12-1989

The Significance of Aspirations Among Unmarried Adolescent Mothers

Naomi Farber
naomif@mailbox.sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/sowk_facpub

Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Publication Info

Published in *Social Service Review*, Volume 63, Issue 4, 1989, pages 518-532.

© 1989 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved

This Article is brought to you by the Social Work, College of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty and Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

The Significance of Aspirations among Unmarried Adolescent Mothers

Author(s): Naomi B. Farber

Source: *Social Service Review*, Vol. 63, No. 4 (Dec., 1989), pp. 518-532

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30012049>

Accessed: 09-12-2019 20:40 UTC

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/30012049?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>

The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Social Service Review*

The Significance of Aspirations among Unmarried Adolescent Mothers

Naomi B. Farber

University of Wisconsin—Madison

Adolescent out-of-wedlock childbearing is associated with persistent poverty, particularly among urban underclass black youth. This article examines findings on the educational and vocational aspirations of teen mothers, how they are associated with class and race and how they may influence economic dependence. The analysis suggests the importance of distinguishing between poor teens' socially normative aspirations and their ability to fulfill those aspirations.

The nature of unmarried adolescent mothers' educational and vocational aspirations provides an important source of insight into the causes and consequences of contemporary out-of-wedlock childbearing in the United States. The recent proliferation of research about adolescent childbearing includes only superficial attention to the development and significance of teens' aspirations for educational and vocational achievement. Those studies that discuss adolescent aspirations often treat them as primarily individual phenomena, conceptually similar to personality traits and divorced from their social context. There is little attempt to explain specifically how family, neighborhood, religion, class, and other social contexts influence adolescents, and how aspirations

Social Service Review (December 1989).

© 1989 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved.

0037-7961/89/6304-0002\$01.00

influence fertility and affect the social and economic consequences of teenage childbearing.

An individual's aspirations cannot be separated from the social context in which they are developed and transmitted. Discussion of teen mothers' educational and vocational aspirations must therefore consider not only the education and careers for which they hope but also to what extent these aspirations reflect the ideals and norms of our society. In addition, it is important to examine what factors enhance or inhibit teens' ability to work toward and fulfill their aspirations. This study examines these aspects of aspirations and whether they are influenced by teens' class and race. The discussion further suggests directions for the development of policies and programs designed to minimize the personally and socially devastating effects of young, out-of-wedlock childbearing.

Teenage Motherhood and Poverty

Research on adolescent childbearing has documented extensively the educational, social, medical, and economic risks faced by a teenager who becomes a single mother.¹ An increasing proportion of white and the great majority of black teen mothers remain unmarried.² Thirty percent of these young women require some form of public assistance.³ Women who begin their spell of welfare receipt as teenage mothers tend to remain welfare dependent for longer periods than other women and families receiving public aid.⁴ Therefore, current concern over teen motherhood centers partly on the real possibility of long-term dependence on public welfare as well as on the tragedy of wasted potential of human life faced by both the adolescent mother and her offspring.

Explanations of Persistent Poverty

Many analyses of the nature of poverty center on the origins and reasons for the persistence of economic and social dependence on public welfare and how best to prevent such dependence. Political bias has tended to influence both research about poverty and analysis of policy and program effectiveness in reducing welfare dependence and related social ills. Heated debate continues over the primacy of underclass "culture" (or subculture) as opposed to social-structural or "situational" factors in the persistence of poverty.⁵

Variants of the cultural model have, in recent years, influenced how the social work profession understood and responded to poverty. The cultural theories explain behavior associated with poverty in terms of adaptive responses to economic deprivation and social and economic marginality.⁶ It is assumed that these responses take on lives of their own and develop as bona fide cultural patterns that are self-perpetuating

in successive generations of poor children. Individuals raised in such environments are believed to hold either low aspirations for achievement or aspirations which appropriately reflect values for success derived from an alternative cultural context. See, for example, Rainwater's analysis of the "many lower-class men [who] assign a low priority to work stability in the way they live their lives."⁷ The political way in which these theories have been used is evident in the fact that advocates of the cultural perspective have alternately been accused of implicitly "blaming the victim" or praised for demonstrating the resilience and integrity of black culture surviving within a racist society.⁸

