

Teenage Cohabitation, Marriage and Parenthood

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Abstract

Research has integrated cohabitation into the family life course of Americans. However, little work has specifically examined the role of cohabitation among teenagers. The National Survey of Family Growth (2002) is used to examine changes in teenage (ages 15-19) women's family formation in terms of cohabitation, marriage, and birth. Analyses indicate that there has been an increase in teenage cohabitation among recent cohorts with about one-quarter of teenagers having cohabited and the growth in cohabitation has offset declines in teenage marriage. In fact, during adolescence, cohabitation is the most common family formation activity to occur. Cohabitation is increasingly linked to teenage marriage and teenage childbearing. It appears that cohabitation has become an important part of the landscape of the adolescent years.

Extended Abstract

Cohabitation has become an increasingly ubiquitous part of the early adult family life course, in part because the age at marriage in the United States is at an all time high point, the median is 25.5 for women and 27.5 for men (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). Even though young adults are waiting longer to get married, this does not mean that young adults are refraining from living together. The majority of young adults have cohabited and the typical path to marriage is through cohabitation (Chandra et al. 2005; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). Furthermore, cohabitation is linked with fertility. Cohabiting women are more likely to have a child than single women (Manning and Landale 1996) and the increase in nonmarital fertility is due largely to an increase in cohabitation (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008).

Although cohabitation is recognized as important part of the family life course, the bulk of research has not explicitly considered cohabitation as a teenage activity. It may be important to consider cohabitation during the teenage years separately than later cohabitation, because teenage cohabitation may be the result of different dynamics and meanings than cohabitation during the twenties and thirties.

Given the mean age at cohabitation is relatively young (22), it is not surprising that cohabitation is not restricted to just women in their twenties. Many studies have included age in their analyses of cohabitation, noting the percent who have cohabited or currently cohabiting among different age groups (Chandra et al. 2005; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008), documenting variation in outcomes of cohabiting unions (Manning and Smock 1998), or examining differentials in the odds of cohabitation or marriage (Qian 1998; Xie et al. 2003). However, prior studies do not specifically examine cohabitation during the teen years.

Only one recent study has examined the correlates of teenage cohabitation, and finds that women from disadvantaged backgrounds, who have weaker community ties, experience higher odds of teenage cohabitation (Houseknecht and Lewis 2005). Our study will examine recently collected, nationally representative data, thus providing an important update, as their work is based on a sample of 8th grade girls in 1988.

A couple of recent studies have integrated cohabitation into teenage fertility research by documenting that about two-fifths of unmarried teenage births are to cohabiting mothers (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008; Mincieli et al. 2007) and evaluating the marital and cohabitation trajectories of teenage mothers (Graefe and Lichter 2007). Using specialized samples researchers have included cohabitation into their assessments of teenage childbearing by evaluating the relationship trajectories of teenage cohabiting and married mothers (Eshbaugh 2008), economic survival strategies of single mothers which include living with a man (Almgren et al. 2002), or the implications of teen mother's cohabitation on education (Eshbaugh 2005).

The current study contributes to the existing research on teenage motherhood, cohabitation, and early union formation by analyzing teenage family formation activities (cohabitation, marriage, and birth) among two cohorts of women and men (birth cohorts 1968-1972 and 1978-1982) who were teens in the late 1980's and the late 1990's. This provides an opportunity to examine change in patterns over a ten year period. Because some of the determinants of union formation

and parenthood vary between men and women, we explore family formation patterns and evaluate the effects of sociodemographic covariates separately for men and women. It is important to assess the family formation activities of teenagers as these decisions are setting the progression of their future family life (e.g., Manning et al. 2008; Meier and Allen 2008; Raley et al. 2007).

Data and Methods

This study draws on the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) (2002). The NSFG collects data on the fertility and family experiences of men and women ages 15-44 in the United States. The strengths of these data include the following: the data have been recently collected, the sample size is large enough for analysis of teenage experiences, and the survey consists of excellent measures of cohabitation, marriage and births.

The analytic sample is women and men from two different birth cohorts (1968-1972 and 1978-82). This strategy allows us to assess whether the family formation experiences of teenagers in the late 1980's differ from those of teenagers in the late 1990's. The sample of women includes 1,336 teens from later cohort (1990s cohort) and 1,345 from the early cohort (1980s cohort). The sample of men includes 938 teenagers born in the later cohort and 724 born during the earlier cohort.

