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# Young Parents: an exploration of whether supported housing promotes social exclusion and dependency

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## **Abstract**

Since the publication of the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy by the Social Exclusion Unit in 1999, housing policy for young parents in England has focused on the prevention of social exclusion through supported housing provision and specific models of housing support for independent living.

This paper is based on a review of the wider academic and policy literature which was used as a framework for a qualitative study undertaken with young mothers and supported housing practitioners to ascertain whether government housing models of support for young parents are meeting young parents' need or further promoting social exclusion and dependency.

Drawing on the wider literature, the paper highlights notions of social exclusion, support, and independent living and illustrates areas where government rhetoric and reality contrast and where policy could have implications in terms of meeting the housing support needs of this group.

**Key words:** England; housing; support; young parents; social exclusion.

## **Introduction**

Since the publication of the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (SEU, 1999), housing policy for young parents has focused on preventing social exclusion through supported housing provision and specific packages of housing support for independent living.

This paper provides an overview of the key academic and policy literature surrounding young parents, supported housing and social exclusion, which was used as a framework for a qualitative study undertaken with young mothers and supported housing practitioners for a MA thesis in Housing Policy and Practice (Sieczkarek, 2008). The aim of the research was to evaluate whether current supported housing policies and models of support were meeting the young parents' need for support, through examining notions of support, independence and independent living and identifying barriers to independent living through the support provided.

Systematic studies reveal that much of the research on younger pregnancy within the UK is based on quantitative approaches, which focus on the reasons and outcomes for younger pregnancy (McDermott et al., 2004). These studies do not privilege the accounts of young parents and have an epistemology which views young parenthood as problematic because of their concentration on the negative factors surrounding younger pregnancy (Swann et al., 2003).

Challenging this perspective is a small but growing body of qualitative studies which focus on needs-based research around housing, education, health and social services. These studies offer a rare insight into the reality of young parenthood by favouring the views and experiences of the young parents themselves. Yet, this research still only occupies a marginal evidence base within UK policy (McDermott et al., 2004).

This review is relevant not only because of the relentless policy focus on younger pregnancy as a social problem, but also because of the wider encroachment of public policy into the private realm of the family. In particular, what Gillies (2005) refers to as the 'professionalization of childrearing practices', which emphasize the need for all parents, but

particularly those who are considered socially excluded, to have access to ‘appropriate’ advice, guidance and support.

The paper starts by setting the wider policy context, in which a definition of terms is provided along with an overview of the literature in relation to young parents and social exclusion, followed by an examination of the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy and a summary of the key research surrounding support, autonomy and independence within the supported housing field. The paper concludes by drawing on some of the findings from the study upon which this paper is based (Sieczkarek, 2008)

### **Younger parenthood and social exclusion**

It should be recognised that slippage in terminology with regards to ‘young parents’, ‘young mothers’ or ‘teenage mothers’ is common within the wider literature. Many critics point out that this lack of specificity reflects the fact that these concepts are socially constructed and often associated with negative stereotypes about the ability of those who become mothers in their younger years to prove good-enough mothering (Luker, 2000, Phoenix, 1993, Lawson & Rhode, 1993).

Research in the field also highlights the construction of ‘teenage’ pregnancy as a social issue (Kidger, 2004, Duncan, 2005) and the highly selective nature of mainstream research which focuses on the damaging effects of early childbearing (Arai, 2003<sup>b</sup>, Lawler & Shaw, 2002). In addition to this, is a small but growing body of research which contradicts the negative stereotypes by documenting young parents’ positive perceptions of early parenthood (Phoenix, 1991, Rolfe, 2000). This research is relevant because it illustrates the epistemological stance and negative undertones underpinning dominant studies within the field and highlights differences between mainstream thought surrounding younger parenthood and young parents’ own views and experiences of parenthood. For the purpose of this paper, I use the inclusive term of ‘young parent’.

Social exclusion is a key theme running throughout the literature regarding young parents, with young parents viewed as socially excluded due to studies which illustrate links between younger parenthood and inequalities such as ill health and deprivation (Mayhew & Bradshaw, 2005). However, within the literature, the argument varies with regards to the

extent to which younger pregnancy is a causative factor of social exclusion, or the result of other factors such as material deprivation (Kiernan, 2002, McDermott et al., 2004).

