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The Social Environment and Childbearing Expectations: Implications for Strengths-based Sexual Health Interventions for Latino Youth

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Abstract

In the United States, adolescent childbearing is disproportionately higher among Latino youth, a growing population facing substantial social exclusion. Exploring the relationship between the social environment and sexual health outcomes among Latino youth may offer insights into the development of novel interventions. In this study, Latino youth in partnerships were recruited from neighborhood venues in San Francisco and completed in-depth interviews. Youth reported a desire to complete higher education goals prior to starting a family to improve future opportunities and further personal development. Youth stated that social network members, family and partners, were supportive of their individual childbearing expectations. Social environment barriers tied to poverty, immigration status, and gang violence hindered educational attainment. Some differences were noted by gender and immigrant generation. Building on protective social ties and creating avenues in poor, urban neighborhoods for Latino youth to fully access educational opportunities may counter early childbearing and improve sexual health.

Keywords

social environment; Latino youth; sexual health; protective factors; resilience; structural barriers

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Informed consent: Informed consent or minor assent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade teen pregnancy and birth rates have declined in the United States overall, yet the U.S. sustains the highest teen birth rates among comparable countries [1]. Among adolescents in the United States, socioeconomic inequalities and poverty at the individual, household, and community levels are associated with early pregnancy and childbearing [2], [3]. Further, there are ethnic disparities: the birth rate for 15 to 19 year old females is highest among Latinas (41.7/ 1000) and is more than double the rate of non-Latina white teens (18.6/1000) [4]. In states with large Latino populations, teen birth disparities are particularly pronounced. In California, 74% (73.8) of teen births are to Latinas, yet Latinas constitute 50% of the population [5]. Culturally-based childbearing norms, such as the importance placed on motherhood in Latino culture, may contribute to the difference in teen birth rates by ethnicity [6]. However, these norms, including childbearing expectations, evolve in neighborhood and social environments shaped by limited socioeconomic opportunities [7], [8].

There is a need to more fully understand avenues for addressing upstream, structural factors associated with pregnancy and birth rates in Latino youth. National studies suggest that Latinas living below the poverty line have double the rate of unintended pregnancy compared to non-Latina white women [9], [10]. Previous research has also documented the inverse relationship between educational aspirations and attainment and adolescent pregnancy and parenting, including adverse implications for future financial stability and wellbeing [11]–[14]. Compared to non-parenting youth, teen parents are almost 40% less likely to earn a high school diploma or GED, particularly Latina teen parents [15]. However, the relationship between economic disparities and adolescent pregnancy is multifaceted. Findings from national data suggest teens living in neighborhoods with high levels of income inequality may be more likely to become teen parents, but that teen parenting does not “cause” poverty, rather economic depravity gives rise to social conditions that persist and differ between youth who do and do not become teen parents [16]. There is a growing demand for comprehensive interventions that incorporate approaches to tackle the socioeconomic factors associated with adolescent pregnancy, acknowledging the need to eliminate barriers to educational, job, and health resources that impact poor and immigrant youth [17], [18]. Adolescent pregnancy and parenting among Latinos requires countering structural inequities and continue to present a complex public health challenge.

Promoting protective social network ties is one asset-based approach to encouraging healthy sexual behavior among young adults living in marginalized communities [19], [20]. This approach draws on a resilience framework, an exploration of how positive outcomes prevail despite threats, such as abuse or poverty, to healthy development [21]. Protective factors are a key aspect of resilience and can include elements that can help youth avoid and/or moderate the negative effects of risks and cope successfully with adversity [21]–[23]. Protective factors may be individual assets (e.g., competence, coping skills, ethnic pride) and resources in the social environment (e.g., parental support, stability, community organizations) [22], [24].

The role of social network ties, including among partners, peers, and family members, has been explored both as a phenomenon of normative behavior as well as a target for leveraging intervention effectiveness [25]. Christakis and Fowler (2009) suggest that the interaction of social network ties is greater than the sum of its parts and can affect individual behavior related to, for example, happiness, weight gain, and partner choice. Previous research has found social norms, shared behavioral expectations among network members (e.g., embarrassment about teenage pregnancy), to be associated with adolescent pregnancy among Latino youth [26]. However, relationship ties do not develop in isolation: the physical and social environments in which they form shape network norms, including those associated with adolescent sexual behavior [26]–[28]. A strengths-based and contextual level approach to intervention design fosters community building and offers a departure from a conventional public health focus on deficits and individual risk behaviors, which has been shown to fall short in terms of promoting change in youths' sexual behaviors [29], [30].

