

# Chapter 4

## Ethics in Research with Teen Mothers

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### **ABSTRACT**

*United States has the highest level of teenage pregnancy amongst industrialized nations. However, research on teenage pregnancy involves research participants who are young girls undergoing the life-altering process of motherhood. Given the topic of research, where the girls themselves would need to shed light on factors responsible for early pregnancy, qualitative methodology would be an appropriate choice. It would allow the participants to voice their own stories to bring alive their experiences, lifestyles, and problems. Further, all participants, being minors, would be emotionally and psychologically stressed out and in a highly vulnerable condition. This raises numerous ethical issues when examining teenage mothers before, during, and after the fieldwork. This chapter provides insights on ethical issues involving human subjects' research in the context of teenage pregnancies.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

United States has the highest level of teenage pregnancy amongst the industrialized nations. Teenage pregnancy is defined as a teenage girl, usually within the ages of 13-19, becoming pregnant. The term in everyday speech usually refers to girls who have not reached legal adulthood, which varies across the world, who have become pregnant. Teen pregnancy is a health issue that has an effect on all of us. A child having a baby as a teenager is more likely to face critical social issues like poverty, poor education, risky behaviors that lead to poor health issues, and child welfare.

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The financial cost of teens having babies is devastating. Educational attainment is difficult for the teen mother, and this leads to decreased economic opportunities and earnings throughout their lifetime. In 2008, public spending for births resulting from unplanned pregnancies totaled an estimated \$12.5 billion (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2013).

According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2013, U.S. teen pregnancy and birth rates have dramatically declined over the past 20 years. However, the U.S. rates of teen childbearing still remain far higher than in other comparable countries in the world. Moreover, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy 2013, the teen birth rate for girls in the age group of 10-14 was 0.4 per 1,000 girls in 2012 with no significant change between 2011-2012, and an overall decrease of 71 percent since 1991. There were 3,674 births to girls age 10-14 in 2012. The teen birth rate for girls age 15-17 was 14.1 per 1,000 girls in 2012, and an overall decrease of 63 percent since 1991. In total, there were 86,440 births to girls in the age group of 15-17 in 2012. There was however a slight decrease of 5 percent between 2011 and 2012, and there were 218,980 births to girls in the age group of 18-19 in 2012. Births to teens aged 18-19 accounted for the majority of all teen births. To be exact, 71 percent of all births to women under 20 were to teenagers in the age group of 18-19.

There is, thus, a need to examine the reasons behind early motherhood. The researchers to cite the reasons resulting in early motherhood have to understand the lives of teenage mothers, their situations, difficulties and issues. They would need to seek out young expecting mothers and record their views and experiences to expand theoretical and practical knowledge, and suggest possible interventions in professional practices. Teenage mothers themselves would need to shed light on factors responsible for early pregnancies? Why do teens get pregnant? What factors are responsible for this early transition into motherhood? What problems are faced by these young mothers during and after pregnancy? How do they deal with these problems? How is it possible to help these girls so as to allow them to emerge as confident women? These are some issues which pregnant girls themselves can effectively answer.

Teenage mothers should be allowed to “voice” their own stories to bring alive their experiences, lifestyles and problems. Listening to the voice of the pregnant teen or teen mother would allow proper understanding of this common phenomenon in today’s teen culture. Listening to the teen’s story would draw the researcher into her world, her reality and her life effectively. However all the participants are human subjects and also minors, who are undergoing a life changing process of motherhood. This brings forth numerous ethical issues which might arise during, on and after fieldwork. This chapter will dwell on ethical issues involved when studying human subjects who are minors, psychologically and emotionally in a vulnerable

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