It should be noted that 'social exclusion' is a contested concept in much of the literature, being defined in a number of different ways including all or some of the following: the social, economic and institutional processes through which disadvantage comes about; disadvantage in relation to certain norms of economic, social, or political activity relating to individuals, households, population groups or spatial areas; and the outcomes or consequences for individuals, groups or communities (Percy-Smith, 2000). For the purpose of this paper, social exclusion will be defined as:

'...a multi-dimensional process of progressive social rupture, detaching groups and individuals from social relations and institutions and preventing them from full participation in the normal normatively prescribed activities of the society in which they live' (Silver, 2007, p15).

In 2001, New Labour defined social exclusion as:

'A shorthand for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown' (SEU, 2001, p11).

Within this agenda, social exclusion is depicted as something that can be addressed through the key objectives of: prevention for those at risk; reintegration for those who have become excluded; and the improvement of basic service standards so that they are more inclusive for the excluded (SEU, 2001, p31). In this sense, Kearns (2003) argues that social exclusion is portrayed as a 'dynamic concept', which suggests a move in and out of exclusion and that something can be done about it.

Also embedded within this agenda is the insinuation that social exclusion is somehow connected to the non-conformist behaviour of the socially excluded:

'Social exclusion cannot be addressed by government alone. Individuals and the wider community, in addition to the private and third sectors, all have a role to play. But most of all, people who are suffering social exclusion must want progress for themselves and those around them' (Cabinet Office, 2006, p12).

‘In this Action Plan we have focused on some of the most excluded groups, such as children in care or adults leading chaotic lives – groups that have generally failed to fulfil their potential and accept the opportunities that most of us take for granted’ (Cabinet Office, 2006, p10).

As Kidger (2004) states, this perspective places an emphasis on individual responsibility and behaviour that arise from structural determinants, rather than these determinants themselves and fits into what Byrne (1999) describes as a ‘weak’ discourse of social exclusion, which emphasizes modifying the behaviour of the excluded to enhance their integration into society. This is in opposition to a ‘stronger’ discourse which draws attention to the powers of exclusion and the role of those who are doing the excluding.

Closer analysis of this policy agenda also highlights a discourse which equates social inclusion with paid employment and social exclusion with welfare dependency:

‘Social exclusion is undoubtedly one of the key upward pressures on public spending. Costs arise in a range of areas: benefits; costs of health care; support services for those who are excluded; the cost of crime and drugs; as well as the tax that would be paid if socially excluded groups were off benefit or in higher paid work’ (SEU, 2001, p26).

This fits into two of the three competing policy discourses described by Levitas (1996, 1998); SID, the social integrationist discourse, where paid work is viewed as the chief instrument for integrating individuals into society; and MUD, the moral underclass discourse, which includes a focus on assumptions about welfare dependency and the moral and cultural causes of poverty.

This political agenda has therefore been criticised within the wider literature for its narrow notions of social exclusion which ignore the multi-faceted nature of exclusion (Percy-Smith, 2000, Silver, 2007) and in particular, the ‘multiple levels of exclusion’ facing this client group (Kidger, 2004, p305). As Kidger (2004) states, this conceptualization of the route to social exclusion is problematic for young parents because:

‘...it ignores the structural and contextual barriers to them gaining inclusion, discounts full-time mothering as a valid option, and neglects the social and moral elements of their exclusion, while in fact contributing to this. A broader understanding of social inclusion is therefore advocated, which emphasizes the significance of social belongingness and community participation, alongside economic self-sufficiency (Kidger, 2004, p291).

There are however gaps within the existing academic literature with regards to young parents and supported housing, with studies focusing primarily on social exclusion and young parents as a social group (Wiggins et al., 2005, Harden et al., 2006), or primarily on poverty, housing tenure and social exclusion (Lee, & Murie, 1997). Thus, there appears to be a lack of specific focus on young parents, supported housing and social exclusion.

Yet, this literature still contributes to our understanding and knowledge by highlighting the contrasting perspectives with regards to social exclusion and by illustrating how dominant paradigms of social exclusion within policy and research could have an impact on those who are socially excluded by concealing the true nature of exclusion.

