

California's Most Vulnerable Parents

A Population-Based Examination of Maltreatment History among Adolescent Mothers

Vol 1-1. A Population-Based Examination of Maltreatment History among Adolescent Mothers

This analysis used linked birth and child protective service records to develop the first population-level estimates of maternal maltreatment victimization among adolescent mothers. Findings document that a significant share of adolescent mothers have had contact with child protective services as alleged or substantiated victims of abuse or neglect. These data underscore the importance of better understanding the impact of childhood and adolescent maltreatment on both early childbearing risk and subsequent parenting capacity.

INTRODUCTION

Demographic, socioeconomic, and environmental characteristics of adolescent mothers have been well documented.^{1,2} Adolescents who give birth are disproportionately from low-income families³ and neighborhoods,⁴ and are more likely to have experienced early puberty.⁵ A history of sexual abuse and other forms of maltreatment has been linked to adolescent pregnancy risk,⁶⁻⁹ with notably higher birth rates observed for adolescents in fos-

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ter care compared to the general population.¹⁰ Yet, no studies to date have documented the population prevalence of prior child protective service (CPS) involvement among adolescents who give birth. In this study, we used linked birth and CPS records from Los Angeles County to produce the first population-based estimates of documented maltreatment reports, substantiated victimization, and foster care placement among adolescent mothers.

METHODS

DATA SOURCES

Birth records for 2009 were obtained from the California Department of Public Health. Personally identifiable data were extracted for mothers, ranging from 12 to 19 years of age (N=47,816). This information was used to probabilistically link adolescent mothers to CPS records maintained by the California Department of Social Services. Records were available dating back to the establishment of the current CPS case management system in 1998. We excluded adolescents who were born in another state (N=2,119) or country (N=11,093) given an increased likelihood that they were not living in California for the entire window in which CPS records were available.

These data were then restricted to adolescent births occurring in Los Angeles County. Birth records provide two means of classifying geography: (1) based on the county in which the birth took place and (2) based on maternal county of residence. We chose to focus on births that took place in Los Angeles County but also examined reported rates based on maternal county of residence; across all covariates, differences were minimal (< 1%).

Linkages were approved by state and university committees for the protection of human subjects and were approved by California's Vital Statistics Advisory Board.

VARIABLES

Adolescent mothers were classified as reported for maltreatment if a record of alleged abuse/neglect was identified in the CPS data. We included reports that were both investigated and screened out by CPS. We then stratified adolescents into three nonexclusive groups: (1) one or more reports of maltreatment; (2) one or more substantiated reports of maltreatment; and (3) one or more foster care episodes. Because we were interested in CPS involvement prior to pregnancy, we excluded reports and placements after the estimated date of conception.

We explored demographic variations in the prevalence of CPS involvement. Stratifications included maternal age at birth (12-15 years, 16-17 years, 18-19 years); maternal race/ethnicity (Black, White, Latina, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American); and whether this was a first birth (first, repeat). We also examined markers of maternal socioeconomic status and health risks, including the trimester prenatal care began (first, second, third, no care/missing) and birth payment method (public, private). Finally, we coded the population prevalence of the four most common forms of reported and substantiated maltreatment (sexual abuse/exploitation, physical abuse, neglect, emotional abuse).

29%, more than 1 in every 4 adolescent mothers who gave birth, had been reported for neglect at some point before pregnancy.

ANALYSIS

Based on 2009 birth records, we reported the characteristics for the full population of adolescent mothers who were born in California and then gave birth in LA county. We then calculated the percentage of adolescents who had been previously reported, substantiated, or placed in foster care by maternal characteristics. Distributional differences were assessed using X^2 tests. Although we report p-values, the large number of observations meant that even modest differences emerged as statistically significant. Therefore, we focus our discussion of results on the variations of greatest magnitude.

RESULTS

Our population included 10,350 adolescent mothers. Of these, 4,276 (41.3%) had been reported for alleged maltreatment victimization during the prior decade, 2,040 (19.7%) had been substantiated as maltreatment victims, and 988 (9.6%) had been placed in foster care (see Table 1). Statistically significant variations ($p < .05$) in the prevalence of past CPS involvement emerged for all variables with the exception of maternal age at birth by foster care placements ($p = .584$).

