

**Adolescent Risk Taking:
Comparing Across a Decade?**

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Adolescent Risk Taking: Comparing Across a Decade?

Adolescence is a period of growth and change. During this time, male and female adolescents begin to experiment with new roles in their search for identity. Early sexual activity, the appropriate use of birth control and early childbearing are all behaviors that typically have been studied discretely. That is, researchers have examined the antecedents of these activities one at a time, rather than as part of a process. Yet, these three behaviors are closely linked. The current policy debate relating to adolescent childbearing indeed highlights, from a pragmatic perspective, their close connection.

In this research, we utilize an adolescent life cycle perspective, to explore the extent to which these three behaviors have common attitudinal and behavioral origins. Related to this issue of course are somewhat competing notions; is there reason to believe that certain kinds of children are more or less likely to systematically have attitudes or follow behavior paths which are conducive to, for example, early sexual activity, a poor use of contraception, and a high probability of early childbearing. Or, conversely, are the three behaviors we examine linked to disparate antecedents, or perhaps even largely random behaviors? In particular, we contrast results for two distinctly different cohorts of adolescents, one born to adolescent mothers, and one born to mothers who were at more mainstream childbearing ages.

In our prior work (Kowaleski-Jones and Mott, 1998), we examined these processes for youth born to young mothers in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79). For example, we found that youth who are inclined toward risk-taking and those who have run away from home are more likely than others to be sexually active at an early age. For young women, having intercourse at an early age, not using contraceptives and having a child were linked with depression, low self-esteem and little sense of control over their lives. The results for young men are less consistent and indeed, sometimes in the opposite direction. Young people who have become parents evidence greater maturity than their childless peers; women are less likely to consume alcohol (consistent with having acquired an awareness of the

potential harm of alcohol on their fetus) or to spend time with friends who drink, and men are more likely to participate in socially productive work.

Since 1994, the NLSY79 data set has biennially included comprehensive interviews with all children of the female respondents who are at least 15 years of age. This permits us to carefully examine linkages between a variety of antecedent family and personal behaviors and attitudes and the more recent sexual and reproductive behaviors specified above. In our earlier work based on the 1994 data, noted above, we explored these connections for youth who were 15 to 18 years of age at that time. Given that their mothers were 14 to 22 when first interviewed in 1979, these particular youth were born when their mothers were largely adolescents, mostly between the ages of 16 and 19.

Our comparative sample are 15 to 18 year olds in 2004 and were born between 1986 and 1989 when their mothers were largely at prime child bearing ages, mostly in their mid- to late 20s at that time. Additionally, the 15 to 18 year olds in this later period have completed a more comprehensive set of questions both at the young adult ages as well as when they were younger 10 to 14 years old, as both the young adult as well as the child data collection have been considerably enhanced with additional essential inputs such as measures of parenting beliefs and attitudes as well as expanded information about peers and potential dating partners including relationship quality measures.

All of the above enable us to accomplish two analytically useful tasks; first, and most basically, using appropriate interaction techniques, we are exploring similarities and differences in what predicts the three outcomes of interest for boys and girls 15 to 18 years of age a decade apart—in 1994 and 2004. While both cohorts include youth from all social classes, it should be apparent that most of the 1994 cohort that had been born to adolescent women were from significantly poorer backgrounds than the 2004 cohort who had been borne to women in their mid and late 20s. In the 1994 study, we found, even after controlling for a wide range of socio-economic indicators, that age of mother at birth was consistently among the most important predictors of adverse adolescent behaviors. Given that the 2004 cohort of youth were almost all born to older mothers, one key issue we are exploring is whether a number of social

class related variables that had been reduced in importance for the earlier cohort with the introduction of the age at birth variable now retain their power. Thus, we are in a better position to gauge the importance of these factors for the youth behaviors we study.

Finally, the 2004 cohort can be examined more carefully in a true longitudinal context because we have available a larger package of theoretically relevant antecedents. We will examine this more recent cohort carefully first limiting to an identical package of predictors that we had used in the earlier research, and then additionally, with the larger set of background factors now available, that may provide useful insights regarding the appropriateness of the more “reduced form” earlier equations.

We utilize partial correlation analysis as our primary analytical technique examining the independent associations between our three outcomes of interest, and a variety of theoretically relevant "explanatory" variables, controlling for a full set of prior familial and maternal socio-economic, demographic, and social-psychological priors. As will be seen, we are clearly on much stronger theoretical ground in inferring causality for some of our linkages than others. Because of this and the longer time line for theoretically relevant temporally prior inputs, after exploring the 1994 and new 2004 partial correlations, we will use more standard logit techniques with the fuller set of 2004 antecedents to enhance our causal story for the more recent period. We believe that our composite story sheds some useful, indeed important, light on the adolescent developmental process for an important national sample of boys and girls.

References

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