### **Teenage Pregnancy Strategy**

This section provides an analysis of government policy surrounding young parents, primarily focusing on the main reference point for work in this area; the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy (SEU, 1999), but also recognising that a number of other cross-cutting policy documents include young parents and/or social inclusion within their remit (DSS, 1999, DTLR/TPU, 2001, SEU, 2001, ODPM, 2002, Cabinet Office, 2006, DfES, 2004, 2006<sup>a</sup> & 2006<sup>b</sup>).

The Teenage Pregnancy Strategy is driven by two goals:

- To reduce by 50% the rate of unintended teenage conceptions among under-18-year olds by the year 2010;
- To ensure that 60% of young mothers are in education, training or employment by 2010, so that they avoid social exclusion (SEU, 1999, p8).

This agenda focuses on the prevention of pregnancy and on highlighting the poor outcomes and risks to young parents and their children, suggesting an epistemology which views young parents as problematic and equates younger parenthood with social exclusion:

‘Teenage parenthood is bad for parents and children. Becoming a parent too early involves a greater risk of being poor, unemployed and isolated. The children of teenage parents grow up with the odds stacked against them’ (SEU, 1999, p90).



This portrayal of younger pregnancy as a social issue is also reiterated in more recent policy documents:

‘Teenage pregnancy is a serious social problem. Having children at a young age can damage young women’s health and well-being and severely limit their education and career prospects. While individual young people can be competent parents, all the evidence shows that children born to teenagers are much more likely to experience a range of negative outcomes in later life’ (DfES, 2006<sup>b</sup>, p7).

This policy agenda focuses the attention away from poverty and structural and contextual factors by personalising the problems facing young parents, such as implying that a multitude of underlying issues are to blame for younger pregnancy including: disengagement and low attainment at school; lack of aspiration; and poor knowledge and skills in relation to sex, relationships and sexual health risks (Cabinet Office, 2006, p65-66):

‘While confirming the strong links to deprivation, it demonstrates that a range of other factors, in particular poor educational attainment and low aspiration, have an impact over and above deprivation levels’ (DfES, 2006<sup>b</sup>, p2).

This discourse of blame has been documented by Gillies (2005) in her analysis of family policy, which she argues portrays socially excluded parents as being disengaged from mainstream values and aspirations:

‘Structured hurdles and barriers to individual action are obscured by a focus on the role of agency and personal responsibility in determining life chances (Gillies, 2005, p86).

The target of ensuring that 60% of young mothers are in education, training or employment by 2010 to avoid social exclusion (SEU, 1999, p8), highlights how social inclusion within this strategy is largely measured by the acquisition of new skills and the transition to economic self-sufficiency. In addition, welfare dependency and burden is heavily associated with this client group throughout this agenda and used in justification of the target to reduce younger pregnancy:

‘There is also a strong economic argument for investing in measures to reduce pregnancy as it places significant burdens on the NHS and wider public services. The cost of teenage pregnancy to the NHS alone is estimated to be £63m a year. Teenage mothers will also be more likely than older mothers to require expensive support from a range of local services, for example to help them access supported housing and/or re-engage in education, employment and training’ (DfES, 2006<sup>a</sup>, p8).

‘Benefit payments to a teenage mother who does not enter employment in the three years following birth can total between £19,000 and £25,000 over three years’ (DfES, 2006<sup>b</sup>, p8).

The main reference to supported housing within the strategy is the objective that:

‘...by 2003 all under eighteen teenage lone parents, who cannot live with family or partner, should be placed in supervised semi-independent housing with support, not in an independent tenancy’ (SEU, 1999, p100).

The strategy argues that previous housing policies have socially excluded young parents by isolating them in their own accommodation and maintains that supported housing models offer the right level of support for this group (SEU, 1999).

Subsequent guidance clarifies the preferred housing models and packages of support for young parents (DTLR/TPU, 2001, DfES, 2006<sup>a</sup>). This guidance appears to be based on the assumption that certain forms of support are ‘appropriate’ and that all young parents who are seeking accommodation are at risk and in need of support, and not merely young parents who are seeking autonomy from their families (Giullari & Shaw, 2005).

