

Schools that employ more minority teachers have lower minority teenage pregnancy rates.

The U.S. has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy among industrialized countries, something that policy-makers are eager to tackle, given the potential negative consequences for future health and economic outcomes. Looking at public schools in Georgia, [Danielle Atkins](#) and [Vicky Wilkins](#) have found that schools that have a greater representation of minority teachers also have reduced teen pregnancy rates. They argue that this may be because African-American students seek out role models that look like they do, and are able to form closer relationships with them due to their perceived (if not real) shared experiences and culture.



Teen pregnancy is a pressing public health concern in the United States. The US has the [highest rate](#) of teen pregnancy among fully industrialized countries; nearly twice that of Great Britain, four times that of France and Germany, and over 10 times that of Japan. The consequences of teen pregnancy on future health and economic outcomes can be devastating.



Much [research](#) has been devoted to understanding the determinants of these behaviors to inform prevention and policy interventions. Researchers have examined numerous individual, family, and community determinants of adolescent sexual behavior. We studied a different potential mechanism for reducing minority teenage pregnancy rates: the representation of minority teachers.

Researchers in the field of representative bureaucracy have found that the presence of minority and female bureaucrats can improve outcomes for minority and female clients of an agency. However, this previous work has almost exclusively connected the benefits of representation to outcomes directly linked to the primary mission or function of the organization. We tested whether there are additional pro-social benefits linked to bureaucratic representation, beyond the mission of the agency.



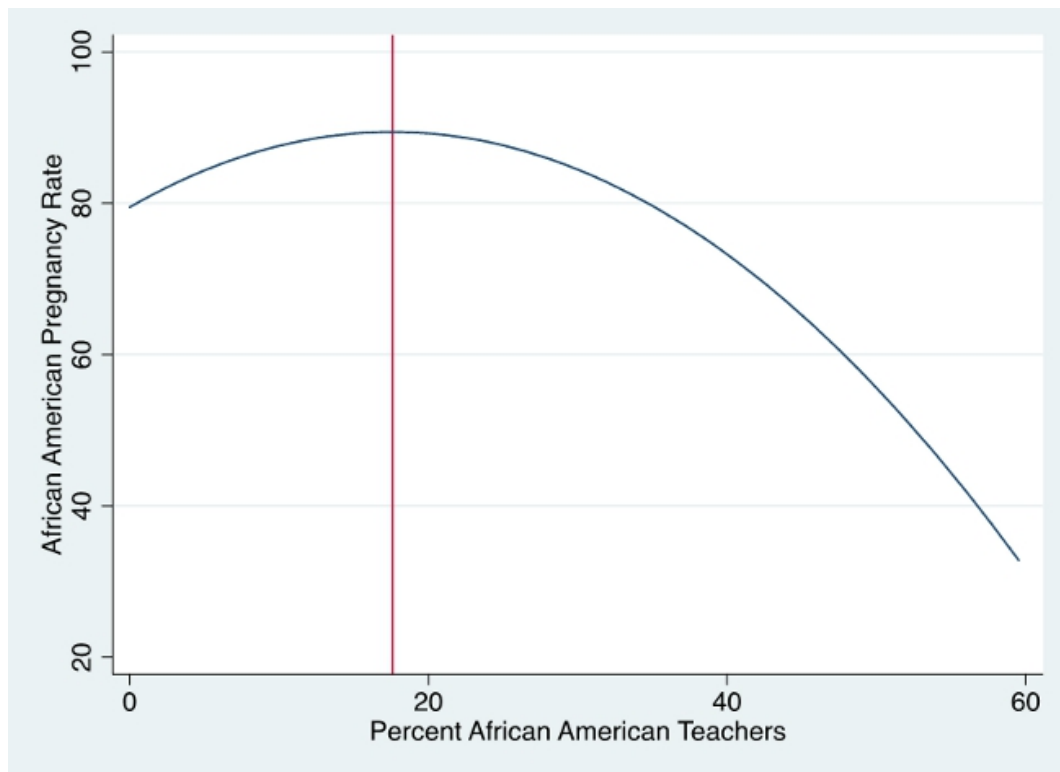
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We used data from Georgia public school districts and county-level teen pregnancy data to test whether the presence of minority and female teachers lowered teen pregnancy rates. We found that school districts employing higher percentages of African-American teachers had lower African-American teenage pregnancy rates. A 10 percent increase in African-American teachers was associated with a 5 percent reduction in the African-American teen pregnancy rate.

