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# **A case study of school age female minority athletes who became pregnant**

By Floyd Jones, Ph.D., West Virginia University, Jennifer Mak, Ph.D., Marshall University,

Phyllis A. Jones, M.S. ED., George Westinghouse High School, Pittsburgh

**Editor's note: The two reviewers of this article differed in their opinions concerning the interest of this article to MAHPERD members. Obviously, the editor agreed with the reviewer who felt the information would benefit the membership. Please read it and feel free to give your opinion.**

## **Pregnancy, teenage girls and athletics**

The past few decades have witnessed heightened social awareness about the problem of teenage pregnancy. Each year, almost 1 million teenage women - 10% of all women aged 15-19 and 19% of those who have had sexual intercourse - become pregnant (Singh & Darroch, 2000).

At this level, the United States has the highest rate of teen pregnancy in the fully industrialized world (Singh & Darroch, 2000). Adolescent mothers face a host of psychological problems including poor education, school failure, limited vocational opportunities, social isolation, stress, depression, earlier-than-planned entrance into the labor force, and poverty (Sabo & Melnick, 1996). Less than one-third of teens who begin their families before age 18 ever earn a high school diploma (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 1997).

It has been documented that girls who participate in sports are positively impacted by the experience (Women's Sports Foundation, 1989; President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sport, 1997). A Women's Sports Foundation (1989) report found that there are significant positive effects of varsity sports participation on the social

relationships, academic performance, and career mobility of high school girls. The President's Council (1997) study found evidence that girls who participate in sports and physical activity are healthier and have more successful futures. Specifically, the interdisciplinary study concluded that regular physical activity can reduce a girl's chance of being afflicted with obesity, heart disease, high cholesterol, osteoporosis, and some forms of cancer. Furthermore, sports and physical activity improve body image, self-confidence, and even help girls improve grades, stay in school, and avoid unwanted pregnancy (President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sport, 1997).

## **Varsity sports and minority girls**

The Women's Sports Foundation Report: Minorities in Sports (1989) studied the effect of varsity sports participation in high school minority athletes. In 1997, Donna Shalala, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, commissioned the President's Council to perform a follow-up study to the Women's Sports Foundation Report. Both reached similar conclusions on the benefits of sports participation to girls. However, both studies also concluded that female African-Americans attending urban schools did not reap the benefits from sports participation that other groups did.

Researchers wanted to know why these same benefits do not translate to urban minority females. The purpose of this study is to provide an in-depth understanding of "What had happened to the urban minority female athletes who became pregnant while playing high school basketball?" The study

wanted to provide a qualitative analysis of rich narrative data collected from questionnaire interviews of two separate groups (one in Pittsburgh, the other in New York City). The findings of this study suggest that in fact urban female African-Americans athletes still received benefits from sports participation.

## **Research Question**

What happened to urban minority female athletes who become pregnant while playing high school basketball?

Twelve former athletes who had graduated five years ago from an urban high school in Pittsburgh and an urban high school in New York City were contacted for consent to participate in the study. The age range of athletes from Pittsburgh was from 16 to 24 years of age and from the tenth grade to the fourth year of college, respectively. The age range of the athletes from New York was from 15 to 17 years of age. Subjects from Pittsburgh were older, average age 20.2 compared to the average age of 16.29 of the respondents from New York City, respectively. Respondents were asked questions regarding what had changed since their pregnancy. How did they feel life would have been had they not become pregnant? They were informed that they would only be required to complete a 14-question interview (Appendix A.) Their identities would be kept private and confidential. Respondents would not be identified by name in the study.

## **Pittsburgh**

The high school in Pittsburgh is predominately African American. It is located in the East End section of the city of Pittsburgh in a significantly high crime



area. Over the past five years this section of the city has led the entire city in deaths due to gangs and drugs. There is no bus service. All students walk to school. Many are from disadvantaged single parent homes. Most of the students must in some way contribute to the quality of life of the family by serving as a caregiver for small siblings while “Mom” is at work or by working part-time at fast food restaurants. On average, two students per year are killed in violent crimes.

### ***New York City***

The school district selected in New York City is very similar. These students face many of the same challenges. They come from New York’s inner city. The community is riddled by crime and suffers from a significant dropout rate. The New York school has a lower than average rate of students going on to college. In both communities male and female students may view sports as a way out of poverty. Data Collection and Data Analysis Interviews and documents were used as the primary source of data collection. Data was gathered through interviews with the subjects as well as conversations with the coaches of the two schools. The research assistant traveled to her hometown of New York City. Once the students were identified, they met individually with the assistant until the interview was completed. The researcher, who lives in Pittsburgh, utilized former players from a local city high school basketball team. Seven players were identified as eligible to participate in the study, of whom two declined to participate. The five (5) players who agreed to complete the interviews did so through their former coaches. In each case the respondents were comfortable with the investigator to the point that they were very open and forth coming with information. Analysis began during data collection. Working hypotheses were generated and checked throughout the data collection period. After data was collected, transcripts were examined several times and recurring themes were identified for content analysis.