In contrast to proponents of a cultural perspective are those who emphasize the larger social-structural determinants of persistent poverty. Ideal aspirations of the poor may reflect those of the larger society, but economic and educational opportunity structures work against achieving those aspirations. Such politically different proposals as the curtailment of public welfare and the emphasis on the need for full employment share assumptions about the primacy of external incentives and opportunity structures in the alleviation of poverty.⁹

Approaches to the Study of Teen Motherhood and Poverty

This study addresses the difficult questions of adolescent parenthood and poverty with an assumption not sufficiently acknowledged by many researchers: how people view their lives is an important factor—perhaps as important as any—in how they lead their lives. The teens' perceptions of their present lives, future hopes, and prospects offer insight into how well the young mothers are able to move toward independent adult functioning.¹⁰

There is a large body of recent research that examines the relationship between macrosystem-level intervention and demographic patterns, for example, how Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) benefit levels affect rates of fertility.¹¹ This study contributes to our understanding of unmarried adolescent motherhood and poverty through a cross-class and cross-racial, microlevel analysis of teen mothers' aspirations. Survey studies have demonstrated the general saliency of aspirations in sexual and parenting decisions among teenagers.¹² The qualitative method employed here allows the complexity of aspirations to emerge, providing a richer and more realistic understanding of the meaning and significance of aspirations in the lives of young women.

Description of the Study

Source of Data

In 1985–86, I conducted in-depth interviews with 28 unmarried adolescent mothers in the Chicago area. The sample included black and

white adolescent mothers, ages 15–20, from middle-, working-, and lower-class families (see table 1). Participants' race was self-identified as black or white. Young mothers were classified as middle class if their parent(s) had held steadily white-collar/managerial or highly skilled work. The working-class subgroup was composed of those teens whose parent(s) worked steadily at semiskilled or clerical jobs. The lower-class group included those whose parent(s) had been significantly unemployed or worked at low-skill or unskilled labor.

Participants were referred by seven agencies in the metropolitan Chicago area that provide adolescents with a range of medical, social, and educational services, excluding psychotherapy. (This exclusion was intended to avoid a psychiatrically diagnosed sample bias.) Generalizations of findings from this study are thus limited both by the sample size and by the fact that respondents were selected from agencies that engaged in some measure of intervention.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were gathered through formal in-depth interviews with teen mothers. The interviews were preceded by one focus group that met with black teen mothers from different socioeconomic backgrounds at a referring agency. Interviews with participants in this focus group were semistructured, utilizing a predetermined list of topics. Questions were posed in an open-ended manner.

As part of a larger interview agenda, the young mothers were asked about various aspects of their educational and vocational aspirations. Questions about how the teens' aspirations compared before and after the birth of their child(ren) also included detailed examination of their plans for and knowledge of how to achieve their aspirations. These questions provide the organizing framework for the presentation and discussion of findings.

Most interviews took place at participants' homes, though a few occurred in public places such as a library or restaurant, at the discretion

Table 1

TEEN MOTHER SAMPLE SIZE AND CHARACTERISTICS
BY CLASS STATUS AND RACE

Class Status	Black	White	Total
Middle class	5	6	11
Working class	6	3	9
Lower class	5	3	8
Total	16	12	28

of the participant. All interviews were tape recorded and ranged in length from 1½ to 6 hours.

Audio tapes and field notes of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. The data were then organized according to the themes that were preselected or that identified new areas not anticipated or not included in other research. Within these categories, the data were cross-filed by class and race and compared for difference and similarity in content.