The strategy is also contradictory in the way that it portrays young parents and their motives for accessing housing. Although, the literature states that access to housing is difficult and young parents are more likely to be housed in poor accommodation (SEU, 1999, p31), it also implies that access to housing could act as an incentive for some women to become pregnant:

‘...the alternatives will look very different to a teenager who: has grown up in poverty and possibly on benefits; has had difficult family relationships, is in care, or is under pressure to move out; and sees no prospect of a job and expects to be on benefit one way or the other. For such a teenager, being a parent could well seem to be a better future than the alternatives’ (SEU, 1999, p31-32).

Thus, this agenda appears to be based on the assumption that all young parents are socially excluded, that independent living for this client group can only be achieved through the correct support and assistance, and that social inclusion can only be measured through education, training and employment. This analysis is supported by other critical social policy literature in the field, including the work of Arai (2003<sup>b</sup>) who argues that this perspective

promotes a technical/educational explanation for younger pregnancy, and Giullari & Shaw (2005) who argue that this agenda is built around the construction of young parents' housing need as an issue of isolation from support.

This overview is significant because it highlights how the government's conceptualisation of young parents' housing need and support is subjective and therefore, could have implications in terms of actually meeting young parents' housing support needs.

## **Support, Autonomy & Independence**

Finally, reflecting the wider policy and academic concerns about young parents, this section of the paper explores in greater depth three key interrelated themes of support, autonomy, and independence.

### ***Support***

Support is difficult to define because of the differing discourses of support (Gillies, 2005), however, within the supported housing policy context, support is largely grounded in assumptions about what constitutes 'relevant' support and the perceived need for this support. Usually this refers to the promotion of a number of key skills to enable the transition to 'independent living' including: parenting skills; independent living skills (i.e. basic skills, financial skills); and support around education and training (DfES, 2006<sup>a</sup>, DTLR/TPU, 2001, Hinton and Gorton, 2001).

Within the academic literature, systematic studies show that a large body of research focuses on the need for support with regards to housing, education, health and social services generally (McDermott et al., 2004). Whilst this research is significant in its own right, of relevance to the study on which this paper is based (Sieczkarek, 2008) is the literature which specifically focuses on supported housing and the young parents' own view of housing need and support (Cooke & Owen, 2007, Croft, 2005, Martin et al., 2005 & Smith-Bowers, 2002, Hinton & Gorton, 2001). This research is important because it highlights issues around perceptions of support and the difficult balance of providing and accepting support, and providing support while promoting independence.

For example Cooke & Owen's (2007) qualitative study of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with young mothers, fathers and practitioners found that support was not always perceived as straightforward by the young parents', who felt under pressure to demonstrate that they could cope with independence.

Moreover, the research also highlights differences in perceptions of family and informal support with studies illustrating how young parents highly valued informal support networks, but how this was sometimes devalued by staff (Hinton & Gorton, 2001), and literature which emphasizes how government policy perceives family support as a 'natural' source of support and makes assumptions about young parents' reliance on and need for this support (Giullari & Shaw, 2005).

Finally, some studies have questioned the very nature of support for socially excluded parents, arguing that it is 'limited, highly conditional and directed towards a wider goal of cultural governance or inclusion' (Gillies, 2005, p87).

This literature therefore suggests a gap in notions of support between the young parents, professional practitioners and government policy.

### ***Autonomy***

Autonomy can be defined as freedom of action or the possession or right of self government (The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1999), and appears to be a reoccurring theme throughout the qualitative research with young parents.

There are two conflicting strands within the field: one which promotes supported housing for young parents because autonomous living is believed to result in a loss of support (Speak et. al., 1995, SEU, 1999, DfES, 2006<sup>a</sup>, & DTLR/TPU, 2001); and the other which highlights the restrictions placed on autonomy within some supported housing schemes and the value placed on privacy, autonomy and choice by the young parents themselves (Hinton & Gorton, 2001, Corlyon & McGuire, 1999, Smith-Bowers, 2002, Giullari & Shaw, 2003).

In addition to this, there is a body of critical social policy literature which emphasizes the controlling and stigmatising nature of housing policy with regards to autonomous living for young parents, illustrating how autonomous living is regarded as welfare dependency and as

isolation from support when associated with this client group (Kidger, 2004, Giullari & Shaw, 2003).

