

## Changes in Young Women's Pregnancy Desire after a Pregnancy Scare<sup>1</sup>

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### Keywords

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### Short running title

Pregnancy Desire after a Pregnancy Scare

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1 **Changes in Young Women’s Pregnancy Desire after a Pregnancy Scare**

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3  
4 **Abstract**

5 **Objectives:** We examined whether and how long young women became more or less likely to desire a  
6 pregnancy after experiencing a “pregnancy scare.”

7  
8 **Study Design:** We used data from the Relationship Dynamics and Social Life (RDSL) study, based on a  
9 random, population-based sample of 992 young women from a county in Michigan. They were  
10 interviewed weekly for 2.5 years. We used logistic regression models with a within-between  
11 specification to predict pregnancy desire after a pregnancy scare.

12  
13 **Results:** We found that the probability of desiring a pregnancy was significantly higher, on average, after  
14 a pregnancy scare than before a pregnancy scare. This increase was largest within the following week,  
15 slightly smaller but still significant within a month, and further diminished but still significant for the  
16 remainder of the study period.

17  
18 **Conclusions:** Our analyses suggest that the experience of a pregnancy “scare” does not scare women  
19 away from wanting pregnancies. On the contrary, the state of possibly being pregnant actually makes  
20 women more likely to want to be pregnant.

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28 **Implications**

29 Clinicians should be aware that young women who experience pregnancy scares have higher pregnancy  
30 rates than other women not only because they have undesired pregnancies, but also because they are  
31 actually more desirous of pregnancy than their peers who have not experienced a pregnancy scare.  
32

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### 35 1. Introduction

36 Young women who previously experienced pregnancy scares – brief periods when they believed  
37 they were pregnant even though they wanted to avoid pregnancy – have higher rates of pregnancy [1].  
38 This is in part because women stop using contraception, become less consistent in its use, or switch  
39 from more to less effective methods after experiencing a pregnancy scare [2]. Studies have concluded  
40 that not only is a pregnancy scare not a “wake-up call” to become better at preventing pregnancy, it  
41 appears to have the opposite effect. What is unknown is whether this is due to something about the  
42 experience of a pregnancy scare that disrupts women's *ability* to use contraception to prevent  
43 pregnancy, or whether it changes their *desire* to prevent pregnancy.

44 There are several reasons that women may actually become more likely to desire a subsequent  
45 pregnancy after temporarily believing they are pregnant, even if they did not want the pregnancy.

46 First, if others – friends, family, or the father – reacted positively to the news of a potential  
47 pregnancy, this could make the idea of a pregnancy more appealing. In fact, many young women report  
48 that their intimate partners desire pregnancy more than they themselves do [3,4]. If the partner reacts  
49 positively to the possibility of being pregnant, this could foster pregnancy desire.

50 Second, some pregnancy scares are probably actual pregnancies that ended in a very early  
51 miscarriage, which may trigger a biological mechanism that increases pregnancy desire. Oxytocin  
52 typically rises throughout pregnancy [5], and it promotes bonding and prosocial behavior [6] and  
53 reduces depression [7]. These feelings coupled with the idea of a pregnancy could make women more  
54 positive about pregnancy.

55 Third, a psychological process called *mere exposure*, also known as the familiarity principle, may  
56 increase desire for pregnancy. Simply being exposed to something makes an individual more positive  
57 about that thing [8]. Women who think they may be pregnant, even those who did not want to be

58 pregnant, could quickly adjust to the idea of being a mother and even start to *want* to be a mother.

59         Each of these processes may be long- or short-lived. That is, the consequences of a pregnancy  
60 scare could dissipate within days or weeks, or could persist for years. In this study, we estimate changes  
61 in pregnancy desire in the weeks following a pregnancy scare.

