

This is a summary of a larger study entitled “Correlates of Adolescent Pregnancy in La Paz, Bolivia: Findings from a Case Control Study.” Limited numbers of the complete study are available upon request from FOCUS on Young Adults.

Risk and Protective Factors for Unplanned Pregnancy among Adolescents in La Paz, Bolivia

From Lipovsek, Varja, Ali Mehryar Karim, Emily Zielinski Gutierrez, Robert J. Magnani and Maria del Carmen Castro Gomez, April 2000. *Risk and Protective Factors for Unplanned Pregnancy among Adolescents in La Paz, Bolivia*. Washington, DC: FOCUS on Young Adults/Pathfinder International.

Background

Recent estimates indicate a teen birth rate in Bolivia of 79 births per 1,000 females ages 15-19, well above the regional average of 68 births. The present study was undertaken to investigate why some female adolescents in La Paz, Bolivia, become pregnant while others in seemingly identical circumstances are able to avoid early pregnancy.

Data and Methods

The target population was females ages 13-19 residing in a peri-urban area of La Paz.* A nearest-neighbor, case-control design was used. Female adolescents were studied in pairs, matched by age and neighborhood, and in each case one of the pair had experienced a pregnancy. The study focused on the following factors as possible explanations of the observed discordant outcomes: family structure, parental relationships, partner relationships, knowledge of pregnancy risk behaviors, self-esteem, and locus of control (internal versus external). Quantitative and qualitative methods were used to gather data, including structured questionnaires and focus group discussions with adolescents.

Findings

- Cases (adolescents who had experienced pregnancy) and controls (adolescents who had never been pregnant) differed with regard to marital and cohabitation status, school attendance, and employment. For example, two-thirds of cases were either married or cohabiting, compared to only 8 percent of controls. Less than one-third of cases attended school, compared to 76 percent of controls, and nearly three times as many cases as controls were employed. Nearly one-third of cases were neither attending school nor working, compared to only 3 percent of controls. For many of the adolescents studied, these differences were likely to have been the consequence of early pregnancy as opposed to the cause.

*La Garita de Lima.

- Cases and controls did not differ significantly with regard to any of the family characteristics considered (place of birth, parents' place of birth, and number of male or female siblings). Neither were significant differences observed with regard to knowledge of pregnancy risk.
- Close relationships between the adolescents and their parents were found to protect against early pregnancy. Controls were 2.1 times more likely than cases to have reported receiving affection and feeling supported by their parents. Cases were 2.4 times more likely than controls to report fighting with their parents frequently.
- Cases were 7.1 times more likely to have low self-esteem. The findings suggest that controls felt less of a need for approval by their peers or partners. However, significant differences were not observed with regard to whether the locus of control was internal or external.
- Focus group results indicate that communication about sexuality with parents generally is difficult for Bolivian girls. The reasons offered included embarrassment and also the perception that the information parents had to offer was limited and not relevant to the girls' lives. Fear of punishment and rejection was another reason given, and one that was expressed very strongly.
- The information extracted from the focus groups also indicates that little communication occurs between adolescent sexual partners about pregnancy and contraception, mainly because of embarrassment and the girl's fear of appearing promiscuous. Nonetheless, participants felt that it was up to them to protect themselves against pregnancy, and most sexually active adolescents used the rhythm method to do so.
- The focus group data also indicate that control issues figure prominently in decision making concerning sex and contraception. Participants stressed the fear of being rejected by partners and identified pressure from peers and partners as being very powerful.

Implications

- The findings suggest that adolescent females in La Paz lack trustworthy support networks—with their families, peer groups, and partners—that would empower them to seek information regarding sex and contraception and act upon that information. The findings further suggest that, although factors related to the individual, such as high self-esteem, are associated with being able to avoid unwanted pregnancy, structural factors also contribute to the health and developmental status of adolescent females. The focus group discussions revealed a complex web of such factors: girls are encouraged (sometimes pressured) by partners and peers to have sexual relations, but strict social norms preclude open discussion about sexuality and contraception between parents and youth, as well as between adolescent partners. At the same time,

transgression of norms—that is, getting pregnant—elicits punishment and ostracism by family, peers, partners, and the broader community.

- Psychosocial barriers to contraceptive use appear to be among the more important obstacles to a reduction in unwanted pregnancy rates among Bolivian adolescents. Interventions intended to reinforce protective factors for Bolivian adolescents might, therefore, focus on improving dialogue between adolescents and parents, partners, and the larger community about sexuality, sexual risks, and ways to protect against unwanted pregnancy. Sex education, which exists in Bolivian schools, offers an opportunity not only to discuss the biological aspects of reproduction, but also to dispel myths regarding promiscuity and the use of contraception. The opportunity in the classroom should also be taken to promote joint responsibility for the use of contraception as well as communication and negotiation between sexual partners.
- The findings suggest that targeting only the behaviors of adolescent girls is not likely to be sufficient. Parents, partners, and the community at large need to be involved in reducing risks and creating opportunities for the healthy development of female adolescents in La Paz.

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