This literature is relevant because it suggests a narrow conceptualisation of autonomous living embedded within the government policy agenda (Giullari & Shaw, 2005) and highlights possible disparities between the research, policy and the perspectives of young parents' on the value attached to autonomous living.

### ***Independence and independent living***

Whilst, the term 'independence' has many different interpretations and definitions which include: free from outside control; self-governing; not dependent on another for livelihood; and not connected with another (The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1999, p720), within the field of supported housing, this term is frequently replaced by the concept of 'independent living', a term used to imply the successful transition from supported accommodation into an independent tenancy.

Within the policy literature, the concept of 'independent living' is synonymous with a particular support model and package of support which views independent living as the ultimate goal for young parents, but only after developing a range of life skills to live independently (DfES, 2006<sup>a</sup>, DTLR/TPU, 2001).

In addition to this, within the wider social exclusion policy agenda, the concept of 'independence' is closely defined alongside social inclusion as being dependent on participation within the labour market, which critics argue has consequences for the position of and attitudes towards those who may be unable to achieve full independence through this means (Percy-Smith, 2000, Kidger, 2004, Giullari & Shaw, 2005).

Independence is also a key theme running throughout the qualitative research in the field, with studies highlighting the young parents' need to show and be independent in a permanent tenancy (Martin et al., 2005, Giullari & Shaw, 2005), the need for schemes that acknowledge and support a transition towards independence (Cooke & Owen, 2007) and limits to the extent to which it is possible to achieve independence in supported housing schemes (Croft, 2005).

This literature is important because it highlights differences between government notions of 'independent living' and the young parents' own notions of what it is to live independently.

## **Conclusion**

The limitation of the mainstream literature concerning young parents and social exclusion is that it is predominantly from the perspective that younger pregnancy is a social issue (Swann et al., 2003) and focused on assessing support and policy interventions (McDermott et al., 2004). This does not approach research from the viewpoint of young parents (McDermott et al., 2004), and therefore, casts doubt on whether this research is asking the relevant questions.

The overview of the qualitative literature also highlights that research around supported housing appears to be a relatively undeveloped area of focus, with most research for this client group centred on housing need or support more generally (Vincent, 1973, de Jonge, 2001, Corlyon & McGuire C, 1999, Phoenix, 1991, Rolfe, 2000). In addition, the small body of qualitative research which specifically addresses supported housing with young parents (Cooke & Owen, 2007, Croft, 2005, Martin et al., 2005, Hinton & Gorton, 2001), does not provide a comparative analysis between the policy literature and the research findings with regards to support, inclusion and independent living.

The overview of the literature and the findings on which this paper is based (Sieczkarek, 2008) therefore suggest that further research and policy inventions need to address the variations in notions of independence and inclusion between young parents, professional practitioners and government policy. Certainly, the young parents and professional practitioners within this study held wider notions of independent living, which encompassed softer indicators of confidence and self esteem, emotional support, choice, control and social networks, alongside the more practical knowledge and skills associated with independent living (Sieczkarek, 2008).

Education, training and employment (ETE) was also not seen as a priority or prerequisite for independent living by the majority of young parents and professional practitioners interviewed, which could have implications for the success of a policy agenda focused on reducing young parents' risk of social exclusion through these means (SEU, 1999, p8).

A number of structural factors were also cited as the main barriers to independent living for this client group at this time (Sieczkarek, 2008), which has been illustrated in previous studies (Croft, 2005, Hinton & Gorton, 2001), and could impact on the outcome of housing support programmes which do not and cannot directly address the wider issues.

Finally, stigma and stereotyping was a reoccurring theme within the research, and has been documented in other qualitative research with young parents (Speak, 1995, Rolfe, 2000, McDermott, 2004), as well as within studies investigating the social and moral exclusion of 'non-conforming' groups (Kidger, 2004, Silver, 2007).

Yet, the policy literature (SEU, 1999, DfES, 2006<sup>a</sup> & 2006<sup>b</sup>) reveals an agenda which is subjective in its choice of research surrounding young parents (Arai, 2003<sup>b</sup>) and which does not directly address this aspect of exclusion, raising questions about the impact of this strategy and the negative implications this may have on young parents as a social group.

To conclude, this review highlights that this is an area of sufficient importance to be researched because of the gaps within the existing research and because the views of young parents should matter and should be reflected within policy interventions for this client group.

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