Among 12- to 15-year-olds, 52.7% had been reported to CPS for maltreatment, 28.7% had been substantiated as victims, and 9.0% had been placed in foster care. At the other end of the age distribution, the figures for 18- to 19-year olds were 39.0%, 18.4%, and 9.8%, respectively. Of the 16.8% of adolescent mothers for whom this was a repeat birth, 55.1% had been previously reported for maltreatment. Notable variations were observed by maternal race/ethnicity. Among Black adolescents—a group disproportionately represented in LA's child protection system—a majority of young mothers had been reported as possible victims of abuse or neglect (56.7%) and more than 1 in 5 had spent time in foster care. Latina mothers accounted for 79.9% of all adolescent births, but had relatively lower rates of past CPS involvement. Although small numbers mean that rate estimates should be interpreted cautiously, more than half of Native American adolescent mothers had been substantiated as victims of maltreatment.

As depicted in Figure 1, more than 1 in every 4 adolescent mothers who gave birth (29.0%) had been reported for neglect at some point before pregnancy, while 18.4% and 15.2% had been reported as alleged victims of physical and sexual abuse, respectively. A similar prevalence pattern emerged when substantiated reports were examined by maltreatment type.

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TABLE 1

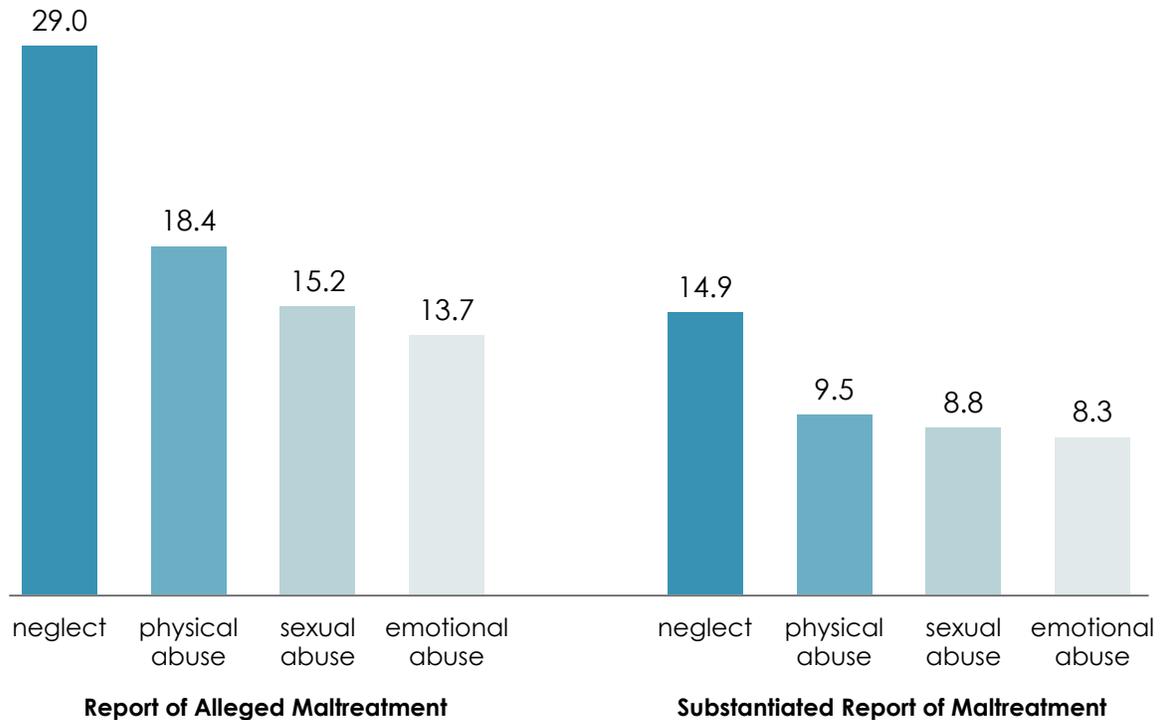
Sociodemographic and Health Characteristics of Adolescents who Gave Birth in Los Angeles County in 2009 by Maternal History of Child Protective Services Involvement

