

"School age pregnancy - A Continuing Culture of Poverty"

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In 1996 Youth Support celebrated it's tenth anniversary - but it also marked over fifteen years work on our longitudinal survey of pregnant schoolgirls and school age parents. In 1987 I presented a paper at the International Medical Women's Federation meeting in Sorrento, Italy entitled ' Teenage Pregnancy - a culture of poverty'⁽¹⁾ and it is with some dismay that I find myself writing about the same subject ten years later.

In fact poignantly on the internet today I found a discussion note from Martin Wolfish , Past president of SAM (Society for Adolescent Medicine) which almost uses my words ⁽²⁾. to quote :-

'I read with dismay Jonathan Klein's reporting of the US Secretary of HHS "National Strategy to prevent teenage pregnancy" I am reminded of the futility of King Canute to hold back the tide. The problem of teenage pregnancy will not be solved by governmental pronouncements but by improving the life of urban and rural poor. Better educational opportunity, adequate housing, proper nutrition, better health maintenace and prevention of individual and social abuse will improve self esteem of teenagers where girls do not have to feel that their reproductive ability is their only raison d'etre and

teenage boys do not have to flaunt their potency to prove that they are persons of worth. Teenage pregnancy cannot be treated as an isolated problem - it is part of the culture of poverty.'

Yes, we too have our government white papers which tell us how to stem the tide of teenage pregnancy - ****! I am not sure how strong an expletive would be allowed in ethical debate but you can guess! The trouble is that sometimes those of us who are working at the frontline with young parents see such profound levels of deprivation that we become numbed and immune to the full horror of how some people live and maybe we are then to blame for not carrying the message to the politicians and policy makers who feel deprived when the pile in their carpets falls below a certain thickness. Many of my girls don't have carpets, or curtains, or comfortable beds of their own, or gardens to look out on, or enough food or warmth. I could show hundreds of slides of deprived homes, broken windows, graffitied halls ... but that could demean our families who generally speaking are making the best of a bad job.

The effects of poverty are complex and far reaching and no less so in the field of young parenthood. The complexity renders research difficult; statistics are vulnerable to challenge by those with opposing politics and qualitative results are often pushed to one side by the less knowledgeable.

Some facts are discernible however. In Britain, schoolgirl pregnancy is part of a culture of poverty and deprivation where

pregnant schoolgirls live in areas of poor housing, overcrowding and unemployment. Results from the first six years of the longitudinal study ⁽³⁾ revealed that 40% of families of pregnant teens were already known to social service agencies before their daughter's pregnancy and 20% of girls had been in care. The typical pregnant schoolgirl is a member of a large single parent family, 70% of girls do not live with both their natural parents; 16% have no mother and 65% have no father. ⁽³⁾ ⁽⁴⁾

Demographic variables associated with schoolgirl pregnancy were studied by comparing rates of teen pregnancies in the very small government census zones covered by what are called ACORN (A classification of residential neighbourhoods) groups. Analysis of ACORN groups in the study area of London revealed that 75% of pregnant schoolgirls lived in areas with a male unemployment rate of over 20%. Poor housing also constituted a significant factor over half the young mothers lived in ACORN groups with more than 10% overcrowding and 61% in groups with less than 10% owner occupied accommodation. In fact, housing conditions were unsatisfactory for 44% of pregnant schoolgirls. Families are cramped, pregnant girls share bedrooms with other family members in some cases beds are also shared, few have enough room for the expected baby.

The study area (Camberwell) is a deprived inner city area. The disadvantaged circumstances of its young people can be seen to influence rates of antenatal anaemia, perinatal mortality and birthweight. One third of girls had a diet which was grossly deficient in both quantity and

quality. All of their families were on low income so that they were unable to spend much money on food - two thirds were surviving on state benefits alone. The younger girls had poorer diets than the older girls and this was associated with their giving birth to smaller babies. Here we are dealing with a life long legacy since 'there is a cycle of maternal nutritional deprivation which leads to low birth weight ... the important stage of deprivation for a mother originates not at the time of giving birth, but at the time of her own birth' ⁽⁵⁾.

The perinatal mortality for babies of mothers under 20 is one of the highest ⁽⁶⁾ but our sample babies had a perinatal mortality of 16.95% per thousand, higher than that seen in social class V mothers and one and a half times the district average ⁽⁷⁾. The class difference in low birth weight and perinatal mortality is highly significant ⁽⁸⁾ ⁽⁹⁾ it is estimated that each year more than 6,000 perinatal deaths occur in the 'lower classes' in excess of the rates for social class I babies and the children of teenage mothers are those most at risk. Katy had her tiny premature babies at roughly 6 month intervals after her first incestuous pregnancy at age 12 years - of the first five, three survived, all sickly.

Looking at long term deprivation - the criteria of disadvantage used in the Newcastle 'Thousand family study' (10) were applied to the sample. (Score of 1-6 for 1-family disruption; 2-parental illness; 3-defective care; 4-social dependence; 5- housing overcrowding; 6-poor mothering.) On this basis 82% of girls and 96% of their babies score as very

deprived. In addition babies scored higher numbers of criteria of deprivation the mean being three criteria for schoolgirl mothers and four for their babies.

Multiply deprived children have been shown to be shorter, poorer school attenders, less likely to take exams, and more likely to attend court (28% as opposed to 6% non deprived) (10). These very factors have been ascribed to schoolgirl mothers (11) ⁽³⁾ and it would indeed seem that such young mothers are locked in a cycle of deprivation with the degree of deprivation increasing in the next generation. Early pregnancy can thus result in a spiral of social deprivation. Pregnancy results in loss of education, which reduces the chance of finding employment. This leads to poverty and the tendency for the girl to find another man, in the hope that he will support her. She then becomes pregnant again and the spiral takes one more turn towards poverty, illiteracy and poor health.

Predictions and reality - So having made such comments after the initial years of the survey - how did the situation change over the years? (12).

Sandra at the stage of her second pregnancy was living in misery in a damp flat with no furniture, no heating and with a small son who could only communicate by burping. He was so emotionally traumatised by his experiences of poverty and abuse at the hands of mum's last boyfriend. We helped her and the next few years were a little easier with Paul learning to speak, going to school and settling down - but at fifteen he truants, goes missing, is angry and upset at his situation - mum

has had several pregnancies by different men - has lost twins at birth and is now finding support in a marriage to an older man who is 'fathering' them all.

Della has had one knock after another - living at first in squalour, sharing a two mattresses on the floor with her mother and sister and two small children. A victim of life, her children have followed in her footsteps - they are perhaps the most deprived family I have ever known.

So why does the situation persist and the problems repeat from generation to generation ?

Because even after 15 years - 10% still have no housing. After giving birth, housing conditions are characterised by more severe overcrowding, due to the presence of the baby and sometimes the boyfriend and lack of privacy. Girls frequently change address in the hope of finding better accomodation, moving from parents house to boyfriends family and friends flats. It took Julie 12 years and the lost opportunity of growing up with her young family before she was able to move into her own home.

Because training and work opportunities are so poor.

Because baby fathers fade out of the picture and most of all - Because there is a heavy loading in all the parameters against girls who have been brought up in the care system or without a supportive family. They have higher pregnancy rates and more of their children end up in care.

We talk of family structures and traditions as if the childbearing experience of our mothers is inevitably copied. A third of pregnant schoolgirls are following in the pattern of their mothers - that means that *two thirds do not*. Hence it is not so much teenage pregnancy that forms the cycle of transgenerational repetition - but the deprivation that fosters early childbirth.

References -

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