Representative bureaucracy researchers have argued that it may be necessary for a minority group to reach a certain threshold, or critical mass, of representation in an organization before the benefits of representation can be realized. Based on this theory of critical mass, we expected that the relationship between representation of African-American teachers and African-American teen pregnancy rates might be curvilinear. If this theory holds, initially, African-American teacher representation and African-American teen pregnancy rates would be positively

correlated. Then, once the critical mass of African-American teacher representation is reached, the relationship would become negative. We found evidence to support this contention. We identified a representation rate of nearly 18 percent as the tipping point where the percentage of African-American teachers started to significantly lower the African-American teen pregnancy rate, as shown in Figure 1, below.

Figure 1 – Effect of percentage of representation of African-American teachers on teenage pregnancy rates



Although we do not know with certainty the causal mechanism underlying our finding, we can identify several possible pathways. African-American teachers may take a special interest in the behaviors and decisions of African-American students and actively try to influence students. These teachers may talk candidly with students about sexual behavior and offer valuable advice. The presence of African-American teachers may influence the behavior of teachers from other demographic groups making them more sensitive to the issue of teen pregnancy. Similarly, the priorities and policies of the school may be influenced by the presence of African-American teachers. Finally, African-American teachers likely serve as role models for African-American students, which encourages students to make healthy decisions regarding sexual activity.

In order to better understand which mechanism or mechanisms might be operating in this case, we interviewed a convenience sample of 11 high-school teachers and one school district administrator. We asked the teachers and the administrator to meet with us to discuss the influence that teachers can have on student behaviors both inside and outside the classroom. The teachers represented several high schools, in both majority–majority and majority–minority settings. We were able to speak with three African-American women, four white women, and four white men. Our discussions with teachers and the administrator offered insights into the influence that teachers have in the decisions (educational and non-educational) of their students.

Race-match was important for role modelling with regard to non-educational outcomes. All of the African-American female teachers we spoke with shared example after example of both male and female African-American students asking questions about relationship choices and decisions. For example, one African-American teacher said some African-American female students asked her if she chose to have premarital sex and if she thought it was all right for them to have sex with their boyfriends. Similarly, another African-American female teacher said that African-American male students asked her about how to treat their girlfriends and about parenting. These questions lead to frank discussions about contraception, pregnancy, and risky behaviors. Our discussions convinced us that, although any teacher can serve as a role model, African-American students seek

out role models that look like them, particularly with regard to non-educational issues.

Minority teachers may also influence policy in a way that benefits minority students. The white female administrator we spoke with said that there is definitely a role for teachers in the development of district-level sex education. She stated, “teachers are encouraged to be part of the discussion, especially those from underrepresented groups.” However, the teachers we spoke with felt that they have a limited voice in formal policy but can make a significant difference through practice. One African-American female teacher discussed a sex education program that she initiated with some students. She said that several African-American female students approached her to say that they wanted to do something about all of the “pregnant bellies” that popped out around school each spring. The teacher and students developed an after-school program that both African-American male and female students attended.

An alternative causal mechanism is that African-American teachers build relationships with African-American students, which allow them to serve as trusted advisors and mentors for the students. We found overwhelming support for this in our discussions with teachers and the administrator. The white teachers and the administrator indicated that they find African-American students are more comfortable and build tighter bonds with African-American teachers. They point to a shared culture, experience, and language as the likely reasons for this, even if this match is only perceived. However, most of them conceded that the power of “looking like” the students should not be underestimated.

The African-American female teachers we interviewed each had numerous examples of African-American students seeking advice and guidance on issues related to reproductive health. These teachers stressed that African-American students are more comfortable with them because the students assume that African-American teachers come from a similar background and that these teachers will understand them. Due to this, African-American students, most often females but also males, trust these teachers and are comfortable having candid conversations about sex, birth control, STDs, and relationships, which can reduce the risk of teen pregnancy.

Given the seriousness of the teen pregnancy problem in our country it is important to identify strategies to combat it. This is especially true for the African-American population, which has the highest rate of teen pregnancy among all groups. Increasing the representation of African-American teachers, both male and female, appears to have a positive impact on African-American students. We should note that this influence is not limited to the interaction between African-American teachers and female students. There is [evidence](#) that the presence of African-American male teachers has a positive effect on the sexual behavior of African-American male students. Given this, schools should consider how their hiring decisions might be related to the reproductive health of their students.

*This article is based on the paper [“Going Beyond Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic: The Effects of Teacher Representation on Teen Pregnancy Rates”](#) in the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, which will be open access until January 18th.*

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