data used in this project comes from the Relationship Dynamics and Social Life (RDSL) study. The study uses a population-based random sample of 18-19-year old women in a county in Michigan. The final sample includes 1,003 women, who completed a 60-minute in-person baseline interview to ascertain background characteristics, attitudes towards childbearing, relationship and pregnancy histories, education and work statuses, and life plans. At the end of the baseline interview, respondents were asked to join a 2.5-year study consisting of weekly journals. Respondents entered the journal information each week either online (using the study's secure website) or by phone. Incentives were offered for completing individual journal entries, with bonuses for consistent participation. For the baseline interview, the response rate was 83%

and the cooperation rate was 94%. Of those who participated in the baseline interview, 99%

agreed to enroll in the weekly journal follow-up (N=992).

The analyses are restricted to (1) the baseline interview and (2) a supplemental survey ("Social

Life" supplement) that took place approximately 14 months after the baseline interview. Some

of the analyses use only the baseline data, in order to maximize sample size. The analytic

sample for analyses of the baseline data is N=983 women. 2% of respondents were dropped

from the analytic sample of baseline data due to missing data on a key variable. Other analyses

examine change over time between the baseline interview and the Social Life supplement, and

therefore these analyses are limited to the 584 women who participated in this supplementary

survey. The analytic sample for these analyses is N=514. Due to missing data on key variables,

12% of the 584 respondents were dropped from the analyses that examine change over time.

Dependent variable

At the baseline interview and in the Social Life supplement, the RDSL respondents were asked,

"*If you got pregnant now, you could handle the responsibilities of parenting. Do you strongly*

agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree?" For analyses of the baseline data, this variable

was recoded as 0 = strongly disagree or disagree and 1= strongly agree or agree. 13 respondents

insisted they didn't know or couldn't answer the question. These responses were discarded.

For analyses of change over time, respondents were coded as 1 if there was an increase in their

agreement with this statement (i.e. an increase in their belief that they could handle parenting)

and coded 0 if there was no change or a decline in their agreement with the statement.

Independent variables

The key independent variables of interest are characteristics of the respondents' lives that are expected to be related to the ability to successfully parent.

School enrollment at baseline is captured using a dummy variable for whether the respondent is currently enrolled in school (0 = no, 1 = yes). For the analyses examining change over time, three mutually-exclusive dummy variables are used: the respondent started school (not enrolled at baseline, but enrolled in the Social Life supplement), the respondent stopped school (enrolled at baseline, but not enrolled in the Social Life supplement), and "no change – not enrolled at either time point" (the reference category is "no change – enrolled at both time points."

Employment status is measured the same way as school enrollment, based on a simple dummy variable for whether the respondent is employed (i.e. working for pay) at baseline and at the time of the Social Life supplement. Employment could have a positive effect on feelings of readiness to parent since paid work allows mothers to provide financially for their children. However, time spent working potentially takes away from time available to spend with children, so it is possible that working would have a negative effect on the belief that one could handle parenthood.

Respondents are also asked about their living arrangements at both time points. Specifically, they are asked to name all the people they live with. The baseline analyses include two dummy variables: one for whether the respondent lives with her mother and one for whether the respondent lives with her romantic partner. In examining change over time, a four-category variable was created: moved in with partner (did not live with partner at baseline, but does live

with partner at the time of the Social Life supplement), moved in with mother, experienced other changes in the household roster, and experienced no change in the household roster (reference category). It is expected that living with a romantic partner will be conducive to feeling ready for parenthood. Living with a mother could result in feeling more ready for parenthood, since mothers typically provide a high level of support to their teenage and young adult daughters with children. Instability in living arrangements is expected to have a negative effect on women's beliefs that they are ready to parent.

Relationship status at baseline is approximated using a four-category variable: the respondent is in a "special" relationship, the respondent is engaged, the respondent is married, or the respondent is not in a relationship (reference category). Change over time is summarized using three categories: changed to a more serious partnership (for example, reporting being in a special relationship at baseline but reporting being engaged in the Social Life supplement), changed to a less serious relationship (reference category), or experienced no change in relationship seriousness. It is expected that being in a more serious relationship will be associated with greater readiness to parent.