The Significance of Aspirations

An individual's aspirations for the future have significance on several levels. What a young woman desires for her future life reflects her individual hopes, that is, what, presumably, she regards as a "good" life. Her aspirations are also an expression of what kind of life the society in which she lives values. They embody aspects of a collective definition of how members of the society should live, a cultural ideal. In as complex and heterogeneous a society as that in the United States, there could not be complete uniformity regarding the perception and acceptance of these central ideals. Family, neighborhood, community, ethnic identity, religious and political affiliation, and so on, are all sources of possible variation from and contribution to the development of ideals. However, each individual ultimately lives within a wider cultural context in a society having a central core of beliefs and norms. Thus, every member of a society, in varying degrees, shares these central beliefs and norms.

The above distinction between individual and collective meanings suggests two conceptual tools in the study of aspirations and lower-class adolescent family formation. In the first instance, the emphasis on the individual's vision of her future implies that this vision acts to motivate her behavior. Leaving aside for a moment the crucial distinction between concrete goal setting and ideals, aspirations are commonly assumed to provide a direction for personal striving, an articulation of an ideal end state. This aspect of aspirations is evident in the growing literature on adolescent fertility that includes measurements of some objective level of aspirations for achievement as an important variable in the calculus of teens' sexual decision making. It is assumed that ideal aspirations provide both a direction for individual activity and an incentive to maintain behavior leading to the desired end.

In the social context, a young woman's aspirations suggest the degree of her understanding and acceptance of prevailing social norms—a measure of her incorporation into mainstream society. How these aspects of individual aspirations are related is explored in the following discussion of the study's findings.

Findings

Two major themes emerge from this study that are of particular significance for the discussion of dependence among teen mothers. First, all of the teen mothers, black and white, whether from a middle-class, working-class, or lower-class background, hold aspirations that reflect mainstream values about educational and vocational achievement. Second, there is dramatic cross-class variation in the teens' ability to conceptualize accurately the process of attainment of the goals necessary to fulfill their ideal aspirations. These two themes are discussed below with illustrative interview excerpts.

Aspirations among Teen Mothers

Table 2 summarizes the research findings regarding the teen mothers' educational aspirations after the birth of their children. A clear majority—24 of a total of 28 teen mothers—hope to achieve some kind of postsecondary education, ranging from training in cosmetology, for example, to graduate school. Nine of the 11 middle-class teens aspire to a university degree. However, only three of eight lower-class mothers hope to finish college. All teens, regardless of class or race, say they want to complete high school. At least one member of each class aspires to only a high school diploma. Given previous findings, which associate pregnancy and childbearing with lower aspirations among teens, we anticipated that teen mothers in general would have low aspirations.¹³ This is not supported by this study's data on levels of aspirations of teen mothers.

Some young women have specific career goals and view educational aspirations in terms of credentials for future occupations. This specificity

Table 2

LEVELS OF EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS OF TEEN MOTHERS: CROSS-CLASS AND CROSS-RACIAL BREAKDOWN

	High School	Postsecondary Vocational Training	College or Higher	Total
Middle class:				
Black	0	0	5	5
White . . .	1	1	4	6
Working class:				
Black	0	3	3	6
White . . .	1	1	1	3
Lower class:				
Black	1	2	2	5
White . . .	1	1	1	3
Total . .	4	8	16	28

is expressed by one 15-year-old black middle-class teen: "I want to go to college. . . . I want to get into computers and get some kind of certificate to get a job working with computers. . . . I want to finish high school, so my parents don't have to push me." A 16-year-old white lower-class teen also named explicit goals for school and career: "I want to go to college and . . . get my nurse's degree or my teacher's degree."

Other teens, both black and white, especially those in the lower class, more often have a general hope to gain enough education to get a good job, one that will allow self-sufficiency and a decent standard of living for themselves and their children. Several teens expressed explicit awareness of the consequences of young single motherhood: less education, fewer job opportunities, and lower income. They sincerely wish to avoid these consequences through education and employment, typified by one 17-year-old black working-class mother: "I would like to get my bachelor's degree one day, . . . [and] try to get my master's—as far as I can go. That's my goal, you know, proving I didn't let my parents down. . . . I've got to keep going . . . because it will be better for me and the baby." One black lower-class teen, age 15, described her general hopes for achievement: "I want to make my mother proud, so I'm finish school, get me a good education, and go to college. I want to get me a good job. I want to get a little college education, maybe two years . . . (and) if I get pregnant again, it won't be so hard."