To examine the relationship between protective social network ties and norms, neighborhood features, and individual childbearing expectations, we conducted a qualitative study with Latino youth in partnerships from a single neighborhood. A qualitative approach can compliment quantitative studies and bridge some of the challenges of assessing network and neighborhood norms, including their interaction, using aggregate survey and census tract-level data [26], [27]. We chose to explore childbearing expectations rather than focus on more proximal behavioral correlates with adolescent pregnancy, such as contraceptive use, to assess a constellation of potential contextual and upstream social environment factors. This paper poses two research questions. First, how do Latino youth articulate childbearing expectations in terms of timing, goals, and future orientation? Second, are individuals' childbearing expectations aligned with those that dominate their social environment? To assess social environment and individual childbearing expectations, we examined partner and family expectations as well as neighborhood norms that may facilitate or impede attainment of pre-parenting goals.

METHODS

Study Design and Community

Mi Cuento (My Story) was a qualitative study conducted with young Latino women and men in San Francisco, California. This study was part of a joint academic and community partner research program initiated in 2001 in the Mission District to examine social environment influences on adolescent sexual health. Like other urban neighborhoods, the Mission District has been undergoing gentrification for decades and subsequent displacement of local businesses and low-income families leading to an increase in health and socioeconomic disparities, and, in particular, the social exclusion of non-white youth [31]–[33]. Home to the largest Latino community in San Francisco, with dozens of active youth agencies, the Mission continues to serve as a cultural center for families with ties predominately to Mexico and Central America [34]. The majority of underperforming schools in the city are also located in the Mission, where students are prohibited from wearing blue or red clothing to discourage visible markers of gang affiliation [35].

Recruitment—Within this context, and in collaboration with our community partners, youth were recruited from street venues (e.g., parks, alleys) as well as through referrals from youth agencies. Youth were approached and screened by trained, bilingual study staff. We stopped recruiting youth when a preliminary review of transcripts indicated we had reached saturation of key concepts of interest. Of the 33 youth who participated, 18 were recruited from venues near a neighborhood high school, and 15 were recruited from community agencies via referrals and study presentations to youth groups. Inclusion criteria included to self-identify as Latino, to be 16–22 years old, to spend at least four days a week in the Mission, to have a parent born outside the U.S., and at least one romantic partner of the opposite sex. Being sexually active was not required. We chose to recruit youth between 16–22 years old, as romantic partnerships become more common during mid- to late-adolescence [36]. To consider our main research questions within the context of immigrant generation, we recruited equal numbers of foreign- and U.S.- born youth. Youth provided verbal consent as part of the audio-recorded interview. The Institutional Review Board at RTI International approved the study and waived parental consent for minor participants. All youth were recruited and interviewed between June and November of 2010.

In-depth interviews—The interview guide was designed to explore how migration, time in the U.S., local and transnational social ties, and neighborhood norms are associated with sexual health, gender role norms, and partnership and childbearing expectations. The primary social network members of interest included partner(s) and family, though peer norms were also explored. The interview guide was piloted and modified following a set of initial interviews with youth who met study eligibility. We revised or removed questions or probes to enhance comprehension and alignment with the overarching areas of interest. The guide began with closed-ended questions to collect demographic data, followed by open-ended questions with probes. To develop rapport, the initial open-ended questions asked about how youth in the neighborhood typically meet partners followed by questions tied to relationship dynamics and community violence.

Youth were also presented with a series of statements expressing neighborhood norms about pregnancy, gang-affiliation, and educational aspirations. These statements were developed based on previous research activities as part of the larger research program in the neighborhood [37], [38]. Youth were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with each norms statement and to provide rationale for their opinion. For this analysis, we assessed one norms statement tied to post-secondary educational aspirations that was most aligned with participant descriptions of childbearing expectations. Two bilingual interviewers, a Puerto Rican man with previous experience with neighborhood schools and community agencies and a white woman who was part of the community research team since 2004, conducted interviews in Spanish or English, per participant request. All interviews were conducted at a community partner site that was safe and convenient for the youth. Names used in this paper are pseudonyms. Professional services transcribed and translated all recordings. We reviewed audio-recordings and transcripts after completion to assure quality and identify necessary modifications to the interview or data collection process.