We focus on family formation activities during the teenage years and analyze three outcomes (cohabitation, marriage, and birth). Using the birth, marriage, and cohabitation history data we evaluate whether teenagers have cohabited, married or had a birth during adolescence. We assess the family context of the births (single, cohabiting, married) by relying on pregnancy histories. We determine women's age at the end of a pregnancy resulting in a live birth to determine whether it was a teen birth (ages 15-19). Whether the birth occurred during singlehood, cohabitation, or marriage is assessed by a direct question asking about the living arrangements at the time of birth. This is repeated for every pregnancy resulting in a live birth. Nearly one-fifth of teen mothers had more than one live birth during their teen years. Consistent with prior research we define teenage years as ages 15 through 19. We will distinguish mid- (15-17) and later adolescence (18-19) in our analyses.

The key independent variable is birth cohort and is divided into women and men born between 1968 and 1972 (early cohort) and 1978 and 1982 (late cohort). This allows us to capture the family formation experiences of women and men during their teenage years in the late 1980s versus the late 1990s. We also include four other measures that are related to family formation. Race/ethnicity is recoded into five response categories: White, African-American, native-born Hispanic, foreign-born Hispanic, and other. Respondent's mother's education is measured by four categories: less than H.S degree, earned H.S degree, less than college degree, and college degree or higher. Religious service attendance, serving as a proxy for religiosity, has five response categories and is treated as a continuous variable. The response categories are as follows: never attends religious services; attends less than once a month; attends 1-3 times per month; attends once a week; attends more than once a week. Religious service attendance during childhood is only asked of women below the age of 25 at interview (the 1990s teenage cohort). A chi-square test confirms that service attendance during childhood is significantly correlated with

service attendance at interview, thus it is included in this analysis of the 1980s teenage cohort. Family type during childhood is measured as a binary response variable, with respondents falling into one of two categories: grew up in a two biological parent household, stepparent household, single mother, or “other” household at age 14.

We begin with a descriptive portrait of the teenage family formation activities with a focus on how cohabitation is tied to adolescent parenthood and marriage. Second, we will use logistic regression to model family formation experience (cohabitation, marriage, and birth) during the teenage years. Given the sampling design, analyses are stratified by gender. We will first estimate zero-order models showcasing the effect of birth cohort and then include the covariates described above. Using interaction terms we will assess whether the covariates have a similar relationship to each dependent variable according to birth cohort. Third, we will examine change in union formation in response to pregnancy and union formation within one year of the child’s birth using logistic regression models.

Preliminary Findings

The preliminary analyses are limited to women and we present descriptive findings associated with cohabitation, marriage, and births in the teenage years. Table 1 shows that one-fifth (21%) of teenage women in the late 1980s cohabited and 15% married. Among teenagers who formed a union in the late 1980s, nearly half had married. About one-third of teenagers who married also cohabited, indicating cohabitation was not the typical route into teenage marriage. Taken together, the majority of teenagers did not form a union, but about one-third did so.

The next column of Table 1 indicates an increase in teenage cohabitation and a decline in teenage marriage. Among women who were teens in the late 1990s one-quarter (26%) cohabited and one-tenth (11%) married. We find that 31% of teenagers formed a union; however, unlike a decade earlier only one-third married and the majority had cohabited. In addition, there is a sharp increase in cohabitation experience among married teens. About half of teens who married spent some time cohabiting prior to marriage. The age distribution of cohabitation has not shifted. In both cohorts about one-third of teenage cohabitation was to women under the age of 18 and two-thirds was to 18-19 year old (results not shown). Overall, the odds of forming a union during the teenage years have not changed, but the type of union has shifted away from marriage and toward cohabitation. The increase in cohabitation has offset the decline in marriage.

Consistent with teen birth rate trends, a relatively steady proportion of women had a child during their teenage years (17%). Not surprisingly, the vast majority of teenage mothers gave birth while single and there was an increase in the percent of teenage mothers who were single when they gave birth. A decline occurred in the percent of teenage mothers who were married at the time of their birth from 33% of teen mothers in the late 1980s to 25% in the late 1990s. No change occurred in the proportion of teenage mothers who cohabited when their child was born (26%). Even though there has not been a change in teenage motherhood, the family context has slightly shifted away from marriage and toward having a child outside of any union.

