

Putting Research to Work for Families



Focus:
Civilian

Prevalence and Risk Factors for Early Motherhood Among Low-Income, Maltreated, and Foster Youth

Font, S. A., Cancian, M., & Berger, L. M. (2019). Prevalence and risk factors for early motherhood among low-income, maltreated, and foster youth. *Demography*, 56, 261-284. doi:10.1007/s13524-018-0744-x

SUMMARY: Early motherhood (defined as bearing a child prior to age 18 years) is a risk factor for many negative psychosocial and economic outcomes. Involvement with child protective services (CPS), defined as a child protection case being opened, has been associated with youth experiencing early motherhood, but due to the many confounding variables, the patterns between early motherhood and CPS involvement have not been clear. This study considered at what point youth became pregnant and compared this across several potential risk groups. Results indicate that youth who experience early motherhood and CPS involvement may have family dynamics that contribute to them becoming pregnant, rather than CPS involvement itself.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Youth who experienced CPS involvement in their lives, whether placed in foster care or not, were at substantially higher risk for early motherhood than youth who were part of low-income families.
- CPS-involved and foster youth were more likely to become pregnant prior to or after their involvement with CPS, rather than during involvement.
- Youth who experienced foster care were least likely to become pregnant during foster care, and less likely to become pregnant after exiting foster care than before entering it, particularly if they were not reunified with their birth families.

IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS:

- Facilitate educational groups for youth with CPS or foster histories regarding sexual health
- Collaborate with other professionals in the field regarding supporting young mothers in foster care and CPS involvement

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAM LEADERS:

- Provide workshops for early mothers in foster care and CPS involvement to improve financial knowledge and occupational opportunities
- Offer post-reunification support groups for youth who have experienced foster care

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS:

- Continue to support programs that provide sexual health education to foster and CPS-involved youth
- Promote education for professionals regarding the risks of early motherhood to those working with foster and CPS-involved youth

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METHODS

- The study used Wisconsin state administrative data from Child Protective Services and food stamps systems totaling 71,824 youth.
- Three groups were compared to determine the likelihood of early motherhood: youth who had been placed in foster care, youth who had CPS involvement in their family but had not been placed in foster care, and the control group, youth who had been the beneficiary of food stamps.
- Births were identified based through Medicaid and verified through several state databases.

PARTICIPANTS

- Youth whose families received food stamps (n = 48,915) only (no CPS involvement) were the control group, while 18,869 youth had CPS involvement in their families and 4,040 youth entered the foster care system.
- Across the three groups, participants were 52-57% White, 24-30% Black, 8-11% Latino, 2-7% Asian, 2-4% Native American, 2-3% multiracial, and 1-3% other/unknown. Youth in the foster care group were more likely to be Black, Native American, or multiracial, and youth in the CPS group were more likely to be non-Latino White.
- Youth were followed in the data from the year 2004 until their 18th birthdays, which included youth born in the years 1991-1996.

LIMITATIONS

- Data were only gathered from 2004 onward, which means some youth's interactions with CPS and foster care may have been missed and data may have thus been incomplete.
- Births that took place outside the public care system may have been under-counted while births to youth in foster care were fully captured, which could affect the associations between the variables.
- Using the outcome of birth rather than pregnancy may have biased the sample by excluding youth who engaged in risky sexual behaviors yet had pregnancies that resulted in other outcomes such as abortions or miscarriages.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Identify and examine reasons for elevated risk of early motherhood in youth who have histories of abuse or neglect
- Examine a cohort of youth with early births for whom there are full CPS records for childhood
- Explore the impact of supports that foster youth receive compared to those youth who are reunited with their families, and how this could influence birth rates

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