Analysis

Using a modified grounded approach, for the first stage of qualitative analysis we created a codebook reflecting interview guide questions (e.g., how partners met) and emergent themes (e.g., family gender dynamics) that was applied in reviewing all transcripts in ATLAS.ti [39]–[41]. Two researchers coded transcripts and made comparisons for a subset to assess consistency in coding. Study staff completed written memos and held meetings to discuss coding and synthesis of findings. For this analysis, we returned to hard copy transcripts to ensure rigor in exploring the research questions.

First transcripts were analyzed for dominant themes identified via repetition (reoccurring topics or concepts), indigenous typologies (“local” terms used by youth), metaphors and analogies (to assess underlying themes), and linguistic connectors (e.g., “as a result” suggesting associations) [42]. This process consisted of open coding to assess similarities and variations in the narrative, constant comparisons of text until concepts were theoretically saturated, and the creation of categories (e.g., partner’s childbearing expectations) of concepts (e.g., partner wants to wait to have a baby until after graduation) [41]. Second, axial coding consisted of examining relationships between the categories to explore dimensions of the categories (e.g., variations in partner and family childbearing expectations related to educational goals) [41]. This occurred within and across narratives. Finally, selective coding served to identify core categories that tied the various categories together to “tell the story” [41]. For the community norms analysis, responses were each examined as “norms categories” to allow for axial and selective coding within and across narratives. A single norms statement that was directly linked to individual and network childbearing expectations was selected for this analysis. Field notes accompanied each interview, which were reviewed in conjunction with transcripts, particularly to assess neighborhood and gang-related exposures. Six participants were pregnant and/or parenting at the time of the interview (four female and two male). To best assess pre-parenting goals, parenting participant responses were included only in assessing the community norms statement, which reflect the larger social environment in which youth, regardless of parenting status, interact and, ultimately, take part in shaping.

RESULTS

The 33 youth that participated in this study had a median age of 17 years and 52% were young women (Table 1). More than half of the youth were born outside the United States with most (73%) living with their mother. Nearly one third of the participants were in a romantic relationship with a foreign-born partner and 58% reported a relationship length of at least one year.

For nearly all youth, “the right time” to start a family centered on the attainment of two goals: completion of college and financial stability. While the rationale for and pathways to achieve these goals differed by gender and nativity, attainment of post-high school opportunities was considered most important by all youth. Youth reported that partners and family members generally shared these expectations and offered verbal and, to a lesser extent, active support to help youth access opportunities. Though individual, family, and partner childbearing expectations were well aligned with one another, youth responses to

community norms statements about college indicated that there were significant barriers to higher education, including poverty, community violence, and immigration status.

Individual Childbearing Expectations

College completion—Nearly all of the non-parenting or pregnant youth explicitly identified college completion as a desired prerequisite before starting a family. In turn, college was viewed as necessary to obtain a desirable career. As 17 year-old Carla, who came to the U.S. from Teculután, Guatemala at 13.5 years old stated, “I don’t want to get pregnant until after I graduate [from college] because I want to be a lawyer...and have everything in order. Somewhere around 32 years old is when I want to have a baby.” Similarly, Juan, 17 years old, migrated to the U.S. at 13 years old from San Salvador, El Salvador. He described his childbearing expectations, “I think after you’ve finished college and you have—a certain good level of education...I think you can get better work. You at least will have a degree and you could defend yourself in life.” College, as Carla and Juan suggest, could serve not only as a means to, but also as protection for a better, more stable future, a pre-requisite to parenthood.

In addition to a pathway to professionalism, U.S.-born youth also identified college as an opportunity for personal development and exploration before assuming the responsibility of raising a family. Sixteen year-old Elena explained that she hoped to go to college in Los Angeles to “try something different”: “I’m trying to live my life first...I wanna go party...go to one of those college parties.” Pedro, 16 years old, shared his desire to become a teacher, but stated he wanted to start a family “around the age of 30” primarily to allow time to “[d]o as many little adventures as I can possibly do.” For some, like Pedro, the appeal of post-high school exploration was as valuable as pursuing a college pathway to obtain a desirable career.