The final set of variables relates to perceived financial strain. Respondents were asked, "*At the end of the month, do you usually have some money left over, just enough money to make ends meet, or not enough money to make ends meet?*" In the baseline analyses, these three categories were converted into dummy variables (the reference category is "not enough money to make ends meet"). For the analyses examining change over time,

Socioeconomic status is measured using parents' annual household income. There were four response categories for this variable: less than $15,000, $15-45,000, $45-75,000 and more than

$75,000/year. A substantial share (20%) did not know their parents' household income. These respondents were retained in their own category.

Analytic Strategy

In the first part of the analysis, I examine the relationship between young women's belief they could handle parenting and their socioeconomic background. Is readiness to parent among young women (18-19) concentrated among the most disadvantaged, or is it evident across the socioeconomic distribution? I examine the proportion of women who agree (or strongly agree) with the statement that they could handle the responsibilities of parenting, stratified by parents' household income, and compare the means.

I also examine whether readiness to parent predicts having an actual pregnancy during the 2-year study period following the baseline. Using a Cox hazard model, I use the baseline measure of women's readiness to parent as a predictor of later pregnancy, controlling for women's stated desire to have a pregnancy (also measured at baseline). Also controlled in the model is a range of other risk factors for early pregnancy including parents' income, experience on public assistance, race, religiosity, early fist-sex experience, and whether she was raised in an intact family.

In the second part of the analysis, I use regression analyses to try to better understand what young women mean whey they say they could handle the responsibilities of parenting. A series of regressions is estimated using only the baseline data, where women's beliefs that they could handle parenting are regressed on schooling and work statuses, living arrangements, partnership status, and financial strain variables. These are logistic regressions where the dependent variable

= 1 for women who agree or strongly agree that they could handle the responsibilities of parenting. I also estimate a series of logistic regressions examining change over time, between the baseline and the Social Life supplement. Here, the *increase* in agreement that one could handle the responsibilities of parenting is regressed on *changes* in life statuses, related to schooling and work, living arrangements, relationship status, and financial strain.

In the regression models that use only the baseline data, it is possible that the associations between the dependent and independent variables are driven by unobserved factors. The advantage of examining changes over time is that these models are more likely to imply a causal relationship showing how the characteristics of women's lives influence their beliefs that they are ready to parent. By comparing women to themselves, the models control for the unobserved characteristics of women that are stable over time.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows that there is a clear socioeconomic gradient in young women's beliefs that they could handle parenting. Among those with the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds (parents' incomes are $15,000 or less), 56% agree or strongly agree that they could handle the responsibilities of parenting. This proportion declines steadily with rising parental income, and among those from the most advantaged backgrounds (parents' incomes above $75,000), 39% agree or strongly agree that they could handle parenthood (difference significant at p<0.05). However, it is also clear that feeling ready to parent among very young women is not limited to the most disadvantaged women – it is fairly common among higher SES women as well.

Table 2 presents the results of a Cox hazard model predicting whether a woman experiences a pregnancy during the 2-year study period following baseline. It shows that agreement with the statement that one could handle the responsibility of parenting is a strong and significant predictor of pregnancy, even controlling for women's stated desire for pregnancy, along with a host of other predictors.

Tables 3 and 4 present descriptive statistics for the baseline characteristics and the variables capturing change across waves, respectively.

Table 5 presents coefficients from logistic regression models predicting whether – at baseline – the respondent agreed or strongly agreed that she could handle the responsibilities of parenting. Model 1 shows that being enrolled in school is negatively associated with feeling prepared to parent, while working for pay not statistically significant (though the coefficient is positive). According to Model 2, living with a partner is positively associated with readiness to parent, while living with one's mother is negatively associated. The finding related to partners is in accordance with expectations, while the finding regarding mothers is somewhat unexpected. Model 3 shows that being in a relationship (compared with no relationship) is predictive of feeling ready to parent. The coefficients associated with serious relationships – particularly being engaged or married – are particularly large. Finally, as Model 4 reveals, respondents' perceived financial strain does not have a significant association with feeling ready to parent. Controlling for all independent variables simultaneously in Model 5 shows that the pattern of coefficients remains, with the exception of the fact that two of the relationship categories ("special" relationship and married) are no longer statistically different from the "no

relationship" group. In the case of married respondents, this may be because the group is quite small.

Models were also estimated which controlled for socioeconomic background (parents' income), since SES is strongly associated with the dependent variable, and also with the independent variables. However, the pattern of results did not change when controlling for parents' income. These results are presented in the Appendix (Table A1).

