

Understanding declining teenage pregnancy rates in England

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POLICY BRIEFING

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This briefing examines the declining rate of teenage conceptions in England over the last two decades. Since 1998, we have seen rising educational aspirations; growing second- and third-generation teenage ethnic minority populations; changing housing availability; and increased deprivation associated with economic recession and post-2008 government austerity. Using data from England's Local Authority Districts (LAD) 1998–2017, we explore the role of these societal changes. Our findings suggest that local area characteristics partly explain teenage conception rates but are better at explaining continuing local geographical differences than why rates have fallen over time. This policy briefing provides an overview of the key findings of a Health & Place article available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2020.102467>

Key Points:

- *All English regions have seen a decline in under-18 conception rates, but there are significant geographical differences in the extent and rates of decline.*
- *Northern regions have higher conception rates than southern regions. Inner London had much higher initial conception rates but has seen a larger decline.*
- *Areas with more youth unemployment still have higher rates of teenage conception than less deprived areas.*
- *Declining rates of teenage conception are related to local areas having increasing Black or South Asian teenage populations, less youth unemployment, higher educational attainment, unaffordable housing, and a lack of available social housing.*

Introduction

The falling level of births amongst England’s under-18s has recently accelerated. Rates fell by around a quarter between 1998 and 2008, but then halved in the following eight years. This decline was mostly driven by reduced conception rates and, to a lesser extent, higher proportions of conceptions ending in abortion. All English regions have seen falling conception rates in under-18s, but there are significant geographical differences in the levels and rates of decline. This briefing provides new insights into how local area characteristics are associated with changes in conception rates.

The study

This analysis explores the characteristics of England’s Local Authority Districts (LADs) and the relationship these characteristics have with local areas’ under-18 conception rates and changes between 1998 and 2017. The way teenagers grow up has transformed within England over the last two decades. We examine whether quantifiable societal changes within local authorities can account for the different rates of teenage conception decline. Using both random effects and fixed effects models, we demonstrate how relationships between these area characteristics and under-18 conception rates have changed, examining differences both between and within LADs.

Main findings

All English regions have seen a decline in under-18 conception rates, but northern regions have higher conception rates than southern regions, and Inner London experienced a distinctive decline from the region with the highest rates to one in the lower half of the country (Figure 1). Inner London had much higher initial conception rates but has seen a faster decline.

Using random effect models, we found areas with greater youth unemployment still had higher rates of teenage conception than their less deprived counterparts, but that area-level unemployment rates had larger effects between 1998 and 2005 and 2011 and 2017 compared to between 2006 and 2010. We also discovered associations between conceptions and housing unaffordability, and with educational attainment and ethnic diversity at different stages during the study period.

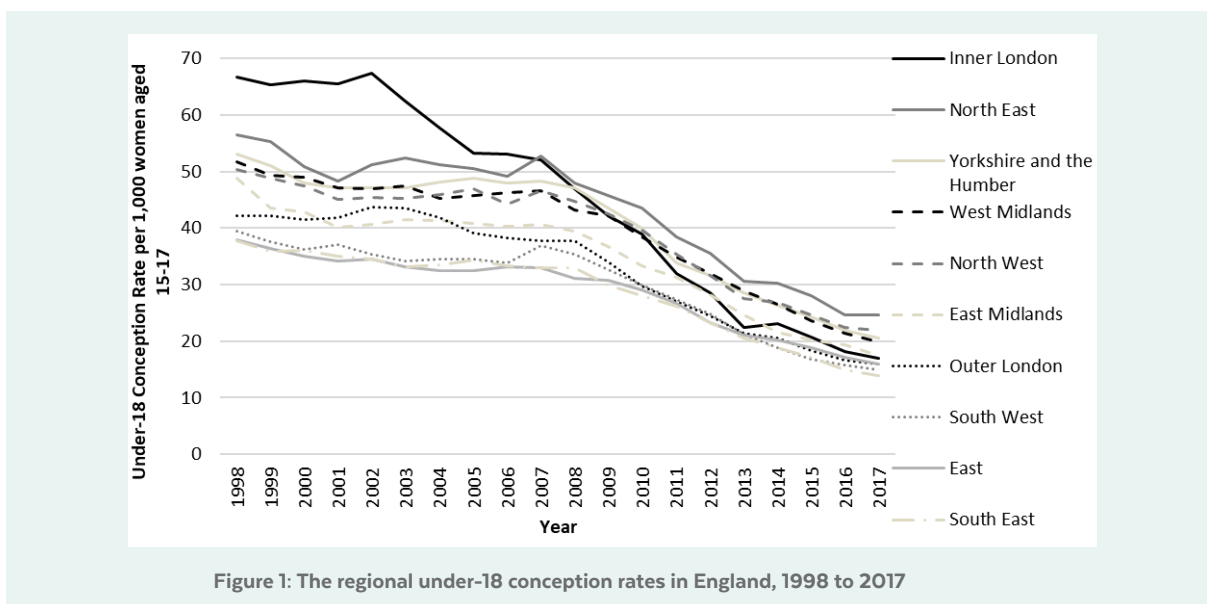
Within LADs, our fixed effect models showed that larger declines in local authority under-18 conception rates were related to areas experiencing growing Black or South Asian teenage populations, decreasing youth unemployment, increasing educational attainment, increased housing unaffordability, and reductions in social housing availability.