62

## 63 2.         **Material and Methods**

64         We use survey data from the Relationship Dynamics and Social Life (RDSL) study. This random  
65 sample of 1,003 young women ages 18–19 was selected from driver’s license and personal identification  
66 card databases to be representative of the population of a Michigan county [9,10]. Professional  
67 researchers from the University of Michigan’s Survey Research Center conducted 60-minute face-to-face  
68 baseline survey interviews at a time and location of each respondent’s choosing between March 2008  
69 and July 2009. Women were then invited to participate in a 2.5-year follow-up study consisting of brief  
70 weekly online or telephone surveys that asked about desire for pregnancy in the upcoming month,  
71 intimate relationship characteristics, and experiences with pregnancy. The follow-up study concluded in  
72 January 2012 and yielded 58,594 weekly interviews with 992 women. The response rate for the baseline  
73 interview was 84%. 99% of baseline respondents entered the follow-up study, and 75% participated for  
74 at least 18 months [11].

75         The University of Michigan’s Institutional Review Board approved the study. Women provided  
76 written informed consent to participate in the baseline interviews, assent for web-based interviews, and  
77 oral consent for telephone interviews. The study mailed women a letter, along with a \$5 bill, to invite  
78 them to participate. Respondents were subsequently paid \$35 for the baseline interview, \$5 each for  
79 the first four weekly interviews, and \$1 per week thereafter, with \$5 bonuses for completing five weekly  
80 interviews in a row within the 10-day “on-time” response window.

81         We limit our analysis of pregnancy scares and pregnancy desire to women who ever had sex

82 during the study period (77%), because women who never had sex were not at risk of a pregnancy scare.  
83 We also drop women who were probably pregnant or pregnant during all of their weekly interviews  
84 (1%), because they never reported their pregnancy desire, or who only completed one weekly interview  
85 (4%), because we cannot analyze change in their pregnancy desire. This results in 41,736 weekly  
86 interviews with 759 respondents.

## 87 **2.1. Dependent variable: Prospective Desire for Pregnancy**

88 In each weekly survey, non-pregnant respondents were asked, “How much do you want to get  
89 pregnant during the next month?” They were given response options of 0 through 5, with 0 labeled “not  
90 at all want” and 5 labeled “really want.” Prior research demonstrates that any non-zero response is  
91 associated with a similarly higher pregnancy rate than a zero response [12]. Thus, we code pregnancy  
92 desire as 1 for any non-zero response (i.e., any desire), and 0 for a response of zero (i.e., no desire).

## 93 **2.2. Independent variables**

### 94 **2.2.1 Pregnancy Scare**

95 We use the same definition of pregnancy scare used in prior research with these data [1,2]. Each  
96 week, respondents were asked about their pregnancy status, and were coded as “not pregnant,”  
97 “probably not pregnant,” “probably pregnant,” or “pregnant.” “Pregnant” is defined as a positive  
98 pregnancy test (self-reported). An uncertain reply of “probably not pregnant” or “probably pregnant”  
99 that was not subsequently confirmed by a pregnancy test (or, eventually, a birth, miscarriage, or  
100 abortion) is considered a “pregnancy scare” if the pregnancy was not desired (occurred during a month  
101 when the woman reported no desire for pregnancy). We code several dichotomous versions of this  
102 variable. First, we code a version for three time periods: within the last week, within the last month, and  
103 ever. These measures are time-varying and coded 1 for each weekly interview with a pregnancy scare in  
104 that time period, and 0 otherwise. A second version codes three non-overlapping time periods: within  
105 the last week, within the last month *excluding the prior week* (i.e., within two to four weeks), and ever

106 *excluding the past month (i.e., 4+ weeks ago but within the study period).*

### 107 2.2.2 *Time-Varying Intimate relationship characteristics*

108 Each week, RDSL ascertained whether each woman had a partner of any kind during the prior  
109 week. Respondents who had more than one partner during the prior week identified the most  
110 important or most serious one and discussed that partner in detail. Women identified multiple partners  
111 in only 1% of weeks [13].

112 *Intimacy & commitment.* We combined answers to multiple survey questions to create a weekly  
113 time-varying categorical measure of relationship type: married or engaged, cohabiting, non-co-  
114 residential relationship committed to monogamy, and relationship not committed to monogamy.

