

WHY IT MATTERS

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TEEN CHILDBEARING AND CHILD WELFARE

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Rates of teen pregnancy are far higher among youth in foster care than among teens overall, creating difficulties for the child welfare system and young people themselves. Not only is the foster care system challenged by the need to house teen mothers and their children, but pregnancy and parenthood can be a barrier to future education and employment for teens transitioning out of foster care. Furthermore, the children of teen mothers are more likely to enter the foster care system than children overall. Therefore, reducing teen pregnancy merits special attention in the foster care system, and youth in foster care merit special attention within efforts to prevent teen pregnancy.

KEY DATA

- In 2011, more than 120,000 teens were living in foster care, and 27,000 youth aged out of foster care—that is, they exited the foster care system because they had reached the age of independence, typically around age 18.

- Nearly half (48%) of teen girls in foster care had ever been pregnant by age 19, compared to 27% of teen girls more broadly.
- Teens in foster care are nearly twice as likely to have had sex and (among girls), one third more likely to not use any contraception.
- Among those transitioning out of foster care, nearly one in six who were not enrolled in higher education cited the need to care for children as the most important reason.
- The children of teen parents are twice as likely to be placed in foster care as children born to older parents.

Foster Care and Teens. As of 2011, roughly 408,000 children in America were living in foster care.^a This included nearly one-third (30%) who were age 14 or older. Most children who leave foster care return to their biological families or are adopted (often by their foster parents). However,

a. Note that this reflects children living in foster care at a point in time. The number of children who have **ever** lived in foster care will be higher. Earlier data suggest that, among 12- to 17-year-olds, the number ever in care was roughly three times higher than the number currently in care.^{23, 24}

a significant portion of these children age out—that is, they remain in foster care until they reach the age of independence and are then essentially on their own.¹ In most states this happens at age 18.

- In 2011, 27,000 youth in foster care aged out, accounting for roughly 11% of all of those leaving the foster care system.¹
- Even as the total number of youth in foster care has been falling over time, the number aging out has been steadily rising (up from 17,909 in 1999).²

Foster Care and Teen Pregnancy. Extensive research concludes that teens in foster care are at higher risk of pregnancy compared to youth overall. The most recent study that measures pregnancy through age 19 focused on the Midwest, though the results are widely believed to reflect foster youth more broadly. Findings from this study, based on youth in foster care who were 17 or 18 in 2002, include:

- One in three teen girls age 17 or 18 had ever been pregnant, and nearly half (48%) had ever been pregnant by age 19.³
- This far surpassed comparable figures reported for the population overall (18% of girls pregnant by age 17 or 18 and 27% pregnant by age 19).
- More than half of women in foster care reporting a pregnancy had been pregnant at least once before, compared to one-third of the population overall.

Nationally representative data from a similar time period only track outcomes through age 17, and represent all youth in the child welfare system, not just those placed in foster care; therefore they cannot tell us the total teen pregnancy rate for youth in foster care. Nonetheless they largely echo findings in the Midwest study for these younger teens. These data, from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Wellbeing (NSCAW I), indicated that roughly one-third (34%) of 17-year-old girls who were in the child welfare system had experienced a pregnancy.⁴

A second generation of this study (NSCAW II), included teens through age 17 in the child welfare system between 2008 and 2010. Like NSCAW I, these data were unable to estimate total teen pregnancy rates among youth in foster care; however its results suggested that the heightened risk of teen pregnancy documented earlier in the Midwest study continues to hold true today. For example, the percent of

15- to 17-year-olds in the child welfare system who ever got pregnant as reflected in NSCAWII was roughly twice that seen in the general population.⁵

This higher risk of teen pregnancy among youth in the child welfare system persists even after controlling for various demographic and family background characteristics.⁶ Not surprisingly, studies show that certain subgroups of youth in child welfare may be at greater risk for pregnancy than others, including those who experienced sexual abuse, those with frequent placement changes, those reporting peers with deviant behaviors, youth in kinship care, and those leaving supervised care by age 18 (as opposed to 21).^{4,6,7}

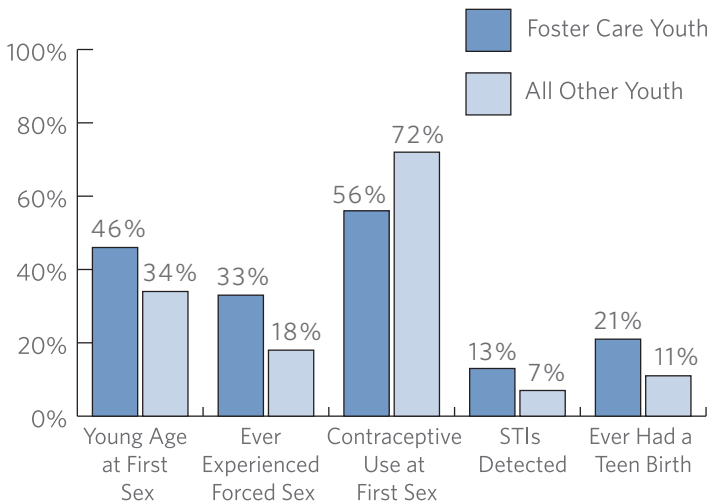
Related Risk Factors. Higher rates of pregnancy among those in foster care can be partially attributed to higher rates of sexual activity. More than half (52%) of 15- to 17-year-old girls in the child welfare system between 2008 and 2010 report ever having sex, and 44% report having sex in the past 12 months.⁸ This is nearly double the rates for 15- to 17-year-old girls overall.⁹ This disparity was similar for boys. Sex at an early age was not uncommon among boys and girls in the child welfare system—nearly one in five 13- to 14-year-olds say they have had sex (not shown).

