

The Risk of Teenage Pregnancy Among Transitioning Foster Youth: Implications for Extending State Care Beyond Age 18

By Amy Dworsky and Mark E. Courtney

Prepared by: Lauren Bagby

This study examines how common teenage pregnancy is among women both in and aging-out of foster care. It also investigates how the risk of teenage pregnancy among transition-age foster youth might be mitigated through extending state care beyond the age of 18. It concludes that the extension of care is a significant contributor to lowering unwanted pregnancies. While this type of extended support is often not possible, the article points to other measures that also significantly reduce unwanted pregnancy within this population. These measures include extended training for providers working with transition-age women. Additional training will expand: mentoring systems, personal connection with a caring adult, and improved communication around sex education and contraception.

Information at a Glance:

- 1/3 of the young women in The Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Foster Youth Study (Midwest Study) had been pregnant at least once by age 17 or 18, compared with just 13.5% of the general population.
- In the Midwest Study, half of 19-year-old women had been pregnant at least once, compared to only 20% of 19-year-old women in the general population.
- Of the young women who had been pregnant by age 17 or 18, 23% had been pregnant more than once (compared with 17% of young women in the general population).
 - By age 19, those figures had risen to 46% and 34%, respectively.
- 22% of the young women in the Midwest Study who became pregnant by age 17 or 18 .

- 35% of those who became pregnant between their baseline interview and their interview at age 19 had “definitely” or “probably wanted” to become pregnant.
- Likelihood of unwanted pregnancy decreased as time spent in care (or other supportive government systems) increased.

Proposed Program Solutions:

It was shown that the motivation for many transition-age foster youth to become pregnant is to create a successful family unit, in which case the perceived benefits of having children may outweigh the costs. Suggestions show that mentoring programs and ongoing connections to caring adults are critical for preventing teenage and unwanted pregnancy (as well as other risky behavior). Specifically:

- Provide options for foster youth to remain in the system longer.
- Begin sex education earlier and implement more consistently.
- Require training for child welfare workers, foster parents, and other adults who work with this population to increase their comfort/skill in speaking with foster youth about sex and contraception.

Courtney, M., Dworsky, A. (2010) The risk of teenage pregnancy among transitioning foster youth: Implications for extending state care beyond age 18. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32, 1351-1356. Retrieved from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740910001623>