These young mothers, regardless of class or race, recognize the value of education as a means for ensuring a "better" life—both in terms of fulfilling familial and personal expectations and as preparation for working to support themselves and their children. Such recognition indicates awareness and incorporation of mainstream values about individual responsibility for productive activity.

In terms of changes in aspirations and goals after the birth of a child, some teens have had to change their plans in order to accommodate the responsibility of single motherhood. Those who are more affluent, with more financial and familial resources are better able to carry out their prior goals, like the 17-year-old black middle-class young woman whose grandmother takes care of her baby, enabling her to attend college full time and work part time: "Well, I had it totally planned. I would graduate from high school at 16, graduate from college at 21 . . . get my career together; at 25 I was going to get married. Twenty-eight— baby. . . . I am just like my mother. There is a Plan A and no Plan B . . . you go by the plan you laid out . . . [or] all of the sudden you run out of alphabet letters. And although it changed when I had her, it changed a lot, but some of the stuff I'm trying to still keep on track: graduate from college at 20." Other poorer teen mothers had to revise their goals more dramatically, typified by one 16-year-old black lower-class teen: "Before I got pregnant, I wanted

to go to college and run track. But now I'm starting to take some classes to prepare me for a job, like typing and word processing." Common to all of the young women in this study, though, is their hope that they will achieve self-support and self-respect through working.

These findings challenge the usefulness of simply measuring levels of aspirations, as typically conceptualized in most survey studies that examine teens' aspirations. In many studies there is an assumed relationship between different levels of educational and vocational aspirations, achievement, and patterns of sexual and parenting behaviors. Zelnik, Kantner, and Ford assert, "Educational aspirations and patterns of mobility are two areas that we believe, on theoretical grounds, to be components in the explanation of adolescent sexual behavior."¹⁴ A common formulation is that the girl with lower aspirations perceives that she has less to lose in terms of future gains, so she risks future achievement and satisfies emotional needs for love and self-esteem by having sexual intercourse and bearing a child.¹⁵

There is some empirical support for these suppositions from survey research: reports of higher aspirations among adolescents are associated with behaviors that minimize the risks of unplanned motherhood, including higher rates of contraception and abortion, and lower rates of premarital sexual activity and out-of-wedlock childbearing.¹⁶ In a cross-class study of fertility among black adolescents, Hogan and Kitagawa measured career aspirations as "high (average and above) and low (below average) based on the educational aspirations of the respondents and the family income they expected when they were age 30."¹⁷ They found that living in an underclass neighborhood had a significantly negative impact on adolescents' educational and career aspirations and concluded that high pregnancy rates among black teens "are the result of the unfavorable social circumstances in which many of those teenagers are growing up."¹⁸ However, the influence of aspirations on specific behaviors is implied without adequate specification of the nature of the dynamics behind such an association.

Findings in this study suggest two limitations to the above conceptualization as typified in the work of Hogan and Kitagawa. First, the relative level of ambition reflected in a stated aspiration is not necessarily the most significant aspect of the aspiration. It is not certain that the factors influencing the desire to be a secretary, in contrast to a certified public accountant, directly affect a teenager's sexual and parenting behavior. We cannot assert with any certainty that there is a direct relationship between a teenager's specific level of ambition and her level of achievement. The aspiration to work and be self-supporting may be more important in a teen's life than the specific job desired.

Second, the data presented below indicate a dimension of a teen's aspirations that is not recognized, and is even confounded, by the simple measurement of a level of aspiration. That is, there is a difference between wanting to work and having the ability to act on that desire.