Table 1. Sexual Activity and Contraception^{8,9}

	Youth in Child Welfare ^b	Youth in General Population
Ever Had Sex, 15- to 17-Year-Olds		
Boys	58	28
Girls	52	27
Had Sex in Past 12 Months, 15- to 17-Year-Olds		
Boys	46	25
Girls	44	25
Did Not Use Contraception at Last Sex, Among Sexually Active		
Boys	9	8
Girls	23	14

b. This reflects all youth in the child welfare system, not only those who were removed from the home and placed in foster care.

Figure 1: Reproductive Health Outcomes Among Young Adults (Age 18–26)¹⁰



Nearly one-quarter (23%) of sexually active girls in the child welfare system used no contraception the last time they had sex, compared to only 14% of sexually active girls overall. Sexually active boys were much less likely to report using no contraception the last time they had sex, and the percentage was similar for boys in the child welfare system and boys overall.⁸

These results largely echo the conclusions of an earlier study of teens and young adults in 2002 that examined an even broader set of risk factors. It found that youth who had been in foster care were more likely to have had sex at a young age, to have experienced forced sex, to have used no contraception at first sex, and, consequentially, to have ever experienced a teen birth or had a sexually transmitted infection (STI).¹⁰

Risky behavior among youth in care is likely related to their adverse childhood experiences. Indeed, youth in foster care are significantly more likely to report having had sex if they have experienced emotional or sexual abuse, or if they have behavioral problems.^{4,11} This higher level of risk is likely related to the fact that many factors that help young people avoid risky behavior—such as caregiver attachment—are lower on average among youth in foster care. Research has found that among teens in foster care, higher levels of school engagement, caregiver monitoring, and future expectations are associated with a lower chance of having sex.^{4,11} Among sexually active foster care youth, those who

reported high levels of caregiver connectedness also were more likely to report routinely using contraception.⁴

IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSITIONS TO ADULTHOOD

School attainment and employment opportunities for youth transitioning out of foster care are major concerns of child welfare administrators. Leaving the foster care system as a young parent increases the odds of a difficult transition. The Midwest study noted previously found that, by age 19, roughly three in 10 teens aging out of foster care had children living with them, and by age 21 the need to care for their children was cited frequently as a barrier to continuing education and employment:

- Of those who had not enrolled in higher education, nearly one in six cited the need to care for children as the most important reason.¹²
- Of those either working or in school, roughly one-third said that finding childcare was difficult and had caused them to miss work or school on occasion.¹²
- At age 24, having a child reduced a woman’s odds of being employed by 30%—even after holding educational attainment constant.¹³
- Among women who were employed, having a child reduced her earnings by 7%.¹³

The fact that employment prospects were further affected by educational attainment, and that teen parenthood increased the odds of being a high school dropout adds to the difficulties young people face as they age out of foster care. Direct comparisons of educational attainment between teen parents in foster care vs. other teens in foster care are not readily available; however, one recent study found that participants in a program for pregnant and parenting foster youth were at high risk for dropping out of high school:

- Among young women who were still enrolled in public high school at the time they entered the program, 50% ended up dropping out of high school.¹⁴
- This compares to 29% who did not receive a high school diploma as measured among women who aged out of foster care more broadly.¹²

- For each additional child the woman had, her odds of graduating high school fell another 45%, which is particularly disconcerting given that more than half of pregnancies among women in foster care are repeat pregnancies.

Intergenerational Impacts. Not only does teen pregnancy adversely affect the outcomes of foster care youth aging out of the system, but the children of teen parents may be more likely to enter the child welfare system themselves, resulting in \$2.8 billion in public spending annually.¹⁵

The most definitive study on the participation of children born to teen parents in the child welfare system is based on data from the 1980s and 90s. It found that:

- Young teen mothers (age 17 and younger at the time of birth) were 2.2 times more likely to have a child placed in foster care than mothers who delayed childbearing until age 20 or 21, and were twice as likely to have a reported case of abuse or neglect compared to mothers who delayed childbearing.¹⁶
- This study also found that teen mothers age 18–19 were about one-third more likely to have a child placed in foster care when compared to mothers who had their first child at age 20 or 21. They were almost 40 percent more likely to have a reported case of abuse or neglect than children born to mothers age 20 or 21.
- Overall, mothers who had their first child as a teen accounted for roughly 60% of children placed in foster care.

More recent data on this topic are less precise, focusing on age of the caretaker who lost custody, who is often the biological parent but not always. Nonetheless, these data largely echo the findings of the Illinois data noted earlier, showing that the children of teen parents/caretakers are twice as likely to be placed in foster care as the children of older parents/caretakers.¹⁷

Numerous studies have documented higher incidence of child maltreatment among children born to adolescent mothers compared to older mothers.¹⁸ According to one study, adolescent mothers were roughly 40% more likely to exhibit physical aggression toward their children, and this held true even after controlling for demographic, educational, and other background characteristics.¹⁹

Another recent study found that being born to a teen parent was also one of four major risk factors identified in association with re-entry into the child welfare system, and that these factors remained significant after controlling for other characteristics. These results showed that children in foster care whose caretaker had a single risk factor—being a teen parent, no high school diploma, a mental health diagnosis, or criminal record—were more likely to re-enter foster care. Among those whose caretaker had more than one risk factor, the risk of re-entry doubled.²⁰ Given that roughly half of teen mothers don't get a high school diploma by age 22, this is of particular concern.²¹ These results largely echo those of another study that found that children born to teen mothers were significantly more likely to be re-reported for child maltreatment than those born to older mothers, although this study found that most of the increased risk was due to their lack of a high school education.²²

About the Authors

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