



Research article

Child welfare services involvement among the children of young parents in foster care[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Despite the high rate of early parenthood among youth in foster care as well as the increased risk of child maltreatment among children whose adolescent parents have been neglected or abused, very little is known about child welfare services involvement among children whose parents were in foster care when they were born. This study uses administrative data from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) to examine the occurrence of child abuse and neglect investigations, indicated reports and out of home care placements among the children of youth in foster. Thirty-nine percent of the children were the subject of at least one CPS investigation, 17 percent had at least one indicated report and 11 percent were placed in out of home care at least once before their 5th birthday. Cox proportional hazard models are also estimated to identify characteristics of parenting foster youth and their placement histories associated with the risk of child welfare services involvement. Implications of the findings for policy and practice are discussed.

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Introduction and background

The teenage birth rate in the United States has dropped sharply over the past two decades, falling from 61.8 births per 1,000 15- to 19-year-old females in 1991 to 26.6 births per 1,000 15- to 19-year-old females in 2013 (Ventura, Hamilton, & Mathews, 2014). Despite this precipitous decline, the rate of teenage childbearing is still far higher in the U.S. than any other developed country. Moreover, although teenage birth rates have declined among all racial and ethnic groups, some adolescents continue to be at very high risk of becoming parents. Among these adolescents are youth in foster care.

The federal government has not required states to report the number of youth in foster care who are parents, and most states do not have a system to track this information. Hence, much of what we know about the high rate of early parenthood among this population comes from just a handful of studies. One of these studies, *The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth* (Midwest Study), followed more than 700 young people in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois as they transitioned out of foster care and into adulthood. By age 19, 32 percent of the young women and 14 percent of the young men in the Midwest Study reported that they had at least one child, compared with 12 percent of 19-year-old young

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women and 7 percent of 19-year-old young men in the general population (Courtney et al., 2005; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010).

More recently, Putnam-Horstein, Cederbaum, King, and Needell (2013) linked child protective services (CPS) records from the California Department of Social Services to birth records from the California Department of Public Health using probabilistic matching to estimate the percentage of 17 year-old female foster youth in Los Angeles County who gave birth during their teen years. Of the 6,749 young women who were in foster care at age 17 between 2003 and 2007, 11.5 percent gave birth at least once before age 18 and 27.5 percent gave birth at least once before age 20.

There are a number of reasons to be concerned about the ability of youth in foster care who become young parents to adequately care for their children. First, many adolescent parents lack basic parenting skills and their limited knowledge about child development can lead to unrealistic expectations of child behavior (Borkowski et al., 2007). Normal adolescent egocentrism can also make it difficult for teenage parents to recognize and respond to their children's needs and feelings (Noria, Weed, & Keogh, 2007; Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). The developmental impacts of the abuse, neglect, or other trauma they have experienced, combined with a lack of positive and stable parenting during childhood, may mean that youth in foster care are even less prepared for early parenthood than other adolescent parents.

Second, a number of studies have examined the relationship between maternal age at birth and child maltreatment. Although some of this research is dated, it does suggest that children born to teenage mothers are at increased risk of child abuse or neglect compared with children whose mothers were older when their first child was born (Connelly & Straus, 1992; Stier, Leventhal, Berg, Johnson, & Mezger, 1993; Goerge, Harden, & Lee, 2008). For example, using aggregate birth certificate data and data from the Integrated Database on Child and Family Programs in Illinois, Goerge et al. (2008) found that the incidence of substantiated child maltreatment by age five was 2.7 times higher among children whose mothers were under age 18 (111.7 per 1000 or about 11 percent) and 2.3 times higher among children whose mothers were 18 or 19 years old (93.2 per 1000 or about 9 percent) compared to children whose mothers were at least 22 years old (41.9 per 1000 or about 4 percent).

And third, studies of intergenerational maltreatment have found a positive relationship between a maternal history of childhood maltreatment and abusive or neglectful parenting (Berlin, Appleyard, & Dodge, 2011; Dixon, Browne, & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Dixon, Hamilton-Giachritsis, & Browne, 2005; Ertem, Leventhal, & Dobbs, 2000; Thornberry & Henry, 2013; Thornberry, Knight, & Lovegrove, 2012). Although most intergenerational maltreatment research has not focused on adolescent parents (De Paül & Domenech, 2000; Valentino, Nuttall, Cmoas, Borkowski, & Akai, 2012; Zuravin & DiBlasio, 1992), the findings from two recent studies suggest that children whose adolescent mothers were neglected or abused may be at increased risk of being maltreated relative to children whose adolescent mothers have no childhood abuse or neglect history.

Bartlett and Easterbrooks (2012) used state child protective services records to examine the relationship between a childhood history of physical abuse and neglectful parenting among 60 adolescent parents who were enrolled in a statewide home visiting program for first time mothers. One-quarter of the young mothers neglected their children, and the odds of being a neglectful parent quadrupled if the young mother had a history of being physically abused. However, the sample size was very small and data on whether the adolescent mother had been physically abused during childhood were missing for over 40 percent of the 92 program participants.

These methodological problems were not an issue for the second study. Putnam-Horstein et al. (2013) linked birth records for all Los Angeles County 15- to 19-year-olds who gave birth for the first time in 2006 or 2007 to statewide child protective services records. Sixteen percent of the children whose mothers had no childhood maltreatment report between their tenth birthday and becoming pregnant were reported as victims of abuse or neglect before age five compared with 31 percent of children whose mothers had an unsubstantiated childhood maltreatment report and 40 percent of children whose mothers had a substantiated childhood maltreatment report. Moreover, a maternal history of alleged or substantiated maltreatment was the strongest predictor of both reported and substantiated maltreatment by age 5, even after adjusting for other risk factors. Other risk factors included younger maternal age at birth, low birth weight and lack of prenatal care.

Despite the high rate of early parenthood among youth in foster care as well as the increased risk of child maltreatment among children whose adolescent parents have been neglected or abused, very little is known about child welfare services involvement among children whose parents were in foster care when they were born. In fact, Putnam-Hornstein and colleagues specifically excluded youth who were in foster care on or after their estimated date of conception from their analysis to avoid potential surveillance bias (i.e., an increased likelihood that child maltreatment will be observed and reported because of the many interactions youth in foster care have with caseworkers and other service providers).

The present study aims to begin to fill this gap by examining child welfare services involvement among children whose parents were under the care and supervision of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS).

Data sources and sample

The data for this study came from three sources.

- The Teen Parenting Service Network (TPSN) is a group of nonprofit agencies created by Uhlich Children's Advantage Network (UCAN) in 1998 to provide a wide range of services and supports to pregnant and parenting youth in DCFS

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