Table 6 reveals coefficients from logistic regression models that examine within-respondent changes over time. The dependent variable in these models is whether there was an increase over time (a 14-month period) in the respondent's agreement that she could handle the responsibilities of parenting. The dependent variables are changes in her life circumstances. Model 1 shows that those who stopped being enrolled in school and those who were continuously not enrolled were more likely to have an increase their belief they could handle parenting, compared with those who were continuously enrolled. Also, starting to work during the interval is negatively associated with readiness to parent (compared with working continuously). Model 2 shows that none of the changes in living arrangements are statistically associated with an increase in feeling ready to parent. In the case of moving in with a partner and moving in with a mother, this could be due to small sample size. However, the signs of the coefficients are in line with predictions – specifically, there is a positive (non-significant) coefficient for moving in with a partner, a negative (non-significant) coefficient for moving in with one's mother, and a negative (non-significant) coefficient for other residential instability. According to Model 4, there is a positive, but non-significant association between an increase in partner seriousness (for example, moving from "special" relationship to engaged). Finally,

Model 5 shows that there is no significant relationship between changes in perceived financial strain and changes in readiness to parent.

Models examining change over time were also estimated with controlled for socioeconomic background (parents' income). Once again, the pattern of results did not change when controlling for parents' income. These results are presented in Table A2.

DISCUSSION

Being in school is negatively associated with readiness to parent (in cross-sectional analyses of 18- and 19-year old women) and stopping schooling is positively associated with an increase in readiness to parent (in change-across-time analyses of 18-20-year old women). This paints a consistent picture suggesting that women consider school not to be conducive to parenting.

Of the variables related to work, only one was significant – that is, those who started working during the interval were unlikely to have an increase in their readiness to parent (compared with those who worked continuously). There are two ways to interpret this. The first is consistent with the "time crunch" theory proposed above, specifically that working makes young women feel less prepared to handle motherhood (rather than more). Right after someone starts working they might "feel" the decrease in free time the most, such that those who started working during the interval are less likely to feel prepared to parent compared with those who worked continuously (and are therefore accustomed to having a finite amount of free time). This would be consistent with the findings for schooling above: specifically, things that would potentially take time away from parenting (even when they're financially beneficial) are deterrents to feeling ready to parent.

An alternative argument related to employment can also be made. Compared to working continuously, the other three variables – continuously not working, started working, and stopped working -- have negative coefficients (though two of these are non-significant). It could be that volatility in work status is negatively associated with feeling ready to parent, while having stable, continuous employment is considered a factor that would put someone in a better position to parent.

Living with mothers was found to be negatively associated with readiness to parent at baseline, and moving in with one's mother during the interval had a negative association with increasing readiness to parent (though the latter coefficient was non-significant). This fits with the fact that living with one's mother is a non-normative arrangement for childbearing. However, it is somewhat surprising in the sense that it is a common arrangement for young women who have children, and that living with their mothers makes early parenthood –in some ways – possible for these young women. It is sometimes argued that young (mostly poor) mothers prefer to live with mothers compared with partners, since partner relationships tend to be less stable and male partners sometimes contribute less.

In the analysis, living with a partner and having a more serious partnership were both positively associated with readiness to parent in the cross-sectional (baseline) analysis, but not in the change-over-time analysis. This could be due to the fact that the most serious relationships (engagement and marriage, as well as living with a partner) are relatively uncommon in this age group, and changes in a short time span are uncommon as well.

The purpose of this analysis was to shed light on how conceptions of parenthood vary by socioeconomic status, as well as disentangling which statuses (schooling, work, residential, and

relationship) are the most salient when women are evaluating their readiness to parent. Overall, I found some evidence that parents' income, school and work status, living arrangements and partnership seriousness all influence young women's conceptions of whether they would be able to handle the responsibilities of parenting. The most robust findings were that school enrollment has a negative impact on women's readiness to parent.

REFERENCES

Barber, Jennifer, Miller, Warren B., Gatny, Heather H. 2011. "The Desire to Become Pregnant and the Desire to Avoid Pregnancy: Ambivalence, Indifference, Pronatalism, and Antinatalism." Paper presented at the Population Association of America Annual Meeting, April 2, 2011

Edin, K., & Kefalas, M. (2005). *Promises I can keep: Why poor women put motherhood before marriage*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Finer, L. B., & Zolna, M. R. (2011). Unintended pregnancy in the United States: Incidence and disparities, 2006. *Contraception*, 84(5), 478–485.

