



OJJDP Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

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Adolescent Motherhood: Implications for the Juvenile Justice System

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A recently released report on a major research project provides a wealth of information about the consequences of adolescent childbearing, including implications for the field of juvenile justice. *Kids Having Kids: A Robin Hood Foundation Special Report on the Costs of Adolescent Childbearing* synthesizes the findings from eight separate studies on the consequences and costs of adolescent motherhood.

Adolescent childbearing has both contributed to and been affected by three alarming social trends. First, child poverty rates are high and rising. Second, the number of welfare recipients and the concomitant costs of public assistance have risen dramatically. Third, among those on welfare, there is a much higher proportion of never-married women, younger recipients, and recipients who have long average durations of dependency. To better understand the full costs and consequences of adolescent (age 17 or younger) childbearing, the Robin Hood Foundation commissioned seven research studies by teams of scholars. The eighth study, a background review of previously researched trends in teenage and adolescent childbearing, informed and helped round out this set of reports.

Nearly 1 million American teenagers (about 10 percent of all 15- to 19-year-old females) become pregnant each year. About a third abort their pregnancies, 14 percent miscarry, and 52 percent bear children, 72 percent of them out of wedlock. Of the half million teens who give birth, approximately 75 percent are first-time mothers. More than 175,000 are 17 years old or younger, and this age group is the focus of the studies. These young mothers and their offspring are especially vulnerable to severe adverse social and economic consequences. More than 80 percent of these young mothers end up in poverty and on welfare, many for the majority of their children's critically important developmental years.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) is responsible for leading the national fight against juvenile violence and victimization. Among other activities, OJJDP supports research on the causes and correlates of delinquency and disseminates information on a variety of juvenile

justice issues. Two of the studies in the *Kids Having Kids* project have a direct bearing on the juvenile justice field. Findings from these studies are summarized below.

“Crime: The Influence of Early Childbearing on the Cost of Incarceration” (Grogger, forthcoming, in *Kids Having Kids: Economic Costs and Social Consequences of Teen Pregnancy*, ed. R. Maynard, Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press) looks at the higher engagement in crime by male children of adolescent mothers. The sons of adolescent mothers are 2.7 times more likely to be incarcerated than the sons of mothers who delay childbearing until their early 20's. Nationally, about 5 percent of all young men were found behind bars over a 13-year period. This is well below the 10.3 percent rate of observed incarceration for young men born to adolescent mothers and slightly above the 3.8 percent rate for young men born to mothers who began their families at age 20 or 21.

Roughly half of the observed difference for young men born to adolescent versus older childbearers is accounted for by observable differences in the demographic and background characteristics of offspring of both groups of mothers. Still, if these adolescents postponed childbearing until age 20 or 21, it would, by itself, reduce the incarceration rate for the affected children by 13 percent (from 10.3 percent to 9.1 percent).

Even the relatively small fraction of the higher incarceration rate that is directly attributable to adolescent childbearing costs society dearly. A delay in childbearing until the age of 20.5 would reduce the national average incarceration rate by 3.5 percent, for an annual savings of about \$1 billion in correctional costs and a potential savings of nearly \$3 billion in total law enforcement costs. These results are, of course, long range. Even if all prospective adolescent mothers were to delay their childbearing as of tomorrow, the incarceration rates would not fall as predicted for about 20 years—the earliest age at which young offenders start going to jail in any substantial numbers.

Notably, the research indicates that delays in childbearing beyond age 21 would lead to even larger reductions in the incarceration

rates of young men born to would-be adolescent childbearers. This analysis also makes clear, however, that a substantial portion of the high incarceration rates and related prison costs associated with adolescent childbearing results from other factors that are strongly related to or that compound the effects of adolescent childbearing. Thus, policies that successfully address adolescent childbearing and these other factors could lead to additional cost savings for the Nation. Furthermore, if these young men spent less time in jail, they could contribute more to the support of their own children.

“Abuse and Neglect: Effects of Early Childbearing on Abuse and Neglect of the Children” (Goerge and Lee, forthcoming, in *Kids Having Kids: Economic Costs and Social Consequences of Teen Pregnancy*) addresses the association between adolescent childbearing and the incidence of child abuse and neglect. In this study of children in Illinois, children born to adolescent mothers were found to be twice as likely to be victims of abuse and neglect than children born to 20- or 21-year-old mothers. These differences are not narrowed by statistical controls for the background factors such as region of the State or birth cohort that could be controlled for in the analysis.

The ratio of foster-care placements to reported abuse and neglect is roughly one in four among children born to adolescent mothers and one in five among children born to the later childbearers. Abuse and neglect rates and foster-care rates continue to decline with longer delays until women give birth. For example, delaying childbearing from under age 16 until age 20 or later leads to a 30 to 40 percent greater impact on the incidence of reported abuse and neglect than does a delay from age 17 to age 20 or later. If generalized to the Nation, the results of this study would imply that as many as 5 percent of foster-care placements could be averted if adolescent childbearing were eliminated. Besides the obvious benefit to the children, this would also produce savings for Federal and State budgets.

In addition to the research findings summarized above, some of the other studies in the *Kids Having Kids* project include information about risk factors for health and behavior problems in the lives of children of adolescent mothers. Taken together, these findings would seem to indicate that programs designed to reduce teen pregnancies are relevant to the field of juvenile justice. Such programs would fit well within the prevention component of OJJDP’s *Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders*. The *Strategy* calls for a continuum of activities—from the earliest of preventive activities to strengthen families and key community institutions and provide opportunities for the healthy development of young people to the deepest of interventions for repeat juvenile offenders. Prevention of adolescent pregnancy is clearly a valuable first step in helping to reduce juvenile violence and victimization.

For Further Information

To obtain a free copy of *Kids Having Kids: A Robin Hood Foundation Special Report on the Costs of Adolescent Childbearing*, call the Foundation at 212-227-6601. For a copy of OJJDP’s *Guide for Implementing the Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders* or a list of other OJJDP publications, call OJJDP’s Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse at 800-638-8736.

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Established in 1988, the Robin Hood Foundation is a public charity to find, fund, and provide management help to the best and most innovative programs serving the poor of New York City. Its primary aim is to develop the best programs and schools for young children and teenagers living in poverty. The Kids Having Kids project was carried out by the Catalyst Institution under a grant from the Robin Hood Foundation.

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