Further, most youth explicitly stated that having a baby as a teenager would be a burden and interfere with their post-high school plans. Twenty year-old Erica, a community college student, was born in Mexico City, Mexico and came to the U.S. at three years old. She explained, “I don’t know if I want to do law school, but—it’s kind of unspoken, we’re not going to go to law school with a kid.” Similarly, Julio, 16 years old who migrated from La Ciudad, Guatemala at 15 years old, stated, “[If we had a baby] now, I ‘d have to get a job, and I wouldn’t be able to continue my education. And that’s no future.” Youth also described how early childbearing posed a significant barrier to reaching education goals for family members and peers. Sixteen year-old, U.S.-born, Hector commented on Facebook friends’ posts about teen parenting, “Yeah, you can have kids...but what you going to do? You can’t bring your kid into the classroom. Who’s going to watch your kid from 8 to 3:30? Are you going to stop your project and help your kid? It’s not going to happen.” Though youth, like Hector, described early childbearing norms within their peer groups, they also critically assessed the “real-life” challenges of teen parenting tied to reaching future goals.

Acquisition of resources—Young women, both U.S. and foreign-born, more often than young men emphasized obtaining resources, such as a house, as an important prerequisite before starting a family. Assets could be purchased through the better paying job one could

obtain with a college degree. Liliana, 16 years old, migrated from Acapulco, Mexico at two years old and listed the steps she planned to take before starting a family, “Get a job. Get a career. Get a place, a good house.” Sandra, 16 years old and born in the U.S., despite barriers tied to missing school credits and gang affiliation, alluded to the time needed to acquire assets, “I think the right time [to start a family] is when you’re done with college... Not right when you’re done but like, be done with college then decide what to do...save up money to get...a car and, you know, a little apartment.” Yadira, 16 years old who came at 13 years old from San Pedro Sula, Honduras, highlighted the relationship between, education, resource acquisition and emotional preparedness, “she needs to at least have a house, and a car...money for the child’s medications, for food for everything...A child isn’t a toy...And that’s why you have to be very prepared and mature.” Such resources and assets described by these young women emphasize the significance of livelihood and financial markers or end-points of completing the higher education process prior to parenthood.

Coping with social environment barriers—Despite nearly uniform aspirations among participants to complete college before starting a family, preparedness to attain goals varied significantly due to a number of obstacles experienced by some participants. Lack of preparedness was largely attributed to social environment barriers including gang involvement and documentation status. Before parenthood, Hector hoped to complete “college, definitely my shots at football, baseball and acting.” However, he acknowledged, “I’m not the best student...I used to be into all that gang stuff. I don’t have a good academic record.” Miguel, 16 years old and gang-involved, migrated to the U.S. at seven years old from Lima, Peru. He was working to improve his grades and considering becoming an engineer before starting a family, but believed that criminal justice involvement carries a stigma impacting academic success: “if you get caught by the police, it just messes with you a lot. You get paperwork...You can’t go back to school and just start doing good ‘cause they’ll look at you different...You feel marked.” Foreign-born youth also stated that documentation status impeded youth from making headway on attaining post-high school opportunities. Twenty year-old José, who migrated to the U.S. from La Ceiba, Honduras at 17 years old, insisted that finishing college was necessary for him prior to starting a family. However, because of state guidelines for aid and entry into a University of California institution for undocumented students, he remained in high school: “they say that to go to a U.C., it’s four years [for me to apply]...I have three...last year I went to apply...I couldn’t do it last year, which is why I’m here.” Though different types of barriers, both documentation status and gang involvement can become pervasive systemic barriers for youth, despite individual efforts to improve their future opportunities.