Notably, most teenagers do not have a teenage birth. In the late 1990s 39% of married teens had a child during marriage and 18% of cohabiting teens had a child while cohabiting. Childbearing during cohabitation has declined slightly and during marriage has increased. It appears that teenage marriage and childbearing are more closely linked than teenage cohabitation and childbearing.

About three-fifths of teens do not experience any family formation activities during adolescence, and in both the 1980s and late 1990s two-fifths of teens do cohabit, marry or have a child (results not shown). Most teens just experience one family transition, and there has been just a slight decline in the percentage of teens who form a union and have a child (9% in the late 1990s). The most common family formation activity during adolescence in the late 1990s was cohabitation, specifically cohabitation with no children (21%). Cohabitation without children was less common in the late 1980s only 16% of teens cohabited with no children. We find that most of the increase in cohabitation is due to cohabitation without childbearing. The second most popular family formation activity in the late 1990s is to become a single mother (10%) and in the 1980s was ranked third (9%). In the late 1990s the third ranking family activity was to marry without children (7%) which was ranked second in the late 1980s (10%).

Discussion

Dramatic changes in the American family formation process have occurred in recent decades in terms of cohabitation, marriage, and parenthood. However, the research on adolescence focuses on teenage parenthood when in fact cohabitation is the most common family formation activity.

The preliminary findings indicate a 25% increase in teenage cohabitation during the last decade and a decline in teenage marriage. We find one-quarter of teens have cohabited and most of the increase is among cohabiting teenage women who do not have children. Most teenagers who form a union are cohabiting rather than married. Even among teens who do marry, cohabitation has become a common pathway into marriage among teenage brides. Overall, it appears that the decline in teenage marriage has been offset by an increase in teenage cohabitation.

The levels of teenage childbearing have not shifted during the time period under consideration, but the family context has slightly changed. The shift in teenage childbearing is a decline in births in marriage and a slight increase in births to single women. It appears that in the teenage years cohabitation is less often a context for childbearing than marriage and marriage is increasingly linked to childbearing.

The next analytic steps are to examine the cohabitation and marriage patterns following a pregnancy and the birth of the child. We will assess in the patterns according to indicators of disadvantage. A series of models will be estimated to predict teenage cohabitation, marriage, and parenthood with attention to the effect of birth cohort and social background covariates. In addition, we will examine the patterns and relationships among men.

An important consideration for future research will be to investigate the implications of teenage family formation. These early family formation patterns will set the groundwork for later family transitions and may have implications for the formation and stability of subsequent cohabitations

and marriages. The trajectories of family life may differ sharply among teenage cohabitators than among their older cohabiting counterparts. To best understand cohabitation and marriage it may be important to move away from general assessments, and instead consider sources of variation in family formation experiences.

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U.S. Census Bureau. (2009). Table MS-2. Estimated Median Age at First Marriage, by Sex: 1890 to the Present.

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Table 1: Distribution of Union Formation and Birth Histories Among Teenage Women in the Late 1980s and 1990s

	Cohort	
	1980s	1990s
<u>Union Formation ages 15-19</u>	%	%
Ever cohabited	20.70	25.88
Ever married	15.21	10.97
Ever cohabit or marry	30.56	31.18
<i>Among married teens</i>		
Ever cohabited	35.10	51.70
<u>Birth ages 15-19</u>		
Ever had child	16.75	17.48
Ever had child while cohabiting	4.33	4.67
Ever had child while married	5.49	4.28
<i>Among all teen mothers</i>		
Cohabiting at birth	25.84	26.70
Married at birth	32.54	24.48
<i>Among unmarried teen mothers</i>		
Cohabiting at birth	38.45	35.38
<u>Unions and Births ages 15-19</u>		
<i>Among cohabiting teens</i>		
Had child while cohabiting	21.74	18.13
<i>Among married teens</i>		
Had child while married	36.32	39.31
Total N	1336	1345

Source: National Survey of Family Growth, 2002

Notes: Weighted percentages and means