Teenage motherhood among disadvantaged girls: A strategy to improve or worsen bad odds in life outcomes?

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Extended Abstract

In Western Europe, teenage fertility rates are low. Most mothers give birth to their first child in their twenties or thirties. Births before age 20 have become rare among the general population with new preferences, the availability of contraception, prolonged stays in education, and increased occupational options for women. The Netherlands belong to one of the 5 countries with the lowest rates of teenage mothers among developed countries – all with teen birth rates of fewer than 7 per 1,000 women aged 15-19 (UNICEF 2001).

Although teenage fertility rates are low, teenage motherhood is still considered a social problem that needs to be addressed. Teenage motherhood is strongly associated to adverse life outcomes for both mother and child, for example in educational attainment, employment, family structure, housing, well-being and health (Berthoud & Robson 2001).

However, while the disadvantaged position of teenage mothers and their children are not contested, it is debated whether the negative consequences may be over-estimated (Kreager et al. 2010; Furstenberg 2003). For example, an UNICEF report about teenage mothers presented that 78 percent of Dutch women who gave birth before age 20 live in households with income in the lowest 20 percent and only 26 percent of the women who had their first child in their twenties are in this income group (UNICEF 2001). What this statistic is unable to show is that women who give birth in their twenties are a much more mixed group for background characteristics than the group of women who gives birth in their teens. The importance of this selection effect, e.g. a deprived background and adverse childhood outcomes, for distorting finding on outcomes of teenage motherhood is still not clear. Research findings both support and reject whether the selection effect is dominant in the outcome findings. There were different strategies employed to control for this effect, for example sister and twin studies were conducted and it was controlled for pregnancy and abortion (Geronimus & Korenman 1992; Grogger & Bronars 1993; Hotz, McElroy & Sanders 1997). It is clear that girls who come from adverse family backgrounds are much more likely

to become teenage mothers: Girls who experienced abuse, domestic violence, and family problems are more likely to become teenage mothers, and the risk of becoming a teenage mothers increases with the number of adverse childhood experiences (Hawkes & Joshi 2011).

We therefore investigate the effect of teenage motherhood among disadvantaged girls. This group is at high risk of having a child early and having a child early may be linked to a different rational to them then among the general female population (Matsueda & Heimer 1997). For these girls, having a child might be deliberate strategy. In face of limited opportunities in education or employment, motherhood may be advantageous for their own life outcome possibilities. From ethnographic research, we know that a child can potentially offer stability in their daily lives and support from outside that was not present before (Edin & Kefalas 2005).

In order to study whether having a child early will improve or worsen the life circumstances of disadvantaged girls, we will look at three outcomes. First, we will study their criminal behavior. There is a large overlap of risk factors leading to teenage motherhood and criminal behavior in girls. Both behaviors are common among disadvantaged women with adverse childhood characteristics. However, having a child early may reduce their criminal behavior as they may stay at home, may have less contact with their previous peers, and may get social support. Secondly, we will study both employment history and welfare dependence among disadvantaged girls.

We want to answer the following research question: How does teenage motherhood influence delinquency, employment success and welfare state dependence among disadvantaged women?

Data and method

To test our hypothesis, we use data on 270 female respondents that were institutionalized and treated during their adolescence in a juvenile justice institution. In the Netherlands, juveniles with serious behavioral problems or a difficult family situation may be treated in a judicial setting under a civil law measure (until age 18) or also for committing a serious offense, under a criminal law measure (between age 12 and 18). The latter was the case for 3 percent of the girls. Respondents were discharged from the juvenile institution between 1990 and 1999 and were institutionalized for at least 2 months. On average, the girls stayed 14 months and left at 16 years and 2 months.

The respondents were followed-up after they have been discharged. Information about the respondents include their treatment files (individual and background characteristics

measured in adolescence), register data about children, marriage, divorce, migration and death as well as official registration about their criminal offenses, employment and welfare support history. In addition, they were contacted in 2011 and asked to participate in interviews. Therefore, new information is now available in the form of life history calendars (self-reported information on family-life events, employment, drug use and abuse, criminality) and qualitative interviews.

Among the 270 women, 34 percent gave birth to their first child between the ages 16 and 19. Our first analysis concentrates on their criminal convictions in each age year from age 16 until age 36. As we measure the number of convictions over a period of time, we use a Poisson model and as the current number of convictions is likely not independent from the previous ones, we run a random-effects model.

Preliminary findings

The preliminary findings present the outcomes for criminal behavior. Table 1 shows the results of the random-effects models. We distinguish between 5 categories: all offenses committed; serious offenses and non-serious offenses, as well as violent and property offenses as subcategories of serious offending.

Table 1: Random-effects model

Variables	Dependent variable: Criminal convictions				
	All offenses	Serious	Non-serious	Violent	Property
Int.	-5.69***	-2.33*	-16.73***	-4.33	-2.89*
Age	.38***	.08	1.19***	.13	.10
Age^2	-.01***	-.00	-.02***	-.00	-.00
Teenage mother	-.51**	-.72***	-.18	-.51	-.95***
Marriage	.09	-.05	.31	-.34	-.08
Divorce	-.29	-.58	-.01	-.69	-.31
Children	.11	.24**	-.10	.28	.22*
Low IQ	.48*	.58*	.25	.74**	.60*
Low Education	.00	-.17	.25	.06	-.21
Convictions before 16	.17***	.17**	.18**	.21***	.17*

The findings indicate that controlling for the status of being a teenage motherhood decreases criminal behavior among disadvantaged girls. The effect is found for all offenses, serious offenses and property offenses. This effect is contrary to the time-varying variable children, where we control for the timing and number of children. An increasing number of children is linked with a higher likelihood of being convicted for serious and property offenses. In order to disentangle these findings we created several dummy variables where we studied whether being a teenage mother and having 1-5 children or being a mother for the first

time at age 20 and higher and having 1-5 children differs (table not shown). Again we find a result for teenage motherhood that differs from those of the other mothers. With an increasing number of children these women were less likely to commit serious and property crimes. However, for later mothers, we found that the effect of motherhood only decreased criminal behavior for children 1 to 3. Women who had four and more children were more likely to be convicted for offenses.

In a next step, we will widen our analysis to include the other two outcomes. Here the findings may differ from those we found for their criminal behavior. Having many children may prevent their labor force participation, particular when they are single mothers, which is quite common in this group.

The preliminary findings indicate that having children early leads to behavioral changes among disadvantaged girls. Our further analysis will help us to analyze whether these women are also in a better position financially or whether having children early stabilized their life.

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