Social Network: Family

Shared childbearing expectations—The majority of non-parenting youth had discussed their educational and career goals with family, including parents, siblings, and extended family members often sharing the same home. Youth indicated that their individual childbearing expectations tied to education goals were aligned with those expressed by their family members. Elena, who wanted to go to college in part to “live [her] life” before having children, explained, “[my mother tells me] you always have to be safe...If you need birth control, you know, you can tell me...you’re still young. You have to go to college [and]

like...do things like travel.” Ideals expressed by family generally reflected a desire to encourage their children or younger family members to strive for “a better life” for themselves and for their future family. Julio stated his parents told him “the best way [to prevent pregnancy] is abstinence [*aguantarse*]” but if “we can’t abstain, then to use condoms or pills.” He then explained, “my mom only finished high school, and the same for my dad...since he lived in small town [and] since he was little they put him to work after school, and then he wasn’t able to continue his education. Yes [I agree with my parents’ ideas], because first I need to have a solid foundation and a basic plan for the future.” Family members also encouraged youth to consider pursuing higher education prior to parenting, even when adolescent pregnancy was normative. As Sandra explained, “my whole family, like my siblings and stuff, it’s normal to have babies at a young age, you know. So, I’m here 16, like I don’t have babies, so my mom is like happy...She’s just like finish school...Go to a university, college, you know. Whatever you want to be... Don’t give up...She wants me to finish school and that’s what I want too.”

Breaking the barriers cycle—Despite support for higher education, some youth were confronted with conflicting messages from family members about the pathway to take, suggestive of the barriers to opportunities parents had faced. U.S.-born Sara, 16 years old, stated her mother, currently unemployed, supported her “going away to a four-year college,” while her father, a cab driver, thought she should go to City College. With aspirations to be a nurse practitioner, Sara explained, “my dad feels that ...nobody should be too good for City...I think City College is fine...it’s affordable, I guess...I just wanna do everything all at once at one school...seeing my parents like work extra hard...I wanna like work hard to get a career where I don’t have to worry.” Youth, like Sara, had to contend with navigating complex messaging regarding family support to achieve pre-parenting education goals.

Partner selection advice—With family members, ideal childbearing timing was often connected with partner selection advice: find someone who is “gonna do something with their life.” Compared to family of U.S.-born youth, family members of first-generation youth more often offered partner selection advice. Miguel, for example, reported that his mother preferred that he date a “good girl” and explained, “The girl has to go to school. [She] [d]oes her work. Doesn’t drink or smoke...talks nice.” In some cases, family advice also included seeking a partner with citizenship status. Overall, partner selection advice that emphasized dating peers with post-high school educational aspirations reinforced broader social network norms tied to pursuing education goals prior to starting a family.

Social Network: Partners

Goals and contraception—Most non-parenting youth had discussed their future goals with their partners. These conversations, in some cases, directly prompted discussions about contraception. Eighteen year-old Victor who migrated to the U.S. from Tegucigalpa, Honduras at 16 years old aspired to go to the Marines. He reported that he and his partner use both condoms and oral contraception and had gone together to the clinic, “We always talk about it [birth control]...I always ask her whether she’s been taking her pills, or if there’s been anything, she’ll tell me...we’re not in a good financial situation because first of

all, neither of us has finished high school... That's why we're trying to prevent [pregnancy] and always use protection."

Friends first—The connection between pregnancy prevention to protect educational goals was also present in narratives of youth who were not sexually active with their current partner. Seventeen year-old Damaris came to the U.S. from Guanajuato, Mexico at 10 years old, "talked for a year" with her boyfriend, now in college, before becoming romantic partners. She shared about their conversations, "if we want something serious that we need to wait, because it's too early to have kids...because I'm still in school, and I want things for me, ...Like college...he also wants his college thing to get done...[but]...we're not that close yet...like, not having sex." Like Damaris, most youth described their relationship evolving from "friends first" to romantic partnerships, which created the temporal and emotional space to discuss future aspirations.

Interplay of Partner and Family Ties

Protective partner and family ties—The interplay of family and partner ties related to completing educational goals prior to starting a family may create a protective environment for youth who are considering early childbearing. This relationship is illustrated by 19 year-old, Brenda, born in the U.S., who explained, "you can say we [my partner and me] have the same goals, because we both want to better ourselves...we've discussed it... you need to have money and an education and a job before having children...When I was 14, all my sisters had babies; one when she was 14, another at age 18, and the other one at 17...So when I turned 14, I wanted to have a child too...I was working, but only occasionally at night cleaning an office...But then I really started to think about it, and my sisters have also really supported me. They say, 'Look if you have child now, what are you going to do? Where are you going to get money? You need to stay in school... If he really loves you, you will take precautions to avoid having children and you'll wait.'" Brenda and her partner have gone together to the neighborhood clinic: "When I got birth control and everything, he was there with me." Overall, sexually active youth in this study reported using condoms as the primary method to protect against pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.