115 *Duration.* We also differentiate between short-term and long-term relationships. In our models,  
116 time-varying relationship duration is the total weeks spent with the current partner, including time  
117 spent together before and after breakups, coded in exact years. We also include a squared term in the  
118 models because the probability of desiring a pregnancy increases as a relationship endures, but  
119 eventually levels off.

### 120 2.2.3 *Time-Varying Enrollment in School*

121 We include a measure of school enrollment coded 1 during all weeks in which the respondent is  
122 enrolled part- or full-time in any educational institution.

### 123 2.2.3 *Time-invariant respondent characteristics*

124 We also include indicators of demographic characteristics, family background, sexual history,  
125 and current socioeconomic characteristics, all measured in the baseline interview. African American is  
126 coded 1 for “Black or African American” and 0 otherwise. Age at baseline is taken from the driver’s  
127 license or personal ID card records and is coded in exact years (i.e., converted to days then divided by  
128 365). Five indicators of family background are coded 1 if the characteristic is true and 0 otherwise:  
129 respondent’s mother’s first birth was age 19 or younger, respondent’s mother’s educational attainment

130 was less than high school, respondent did not grow up with two parents, family received public  
131 assistance during respondent’s childhood, and respondent considers herself highly religious. Sexual  
132 history – experiences before the baseline interview – are coded 1 or 0 and include age at first sex was 16  
133 or younger, had two or more sexual partners, ever had sex without contraception, and had any  
134 pregnancies.

135

### 136 **2.3. Data analysis**

137 First, we calculated the mean and standard deviation (continuous variables) or the proportion  
138 (dichotomous variables). Next, we estimated logistic regression models for our dichotomous outcome,  
139 pregnancy desire. We use the within-between specification for clustered data (using the command  
140 *xthybrid* in Stata), applied to weekly interviews clustered within individual women [14–16]. The method  
141 is called “within-between” because separate coefficients are estimated for within-woman differences  
142 (i.e., each week’s deviation from the corresponding woman-level mean) and between-women  
143 differences (i.e., differences across the woman-level means), as well as random effects for time-  
144 invariant individual-level control variables. The within-woman coefficients permit us to compare  
145 pregnancy desire during the weeks after a pregnancy scare to pregnancy desire during other weeks, and  
146 to differentiate between recent and more distal pregnancy scares. We do not present the between-  
147 woman coefficients from our models.<sup>2</sup>

148 As in fixed-effects models, the within-woman coefficients are net of the effect of any  
149 unmeasured stable characteristics of women that increase their probability of experiencing a pregnancy  
150 scare and their probability of desiring pregnancy at these young ages (e.g., unmeasured aspects of

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<sup>2</sup> These coefficients are based on average pregnancy desire across all of a woman’s weekly interviews, including the weeks immediately following the pregnancy scare. For each woman, the fraction of total weeks that took place after a pregnancy scare is dependent on not only when she experienced her first pregnancy scare and the number of pregnancy scares she experienced, but also the total number of weekly interviews she completed.

151 disadvantaged socioeconomic background, low educational expectations, etc.). However, the within-  
152 between specification combines aspects of fixed-effects models with random-effects models, such as  
153 the inclusion of random intercepts for stable cluster-level variables. (This is why it is sometimes called a  
154 “hybrid” approach.) We include random effects for all of the control variables described above.

155           The unit of analysis is the weekly interview. We present odds ratios, which represent the  
156 multiplicative effect on the odds of desiring a pregnancy.

157

## 158 **2.4 Results**

159 Table 1 shows that 38.6% of women reported some desire for pregnancy at some point during the  
160 study, and they reported such desire in 8.7% of the total weekly interviews. Further, 13.6% of women  
161 experienced a pregnancy scare during the study period.

162           Women spent a great deal of time in intimate relationships during the study period – women  
163 reported no partner during only 27.6% of their weekly interviews (although 65.2% of women were  
164 unpartnered for at least one of their weekly interviews). The most common intimate relationship type  
165 during the study period was a committed dating relationship (spent a lot of time together, committed to  
166 be monogamous) – 81.4% of women were ever in such a relationship, and they reported that type of  
167 relationship during 35.7% of their weekly interviews. On average, women’s relationships lasted 2.20  
168 years. In all, 81.8% of women were ever enrolled in post-secondary education program, and they were  
169 enrolled during 71.1% of their weekly interviews.

