

# WHY IT MATTERS

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## TEEN CHILDBEARING, EDUCATION, AND ECONOMIC WELLBEING

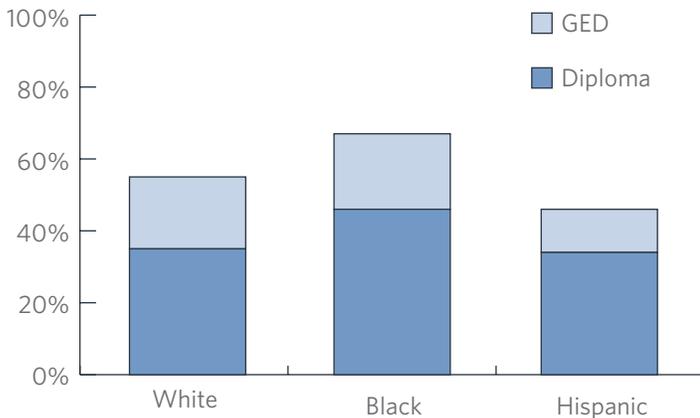
### KEY DATA

- 38% of teen girls who have a child before age 18 get a high school diploma by age 22.
- 30% of teen girls who have dropped out of high school cite pregnancy or parenthood as a reason.
- 67% of teen mothers who moved out of their own families' household live below the poverty level.
- 63% of teen mothers receive some type of public benefits within the first year after their children were born.
- Less than one quarter of teen mothers received any child support payments.
- Children born to mothers younger than 18 years old score significantly worse on measures of school readiness including math and reading tests.

### EDUCATION

Given the increasing demands in schooling necessary to qualify for a well-paying job, it is more important than ever for teens to finish high school and attain post-secondary education when possible. Yet, overall, only about half (51 percent) of teen mothers get a high school diploma by age 22 compared to 89 percent of women who didn't have a teen birth. *Young* teen mothers (those who have a child before they turn 18) are even less likely to graduate from high school—fewer than four in 10 (38 percent) get a high school diploma and another 19 percent get a GED.<sup>1</sup> Black young teen mothers are the most likely to finish high school or its equivalent; two in three do so by age 22. Hispanic young teen mothers are the least likely; less than half finish by age 22. Another study found that less than two percent of young teen mothers attain a college degree by age 30.<sup>2</sup>

### Diploma/GED Attainment Among Young Teen Mothers by Age 22, by Race/Ethnicity<sup>3</sup>



Furthermore, teen girls themselves report that parenthood is a leading factor in dropping out of high school; 30 percent of teen girls who have dropped out cite pregnancy or parenthood as a reason. This percentage varies substantially by race/ethnicity; nearly four in 10 Hispanic and black teen girls who dropped out list pregnancy or parenthood as a reason, compared to less than one-quarter (24 percent) of non-Hispanic white teen girls.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, there are many factors that may lead to an increased risk of both teen pregnancy and dropping out of high school, such as poverty, neighborhood characteristics, school quality, future aspirations, and more. Consequently, one cannot assume that the entire difference in high school educational attainment between those who do and don't have a teen birth is attributable to teen motherhood alone. However, numerous studies using extensive statistical controls for differences in both observable and unobservable characteristics between teen girls who do and don't have a birth still find, on balance, a statistically significant association between teen childbearing and dropping out of high school.<sup>5,6,7,8</sup> While less extensive, the recent literature looking at outcomes for teen fathers finds that teen childbearing has a significant, negative influence on their educational attainment as well.<sup>9,10</sup>

The relationship between education and teen pregnancy works both ways. In addition to teen pregnancy's negative impact on education, as noted above, it is also the case that school achievement, attendance, and involvement helps reduce the risk of teen pregnancy.

One study found that of all students who had dropped out, nearly four in 10 went on to have a teen pregnancy, compared

to only one in 10 among those who did not drop out.<sup>11</sup> The increased risk of teen pregnancy among teens who have dropped out remained significant even after controlling for other characteristics, but only among white non-Hispanic teens and Hispanic teens. Among white non-Hispanic and Hispanic teens, those who dropped out of school were one and a half times more likely to become pregnant and have a child than their peers who stay in school, net of other factors.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, research shows that teens who are more involved in their school are less likely than their peers who are not as closely connected to their school to get pregnant. Important aspects of school engagement include grades, test scores, class participation, homework completion, and a perception of support and connectedness with teachers and administrators. Planning to attend college after high school is also associated with a lower risk of teen pregnancy.<sup>12</sup>

## ECONOMIC WELLBEING

**Employment and Earnings.** This disparity in educational attainment between teen mothers and other teens is followed by decreased economic opportunities and earnings in subsequent years. As is the case with disparities in educational attainment, we cannot assume that the entire gap in future earnings between those who do and don't have a teen birth is attributable to teen motherhood alone. The employment opportunities available to many young women, and in particular to the young women most likely to become teen mothers, may be limited even if they do not have a teen birth and even if they go on to finish high school. The fact that these limitations, whether real or perceived—could increase the risk that young women become teen mothers makes it difficult to sort out the actual impact of teen motherhood on future economic wellbeing. Even so, on balance, recent research suggests that teen motherhood continues to have a negative impact on employment and/or future earnings, even after controlling for other factors that could affect opportunities.<sup>5,6</sup>

Regardless of the extent to which their future economic opportunities are impacted by teen motherhood vs. other sources of disadvantage in their lives, it's important to understand that, on average, teen mothers are at risk for economic hardship, as detailed below.

