

Briefly...

Policy Brief: Preventing Pregnancy Among Youth in Foster Care

Early pregnancy and parenthood is closely linked to a host of other critical issues, including poverty and income disparity, educational attainment, and overall child well-being. Teen pregnancy is also directly related to entry into foster care; which has serious consequences for the child welfare system. Teens in foster care—many of whom suffered abuse and neglect before leaving their homes—are at increased risk for getting pregnant and becoming parents than other teens. Nearly half (48%) of the 19 year-old girls that have been in foster care have become pregnant at least once and nearly one-third (32%) have at least one child.¹ It is also the case that children born to teen parents are significantly more likely than children born to adult parents to enter the foster care system. These data suggest a more intensive and coordinated effort is needed by those concerned with child welfare and teen pregnancy. One important place to start is to help prevent early pregnancy among youth in foster care and those transitioning out of foster care, and to help those who have already gotten pregnant to avoid subsequent pregnancies.

Teen childbearing cost taxpayers \$9.1 billion in 2004. Fully \$2.3 billion of these costs can be attributed to increased child welfare costs from foster care and Child Protective Services.²

Recommendation

Policymakers are encouraged to support legislation that addresses the high rates of pregnancy and parenting among youth in foster care and those aging out of the foster care system. For example, investments could support research and demonstration projects to develop new teen pregnancy prevention programs for foster youth or to adapt existing, proven teen pregnancy prevention interventions for youth in foster care and those aging out of the system. These approaches should promote collaboration between teen pregnancy and child welfare experts. In addition, training, materials, and other forms of assistance are needed to help foster parents and child welfare service providers discuss pregnancy prevention, respectful relationships, family goals, and personal responsibility with youth in and aging out of foster care. Investments could also support technical assistance for state independent living programs to help them can incorporate these issues into their transitional service plans for youth aging out.

Key Facts

Teen childbearing cost taxpayers \$9.1 billion in 2004. Fully \$2.3 billion of these costs can be attributed to increased child welfare costs from foster care and Child Protective Services.²

Early pregnancy and parenthood put children at increased risk for negative outcomes

- Children born to a teen mother (age 17 or younger) are 2.2 times more likely to end up in foster care and they are twice as likely to have a reported case of abuse and neglect compared to those children born to a mother in her early twenties.³
- Children of mothers age 17 and younger are more likely than those born to mothers age 20-21 to be impulsive or overactive, and to suffer from anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem, or sadness (before controlling for background characteristics).⁴

Youth in foster care have higher rates of early pregnancy and parenthood than those who are not

- Those in foster care are 2.5 times more likely than those not in foster care to have been pregnant at least once before age 20 (48% compared to 20%).⁵
- Forty-six percent of teen girls in foster care who have been pregnant have had a subsequent pregnancy, compared to 29% of their peers outside the system.⁶
- By age 21, nearly 71% of the young women who had been in foster care report having been pregnant at least once; of these women, 62% had been pregnant more than once.⁷
- Half of 21-year-old men aging out of foster care report they had gotten someone pregnant; compared to 19% of their peers who were not in the system.⁸

Legislative Background

Congress has long supported efforts to provide youth in foster care and those aging out of the system with the resources to adequately prepare them for the transition to adulthood. The Foster Care Independence Act (PL 106-109) included additional counseling and education for this population and allowed states to expand Medicaid eligibility for these youth to ensure they had access to health care. Early pregnancy and parenthood can and often does derail a smooth transition into adulthood.

Congress now has the opportunity to further improve efforts to help this vulnerable population's transition into adulthood by addressing early and subsequent pregnancy among youth in foster care and those transitioning out of foster care. Allocating additional resources for prevention will improve the health, economic, and social well-being of this generation, as well as the next.

Currently there are no legislative proposals that explicitly authorize funding for teen pregnancy prevention for foster youth. However, there are several legislative proposals—both stand-alone bills and more expansive legislative proposals that give priority to projects in communities with above average teen pregnancy rates—that could provide resources for foster care youth. These provisions are included in: **the Reducing the Need for Abortion and Supporting Parents Act (H.R.1074), the Prevention First Act (S.21/ H.R.819), and the Teen Pregnancy Prevention, Responsibility, and Opportunity Act (S.1137/H.R.2097).**

Sources

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4. Terry-Humen, E., Manlove, J., & Moore, K.(2005). *Playing catch-up: How the children of teen mothers fare*. Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.
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