Aspirations and Barriers to Achievement

What does it mean for young women of different socioeconomic status to hold similarly conventional aspirations? All of the teen mothers in this study hold ideal aspirations that are minimally congruent with societal expectations of functioning citizens. No one wants to be poor, as stated by one 17-year-old white lower-class mother: "It's getting real sick—we don't have no money. . . . The baby wants one thing and another and I want to be able to give it to her." Another 16-year-old black lower-class mother expressed acute self-consciousness about being perceived as a "welfare mother" and wishes to better her life: "When I was pregnant and going places with my son, I mean it's like people are looking at me, and I wish I could just read their minds and imagine what they're saying. . . . I don't expect you to say it's wonderful. I don't think it's wonderful. But still, you know, that doesn't make me terrible. I'm still human. . . . I made some mistakes, but I want to pull myself up and change, you know, from where some people are looking down on me." Young women do not aspire to being welfare mothers; they have internalized the dreams that conventionally define success in our society. At the same time, the observation that poor teen mothers have ideal aspirations that reflect mainstream values does not provide a complete picture. This study suggests that we must also acknowledge the degree to which class circumscribes individual opportunity and, to a large extent, behavior. To be aware of and to want the standard of living that accompanies success in our society is not synonymous with having the ability to translate desire into behavior that will reap hoped-for rewards. Both black and white lower-class teen mothers here differ from the those in the other classes in more than their access to resources and opportunity. They also differ dramatically in their knowledge about how they—indeed anyone—should go about attaining educational and vocational goals. Such knowledge includes how crucial opportunity structures work, notably educational and employment-related institutions, and how to gain access to them. This distinction between a young woman's ideal aspirations and her ability to fulfill them suggests that a measurement of her level of aspiration may be misleadingly simplistic as a predictor of achievement.

While the middle-class teens, both black and white, hold a range of specific aspirations, they most consistently display knowledge of how to set and attain their goals. All of the middle-class teens describe their future in concrete and specific terms, exemplified by one 15-year-old black middle-class teen: "I want to go to college after high school. . . . I want to get into computers. . . . In summer school I plan to take some computer classes. . . . My mom was taking care of my daughter, but my daughter will be going to day care, so I can attend day school in September." One 19-year-old white middle-class mother plans to

begin work as an electrician's apprentice, although her parents prefer to have her attend college.

In addition to their ability to project themselves into an imaginable future, the more affluent teens are also able to assess realistically how their past and present may affect the future as described with acute awareness by a 17-year-old black middle-class mother:

I know it's bad dropping out of high school . . . but I'm going to get my GED and then college. . . . My father tells me how important it is to graduate from high school, and when I do start college and look for a job they're going to look back on that: "Well, she started this and she didn't finish—how is she going to be at this job?" It's not like I'm dumb or anything, like I'm saying they're not going to pay attention to that. . . . I understand all that, and that's why I want to get that GED and not play around home for a few years . . . if you don't go to college, what else are you going to do? Are you going to work at Burger King for the rest of your life?

The working-class mothers are somewhat less clear about plans for obtaining their desired education and employment, but the differences between them and the middle-class teens are more a matter of degree than kind. One 15-year-old black working-class teen stated that, in order to achieve her goal of becoming a court reporter, she must attend business school after high school, but she doesn't know how long it will take to finish her degree.

As is evident in table 2 above, the working-class teens' educational aspirations are lower than those of more affluent adolescents—particularly black middle-class teens—who generally aspire to a 4-year university degree. This may reflect in part a realistic assessment of their financial resources relative to the cost of education. That is, their lower aspirations may indicate a familiarity with educational and employment systems that discourages false hopes for highly paid and prestigious careers. For example, one 18-year-old white working-class mother is interested in becoming a paralegal, but does not think she can afford the \$4,000 tuition for community college. Another white working-class mother who graduated from high school and works full time would like to change careers, but doubts whether it is feasible: "I'm very interested in art, and in using art as a therapy. That's what I wanted to go into, but it takes a lot of money. And for that type of field, well, I'd have to go to school full-time, which would mean I couldn't work, which would mean I couldn't support myself and my son."