Opportunity linkages—Despite verbal support to accomplish post-high school education and social development prior to parenthood, very few partners or family members provided linkages to educational opportunities tied to formal programs or services. In one case, the partner of 16 year-old, U.S.-born Abel linked him to an afterschool program designed to introduce youth to careers in medicine. Abel also identified his partner as his motivation to focus on school, "at that point, I didn't really care much for school... But then I got to know her, she kinda changed my life around into me actually wanting to go to college." For Erica, though her parents faced language barriers, they attended all parent-teacher conferences, which led to private school scholarships. She elaborated, "when I had to get a computer, like even though it was really hard for them to like, pool the money to get it, like they managed to do it." In addition to few network linkages to educational opportunities, participant perceptions of neighborhood education norms did not reflect the high aspirations shared by youth, their partners, and their families.

Community Norms: Educational Aspirations and Violence

All 33 youth participants were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “Most Mission youth plan to go to college.” Despite a range in responses, participants provided nearly uniform rationale for their responses centered on three structural barriers: poverty, immigration status and the negative demands of gang affiliation. In addition, though some youth described positive peer norms related to both post-high school aspirations and adolescent pregnancy prevention, among non-parenting youth, most females and males reported having at least one friend who had been pregnant.

Poverty and documentation status—For foreign-born youth, a college degree without U.S. citizenship was regarded as providing little career advantage. Sixteen year-old Jessica, who came from Nogales, Mexico at 12 years old, disagreed with the college norms statement saying, “they can’t go [to college] because they don’t have the money, because they’re undocumented...they don’t see a future. If you are undocumented, why the hell would you go to college?” In addition, familial fragmentation due to migration depleted financial and emotional support for higher education. Julio also disagreed with the norms statement and said, “most of them would like to [go to college], but there are always barriers...some people don’t live with their parents and everything and some are undocumented. So they say, ‘It won’t help me here because I won’t be able to get a job in the field I’m interested in.’” José was undecided and believed that recently arrived youth were more motivated to pursue higher education than their U.S.-born peers: “the ones who plan to go [to college] are the ‘wetbacks’ as they’re called...they [U.S.-born youth] say, ‘I already know English...’ graduate and then go work at McDonald’s.” José believed youth born in the U.S. might also be less likely to access academic support or be recruited by high school college counselors.

Poverty and gang life—Gang affiliation offered strong peer ties, particularly for some males in this study. Such allegiance often, but not always, conflicted with education goals and aspirations. Twenty-two year-old Leo came to the U.S. from San Salvador, El Salvador at eight years old and had been, like his sister, gang involved, including transnational affiliations through family. He was undecided about the college norms statement: “I hope they do. I want all the youth to, to plan to go to college, but...I know a lot of Mission youth, they planning on shooting somebody or they’re planning getting shot or they’re planning how the f--- they gonna eat....So going to school is not on the list, let alone going to college.” Leo explained that when he was younger his “list” was to “get money, stay out of jail, stay out of the cemetery.” Nonetheless, he acknowledged, that despite having “homies” that are dead or “doing life,” “I got homies that are doing it. I got homies in college, I got homies like me working, you know, living cool.” Leo’s girlfriend was training to become a medical assistant. They agreed she should complete her training and gain work experience before having children, though these plans were contingent on Leo’s stipulation, “unless I get killed.” Pedro, whose brother was stabbed, was also undecided about the norms statement and highlighted the role of individual motivation: “if it’s somebody that has more goals for the future then yeah, but if it’s somebody that just wants to die in the hood...then probably not.” Yet, like with Leo’s friends in college, Pedro’s peer network included older gang members (“O.G.’s”) teaching “game” (the art of “persuasion”) to younger members

with positive messaging: “I was out late and this O.G. dude... He’s like, ‘You got to get that paper.’ I was like, ‘What paper?’ He’s like, ‘That diploma’...And then he started rapping, and at the end of all his sentences, ‘Got to get that paper.’”

