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New UCT research investigates effects of drug use and pregnancy on SA youth

Choices made by youth provide the research focus of two PhD graduands at the University of Cape Town. One thesis examines the likelihood that babies born to teenage mothers will be born underweight and grow up to be shorter than average and stunted; the other looks at the effects of methamphetamine ("tik") use on the social interactions of young people in Cape Town. Both graduands will receive their PhDs from the on Thursday, 9 June 2011, at 15h00.

Children born to teen mothers are found to be more likely to be born underweight, to be shorter and to be stunted. **Nicola Branson's** PhD thesis, *Health and education outcomes for children born to teenage mothers in South Africa*, investigates such consequences of teenage childbearing in South Africa.

The levels and trends in teenage childbearing and the relative wellbeing of mothers and children affected by teenage childbearing are documented and an assessment of whether children born to teen mothers are at risk of worse health and educational outcomes is made. Using both cross-sectional and longitudinal household survey data, Branson finds that while there is a strong association between the timing of childbearing and worse outcomes, much of this association can be explained by relative levels of poverty and maternal education. Some of the adversity, however, can be attributed directly to teenage childbearing.

Branson obtained a B (Bus) (Sci) degree in Economics and Statistics in 2005 and an MA degree in Economics in 2008 from the University of Cape Town. Since then she has been working in the Southern African Labour Development Unit, including work on a longitudinal study of Cape Town's youth, the Cape Area Panel Study, while writing her thesis under the supervision of Professor Murray Leibbrandt in the School of Economics at UCT. Branson will receive her PhD in Economics.

Andreas Plüddemann's PhD thesis, *Methamphetamine ("tik") use, sexual risk, aggression and mental health among school going adolescents in Cape Town*, investigates methamphetamine use and associated problems among adolescents in Cape Town. His thesis presents among the first and most comprehensive studies on adolescent methamphetamine use and associated problems internationally, and the first publications on this problem among adolescents in Africa.

Using data from three studies, he found a high prevalence of methamphetamine use among adolescents in Cape Town, as well as associations between methamphetamine use and mental health problems, including depression and aggressive behaviour, sexual risk behaviour, and high school dropouts. Plüddemann clearly demonstrates that methamphetamine use is a significant problem in Cape Town, and that developing strategies to curb and address this problem should be given priority. For South Africa, and Cape Town in particular, the greatest concern remains the associations between methamphetamine use and sexual risk behaviour, leading to an increased exposure to HIV. Further prevention efforts targeting both methamphetamine use and sexual risk behaviour should be a high priority for government and community-based prevention efforts.

Plüddemann obtained an MA in Psychology from the University of Stellenbosch. He is employed by the Medical Research Council and has been conducting research on substance abuse in South Africa since 1998. His primary focus areas include substance abuse epidemiology in South Africa and adolescent methamphetamine use. The primary purpose of his position is to stimulate and conduct research in the substance abuse field, to expand the knowledge and available data on substance abuse issues in South Africa. His co-supervisors are Associate Professor Crick Lund of the Psychiatry and Mental Health *Department at UCT*, and Professor Charles Parry of the Alcohol & Drug Abuse Research Unit at the Medical Research Council. Plüddemann's will receive his PhD in Psychiatry.

ENDS

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