

Teenage Pregnancy Research Programme

research

briefing

Living on the Edge: sexual behaviour and young parenthood in rural and seaside areas

Teenage pregnancy and parenting are issues of concern particularly in areas characterised by deprivation and social exclusion. Amongst these are a number of seaside resorts, where rates of under-18 conceptions have been higher than national averages, together with their surrounding rural areas. Researchers from the Universities of Hull, Brighton and Liverpool explored the factors that shape young people's attitudes to, and experiences of, sexual behaviour and young parenthood in three linked seaside and rural areas. They found that, although there were many characteristics of sexual behaviour which were familiar from other research, the impact of the local context – for example the hedonistic and exploitative environment of the seaside or the isolation, difficulties in accessing services and heightened 'visibility' of rural areas often accentuated their difficulties.

Key findings

- Young people in these areas face common factors in relation to sex, sexuality and relationships and some felt sexually and emotionally illiterate in dealing with them. Embarrassment, low aspirations, low family expectations, lack of self-esteem were seen to be associated with risky behaviours. However, these factors interact in ways that reflect the particular characteristics of the local context, whether seaside, rural or remote.
- In seaside resorts, and their surrounding rural areas, a hedonistic 'carnivalised' leisure and entertainment environment, together with more transient populations, increase the likelihood of young people engaging in unprotected sex. Easy access to alcohol in both seaside and rural areas increased the likelihood of risky behaviour.
- Young people in both rural and seaside areas described gendered roles and rules for sexual behaviour. These have negative consequences for both sexes, creating circumstances where unplanned pregnancies can occur and subsequent choices and life-paths are shaped.
- Sexual health services were experienced by young people as inaccessible, too visible and not provided at times or in ways to meet their needs: these difficulties were heightened in rural and remote areas. Schools could – and sometimes did – play a key role in helping young people to access appropriate services.
- Some young parents spoke of their positive feelings about parenting and its impact on their goals. Their aspirations for achieving a high standard of care for their children were felt to be undermined through unrealistic expectations (in the light of the poor availability of appropriate work or childcare services), together with negative public and professional attitudes. Childcare services and support for young parents in particular were again particularly difficult to access in rural areas.

Background

There has been very little research on sexual behaviour amongst young people in seaside or rural areas although there have been a few studies - usually action-research projects supported by national children's organisations - which have engaged with young people in rural areas to help give them a voice in shaping policy and service provision. Seaside economies have been the focus of a number of recent national studies but these have focused on issues of economic regeneration and sustainable tourism and have had no obvious concern with the needs of young people. This study therefore fills important gaps in the literatures.

About the study

The research took place between 2001-3 in three seaside resorts and their surrounding rural areas in the East Midlands, Northwest and Southeast regions of England. The main research methods were discussion groups with secondary school pupils (57 groups with year 8, 10, 11 and 12 pupils i.e. roughly 12-17 year-olds) and with those not in mainstream schooling (11 discussion groups); and 80 individual interviews with key professionals, young parents and transient workers. Young people were also involved through local advisory groups commenting on research instruments, on the research as it progressed, and on its findings. Material collected from the sites was combined, analysed and reviewed by the team to identify key themes for policy and service provision.

Findings

Carnival atmosphere

'The fair, the pier, the arcades, even now I get excited when summer comes.' (Young mother)

Seaside areas, with their 'carnival' atmosphere of holidaymaking, heightened by easy availability of alcohol in clubs and other venues, and, to a lesser extent, of drugs, encourage sexual risk-taking. There are regular flows of casual and seasonal workers taking up jobs in the tourism and entertainment sectors, and of seasonal holidaymakers and weekend visitors. This contributes to a sense of temporality, of

'carnavalesque excitement', to which young people are drawn both from within the area and from neighbouring rural areas. Some resorts have more distinct holiday periods, others tend towards a year-round 'weekend resort' culture; these local characteristics impact on the nature of employment and leisure opportunities. However, seaside resorts are generally characterised by a sense of detachment, the suspension of reality, and a considerable amount of movement in and out of the labour market, all of which can encourage casual sex and a lack of responsibility for the consequences of actions.

Economic and sexual exploitation

'They don't care as long as they get money for it.' (Year 8 girl)

'They' – the entertainment industry in general – is perceived by young people as prioritising meeting the needs of adults with little concern for its impact on potentially vulnerable young people. Young people respond to the opportunities presented for engagement and employment. But these sectors capitalise on the attraction of 'sun, sea, sand and (casual) sex' and promote factors that encourage early sexual activity and unprotected sex. The result is that young people growing up in seaside areas and surrounding rural areas often experience sexual, as well as economic, exploitation.

Preparation for sex and relationships

'They don't give you a clue about your emotions' (Year 10 girl)

Growing up in locations likely to encourage risk-taking, young people's sense of a lack of preparation for relationships and sex is particularly acute. They see this as the fault of schools and cultural attitudes to sexuality. Warnings from adults concerning the negative consequences of sexual behaviour are contradicted by messages in the media associating pleasure and status with sexual activity. Particular factors protect some young people from the worst excesses of the seaside. Social class, education and aspirations are significant, as is good quality preparation for sex and relationships provided from school or home. Social exclusion and family breakdown

factors – common in seaside areas – act to remove the buffers and make young people especially vulnerable.

