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Babies are not a cash crop for SA's young mothers

There is no evidence that the child support grant is an incentive for teenagers to have more babies, Monde Makiwane and Eric Udjo conclude in a report for the Human Sciences Research Council

A school of thought has developed in South Africa that the child support grant (CSG) has some perverse incentives, one of which is to encourage women, especially teenagers, to have more children. It is widely acknowledged in South Africa that the teenage fertility rate is high. About half of all young people between 15 and 19, slightly more men than women, report having had sex. By 19, close to 80% of South African women have had sex, and about 37% have been pregnant.

We analysed existing national datasets to examine whether there was a relationship between the CSG and teenage fertility, namely the 1995 and 1998 October Household Surveys, the 1998 South African Demographic and Health Survey, and the 2001 Census. Data from the Social Pension Fund grant system, available since 1999, were also used.

The widespread belief that young women are having children specifically so they can have access to the grant is unfounded. What we did find, firstly, was that the upsurge in teenage fertility (for young women aged 15 to 19) predates the introduction of the child support grant, and is now declining.

If anything, the upsurge coincided with the major political changes that were taking place in South Africa, and may be similar to a post-war boom.

In the second place, throughout the eight-year existence of the grant, teenage direct beneficiaries

of the grant make up fewer than 3% of the total number of beneficiaries, yet teen mothering comprises 15% of all fertility. If young women were bearing children to benefit from the grant, one would expect a higher proportion of teenagers to take advantage of the money.

In line with older women taking on the care of the children of younger women, the data show that those of 35 and older, whose fertility has been declining, are more likely to be direct beneficiaries of the grant.

Finally, the increase in youthful fertility has occurred across the board, including sections of society that do not qualify for the grant.

Our HSRC report says there are possible alternative explanations for the high rates of youthful fertility. The rising proportion of births to young women is seen in most countries. The general trend, worldwide, is that where fertility rates are lower, the share of births to young women is among the highest. In line with this trend, as the general rate of fertility in South Africa declines, so the rate of fertility among young women is increasing.

Teenage fertility declined rapidly from 1990 until 1996, when a dramatic upsurge occurred. After that time, teenage fertility appears to level off. The exact pattern of teenage fertility from early 2000 is not known with any accuracy, because of the lack of recent reliable data. Unadjusted fertility data from the Demographic and Health Survey 2003 (not yet publicly avail-



FIRST-BORN: Khlofelo Pilusa, 18, a Grade 10 learner from Soweto, with her three-month-old daughter Lov receives a monthly child support grant from the government. The writers say there is no evidence to support a widespread perception that teenagers are having more babies because of the grant. Picture: MIKE DIBET.

able) suggest that no further increase in teenage fertility was experienced for the few years after the 2001 census.

Although overall fertility levels of the African population group have been higher than those of other population groups, it has recently experienced the steepest rate of decline. It is against this background that the fertility rates of different population groups are examined in Table 1, which shows the estimated trends in total fertility rate (TFR) and age-specific fertility rate (ASFR) for teenagers, by race, in 1995 and 2000.

Total fertility rates in South Africa have been declining over the past few decades, as illustrated in Table 1.

Eric Udjo estimates that the total fertility rate declined from about 4.9 per female in 1970 to about 3.2 in 1998. In contrast, teenage fertility has increased in all race groups except Indians, suggesting that overall fertility has been accompanied by a shift in childbearing towards younger women.

Table 2 shows the estimated proportion of children who received grants in each province in 1999 and 2005. The proportion was compiled by dividing the number of children who received the grant in March 1999 by projections from Statistics South Africa of the number of children in the age group 0 to 7 at mid-year 1999; and, for the 2005 estimates, the number of recipients was divided by the number of children in the age group 0 to 14.

It is estimated that about 45% of all children in South Africa received the child grant in March 2005, from a low of 0.27% in 1999.

These findings concur with a research report commissioned by the Department of Social Development, released in January this year, of a quantitative analysis of the data on the social pensions system.

That report found that in October 2005, teenagers (women younger than 20 years) represented only 5% of all child support grant recipients,

Table 1: ASFR (Number of births per 1000 women aged 15-19) and TFR (Number of births per woman in her lifetime), by race, 1995 and 2000

	1995		2000	
	ASFR 15-19 years	TFR	ASFR 15-19 years	TFR
African	42	5.0	31	3.9
Coloured	34	3.8	25	2.9
Indian	24	2.8	21	2.5
White	8	1.0	10	1.0

Table 2: Percentage of children receiving the CSG, by province, 1999 and 2005

Province	March 1999	March 2005
Eastern Cape	0.66%	1.18%
Free State	0.63%	0.66%
Western Cape	0.24%	0.66%
Northwest	0.69%	0.22%
Northern	0.17%	0.11%
Eastern	0.20%	0.11%
North	0.18%	0.11%
Free State	0.19%	0.11%
Western	0.22%	0.11%
Eastern	0.21%	0.11%

Table 3: Estimated age distribution of CSG beneficiaries, March 1999 and March 2005

Age group	March 1999	March 2005	Fertility contribution 2005
0-7	1.83%	2.69%	74%
8-14	11.20%	16.14%	24%
15-19	1.13%	2.10%	7%
20-24	0.33%	0.35%	1%
25-29	0.23%	0.23%	0%
30-34	0.29%	0.23%	0%
35-39	0.29%	0.23%	0%
40-44	0.29%	0.23%	0%
45-49	0.29%	0.23%	0%
50-54	0.29%	0.23%	0%
55-59	0.29%	0.23%	0%
60-64	0.29%	0.23%	0%
65-69	0.29%	0.23%	0%
70-74	0.29%	0.23%	0%
75-79	0.29%	0.23%	0%
80-84	0.29%	0.23%	0%
85-89	0.29%	0.23%	0%
90-94	0.29%	0.23%	0%
95-99	0.29%	0.23%	0%

which is considerably lower than the proportion of teenage mothers (13%) in the population.

Debates about perverse effects of welfare, and proposals for punitive exclusion and withdrawal, have occurred in other countries, also with respect to teen motherhood. The issue attracts strong personal, moral and cultural opinions. Based on the data we have analysed, we conclude that there are no grounds

to believe that South African girls are deliberately having children in order to access welfare benefits.

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