In general, the working-class mothers have adequate knowledge about the general steps they must take to attain their aspirations. They also possess the skills necessary to maneuver their way through the appropriate bureaucracies and systems. The young woman with a child must often be more resourceful and persistent than the average

young woman, but both working-class and middle-class teens in this study are familiar with the opportunity structures that allow them to set and achieve realistic goals.

Not only are the middle-class and working-class mothers reasonably realistic in their assessment of how to achieve their goals, they are relatively confident of their abilities to persevere in working toward their goals and to control the direction of their lives. An 18-year-old white middle-class mother exemplified the young women's self-confidence when she stated, "I can achieve anything I want to, believe me."

Many young women evince a sense of solemnity as they reflect on the challenges of reaching their goals with the responsibility of motherhood. However, most are doing their best, often with help from their families, not to let what they almost unanimously and explicitly view as a mistake drag them down. One 18-year-old black working-class mother describes her uphill struggle to succeed despite the odds against her: "I just got to believe in myself. I just keep telling myself I'm going to do it, and I'm going to prove everybody wrong. . . . I just got to take one step at a time. I know sometimes it's going to be hard because I have the baby to attend to, but I gotta keep going, me and him, because it will be better for me and the baby." One 15-year-old black working-class teen looks to her mother for support and encouragement in working toward her goal. "I do want to make it through high school and try to go and be a court reporter. I think I could do it, if I put my mind to it. My mother says, 'It's hard work, Roberta, but you can do it. If I can do it, you can do it.'"

In what way do the lower-class teens present a different picture from the middle-class and working-class teen mothers? The lower-class teen mothers aspire to a "better" life but display only a tenuous connection to critical educational and vocational systems. This is evident in their vague descriptions of what is entailed in gaining the skills to qualify for a particular job, or even what a desired job is actually like, exemplified by the following three black lower-class teens, all age 16:

After I get me a job, if I need to go through school, through another school, I'll go. . . . There are these secretary jobs; I'm gonna see if I can get me a secretary job. I'm taking up a lot of skills for it.

I don't know, maybe I'll be a secretary. I don't know, I want to work with typewriters, where I could have my own desk.

I want to be a beautician. . . . You know, you have to finish school, you know, you have to go to school, some kind of beauty school, to learn the ropes and things.

The lower-class teens have a general vision of where they would like to work, but lack concrete details about exactly what steps will lead them there or what tasks will be required once they have arrived.

The effect of lack of knowledge on these poor young women is worsened by doubts that they can overcome the barriers to achievement that exist in their present circumstances. They regretfully acknowledge that their chances of success are limited, despite a sincere desire to move up into a more affluent and rewarding life.

One 16-year-old white lower-class mother assessed her chances of fulfilling her desire to become a "nurse or a teacher" as "not too bad, not too good" because "well, it's going to be hard. I know that now 'cause the money situation money-wise is going to be real rough. . . . I don't know. I guess it's because I'm not going to want to do it. It's probably going to be—I'm going to feel like it's too much schooling. It's too much work or something."

The lower-class teens exhibit a sense of passive acceptance of the future, a profound doubt that they can muster the wherewithal to master their lives. They seem to believe that the future will probably resemble the present despite their best efforts to the contrary. This may contribute to the much higher incidence of repeat pregnancies among the lower-class teens (see table 3), about three times the rate of repeat pregnancies found among more affluent teen mothers in this study.

In discussing how they wished their lives were different, nearly all of the teens in all classes spoke with some bitterness about the consequences for their future lives of being teen mothers. While few wished that their child had not been born, once conceived, all but two judged their situation as undesirable. However, the middle-class and working-class mothers did differ from the lower-class teens in one important respect. Their perceptions of the meaning of the child in their projected scheme of life influenced their determination to prevent compounding past mistakes, most notably by preventing a second pregnancy through sexual abstinence or the use of birth control.

The lower-class teens, in contrast, even expressed at times the inevitability of having more children, typified by a 16-year-old black teen. "In five or ten years? I don't know, I probably will be somewhere out of this state, I don't know. . . . I'll probably find something else, something better I like to do, or I might have some kids."

