
California's Most Vulnerable Parents: When Maltreated Children Have Children

BACKGROUND

Nationwide, teen pregnancy rates have declined by more than 40 percent during the last two decades, rising briefly in 2006 and 2007 before dropping to historic lows in 2011. Still, the United States maintains the highest rate of teenage pregnancy and childbirth among comparable industrialized countries. Teen births in the U.S. garner significant attention because they are correlated with a range of poor outcomes for both young mothers and children – and because significant risk differences persist across groups. Youth placed in foster care and involved with child protective services have heightened rates of teen pregnancy and births, yet there have been limited data with which to characterize these dynamics or track trends over time.

This research study linked Child Protective Services (CPS) and birth records from California, generating new knowledge concerning teen births among youth currently and formerly involved with the state's child protection system. This database of integrated birth and CPS records is unique in that it not only offers a "population-level" examination of past CPS involvement among teen mothers, but it also provides an opportunity to prospectively examine health and safety outcomes in the next generation, both for the state as a whole and for Los Angeles County. Through the linkage of these two data sources, we now have a more complete understanding of birth and early-parenting dynamics among a very vulnerable subset of young parents.

KEY FINDINGS

1. A significant number of teen mothers have a history of CPS involvement.
 - Among girls who gave birth in their teens, more than 40% had been reported as alleged victims of abuse or neglect.
 - 20% had a history of confirmed or substantiated maltreatment reports.
2. Although only a small percentage of teens in foster care give birth in any given year (approximately 4%), tracking births that occur over time provides a more complete picture of the share of foster youth who are parenting during their teens.
 - Among girls in foster care at age 17, more than 25% had given birth at least once during their teens.
 - Among girls in foster care with a first birth before age 18, more than 1 in 3 went on to have a second teen birth.
3. Multi-generational involvement with CPS is not uncommon and a teen mother's history of alleged or substantiated maltreatment emerged as a strong and significant predictor of offspring maltreatment.
 - By age 5, children born to teen mothers who were victims of maltreatment were abused and neglected at twice the rate of other children.
4. The rate of childbearing was significantly higher among girls in foster care than for girls in the general population of Los Angeles County.
 - Unknown, however, is whether girls in foster care have a heightened teen birth rate compared to socioeconomically similar adolescents in the county.
 - Among girls who were in foster care and gave birth – roughly half became pregnant before entering care.
5. A history of maltreatment among teen mothers may have intergenerational health consequences for children.
 - Among an already high-risk population of teens giving birth, a maternal history of maltreatment was a significant predictor of low infant birth weight (<2500g), even after adjusting for smoking and other known risk factors.

IMPLICATIONS

- Documenting the prevalence of past abuse and neglect among adolescents who give birth and understanding its role in pregnancy decisions is critical to the development of informed prevention programs.
- Recognizing that a history of maltreatment characterizes a significant subset of adolescent mothers may be relevant to the development of interventions that enhance parenting capacity and protect against abuse and neglect in the next generation.
- Maltreatment may not only have consequences for the victim, but also may contribute to next-generation health outcomes; targeted prevention programs, behavioral health interventions, and developing stress-coping mechanisms among pregnant and parenting foster youth may benefit both mothers and children.
- Data from the present study indicate that more than 1 in 4 young women in foster care will be parenting during their teens (and by age 20 it will be 1 in 3). The extension of foster care to youth over the age of 18 means that the nature of the state's parenting obligations will expand and will increasingly include the next generation of children.
- Monitoring the incidence of first and repeat births among girls currently and formerly involved with CPS is critical to evaluating the efficacy of pregnancy prevention efforts and determining the nature of services needed for young mothers and children.

DATA & METHODS

This project resulted in the linkage of roughly 1.5 million California birth records (from 2000-2010) to 1 million CPS records, with a second phase of research focusing on the maltreatment risk of children born to adolescent mothers. After linkages were finalized, unique datasets were constructed to explore five different research questions. Findings were generated using both statewide data and information specific to Los Angeles County.

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FULL REPORT

The full report and research briefs can be downloaded at:
<http://www.hiltonfoundation.org/teenparentsreport>

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