

Chapin Hall

Report Summary

Policy research that
benefits children, families,
and their communities

Pregnant and Parenting Foster Youth: Their Needs, Their Experiences

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Teenage pregnancy and childbearing remain significant problems, particularly among youth in foster care. Although the exact rates of teenage pregnancy and childbearing among this population are not known, research by Chapin Hall and others suggests that female foster youth are at high risk of becoming pregnant and giving birth.

To better understand the needs of pregnant and parenting Illinois foster youth, Chapin Hall analyzed administrative data from the Teen Parenting Service Network, a comprehensive service delivery system targeting pregnant and parenting foster youth in the Chicago metropolitan area and surrounding counties (Cook, DuPage, Kane, Lake, McHenry, and Will). The administrative data included records for 4,590 pregnant and parenting foster youth, primarily female. Their service network records were linked to records from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), the Chicago Public Schools, and the Illinois Medicaid Paid Claims Longitudinal Database.

Key Findings

- Eighty-six percent of the pregnant and parenting youth in DCFS care are African American, although their placement histories are quite diverse.
- At least 30 percent of the female foster youth had been pregnant more than once, and nearly 90 percent of their pregnancies resulted in a live birth.
- On average, female foster youth gave birth to their first child when they were 17.8 years old, although nearly one-third of the young mothers had given birth by age 16.
- Nearly one-quarter of the young mothers had at least two children.
- Close to 90 percent of the female foster youth received prenatal care while they were pregnant, although prenatal care did not begin until the third trimester (or did not begin at all) during 22 percent of their pregnancies.

- Only 44 percent of the female foster youth and only 27 percent of the male foster youth who exited the network had a high school diploma or GED at the time of exit.
- Having more than one child was a significant barrier to educational attainment among female foster youth. Each additional child reduced the odds of having a high school diploma or GED by 45 percent.
- The children of DCFS wards are an especially vulnerable population. Twenty-two percent of the young mothers who were served by the network were investigated for child abuse or neglect and 11 percent had a child placed in foster care.

To help contextualize these findings, we also interviewed the program director and a caseworker from each of the five private child welfare agencies that provide services to TPSN foster youth. Among the major themes that emerged from the interviews were

- challenges associated with engaging pregnant or parenting foster youth in services;
- strategies to prevent repeat pregnancies;
- prenatal care and other services for pregnant youth;
- services for parenting youth, especially youth with special needs, and their children;
- efforts to promote educational attainment;
- concerns related to specific placement settings;
- preparing foster youth for independent living; and
- the need for ongoing supports after foster youth leave care.

Implications for Policy and Practice

- New strategies to prevent repeat pregnancies among female foster youth are needed.
- Interventions to improve the school success of pregnant and parenting foster youth—including males—should be developed.
- Target high-risk young mothers with additional supports to prevent out-of-home care placement of their children.
- Further research is needed to better understand (1) why some female foster youth do not receive prenatal care or receive it only late in their pregnancy; and (2) the practical (e.g., childcare) and motivational (e.g., past failures) barriers to educational attainment experienced by pregnant and parenting foster youth.