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Guest Editorial

Rachel Eni
University of Manitoba, Rachel.Eni@ad.umanitoba.ca

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Abstract

The current Special Edition of the Journal explores teen pregnancy and parenthood in Canadian First Nation and urban Aboriginal communities. Our better understanding of the factors associated with teen pregnancy in Aboriginal communities is essential to making improvements in health and wellness and in fostering the involvement of youth in community economic and cultural development.

Keywords

teenage pregnancy, Aboriginal, early parenting

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Guest Editorial

The current Special Edition of the Journal explores teen pregnancy and parenthood in Canadian First Nation and urban Aboriginal communities. Our better understanding of the factors associated with teen pregnancy in Aboriginal communities is essential to making improvements in health and wellness and in fostering the involvement of youth in community economic and cultural development.

The topic of teen pregnancy is of particular importance to me. I am honoured within Aboriginal communities with the title of “Kokum.” I am the grandmother of a little girl who is the child of teenage parents. My granddaughter is named Adinah, “the delicate and delightful one.” She was born in a northern Canadian blizzard just after the New Year in a secondary hospital three hours from her community, away from extended family, although we all sat by our phones and computers eagerly awaiting her arrival into our lives. Before her second birthday, Adinah had already experienced hardships associated with poverty and, to speak frankly, those often accompanying young parenting. At the same time, she has been, from the moment she became known to her parents, the impetus for their change. It is because of Adinah that her parents have decided to go back to school and participate in the educational, social, and cultural activities of their community. They struggle to create a better life for their child. Many challenges persist.

Teenage pregnancy and parenthood in Canadian Aboriginal communities is a familiar story. Though the birth of a child is a celebration of life not diminishable with timing or circumstance, there are undeniable factors commonly associated with early pregnancy and parenthood that constitute challenges at multiple levels. Though traditionally, women might have had their babies young, the matter may be one that is very different in today’s world. For example, young women and men have many opportunities today that were not a part of traditional living in the past. Today’s opportunities might not be as readily available to teenagers who are also parents.

Early pregnancy today might also mean that the child is born out-of-wedlock or out of a relationship with the child’s father, leaving fathers less likely to be involved in the daily lives of their children and therefore less likely to provide appropriately for them.

Often, many of us don’t come to realize how important and necessary our traditions and cultures are to our wellbeing until we are much older and have had the chance to reflect on what these things mean to us as individuals and in terms of our connection to our families and communities. In Aboriginal communities, loss of culture and a sense of tradition are further complicated by colonization. Knowledge of the traditional rituals of parenting and customs that help instruct parenting roles and responsibilities may be unknown to young parents and therefore impossible for them to draw upon when needed or to pass on to their children. What are the impacts of a loss of tradition on the healthy development of individuals and families?

In the current Special Issue, many of the circumstances that surround teenage pregnancy and parenting are explored. [Brant Castellano](#) discusses economic deprivation and high fertility rates among Aboriginal teenagers. She considers the challenges, consequences, and need to break the cycle of negative outcomes, very much achievable through education and community level support. Interpretations of teenage pregnancy as being or not being problematic are issues

explored in both [Cook](#), and [Eni and Phillips-Beck](#). In these articles, we see how personal insecurities, fears, and hope affect decisions to have a baby at a young age. [Fonda](#), and [Cardinal, Cardinal, Waugh, and Baddour](#) explore issues pertaining to spirituality and religious affiliation to discover whether there is a relationship between spiritual belief patterns and affiliation on the one hand and teenage sexuality and its consequences on the other. It is interesting indeed and may be the case that communities not demonstrably following a spiritual or religious path may have a different trajectory with regards to teen fertility than those with particular religious affiliation.

[Fonda, Eni, and Guimond](#) point to the practice of socially constructing social issues. When we say a thing is socially constructed we recognize our tendency to focus on subjective and conditional aspects of our social selves – rather than on any inherent or objective conditions naturally existing in a predesigned social world (the latter do not exist). In other words, we actually do define our own lives as being problematic or not problematic and act accordingly. What is most fascinating about this article within the current exploration of teenage pregnancy is that it forces us to look at what is possible, fixable, transformable – because the only reason a thing exists as a social issue in the first place might be because we refuse to stop defining it as such.

Then there are the grandparents. [Quinless'](#) research shows that living in multiple family households is common among teenaged lone mothers, particularly those living on reserve. Multigenerational families provide important assistance to young mothers including income, childcare, and housework. Though we often praise grandparents for their contributions to caregiving, what are the impacts on their health of our overreliance on them as primary caregivers? Like others in Aboriginal communities, many of the Eldest generations struggle to find a healthy balance between work and family responsibilities, possibly without adequate resources. What are the consequences of teen parenting on their health? What are the long-term consequences of an absent generation of parents from the family on families as a whole and on the communities (as discussed previously by [Eni, Harvey, & Phillips-Beck, 2009](#))?

There are many challenging health and social consequences of teenage pregnancy and parenthood, for both mothers and children ([Guimond & Robitaille, 2008](#)). The articles in the current edition further emphasize this point. Teenage pregnancy and parenting in Aboriginal communities increase the vulnerability of youth who may be ill prepared for the responsibility of parenting and already disadvantaged socially and economically. [Guevremont and Kohen](#) report higher rates of inattention-hyperactivity and conduct disorders among children of teenage mothers on reserves. [Garner, Guimond, and Senécal](#) find that First Nation teenage mothers, compared to non-Aboriginal teenage mothers, are less likely to graduate from high school, more likely to live in compromised living conditions, and have lower household income. Other serious issues associated with early sexual relations are discussed, including: promiscuity, alcohol and use of drugs, and the risk of contracting a sexually transmitted infection (STI) or HIV/AIDS.

[Hull](#) introduces equity issues. Aboriginal teenagers are less likely, if they are likely at all, to receive employment benefits (i.e., maternal or paternal benefits) due to their employment characteristics. [Mann](#) further explores accessibility to reproductive health care services among

women living in remote northern communities and includes commentary, also from international agencies, on related sensitive issues. These works reveal to us the need for greater policy change in effecting better health through improved service accessibility. They may also point to specific instances of the causes of inequity.

The purpose of this collection of research and policy articles is to better understand the issues that pertain to the topic of teenage pregnancy and parenthood in Canadian Aboriginal communities so that we may mobilize effective strategies for change. In her paper, [Wuttunee](#) provides thoughtful analysis of this very issue. She asks: What tools for community economic development can be applied to move young parents into positions from which they can actively and meaningfully engage in local economies? Wuttunee looks at effective supports for young people, supports for the development of independence, resilience, healthy sexuality, lifestyle, education, and training. Mobilization strategies are essential, she writes, because the situation for youth comes with “too high a cost to ignore.”

When I found out my child was having a baby, I cried. I cried because I feared that he now would not realize his potential beyond what I have experienced for myself. We live for our children. We want them to experience more fulfilled lives than we ever thought imaginable. After all, we live and work to benefit the 7th generation into the future – so it is my *raison d'être* to ensure that I, personally, with help of my generation, prepare the world so that it is as accessible as possible to young people so they can realize their potential, and so they, in their turn, can offer better opportunities for their children. That is our work.

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