Table 3

PREGNANCY OUTCOMES BY CLASS STATUS FOR ADOLESCENTS
EXPERIENCING MORE THAN ONE PREGNANCY

Class	Abortion	Live Birth	Total
Middle class	1	1	2
Working class	0	0	0
Lower class	1	5	6

Discussion

This study found that nearly all of the teen mothers from all classes hope to achieve education beyond high school, most aspiring to a university or 2-year professional college diploma. Regarding intergroup differences, both black and white lower-class teen mothers hold aspirations that tend to be less objectively ambitious in terms of job status and educational level than the more affluent teens but that fall well within normative expectations of productive activity leading to economic self-support.

The lower-class young women express ideals and values that reflect acceptance of conventional definitions of educational and vocational success. This represents a powerful argument against cultural relativists and others who rely on notions of "culture" to argue that the poor live in such a separate world that mainstream values and aspirations cannot fully penetrate the boundaries that define the lower-class response to poverty. Rather, the teens state a desire to complete their education and to work in occupations that reflect mainstream standards of respectable employment.¹⁹ Certainly, American teens in general vary in their degree of ambition, as do these teen mothers. What is significant here is that the lower-class teens do not express ideals indicative of an "alternative value system," but instead are dissatisfied with their marginal economic and social position in society.

Most of the lower-class teens, regardless of their race, acutely feel that they have made mistakes, that their lives are undesirable, and that they wish they had a better standard of living. Yet they generally do not possess sufficient external or internal resources to utilize the appropriate educational and vocational systems to take advantage of what opportunities do exist. Thus they labor under disadvantages that are not sufficiently recognized by situational environmentalists who argue that opportunity and incentive are the most important motivating forces in an individual's life. The lower-class teens are substantively unfamiliar with critical social institutions that would allow them to attain their conventional aspirations. The disparity between ideal values and skills and knowledge is compounded by, and contributes to, a lack of confidence in their ability to overcome this distance through individual effort. This lack of confidence increases the likelihood of repeat pregnancies that, in turn, create further barriers to achievement of their aspirations.

This study suggests that by the time they reach adolescence, the lower-class young women have significant deficits in crucial areas of knowledge and skills. The absence of quality education and meaningful opportunity define the social context in which they grow up. They also express a lack of hope, of a sense of personal mastery, and of the perception that genuine life options exist for them. As Clark observed

among the poor in Harlem, "Real hope is based on expectations of success; theirs seems rather a forlorn dream."²⁰ Consequently, their aspirations have no immediacy and are too distant to be sources of motivation today.

Policies and programs designed to prevent long-term economic and social dependence among adolescent mothers must support and build on the teens' understanding and acceptance of normative expectations of self-supporting adult behavior. This study suggests that such societal expectations are congruent with the teen mothers' own hopes.

However, it is important to distinguish between a young woman's aspirations and her ability to realize those aspirations. Poor young mothers must be provided with the individual support and education to increase their ability to take advantage of existing opportunities. This means that teens growing up in poverty require special support services such as educational and training programs, child care, and counseling in order to overcome individual deficits in knowledge and skills as well as in resources. These young women must also have tangible evidence that such effort has a chance of being rewarded in the form of meaningful employment opportunity. Thus social and economic policies and programs must concentrate on enhancing both individual efficacy and meaningful job opportunities for poor young women.

Nonpoor young mothers also need support services that mitigate the worst consequences of early parenthood. For example, flexible educational programs for pregnant teens and the provision of child care to allow teens to continue their education and job preparation are important services. Insofar as young mothers from both poor and nonpoor backgrounds hold aspirations that reflect normative expectations, services that assist them concretely in realizing their goals would significantly contribute to preventing economic and social dependence.

Notes

This research was partially funded by a National Research Service Award from the National Institute of Mental Health, Department of Health and Human Services, grant 1-F31-MH09368-01A1, July 1986–July 1987.