Sable, M. R. and D. S. Wilkinson. 2000. Impact of perceived stress, major life events and pregnancy attitudes on low birth weight. *Family Planning Perspectives* 32(6): 288–294.

Singh, S., J. E. Darroch, M. Vlassof, and J. Nadeau. 2003. "Adding it up: the benefits of investing in sexual and reproductive health care." New York: The Alan Guttmacher Institute.

United States Department of Health and Human Services. (2010). Healthy People 2020. Washington, DC: United States Department of Health and Human Services.

Table 1. Percentage of Respondents who "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" They Could Handle the Responsibilities of Parenting (Baseline)

	%	
Parents' income		
Less than $15,000	55.9	
$15,000-45,000	47.5	
$45,000-75,000	41.8	*
More than $75,000	39.0	*
Don't know parents' income	47.0	
N=983		
*Different from "Less than $15,000" category, at 0.05 level		

Table 2. Coefficients from Cox Hazard Models Predicting a Pregnancy in the Two-Year Period Following the Baseline Survey

Could handle the responsibilities of parenting	0.577	**
Positive desire for a pregnancy	0.482	*

$p<0.05$, $**p<0.01$

Note: Model controls for: parents' income, experience on public assistance, race, religiosity, early fist-sex experience, and whether she was raised in an intact family

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics: Characteristics of Respondents at Baseline

Descriptive Statistics - Baseline variables	
	%
Agree/Strongly agree that could handle responsibilities of parenting	46.0
School and work	
Currently enrolled in school	69.8
Currently working for pay	50.8
Living arrangement	
Lives with partner	17.0
Lives with mother	60.1
Relationship status	
Not in a relationship	42.8
In a "special" relationship	47.8
Engaged	7.3
Married	2.0
Money left at the end of the month	
Not enough to make ends meet	18.8
Just enough to make ends meet	34.0
Some left over	47.2
Parents' income	
Less than $15,000	14.5
$15,000-45,000	28.1
$45,000-75,000	19.2
More than $75,000	18.0
Don't know parents' income	20.1
N = 983	

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics: Changes in Respondent Characteristics During Interval (Between Baseline and the Social Life Supplement)

	%
Increase in belief that could handle the responsibilities of parenting	60.0
Changes in school enrollment	
No change - Not enrolled	16.0
Started school	5.0
Stopped school	13.0
No change - Continued school	66.0
Changes in employment status	
No change - Not working	36.0
Started working	14.0
Stopped working	10.0
No change - Continued working	39.0
Changes in living arrangements	
No residential change	55.0
Moved in with partner	7.0
Moved in with mother	9.0
Other residential change	29.0
Changes in partnership status	
No change - continued no partner	32.9
No change - continued special relationship	33.1
No change - continued engaged or married	5.4
Change to less serious partnership	12.1
Change to more serious partnership	16.5
Change in amount of money left end of month	
Money tighter than before	32.0
No change	54.0
Money less tight than before	14.0
N=514	

Table 5. Coefficients from Logistic Regression Models Predicting Agreement that Respondent Could Handle Parenthood (Baseline)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	School and work		Living arrangement		Relationship status		Financial strain		Full model	
School and work										
Currently enrolled in school	-0.830	**							-0.592	**
Currently working for pay	0.043								-0.030	
Living arrangement										
Lives with partner			1.137	**					0.774	**
Lives with mother			-0.400	**					-0.341	*
Relationship status (Ref = Not in a relationship)										
In a "special" relationship					0.413	**			0.173	
Engaged					1.310	**			0.646	*
Married					1.876	**			0.920	
Money left at the end of the month (Ref = not enough)										
Just enough to make ends meet							0.073		0.046	
Some left over							-0.189		-0.024	
Constant	0.396	**	-0.108		-0.489	**	-0.097		0.197	
N=983										

