

Book Review

Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy, B. C. Miller, J. J. Card, R. L. Paikoff, and J. L. Peterson (Eds.), Newbury Park, CA, Sage, 1992.

The high rates of teen pregnancy have been widely documented. Each year in the United States, more than 1 million pregnancies occur to women 20 years of age or younger,¹ and the rates among the youngest of these women have increased dramatically during the past decade.¹⁻³ Most pregnant adolescents choose to keep their children rather than receive abortions or give their babies up for adoption,⁴ but doing so typically results in negative social consequences, including school dropout and long-term economic and vocational problems.⁵ As a result of this social crisis, many communities have implemented pregnancy prevention programs. *Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy* is an edited book presenting evaluations of state-of-the-art pregnancy prevention programs from researchers around the United States.

The first chapter, authored by Card, Peterson, and Greeno, helpfully discusses some of the pitfalls and problems associated with implementing and evaluating these programs. These authors offer useful strategies to increase program effectiveness—for example, the developmental timing of the program, the importance of a comprehensive, intense program, and the like. The authors also make a case for assessing the process and impact of the program once it is implemented; however, they emphasize the fact that impact assessment is extremely difficult and requires considerable expertise. The final few pages of the chapter point the reader to important additional resources in the area of pregnancy prevention. As a broad overview, this chapter is useful for the uninitiated program evaluator. Unfortunately, some of the topics discussed, if not followed by further study, may be misleading. For example, the authors note that “poverty, family instability, minority status, and failure in school are important risk factors in adolescent pregnancy” (p. 9). The authors fail to note that these same factors are risk factors for most social problems. Further, they do not cite research indicating that studies attempting to examine risk factors for teenage pregnancy are not particularly good at predicting who will and will not get pregnant.⁶ Problems with identifying high-risk populations and targeting services to those groups have been examined extensively by researchers in diverse problem areas.⁷

The chapters that follow Card et al.’s chapter describe the implementation and findings of evaluations conducted on a variety of different pregnancy prevention programs. Miller and Paikoff’s final chapter in the book critically summarizes the studies as a whole, and many of the points I make about individual chapters are contained in their critique.

The chapter by Thomas and associates discusses the evaluation of the McMaster Teen Program, a cognitive-behavioral program modeled on one by other authors.⁸ Results of the study indicated that participation in the experimental program had no influence on students’ level of abstinence, their use of birth control, or their rate of pregnancy. The authors suggest several reasons why their results are different from other evaluations using a similar program model: more middle-class participants, younger participants, and no discussion of birth control methods in the curriculum. There are also numerous methodological and statistical flaws in the study that preclude confidence about the results. However, the “private ballot,” an innovation in data collection by the authors, is outstanding. Questionnaires were placed in an envelope, and students pulled the questionnaires out of the envelope and answered them item by item. Questions are ranked according to the extent of sexual activity, and students do not answer questions that query activities in which they have not engaged. This procedure can do much to allay the fears held by many parents that answering

questions about sexual activity might actually promote such activity as well as concerns of evaluators that exposure to explicit questionnaires may promote a pretest effect (although this latter point does not seem to be a concern of the researchers in this book).

Barth, Leland, Kirby, and Fetro also describe a cognitive-behavioral program based on social influence theory. Their program reduced the incidence of the initiation of sex in the experimental group over time (18 months) but not at the initial posttest. However, the program was not effective at diminishing either the frequency of sex or the use of birth control among students already having sex (a common finding among many of the programs reported in this book). The program was controversial in the community (e.g., curriculum role-plays had students enact how to avoid pressure to have sex or unprotected sex), and some schools had to withdraw their support because of parental pressure and concern. Surprisingly, such concerns are not mentioned by other researchers in this volume.

The chapter by Howard and McCabe details a program for younger teens, run by youths, and containing the explicit value that young people should not be having sex. The program had two elements: (a) postponing sexual involvement and (b) human sexuality (with information on birth control). The evaluation of the program indicated that students attending the program were less likely to initiate sexual relations; when they did initiate sex, they engaged in less of it compared to those in the control group. Further, there were fewer pregnancies in the experimental group, and the program was helpful to both girls and boys. The program did not help those students who had begun to have sex before participating in the program. This study is remarkable for its attention to good methodology and data analysis techniques. One example of the authors' attention to methodological issues was controlling for the various "opportunities" for sex that may have differentiated the experimental and control groups; that is, not having a boyfriend or girlfriend makes it less likely that a given teen will engage in sex. The authors analyzed their data controlling for involvement with a boyfriend or girlfriend and found that "the difference in rates of sexual involvement [between control and program groups] could [not] be attributed to less interpersonal involvement" (p. 99). Additionally, the appendix regarding techniques on coping with inconsistencies in subject data collected over time is excellent. Numerous teens who indicated at pretest that they were sexually active indicated at posttest that they had never engaged in sex. The authors note that eliminating subjects with inconsistencies in the data analysis may result in "clean" data, but it biases the data set in favor of those individuals who have never had sex. The authors suggest several ways to maintain the integrity of the data and remain sensitive to the information provided by participants in the research project.

