Reviewer's report

Title: Psychosocial factors associated with becoming a young father in Finland: a nationwide longitudinal study

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Reviewer: Anne Mari Sund

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This is a large national representative follow-up study of boys based on information on three time-points assessed for the first time when they were eight years old, also with self-report measures, then information about criminal offenses in adolescence (15 to 20 years). Lastly, information about young fatherhood (< 22 years of age) was retrieved from official registers. The main findings were that conduct problems assessed at eight, level of criminal offenses in adolescence, being born to a young father and having a mother with low educational level at 8, all independently predicted becoming a young father (< 22 years old). This article thus elucidates concomitantly childhood and adolescent putative risk factors.

This is a straightforward interesting article addressing a question not often investigated world-wide. The article is well-written and readily understandable. The research questions are clear and choice of variables and analyses are logical following the aims of the study, and well substantiated for. The choice of methods is appropriate for the research questions and for the data set. The analyses are clearly presented both in the text and in an astonishingly easy-to-understand table.

The English language is according to accepted standards.

The abstract accurately conveys what is found.

However, there are a few problems:

In the discussion, the authors raise the issue of prevention, and emphasizes the postponing of being a father. This article is a first step to elucidate risk factors in this area of research. However, the article has shortcomings that are not discussed when trying to perform this task:

1. The time-span. Although the independent variable comes before the outcome in time, the time-span is very long. The role of possible intervening factors is not sufficiently discussed. An example is educational level of parents. This is assessed at the age of 8. However, adults go to school after having got children, so this is not precise information on putative risk factors at the time of outcome.

An exception is criminal offenses in adolescence. This variable is measured validly, and close in time to the time of becoming a father; however, becoming a father actually might come first in time, and criminal offense later. Becoming a father might be a particular stressful event, being a starting point for negative views on themselves and of negative behavior.
2. Possible risk factors and outcome must be valid and reliably measured. In the article there is some confusion related to outcome, i.e. the exact number of young fathers. Since many young people to-day live together without being married; this number should be better clarified. Is the number underestimated? How much? How might this affect the results?

3. Also, to state that a putative risk factor actually is a risk factor, one need experiments where a possible risk factor is manipulated and the outcome then evaluated. The authors jump over this necessary step only with a comment in the last sentence, and suggest sex health education programs to avoid risky sexual behavior tailored specifically to boys. Do the authors mean all boys? Or boys who had misconduct in childhood? How can the authors conclude with that? There are probably many explanations and one must take a range of these into account and actually test these by altering risk factors before implementing interventions in large groups.

Probably are a lot of these unwanted pregnancies are result of a "slip", and often with simultaneous substance use. Possible, some can be attributed to a typical personality style of adolescents with criminal behavior, disregarding “rules” always to use contraceptives. To reach this group of impulsive, and sometimes antisocial, young men, one must very carefully adapt a group approach. Political measures should also be taken like making contraceptives for free and easy to access, etc. Such interventions require in depth knowledge of this population, and might also benefit from knowledge about groups having experienced other negative consequences of impulsive sex behavior, as HIV infected males.

Probable are these boys very difficult to reach. May be a wiser approach is to convince the girls to demand the boys to use contraceptives, and to take care of their own contraception.

The role of early child psychopathology

Self-reported depressive symptoms in childhood are seldom assessed and seldom in a longitudinal study with such a long span. Very few studies have addressed this in one way or another, and not with this specific outcome. The finding of the role of depressive symptoms possible last longing effect on early fatherhood is not sufficiently discussed. And could the lack of knowledge of the course of depressive symptoms in the present sample be compensated by using psychiatric comorbidity in this sample at 18 to 23 (at Follow-up), and by making comparisons over the groups?

The same problem pertains to the role of reported conduct problems at 8, although possible pathways are discussed on page 10.

MODERATION AND MEDIATION FACTORS

To focus further on certain subgroups, moderation analyses are necessary. Are there any possible additional moderation analyses that could be performed in the present sample?

Mediating factors helps us to design wise and effective interventions, this is also mentioned by the authors. In the present study the analyses showed that the effect of depressive symptoms self-reported at the age of 8 disappeared when
levels of criminal offences was introduced. The long-term effect of depressive symptoms thus possibly is mediated through adolescence criminal behavior. Here lacks a discussion.

Conclusion

Major revisions; Advice to perform moderation analyses if possible, but this is not compulsory

Minor revisions: See above, some clarifications and broadening of the discussion according to the suggestions.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.