Future uncertainty—For youth born in the U.S., their foreign-born family members exhibited the daily reality of limited access to opportunity. Family members employed in low-wage work with long hours coupled with the fatalism endemic to gang life led some youth to question the tangibility of their future goals and the odds of waiting “too long” to have children. Eighteen year-old Alberto, born in the U.S., had applied to “barber school” and planned to save money by working a side job as a truck driver for Pepsi Cola with his cousin. He had also experienced and witnessed substantial gang-related violence. Alberto reasoned, “You don’t want to have [a baby] when you’re 30, because then you’re just too old to have a kid. You might be too tired to do anything. And when you’re young, you’re energetic and ready to go.” If necessary, Alberto believed that he and his partner, who had also applied to college, could alternate day and night classes to care for a baby. Abel, who had lost friends to gang-related homicides and whose parents worked opposite shifts as janitors, also felt like waiting until his 30s to start family was “gonna be too far off.” He explained, “it’s just the fact that like maybe there won’t be enough time, ‘cause like anything could happen...you wouldn’t want to leave the kid by himself...like if someone were to die.”

DISCUSSION

Overall, the youth in the study expressed individual aspirations to complete higher education prior to starting a family. Family and partners generally supported these aspirations. However, neighborhood norms and structural barriers posed significant roadblocks to meeting childbearing expectations. These narratives illustrate the resilience of youth given the disconcerting paradox between individual childbearing expectations and the social environment in which youth attempt to pursue their goals. Most youth not only expressed the importance of fulfilling educational milestones as intrinsic to their childbearing expectations, they explicitly articulated early childbearing as an obstacle to goal attainment. Previous research has identified this connection as a distinguishing characteristic of youth with risk profiles for teen pregnancy and suggests that pregnancy prevention efforts shift the focus from addressing unprotected sexual behavior to encouraging youth to directly examine how early childbearing presents challenges to fulfilling long-term educational goals [43]. Future research should also further examine the nuances of the relationship between immigrant generation and childbearing expectations to include, for example, emphasis on also protecting time for personal discovery as voiced by U.S.- born youth in this study.

Our findings also suggest the role family members can play in supporting youth to avoid pregnancy as a means to reach educational goals. Family support can contribute to resilience by buffering the effects of structural inequities in the social environment. Previous studies with Latino youth have found protective associations between parental monitoring, ethnic pride, and communication of clear sanctions against teenage childbearing and adolescent sexual intentions and behavior [44]–[49]. Protective family ties can be vital in offering

support for youth at a crossroads in their future planning which may be exceptionally complicated in families with teen parents.

Few studies have examined the potential of protective influences of partners. Non-parenting youth in this study reported having conversations about educational aspirations with partners, including how early childbearing would negatively impact their ability to reach goals, and indicated that these conversations were helpful in terms of avoiding pregnancy. Previous research has identified the role partners play in contraceptive decision-making and pregnancy timing, including protective aspects of joint communication about contraception [50], [51]. Our findings suggest that promoting partner discussion that clearly connects future goals with post-adolescent childbearing, particularly during the friendship phase of romantic partnerships, may be a promising component of unplanned pregnancy prevention efforts. These findings also contribute to the development of a healthy relationship framework to inform adolescent sexual health programming [52]. Verbal social support should not be underestimated. Yet, if partners and family members could also readily link youth to resources to improve their academic preparedness and realize their goals, the potential impact of protective social ties on sexual health may be more sustainable and far-reaching. Such linkages were not common in the youth narratives presented here. Again this finding raises questions about the social environment and the barriers youth identified to reaching education goals. We encourage researchers, youth providers, and policymakers committed to preventing unplanned pregnancy among Latino youth to consider structural interventions that ultimately challenge the status quo and break the cycle of an inequitable distribution of access and opportunity.