^ p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01

Table 6. Coefficients from Logistic Regression Models Predicting an Increase in Agreement that Respondent Could Handle Parenthood During Interval (Between Baseline and the Social Life Supplement)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	School and work		Living arrangement		Relationship status		Financial strain		Full model	
Changes in school enrollment (Ref = No change - Continued school)										
No change - Not enrolled	0.5413	*							0.574	*
Started school	-0.1996								-0.1744	
Stopped school	0.5549	^							0.5794	*
Changes in employment status (Ref = No change - Continued working)										
No change - Not working	-0.3065								-0.3132	
Started working	-0.4766	^							-0.5144	^
Stopped working	-0.4522								-0.511	
Changes in living arrangements (Ref = No residential change)										
Moved in with partner			0.2549						0.0661	
Moved in with mother			-0.2691						-0.231	
Other residential change			-0.2954						-0.3357	
Changes in partnership status (Ref = Change to less serious)										
No change in partnership seriousness					0.1751				0.1195	
Change to more serious partnership					0.412				0.4192	
Change in amount of money left end of month (Ref = less tight than before)										
Money tighter than before							0.402		0.4604	
No change							0.2165		0.237	
Constant	0.4724	**	0.4827	**	0.1942		0.1411		0.167	
N=514										

^ p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01

APPENDIX

Table A1. Coefficients from Logistic Regression Models Predicting Agreement that Respondent Could Handle Parenthood (Baseline), with Controls for Parents' Income

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
	Parents' income		School and work		Living arrangement		Relationship status		Financial strain		Full model	
Parents' income (Ref = Less than $15,000)												
$15,000-45,000	-0.340		-0.293		-0.251		-0.331		-0.335		-0.231	
$45,000-75,000	-0.570	*	-0.550	*	-0.445	^	-0.526	*	-0.548	*	-0.432	^
More than $75,000	-0.687	**	-0.580	*	-0.519	*	-0.641	**	-0.652	**	-0.452	^
Don't know parents' income	-0.360		-0.394	^	-0.317		-0.312		-0.347		-0.339	
School and work												
Currently enrolled in school			-0.800	**							-0.587	**
Currently working for pay			0.104								0.003	
Living arrangement												
Lives with partner					1.118	**					0.762	**
Lives with mother					-0.370	*					-0.324	*
Relationship status (Ref = Not in a relationship)												
In a "special" relationship							0.414	**			0.171	
Engaged							1.261	**			0.622	*
Married							1.888	**			0.922	
Money left at the end of the month (Ref = not enough)												
Just enough to make ends meet									0.142		0.088	
Some left over									-0.051		0.061	
Constant			0.715	**	0.190		-0.115		0.200		0.414	
N=983												

^ p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01

Table A2. Coefficients from Logistic Regression Models Predicting an Increase in Agreement that Respondent Could Handle Parenthood During Interval (Between Baseline and the Social Life Supplement), with Controls for Parents' Income

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
	Parents' income	School and work	Living arrangement	Relationship status	Financial strain	Full model
Parents' income (Ref = Less than $15,000)						
$15,000-45,000	-0.0602	-0.0472	-0.0643	-0.046	-0.0776	-0.0452
$45,000-75,000	0.2332	0.2344	0.2149	0.2368	0.2095	0.206
More than $75,000	-0.2776	-0.2279	-0.2493	-0.2732	-0.3054	-0.2166
Don't know parents' income	-0.4563	-0.458	-0.4236	-0.4332	-0.478	-0.4315
Changes in school enrollment (Ref = No change - Continued school)						
No change - Not enrolled		0.5307 *				0.5686 *
Started school		-0.1693				-0.1567
Stopped school		0.5663 ^				0.5932 *
Changes in employment status (Ref = No change - Continued working)						
No change - Not working		-0.2894				-0.3038
Started working		-0.4905 ^				-0.5258 ^
Stopped working		-0.4313				-0.5061
Changes in living arrangements (Ref = No residential change)						
Moved in with partner			0.1751			-0.0089
Moved in with mother			-0.2484			-0.2108
Other residential change			-0.2441			-0.2896
Changes in partnership status (Ref = Change to less serious)						
No change in partnership seriousness				0.1386		0.0939
Change to more serious partnership				0.3653		0.3872
Change in amount of money left end of month (Ref = less tight than before)						
Money tighter than before					0.4112	0.4654
No change					0.2174	0.2287
Constant	0.5008 ^	0.5652 ^	0.5778 ^	0.3327	0.2725	0.2775
N=514						
^ p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01						