The chapter by Nicholson and Prostrado describes a number of different programs offered to members of a national youth organization, Girls Incorporated. The authors hoped to determine whether attendance at two or more program components led to better pregnancy prevention outcomes for the teens. The findings are mixed, and it is difficult to determine what factors might be driving these results. For example, because the programs are very different from one another, it is not clear whether it mattered which programs girls participated in, not just that they participated in two or more programs. The reader is not told the relative popularity of the various programs (all of them were voluntary) except that the daughter/mother communication groups were poorly attended. The lack of results found by this program probably highlights the need to target younger girls (ages 11 and 12 years).

Philliber and Allen describe the implementation and evaluation of the Teen Outreach Program, a nationwide program that has been in existence since 1984. The program is voluntary and lasts for 1 year (meetings occur at least once per week), during which time the teens receive mentoring and participate in a volunteer work experience in the community and a peer support group. Five sites were able to "use randomization procedures" to assign volunteering students to control and experimental groups; the other sites could not or would not randomize their participants. The authors are extremely enthusiastic about the benefits of their program, but I believe that such enthusiasm must be tempered by the myriad methodological problems in this research. Conducting a nationwide evaluation study is an extremely difficult endeavor, but serious problems diminish

the reliability of the findings: the volunteer participants used in this study may well be very different from the general population, the lack of process data (how many times did students actually attend the program?), the differential impacts of coordinators, the reliance on self-report data, the lack of information as to how data were collected, and the percentage of students at each site completing the questionnaires. The lesson exemplified by this research is an important one: Researchers must take a hands-on, collaborative approach with the sites at which services are delivered.

Zabin and her colleagues have published a number of studies detailing a pregnancy prevention project in Baltimore, Maryland. The current chapter provides an overview of this work. The strong point of the Zabin et al. chapter is its description of the difficulties of doing community research and the level of cooperation necessary between all parties for a successful program and evaluation. For example, discussion regarding the design of the evaluation took approximately 1 year. Given the authors' attention to the collaborative aspects of their project with sites in the community, I was surprised that passive parental consent was employed; parents were asked to call a telephone number if they did not want their children to participate in the project. Because teen pregnancy is a community problem, it seems important that researchers mobilize as many allies as possible to combat it. Further, enlisting the support and cooperation of parents might allow the program to be more culturally sensitive and locally appropriate.

Kirby and Waszak's chapter reports on an evaluation of school-based clinics. The chapter is most useful for its description of different approaches used by communities when initiating these clinics. Again, as with so many of the other chapters in this book, the methodology and statistical analyses are somewhat problematic.

The final program chapter is by Eisen and Zellman, who describe an elaborate intervention that compared a health belief model intervention to a comparison intervention. The two programs were differentially effective regarding impact on the target behaviors. The authors suggest that the next step for the field is to match programs with participants who can benefit from them. This is an important point.

As much as I admired the work of all of the authors in this book, I could not help but feel that pregnancy prevention research is in its infancy. The number of researchers and community members who will undertake the implementation of these programs is impressive, and it is comforting to know that some of these interventions sometimes work for certain groups of young people. However, more information is needed to understand why the programs are effective for some and not for others. Programs described in this book attempt to affect the behavior of the individual by focusing on the individual, but the context in which teen pregnancy occurs is important as well. Some literature has indicated that pregnant and parenting adolescents often grow up in environments that encourage and condone early sex and pregnancy.⁹ Future programs should attempt to intervene at a level beyond the individual.

Finally, although many of the programs cited in the book were developed for high-risk teens (i.e., minority students from low-income backgrounds), the middle-class bias of the authors sometimes is all too apparent. For example, one item on a questionnaire reproduced in this book states, "A young girl's pregnancy can really hurt her parents." This question assumes that family norms are generally against early pregnancy; this is not always the case.

In summary, then, I feel that this is an excellent introduction to the extant literature in the field of pregnancy prevention. Many important lessons in program design, implementation, and evaluation can be learned by a careful study of the projects presented. By avoiding the pitfalls of previous researchers, future researchers might begin to concentrate their efforts on developing more methodologically sophisticated evaluations and determining factors (at the individual, family, and community levels) that can further our understanding of why some programs work and others do not work for some adolescents.

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