Limitations

Youth in this study were recruited drawing from a decade of ethnographic and quantitative-based venue research with the Mission community to ensure participation of youth from distinct social groups, but are not representative of urban Latino youth across the country [53]. Though their narratives can inform local programming and intervention design, we cannot generalize these findings. Youth in this study generally reported high educational aspirations, which may reflect sampling or social desirability bias and may not reflect the experiences of youth with low aspirations. Of note, high educational aspirations are not uncommon among Latino immigrant youth and youth of immigrant parents, despite legal and economic barriers to educational attainment [54], [55]. To further explore the relationship between aspirations and childbearing, a comparison of parenting and non-parenting youth or a longitudinal qualitative study of non-parenting youth would be informative. This study did not have a sufficient number of parenting youth for this comparison. Though the diversity of youth in this study speaks to the diversity of Latino youth in the Bay Area, nuances tied to country of origin and discrete levels of gang involvement could not be assessed in detail. Peer norms were explored, including protective aspects, but not to the extent of partner and family norms. A closer exploration of peer influences on individual childbearing expectations could yield important findings for interventions targeting peer networks.

Conclusion

The President's Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative for 2010–2015 centers on reducing pregnancy and births among target communities through evidenced-based programing and community mobilization and sustainability including accessing resources and public and private collaboration [56]. This vision is promising for Latino youth in the U.S. First, a focus on mobilizing and building local communities respects the diversity in youth experience. While large numbers of Latino youth live in poverty, Latino youth also arrive to the U.S. at different times in their lives from different countries. Unique transnational ties to culture and life histories can impact adaptation to urban life in the U.S. Second, a multi-sectoral approach encourages schools, criminal justice, and community agencies to work together with families and youth to mount a response to adolescent pregnancy prevention. Specifically, such an approach could include mechanisms to support linkages to educational resources. In cities with significant gentrification, to increase the likelihood of successful mobilization, it will also mean creating spaces for dialogue between neighbors that may co-exist but have not come together to create a collective vision for local youth development. Structural interventions during mid to late adolescence can also affect social cognitive maturation related to the weighing of risks and rewards, controlling impulses, and social relationships [57]. Thus, it is vital to consider opportunities to help insulate youth by building on assets - including positive family, peer, and partner relationships - to offset deficits created by poverty or community violence that may offer competing and potentially harmful normative behavior expectations.

A social environment that fosters truly tangible future opportunities for urban, Latino youth can create pathways to attain higher education and meet post-adolescent childbearing expectations. To this end, neighborhoods will also need to organize beyond their communities to effectively demand inclusive local and national policy that facilitates sustained and comprehensive higher education access. In 2012, national enrollment rates of Latinos in higher education surpassed that of white high school graduates [58]. However, compared to white youth, Latino youth are less likely to enroll in a four-year college, be enrolled fulltime and obtain a bachelor's degree [58]. Furthermore, citizenship status impacts eligibility for higher education and vocational programs. The federal Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act introduced in 2001 would allow undocumented youth, who meet certain eligibility requirements, to apply for U.S. citizenship on a conditional basis, including enrollment in higher education [59]. Though at the federal level the DREAM Act has not passed into law, individual states have passed their own Dream Acts, which, in addition to offering a pathway to citizenship also include college financial aid benefits. A multi-sectoral approach at the local level coupled with national immigration reform comprises key aspects of community mobilization as a means to address teen pregnancy. In conclusion, we highlight implications for social action and strengths-based community intervention to promote sexual health and prevent adolescent pregnancy among Latino youth in the United States by supporting youth to fully participate in educational attainment options and contribute to building the assets of the communities in which we live.

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Table 1Background Characteristics of *Mi Cuento* Study Participants, N=33

Characteristic	N or median	% or range
Age in years	17	(16–22)
Male	16	48
Female	17	52
Born in U.S.	15	45
Born in Mexico	6	18
Born in Central America ^a	11	33
Born in Peru	1	3
Age first immigrated to U.S., in years	13	(2.5–18)
Currently lives with mother	24	73
Currently lives with father	15	45
Currently lives with other family member(s)	28	85
Foreign-born friends (some) ^b	16	48
Foreign-born friends (most)	12	36
Foreign-born partner	10	30
Relationship length with partner, 1 + years ^c	19	58

^aGuatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador^bScale: *None, Some, Most, All*^cRomantic partner: having a sexual partner was not part of study eligibility