In rural locations, the ‘silences’ and the absences of information and resources create a different style of vulnerability, the consequences of which, including early pregnancy, can be the same. The highly visible nature of rural social networks (particularly in the more remote areas) also means that young people feel exposed to public scrutiny and lack assurance of confidentiality.

Gender relations

‘If a male is seen as sleeping around it is seen as a good thing – if it is a girl she is a slut.’
(Year 12 boy)

Different expectations of young males and females in relation to sexual behaviour can also contribute to increased risk-taking. Young men are expected to become sexually active early whilst young women are denigrated if they are sexually active. Young women are reluctant to anticipate sexual behaviour because of the negative connotations of doing so. The low status of sexually active women allows young men to feel little responsibility for contraception. Combined with low levels of awareness of sexually transmitted infections, this results in low levels of contraception, and especially, condom use. However, it was noteworthy that there were a group of young women who, either related to their education or life experience, discussed more assertive and self-protective sexual behaviours. In seaside areas, risk-taking is more prevalent and is facilitated by the environment; in rural areas, heightened ‘visibility’ brings its own difficulties.

Sexual health services

‘Vending machines don’t look at you.’ (Year 8 boy)

Young people want sexual health services they can use without being scrutinised and at times that correspond to their needs. In rural and particularly in remote areas, scarcity of services, transport problems and high visibility make services particularly inaccessible. Anxieties about ‘everyone knowing everyone else’s business’ combined with anticipated embarrassment, constitute a significant barrier to utilising local sexual health services. Many services, in both seaside and rural areas, were difficult to access.

Young people’s ability to approach such services was compromised by their dependence on their parents for transport. Opening hours often did not fit with young people’s availability. In contrast, young people in some areas were empowered to use sexual health services when schools sensitively brokered their access, taking account of issues of mobility and visibility.

Sexual health professionals

‘You’re treated as though you’re an alien.’
(Young mother)

Young people frequently described sexual health professionals as judgmental and stigmatising. On the other hand, they valued those school staff and health professionals who were well-trained, knowledgeable, confident, respectful, maintained confidentiality and talked to them without embarrassment. Trust is a key element in establishing positive relationships, but young people frequently experienced hostile attitudes from those delivering services, particularly in relation to under-age sex and terminations and were often uncertain about their rights to confidentiality. These problems were exacerbated in more rural areas where young people had access to a limited range of professionals, often known to them and their families.

Young parenthood

‘I’m a teenage mother and I love it.’
(Young mother)

Some young parents spoke positively about parenting and its impact on their lives. It increased their self-esteem and enhanced their lives, providing a sense of security and stability in lives characterised by transience, detachment and low economic aspirations. However, expectations on them to work or study were seen as unrealistic. Services to help them achieve this – particularly childcare and support for young parents – were seen as poor quality and difficult to access; this undermined their ability to be good parents. While pregnant and as young parents they experienced stigma, and punitive and hostile responses from professionals which caused a great deal of distress. Parenting became more difficult when decent housing, adequate income and childcare were hard to obtain; these difficulties were seen to result from negative attitudes towards young parents and poor service provision.

Conclusions and Policy implications

Planning approval, and more general policy and service development, in both rural and seaside areas need to be 'young-people proofed', to avoid damaging impacts on young people. Local authorities need to evaluate the impact of new leisure and entertainment provision on local populations and particularly on young people. Child and family-friendly activities in seaside resorts – i.e. those which do not implicitly or explicitly target the vulnerabilities of young people – need to be encouraged and 'adult-only' activities, which often place young people at risk, discouraged. Young people are effective and engaged when consulted over relevant service and policy issues; organisations should take appropriate steps to consult them over such developments.

Local patterns of sexual health services in rural and seaside areas should be reviewed to ensure they are adequate and accessible, bearing in mind young people's lack of information and personal mobility. Training and ongoing professional development of those delivering services to young people must promote non-judgmental and non-stigmatising approaches. Schools should build ongoing dynamic links with local sexual health services, particularly advice and information services, and contraception and related facilities, advertising them effectively to young people and ensuring they are accessible in terms of time and place.

Access to, and availability of support services for young parents need to be enhanced. The quality of housing and childcare provision for young parents in rural and seaside areas remains inadequate and needs to be given a higher priority.

The authors

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How to obtain further details

Copies of *Living on the Edge: Sexual behaviour and young parenthood in seaside and rural areas of England*, are available from August 2004, price £6 (including p&cp, cheques payable to 'The University of Hull') from: Social Research Papers, Social Policy, University of Hull, Hull, HU6 7RX or to download from the TPU website (www.teenagepregnancyunit.gov.uk).

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About the programme

The TPU, in partnership with the Research and Development Division, Department of Health has commissioned a major research programme under a number of themes in order to inform implementation, and development of, the Government's Teenage Pregnancy Strategy. Five themes were identified through consultation with the Teenage Pregnancy Unit's policy team, other government departments, the research community and practitioners:

- The impact of growing up in rural and seaside resorts on the sexual behaviour and life-chances of young people.
- Attitudes and behaviour of black and minority ethnic young people, relating to sexual activity, contraceptive use and teenage pregnancy.
- Black and minority ethnic young people's experience of teenage parenthood.
- Educational experiences of pregnant young women and young mothers of school age.
- Long term consequences of teenage births for mothers, fathers and their children.

Reports and research briefings from the nine projects commissioned under these themes will be published throughout 2004. See www.teenagepregnancyunit.gov.uk for more details. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Department of Health or the Teenage Pregnancy Unit, Department for Education and Skills.