170           Thirty-four percent of the sample was African American. Average age at the time of the baseline  
171 survey was 19.18 years. In terms of family background, 37.4% had a mother who gave birth as a teen,  
172 9.1% had a mother whose education was less than high school, nearly half (48.2%) did not grow up in a  
173 two-parent household, 37.2% received public assistance during their childhood, and 55.3% considered  
174 themselves highly religious.

175 Overall, 58.5% had sex at age 16 or younger, 68.1% had two or more sexual partners before the  
176 study began, 54.4% had ever had sex without contraception, and 28.1% had at least one prior  
177 pregnancy.

178 In terms of their current (at the baseline interview) socioeconomic characteristics, 51.10% were  
179 employed (full- or part-time), 27.40% were receiving public assistance, and their average high school  
180 GPA was 3.09. Overall, women completed an average of 59.81 weekly interviews.

181 Table 2 shows that the odds of desiring a pregnancy are substantially higher following a  
182 pregnancy scare than in other weeks. The first model shows that a woman's odds of desiring a  
183 pregnancy are nearly four times higher during the week immediately after a pregnancy scare, compared  
184 to the same woman's odds of desiring a pregnancy in her other weekly interviews. Model 2 shows that  
185 this difference is slightly smaller when comparing a woman's pregnancy desire during the entire month  
186 after a pregnancy scare to her pregnancy desire in other weeks, but she still has three-fold higher odds  
187 of desiring a pregnancy in the month after her pregnancy scare. Model 3 shows that this persists over  
188 time – a woman has about twice the odds of desiring a pregnancy after experiencing a pregnancy scare  
189 than she did before experiencing the pregnancy scare.

190 Model 4 illustrates the odds of pregnancy desire across these different time frames. In this  
191 model, the reference category is all weeks before the pregnancy scare. The coefficients represent the  
192 increased odds of desiring a pregnancy over time as the pregnancy scare becomes further in the past. In  
193 the week after the pregnancy scare, a woman has more than five times higher odds of desiring a  
194 pregnancy than she did before the pregnancy scare. After that week but within the first month after the  
195 pregnancy scare, her odds of desiring a pregnancy are more than three times higher than before the  
196 pregnancy scare. Averaging across all weeks that are more than one month after the pregnancy scare,  
197 her odds of desiring pregnancy are still nearly twice as high as before the pregnancy scare.

198 These differences in pregnancy desire are net of the seriousness of her intimate relationship, its

199 duration, and also whether she was enrolled in a post-secondary education program, all of which are  
200 strongly related to desiring pregnancy. They are also net of individual demographic characteristics,  
201 family background, pre-study sexual history, current socioeconomic characteristics, and the total  
202 number of weekly interviews a woman completed, many of which are linked to the odds of pregnancy  
203 desire during these ages.

204

## 205 **2.5 Discussion**

206 Previous studies have found that pregnancy scares lead to decreased contraceptive use and  
207 increased pregnancy rates. We have shown that this is likely at least in part because the experience of a  
208 pregnancy scare increases women’s desire for a pregnancy, even during these young ages. Our data  
209 cannot distinguish among several plausible mechanisms for why pregnancy desire would increase after  
210 this unwanted experience. Future research should explore the reasons behind this change.

211 Pregnancy scares and pregnancy desire are both strong predictors of subsequent pregnancy  
212 [1,12]. It is likely that their intersection – young women who experienced a pregnancy scare and now  
213 desire a pregnancy – represents a group of young women who are even more likely to get pregnant.  
214 Although these pregnancies will be desired at first, many young women who want to become pregnant  
215 at these ages change their mind about wanting the pregnancy before their baby is born [17]. An analysis  
216 of the same dataset showed that among the 55 women in the RDSL study who became pregnant after  
217 reporting that they desired a pregnancy, 62% retrospectively reported that they hadn’t wanted to  
218 become pregnant [17]. Having an intimate partner who responded negatively to the pregnancy was a  
219 strong predictor of that negative shift, as was not being in a serious intimate relationship. Further  
220 research should explore whether young women who develop a desire for pregnancy after experiencing a  
221 pregnancy scare are at higher risk of experiencing negative reactions from the father of their pregnancy,  
222 and/or are correspondingly more likely to change their minds about wanting the pregnancy after

223   conceiving.