The Lady Bulldogs are from New York City.

### **Findings and Discussion**

In both groups the reasons for the girls becoming pregnant varied. However, a main theme was “lonely and in love with a boyfriend.” Parents were very instrumental in supporting the girl’s decision to have the child once they discovered she was pregnant. According to the teen mothers, they found it hard to go to school, work, and be a parent at the same time. One participant felt that her child, “needed a lot of love, time, and attention”, which prevented her from doing a lot of things she wanted to do. Most of them had to take some time off from school. One of the Pittsburgh girls dropped out of school and one took a semester off from school while three of the seven New York teens dropped out of school.

Career plans were ruined for some respondents who became pregnant. They felt their dreams of participating in basketball were shattered. As one 16 year old from NY put it, “I was one of the best players in the city and had lots of letters from colleges. The pregnancy put everything on hold and I never got a chance to play in college.” Seventy-five percent of the former players from site one still play the game compared to less than 30% of the former players from site two. Although three players still shoot around in site two, they do not play organized basketball. Sixty-five percent of site one subjects and 75% of site two subjects believed they were going to be successful before their pregnancy.

It appears the most significant result of the study is revealed in the accomplishments of the girls after the child was born. Site one results were impressive: all five girls reported doing well. They are either married, going to college or working in promising careers such as teacher or coach. This may be the outcome of the model of success implemented by the basketball coach at site one (Jones and Jones, 2002). Over 95% of the graduates from the high school at site one attends college on an athletic or academic scholarship. Over years of tracking these former and current athletes some remarkable outcomes have been reported. Many of the females are now graduating and returning to their communities to teach and coach. At least one is an assistant coach with a Division I college team. To understand how significant these results are, one need consider that only 65% of the general student body graduate from this high school and just 24% go on to college. In Jones and Jones’s (2002) study it was revealed that prior to the implementation of the coach’s model, the graduates from the basketball team mirrored the general student body.

Site two results revealed that the majority of the girls are still in school or college (4). One is a high school teacher; two others work in the post office and restaurant, respectively. Girls at site one and site two provide evidence that pregnancy has not completely derailed their career plans. In other words, becoming pregnant is not a death sentence. These girls recognize they have missed a golden opportunity. However, they are focused on working to make the best out of their situation. These findings provide valuable information that should not be overlooked. The two sites again share similar comments regarding the reasons for their ultimate success. They credit their success to family and friends, personal motivation/determination, coaches and teachers, God (faith and prayer), completing education, the inspiration of their child, and sports participation. They also offered some advice to young women as follows



**Table 1: Advice to Young Girls and Young Female High School Athletes**

**Advice for young girls who are sexually active:**

- Use protection
- Say no!
- Put school, sports, and other things in life first, worry about sex later.
- Don't be pressured into anything
- Realize the responsibility/consequences
- Wait to have children
- Let basketball lead you to success. It can teach you discipline, motivation, and time management. Enjoy your life. You only get to be a child/teenager for so long. You're an adult for the majority of your life.

(See Table 1.)

**Conclusion**

Minority females in this study surprisingly mirrored similar positive outcomes. These outcomes occurred even though the literature suggests that urban minority females do not receive positive benefits from athletic participation. Respondents from site one and two revealed in-depth detailed information regarding their attempts to move forward with their lives although they had become pregnant and lost their original dreams.

Given the limitations of this research effort, there apparently exists the need to revisit previous studies regarding urban minority females' sports participation. Twelve subjects may not provide enough information to draw many conclusions. However, the evidence contained in this qualitative analysis suggests that more research may need to be done in order to explain the apparent long term benefits that this urban minority received from their sports experience. The findings from site one suggest that a model for success currently used in an urban high school in Pittsburgh may be valuable in addressing these issues in other urban high schools.

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**Appendix A: Interview Questions**

Question 1: What age were you when you became pregnant?

Question 2: What grade were you in when you became pregnant?

Question 3: Did you drop out of school?

Question 4: Explain the circumstances surrounding your pregnancy.

Question 5: What have you been able to accomplish since your child was born?

Question 6: What do you credit your success to?

Question 7: List any obstacles that have hindered your personal, career or professional growth.

Question 8: Do you still play basketball? On what level?

Question 9: What is your current profession?

Question 10: When you became pregnant, did you feel your career plans were ruined?

Question 11: Who are the people who helped you achieve success or maintain a positive outlook on life?

Question 12: Thinking back before you had your child, did you believe you were going to be successful at the time?

Question 13: What advice would you give young girls who are playing basketball in high school?

Question 14: Do you have any advice for young girls who are sexually active as a high school athlete?



Westinghouse High School is in Pittsburgh, PA. One of the co-authors is from Westinghouse.