Black or South Asian teenage populations

Relationships between teenage pregnancy and ethnicity are changing as second and third generation ethnic minorities have become increasingly educated and are postponing family formation.

Local areas with greater proportions of South Asian pupils had lower conception rates throughout 1998–2017. This may be due to later sexual debut by Pakistani and Indian teenagers, and because ethnicity may act as a proxy for religion; teenage Muslim or Hindu women are less likely to have had intercourse by age 18 than their Christian or non-religious counterparts.

Ethnic minorities may have more reason to avoid pregnancy, being more likely to aspire to higher education. Black African, Black Caribbean, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani teenagers had lower GCSE attainment than their White British counterparts in 2003 but by 2013, had closed this gap, whilst Indian teenagers had consistently higher



attainment. Young people from ethnic minority groups are now more likely to attend university than in the past. While areas with greater proportions of Black teenagers had higher conception rates in the early 2000s, post-2005 this was not the case which may be due to the narrowing of these educational and aspirational gaps.

Employment

The education and employment of young people changed dramatically during this period, with rising numbers of teenagers entering higher education. Educational enrolment has consistently been found to delay childbearing. Young people were most affected by the financial crisis. While increased economic uncertainty was accentuated by the 2008 economic recession, with our particular analyses, we were not able to isolate any direct effect of the crisis on teenage fertility. We found that areas with higher levels of youth unemployment continue to have higher teenage pregnancy rates, although this relationship declined during the years around the financial crisis when youth unemployment was more widespread.

Housing

Housing has become far less affordable over the past 19 years. The stock of social housing has also reduced markedly. We found that there were lower conception rates in areas with less affordable housing, and increasingly unaffordable housing was associated with larger declines in conceptions. The reasons behind the relationship between living in an area with an expensive housing market and avoiding teenage pregnancy are unclear; housing affordability may capture gentrification or the changing characteristics of residents in areas which have rapidly become unaffordable. The effect of changing population composition and the gentrification of particular areas is a topic that requires further study.

Policy implications

This study found that some of the changes in teenage pregnancy rates at the local level are explained by the characteristics of teenagers living in the area and the wider society changing, so policy-makers need to keep in mind the contextual changes of their area and areas they aim to emulate alongside behavioural changes. For example, other factors that could not be captured by this study include increased contraceptive uptake and changes in patterns of sexual behaviour among young people.

The much higher rates of teenage pregnancy in Inner London in the early 2000s were found to be largely due to the characteristics of these areas rather than an 'Inner London effect'. Whilst variations between urban and rural areas were also partly due to differences in area characteristics like teenage ethnic composition, housing availability, educational attainment and unemployment, rural areas continue to have much lower teenage pregnancy rates than urban areas.

This study provides evidence that the associations between traditional variables - like overall economic deprivation in an area - more recently had smaller, but still noteworthy relationships with under-18 conception rates. However, since the current study was based on area-level analyses we cannot assume the existence of these relationships at the individual level.

Overall, the key concern is to improve outcomes for teenagers and children, especially the most vulnerable, and reduce long-term demand on services. It will therefore be vital for policy-makers to consider these geographical and population-level changes, helping local areas to continually adapt their approach to maintaining and reducing under-18 conception rates.

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