**Poverty.** Between 2009 and 2010, roughly 48 percent of all mothers age 15 to 19 lived below the poverty line. Teen mothers still living with their own family were somewhat better off, as only 34 percent of them lived below the

Percentage of Teen Mothers Living in Poverty, by Race/Ethnicity				
	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Hispanic	Total
Current Teen Mothers	39 percent	48 percent	60 percent	48 percent
Had Teen Birth, Child Less Than 1 Year Old	35 percent	39 percent	51 percent	41 percent
Had Teen Birth, Child 3 Years Old	41 percent	48 percent	69 percent	50 percent

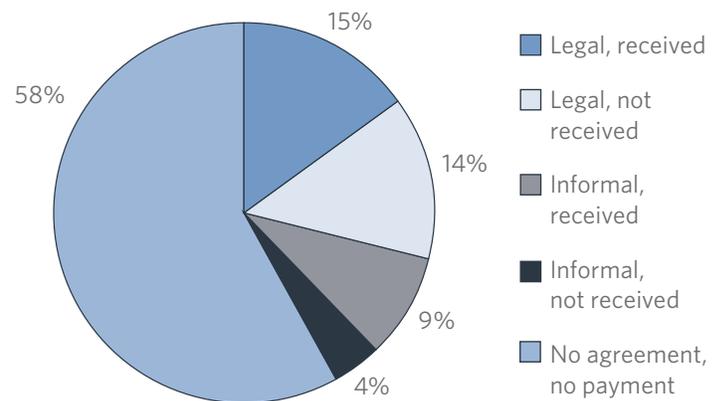
poverty line, while teen mothers who did not were particularly at risk—63 percent of them were living in poverty. As their children grow older, their likelihood of living in poverty increases. Forty-one percent of mothers who gave birth before age 20 were living in poverty within the first year of their child’s birth, while the chances of living in poverty rose to 50 percent when their child reached age three, in part because more of them have left their own parent’s home.<sup>13</sup> Non-Hispanic black and especially Hispanic teen mothers became even more likely to drop below the poverty line once their children reached age three.

**Public Assistance.** Given the high proportion of teen mothers who spend at least some time in poverty, it’s not surprising that many also rely to some extent on public assistance. In fact, nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of teen mothers received some type of public benefits within the first year after their children were born, based on the Census Bureau’s most recent published analysis using 2004 data.<sup>14</sup> This includes not only 55 percent of teen mothers who received Medicaid in the first year, but also three in 10 who received food stamps and 10 percent who received TANF. Another study indicates that the proportion of teen mothers who received public assistance *at any point over the first three years* following the birth of their children is even higher—roughly 25 percent receiving TANF and 40 percent receiving food stamps.<sup>15</sup>

**Child Support.** The vast majority of teen mothers are not married when their child is born.<sup>16</sup> Although structures are in place to establish the father’s paternity and enforce payment of child support, the reality is that most teen mothers receive little or no child support. More than half (58 percent) of custodial teen mothers have no agreement in place, either formal or informal, and received no child support in the previous year. Non-Hispanic black teen mothers (63%) and Hispanic teen mothers (60%) are more likely to have neither an agreement nor receive any support, compared to non-Hispanic white teen mothers (53%). Furthermore,

although 29 percent do have a legal child support agreement, only about half of those mothers actually received any child support payments. An additional 13 percent of all custodial teen mothers said they had an informal child support arrangement—but again, not all of those mothers reported actually receiving payments. In total, less than one-quarter (24 percent) of all custodial teen mothers received *any* monetary support from the child’s father in the previous year, including both formal and informal child support payments. Among those mothers who did report receiving payments, the average amount they received was about \$2,000 a year.<sup>17</sup>

**Receipt of Child Support Payments In the Prior Year Among Custodial Teen Mothers, by Type of Child Support Agreement\***



**INTERGENERATIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

The educational challenges faced by teen mothers often set the stage for a cycle of economic hardship that repeats across generations. Children of teen mothers tend to struggle more in school themselves. Studies suggest that

some of this disadvantage is attributable to the difficult circumstances that families headed by teen mothers often find themselves in, including greater odds of poverty and single parenthood, while some is directly attributable to the mothers' age when she gave birth. For example, one recent study of preschool children found that even after controlling for numerous other family characteristics, those children born to mothers younger than 18 years old scored significantly worse on measures of school readiness including math and reading tests.<sup>18</sup>

Earlier studies that followed children all the way through high school also found that children of teen mothers are less likely to complete high school and have lower performance on standardized tests, even controlling for other personal and family characteristics.<sup>2,19</sup> In fact, only about two-thirds of children born to teen mothers earned a high school diploma compared to 81 percent of children born to older mothers.<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

\* Custodial teen mothers who did not report having any kind of child support agreement *and* still received any child support were defined as having an informal agreement. Those who had a pending legal agreement were included in the legal agreement category. Due to small sample sizes, results are based on a pooled sample of custodial teen mothers in the years 2000 through 2010, and thus reflect average outcomes over that period.

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