1. Catherine Chilman, *Adolescent Sexuality in a Changing Society*, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) Publication no. (NIH) 79-1426 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1980); Cheryl D. Hayes, ed., *Risking the Future: Adolescent Sexuality, Pregnancy and Childbearing* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1987).

2. In 1955, the ratio of illegitimate to total births for whites under age 15 was 421.3 per 1,000 births; by 1979, it had nearly doubled to 749.7. Among white teens, 15–19, in 1955 the illegitimacy ratio was 63.5 per 1,000 births; by 1979, it had jumped to 303.3. Among black teens during the same years, the increase was from 800.6 illegitimate births per 1,000 to 948.6 for girls under 15, and from 406 to 825.2 for girls 15–19.

3. The 1985 Current Population Survey extract analysis prepared by the Institute for Research on Poverty, University of Wisconsin—Madison; see also Sandra K. Danziger, *Breaking the Chains: From Teenage Girls to Welfare Mothers, or, Can Social Policy Increase Options?* Institute for Research on Poverty, Discussion Paper no. 825-86 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986), p. 3.
4. Mary Jo Bane and David Ellwood, "The Dynamics of Children's Living Arrangements," working paper, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services grant, contract no. HHS-100-82-0038 (Washington, D.C., 1984); Hayes, ed.
5. Charles A. Valentine, *Culture and Poverty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); William J. Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 169–76.
6. Kenneth B. Clark, *Dark Ghetto* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939); Oscar Lewis, *Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty* (New York: Basic, 1959); Elliot Liebow, *Tally's Corner: A Study of Streetcorner Men* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967); Carol Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).
7. Lee Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Families in a Federal Slum* (New York: Aldine, 1970), p. 382.
8. Robert Staples and Alfredo Mirande, "Racial and Cultural Variations among American Families," *Journal of Marriage and Family* (February 1980), pp. 887–902; Valentine.
9. Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980* (New York: Basic, 1984), p. 204; Wilson.
10. Although this study does not address the important questions of how individuals set their aspirations, there is a body of literature that has attempted an explanation through examining the influence on behavior of reference groups, the effect of past experience on motivation, and the different criteria for self-evaluation. See, e.g., Timothy Brock, S. Edelman, David Edwards, and John Schuck, "Seven Studies of Performance Expectancy as a Determinant of Actual Performance," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (1965), pp. 295–310; I. Child and J. W. M. Whiting, "Determinants of Level of Aspiration: Evidence from Everyday Life," in *The Study of Personality*, ed. H. Brand (New York: Wiley, 1954), pp. 495–508; Leon Festinger, "Wish, Expectation, and Group Standards as Factors Influencing Level of Aspiration," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 37 (1942): 184–200; Kurt Lewin, Tamara Dembo, Leon Festinger, and Pauline Snedden Sears, "Level of Aspiration," in *Personality and the Behavior Disorders*, vol. 1, ed. J. McV. Hunt (New York: Ronald, 1944).
11. Mary Jo Bane and David Ellwood, "The Impact of AFDC on Family Structure and Living Arrangements," working paper prepared for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under grant no. 92A-82 (Washington, D.C., 1984); I. Garfinkel and S. McLanahan, *Single Mothers and Their Children: A New American Dilemma* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 1986).
12. Chilman (n. 1 above); Hayes, ed. (n. 1 above).
13. Chilman.
14. Melvin Zelnik, John Kantner, and Kathleen Ford, *Sex and Pregnancy in Adolescence* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1981), p. 172.
15. Rainwater.
16. See n. 1 above.
17. Dennis Hogan and Evelyn Kitagawa, "The Impact of Social Status, Family Structure, and Neighborhood on the Fertility of Black Adolescents," *American Journal of Sociology* 90, no. 4 (January 1985): 837.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 852.
19. Like the men Liebow studied in *Tally's Corner*, these young women are acutely, even painfully, aware of their disadvantaged position and the personal cost of their distance from the resources of the larger society. This cost is emotional as well as material.
20. Clark (n. 6 above), p. 32.