	Adolescent Births (n = 10,350)		Reported for Maltreatment (n = 4,276)		Substantiated as Victim (n = 2,040)		Placed in Foster Care (n = 988)	
	n	col%	row %	χ^2	row %	χ^2	row %	χ^2
Maternal Age at Birth								
12–15 years	543	5.3	52.7		28.7		9.0	
16–17 years	3,068	29.6	44.3	$p < .001$	21.1	$p < .001$	9.2	$p = .584$
18–19 years	6,739	65.1	39.0		18.4		9.8	
Birth								
First birth	8,604	83.2	38.5	$p < .001$	18.3	$p < .001$	8.9	$p < .001$
Repeat birth	1,741	16.8	55.1		26.7		12.9	
Race/Ethnicity								
White	554	5.4	42.6		20.4		11.0	
Black	1,329	12.9	56.7	$p < .001$	33.1	$p < .001$	23.7	$p < .001$
Latina	8,248	79.9	38.7		17.4		7.2	
Asian/Pacific Islander	164	1.6	37.8		20.7		8.5	
Native American	18	0.2	83.3		55.6		27.7	
Initiation of Prenatal Care								
First trimester	7,244	70.0	40.8		19.7		9.5	
Second trimester	1,118	10.8	41.1	$p = .049$	18.7	$p = .057$	8.0	$p < .001$
Third trimester	1,611	15.6	42.3		19.2		9.4	
None / missing	377	3.6	47.8		24.9		14.9	
Birth Payment Method								
Public	8,310	82.1	43.0	$p < .001$	21.2	$p < .001$	10.6	$p < .001$
Private	1,808	17.9	33.7		12.8		4.7	

Notes: Summed counts may not equal “adolescent births” column total due to missing values for some variables. Summed percentages in “adolescent births” column may not equal 100% due to rounding. Percentages reported for referred for maltreatment, substantiated as victim, and placed in foster care reflect the population prevalence of these child protection events for each variable level (e.g., 56.7% of Black adolescent mothers who gave birth in LA County in 2009 were previously reported for maltreatment). Adolescents who gave birth in LA county, but who were born outside of California were excluded given our inability to account for CPS involvement outside of the state.

FIGURE 1

Percentage of Adolescent Mothers Who Gave Birth in Los Angeles County in 2009 and Were Reported or Substantiated for Pre-Conception Neglect, Physical Abuse, Sexual Abuse, or Emotional Abuse



Notes: Percentages reflect the share of adolescent mothers with any history of alleged or substantiated neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, or emotional abuse. Adolescents reported and substantiated for more than one form of maltreatment appear in more than one category. Adolescents who gave birth in LA county, but who were born outside of California were excluded given our inability to account for CPS involvement outside of the state.

DISCUSSION

Although prior research indicates a heightened risk of early childbearing among adolescents with a history of maltreatment,⁹ no studies have estimated the population prevalence of officially reported maltreatment among adolescents who give birth. This descriptive analysis used linked birth and CPS records to generate the first population-based estimates of adolescent mothers reported for maltreatment, substantiated as victims, and placed in foster care. Although caution should be used when making generalizations and findings should not be interpreted causally, these data indicate that more than 4 of every 10 adolescents who gave birth in Los Angeles County in 2009 had been previously reported to CPS as a victim of abuse or neglect and nearly 20% of these young mothers had been substantiated as victims of maltreatment before pregnancy.

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DISCUSSION (continued)

The prevalence of childhood and adolescent maltreatment reported in this research brief should be viewed as a lower-bound estimate of past CPS involvement given our inability to examine CPS records prior to 1998. This means that for a 12-year-old who gave birth in 2009, we had historical CPS data starting after infancy, whereas for a 19-year-old we only had historical data beginning at age 8. Given that the rates of CPS involvement are highest during the first few years of life, the true rate of earlier maternal reports, substantiations, and foster care placements among adolescents giving birth in Los Angeles County is undoubtedly higher.¹¹

Variations in past CPS involvement were observed across most sociodemographic and health covariates. Although differences by maternal age at birth may be an artifact of the historical windows of available CPS records (i.e., we had more years of CPS records for 12- to 16-year-olds than for older adolescent mothers), notable variations by race/ethnicity are consistent with disparities documented in other studies of CPS involvement.^{11,12}

For a 12-year-old who gave birth in 2009, we had historical CPS data starting after infancy.

In reference to the continuing public health burden of teen birth rates in the United States (estimated at \$11 billion annually¹³), it was recently noted that “one explanation for the persistently high US birth rate is that there are risk factors for teen pregnancy and childbirth that are not addressed in current prevention efforts.”⁹ Documenting the prevalence of past abuse and neglect among adolescents who give birth and understanding its relationship to teen pregnancy and birth rates is critical to the development of informed prevention programs. Additionally, recognizing that a history of maltreatment characterizes many adolescent mothers may be relevant to the development of interventions that protect against abuse and neglect in the next generation.

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