224           Our study has several limitations. First, the sample is from a single county in Michigan, which  
225   decreases the generalizability of our models. Second, there are well-established differences between  
226   Latina, African-American, and white women in terms of pregnancy desire. Unfortunately, the RDSL’s  
227   sample of Latina women, although representative of the county in which the sample was selected, is too  
228   small to permit their analysis as a separate group. Third, the RDSL is focused solely on young women  
229   during the transition to adulthood. Older women’s experiences with pregnancy scares are likely quite  
230   different, and may also influence their pregnancy desire less or in a very different manner.

231           Understanding how pregnancy scares can affect young women’s feelings about pregnancy  
232   should inform clinicians and interventions to help women clarify and implement their family formation  
233   desires. On the one hand, new information as a result of a pregnancy scare – say, a partner  
234   unexpectedly reacted positively or unexpected sources of social support emerged – could explain a  
235   young woman’s abrupt desire for pregnancy. On the other hand, if there is no new information or  
236   change in circumstances, her sudden desire for pregnancy may be less secure, and if she conceives a  
237   pregnancy she could be part of the large fraction of young women who later remember their desired  
238   pregnancies as undesired [17]. These women may be important targets for pre-natal and post-natal  
239   interventions if they experience the wide range of negative psychological and health conditions that are  
240   associated with having an undesired pregnancy or birth [18,19].

241

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298

**Table 1**

Descriptive Statistics (n = 41,736 weekly interviews with 759 women)

	Women		Weeks
	Mean/%	SD	%
<b>Desired a Pregnancy</b>	38.6		8.7
<b>Ever Experienced a Pregnancy Scare</b>	13.6		--
<b>Time-Varying Control Variables</b>			
Seriousness			
No Relationship	65.2		27.6
Uncommitted	65.6		9.7
Committed	81.4		35.7
Cohabiting	47.7		12.9
Married/engaged	32.4		14.1
Duration of relationship (in exact years)	2.20	(1.82)	--
Enrolled in school†	81.8		71.1
<b>Time-Invariant Individual-Level Control Variables</b>			
<b>Demographic Characteristics</b>			
African American	34.0		--
Age at baseline	19.18	(.57)	--
<b>Family Background</b>			
Mother's age at first birth 19 or less	37.4		--
Mother's education less than high school	9.1		--
Did not grow up in two-parent household	48.2		--
Childhood public assistance receipt	37.2		--
Highly religious	55.3		--
<b>Sexual History</b>			
Age at first sex 16 years or less	58.5		--
Number of sexual partners 2 or more	68.1		--
Ever had sex without contraception	54.4		--
Any prior pregnancies	28.1		--
<b>Current Socioeconomic Characteristics</b>			
Employed	51.1		--
Receiving public assistance	27.4		--
High school GPA	3.09	(.63)	--
<b>Time in Study</b>			
Total number of weekly interviews	59.81	(40.71)	--

† Proportion who ever attended post-secondary education program. Time-varying version included in regression models.

**Table 2**

Logistic Regression (with within-between specification) of the effects of pregnancy scares on the odds of pregnancy desire (N = 41,736 weekly interviews with 759 women)

	(1)		(2)		(3)		(4)	
	OR	95% CI						
<b>Pregnancy Score</b>								
Last week	3.697 **	(2.271,6.017)					5.291 **	(3.199,8.751)
Within the past month			3.044 **	(2.262,4.095)			3.159 **	(2.215,4.508)
Ever					2.059 **	(1.541,2.751)	1.805 **	(1.364,2.390)
<b>Time-Varying Control Variables</b>								
Seriousness of current relationship (ref = no relationship)								
Uncommitted dating	1.209	(0.922,1.584)	1.174	(0.895,1.541)	1.221	(0.932,1.599)	1.186	(0.904,1.556)
Committed dating	2.566 **	(2.065,3.189)	2.529 **	(2.034,3.144)	2.639 **	(2.122,3.283)	2.558 **	(2.055,3.184)
Cohabiting	2.924 **	(2.222,3.846)	2.875 **	(2.183,3.785)	2.833 **	(2.151,3.732)	2.814 **	(2.135,3.709)
Married/engaged	7.129 **	(5.385,9.436)	6.902 **	(5.214,9.138)	7.393 **	(5.579,9.797)	7.044 **	(5.313,9.339)
Duration of current relationship (in years)	1.673 **	(1.412,1.981)	1.687 **	(1.424,1.999)	1.661 **	(1.403,1.967)	1.693 **	(1.428,2.007)
Duration squared	0.876 **	(0.845,0.908)	0.877 **	(0.846,0.909)	0.875 **	(0.844,0.907)	0.875 **	(0.844,0.907)
Enrolled in school	0.765 **	(0.656,0.891)	0.762 **	(0.654,0.887)	0.790 **	(0.678,0.920)	0.780 **	(0.669,0.909)
<b>Time-Invariant Individual-Level Control Variables</b>								
<b>Demographic Characteristics</b>								
African American	2.789 **	(1.482,5.249)	2.707 **	(1.436,5.104)	2.438 **	(1.298,4.577)	2.432 **	(1.294,4.569)
Age at baseline	0.658	(0.425,1.020)	0.667	(0.431,1.034)	0.703	(0.455,1.088)	0.693	(0.448,1.073)
<b>Family Background</b>								
Mother <20 at first birth	1.570	(0.940,2.623)	1.593	(0.954,2.662)	1.684 *	(1.013,2.799)	1.618	(0.971,2.695)
Mother's education < high school	0.584	(0.259,1.314)	0.555	(0.246,1.253)	0.548	(0.244,1.233)	0.567	(0.252,1.276)
Not raised in 2-parent household	1.350	(0.798,2.287)	1.369	(0.808,2.318)	1.350	(0.800,2.278)	1.301	(0.770,2.198)
Received public assistance during childhood	2.813 **	(1.667,4.746)	2.839 **	(1.681,4.794)	2.619 **	(1.557,4.403)	2.637 **	(1.566,4.438)
Highly religious	0.583 *	(0.346,0.983)	0.563 *	(0.333,0.950)	0.490 **	(0.290,0.827)	0.502 *	(0.297,0.849)
<b>Sexual History</b>								
Age at first sex 16 years or less	1.164	(0.630,2.150)	1.148	(0.622,2.122)	1.084	(0.589,1.993)	1.083	(0.588,1.994)
Number of sexual partners 2 or more	1.379	(0.713,2.669)	1.382	(0.714,2.676)	1.390	(0.720,2.680)	1.371	(0.711,2.645)
Ever had sex without contraception	2.987 **	(1.685,5.295)	2.928 **	(1.652,5.189)	2.777 **	(1.576,4.896)	2.791 **	(1.582,4.925)
Any prior pregnancies	0.493 *	(0.254,0.954)	0.498 *	(0.257,0.965)	0.526	(0.274,1.012)	0.510 *	(0.265,0.980)
<b>Current Socioeconomic Characteristics</b>								
Employed	1.062	(0.640,1.763)	1.074	(0.646,1.784)	1.043	(0.631,1.725)	1.069	(0.645,1.772)
Receiving public assistance	1.146	(0.606,2.168)	1.136	(0.600,2.151)	1.065	(0.565,2.006)	1.075	(0.571,2.025)
High school GPA	0.688	(0.455,1.039)	0.683	(0.452,1.032)	0.764	(0.506,1.154)	0.768	(0.508,1.161)
<b>Time in Study</b>								
Total number of weekly interviews	1.009 *	(1.002,1.016)	1.009 *	(1.001,1.016)	1.003	(0.996,1.010)	1.003	(0.996,1.011)
Chi-Squared	561.47		584.42		569.1		615.35	

\* p &lt; .05, \*\* p &lt; .01, two-tailed tests