



Pregnant and Parenting Unaccompanied Youth

The Intersection of Youth Homelessness and Pregnancy and Parenting

One third of unaccompanied female youth have been pregnant. Fifty percent of unaccompanied youth have had a pregnancy experience. Whether they became pregnant while experiencing homelessness or they became homeless after becoming pregnant or parents, homeless young families find themselves without safe places to live, and without access to many opportunities and supports. Homeless young parents have little to no access to basic needs, have difficulty accessing temporary income assistance, and are largely uneducated in terms of health, sexual safety, and child-raising. Though most unaccompanied pregnant and parenting youth have not completed high school, work requirements imposed on young adult parents (either as a condition for receiving temporary income assistance or out of necessity) take away their chances of completing secondary and post-secondary education, and thus imperil their opportunity for high-paying employment and quality of life. Many unaccompanied parenting youth watch as their children are removed from them and placed in foster care.

Unaccompanied Parenting Youth Should Have Better Access to Housing, Integrated Services, and Assistance

Most unaccompanied pregnant and parenting youth face difficulty accessing and obtaining housing and childcare, and cannot easily navigate temporary cash assistance programs. They have limited ability to continue their education. Further, their widespread lack of knowledge of sexual safety & health, secondary pregnancy prevention, and child-raising brings additional challenges to these young families. Policymakers must address the need for more housing – emergency, transitional, and permanent – that can accommodate pregnant youth and homeless young families. Policymakers must also address the need for affordable childcare for unaccompanied parenting youth. Ideally, housing and services for homeless young families should be integrated so that young families have more efficient access to resources that will ensure their self-sufficiency and well-being.

Unaccompanied Pregnant and Parenting Youth Lack Needed Assistance and are At-risk for Unhealthy Behavior

Statistics show that pregnancy rates among youth are higher for those experiencing homelessness than their housed peers. One study reports that fifty percent of all female unaccompanied youth have had a pregnancy experience, a number which is significantly disproportional to that of the general (non-homeless) youth population.¹ Most all unaccompanied youth are sexually active,¹ and many practice “survival sex,” the exchange of sex for food, clothing, and shelter.² These behaviors place them at risk for pregnancy.



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Researchers have found a correlation between sexual abuse and pregnancy. Pregnancies caused by sexual abuse are significantly higher in homeless populations than in the general population.¹ Because of high levels of sexual victimization and inconsistent use of contraception among unaccompanied youth, homeless young women are at increased risk for pregnancy compared to their housed peers.³ Further, sexually abused teens are more likely to engage in survival sex, an act which significantly increases chances of pregnancy.²

Note that some youth do not become pregnant because they are homeless, but rather, become homeless because they are pregnant or parenting. It is often the case that pregnant teens are expelled from their homes by parents or guardians who disapprove of the youth's pregnancy, refuse to tolerate the presence of an additional child in the home⁴ or are financially unable to care for the grandchild.

In those instances of unaccompanied pregnant/parenting youth who were not expelled, the youth often desire to return home, but cannot, due to the fact that conditions in the home that caused the youth to leave in the first place (abuse, family member drug addictions, etc.) continue to keep them from returning home for their own safety and that of their child.

The majority of pregnant unaccompanied females give birth to their babies while they are homeless.⁵ Somewhat evenly divided are the results of these pregnancies (almost by thirds) between miscarriage, abortion, and live delivery.¹¹ Pregnant unaccompanied females have reported finding abortion services relatively accessible. Females who carry their babies to term are often forced to give up custody upon birth of the baby.³ However, there are still some that are able to and choose to raise their children themselves. Thirty five percent of the 3.5 million people who experience homelessness in a given year are families with children. The vast majority of these are single mothers with children.¹² Homeless children living with a homeless parent are seven times more likely to live with their mother than their father.¹³ However, the number of single homeless men parenting children is increasing.¹²

Babies born to unaccompanied youth are at high risk for health complications. Each year, women in the United States give birth to nearly half a million babies who have been exposed to illicit drugs in utero.¹⁴ Unaccompanied youth are at high risk for substance abuse, and upwards of one-fifth of unaccompanied youth identify as being dependent on substances. Studies show that substance use is affected in part by living circumstances, and increases as living situations of unaccompanied youth become "more stressful and less stable."⁶ Pregnant unaccompanied youth put themselves and their unborn babies at risk when they use substances. When consumed by an expectant mother, all substances (tobacco, alcohol, illegal drugs, etc.) are transmitted to the unborn baby through the placenta and are able to cause extreme irreversible damage such as birth defects, low birth-weight, and among other effects, fetal and infant death.⁷ Homeless women have low birth weight babies at higher rates than other women.¹⁵ Further, miscarriages were two to four times higher among homeless street youth than the general population, attributed in part to increased rates of substance abuse.¹¹ Sadly, less than 15 percent of all unaccompanied youth ever receive treatment for drug and alcohol related problems.⁶

Parenting is stressful for any youth, but unaccompanied youth face the additional difficulties of living in unsafe conditions and having limited access to information, services, and basic needs like food, clothing, and health care.⁴ There is a profound lack of knowledge regarding pregnancy, contraceptives, and child-raising among unaccompanied youth. One study showed that half of homeless young mothers do not believe birth control to be important and nearly half did not know they were pregnant until their second trimester.⁸



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Most unaccompanied youth programs do not accept small children because of liability and facility licensure issues.⁹ Homeless young families who seek shelter have difficulty locating facilities which accept and are suited for youth with small children. For example, in Chicago, only one shelter in the entire city accepts pregnant and parenting youth under the age of 18, and it can only accommodate up to five pregnant parenting females and five children.¹ Youth who manage to locate shelter are often discouraged and driven away by strict rules and policies. Youth find themselves quickly overwhelmed by curfews and unwanted supervision,⁹ especially after spending time living alone, taking care of themselves, and making their own decisions.

An overwhelming majority of pregnant and parenting unaccompanied youth cite affordable childcare as a current need that was not being met. Many subsidized childcare programs require identification, pay stubs, school records, or other documentation that homeless youth lack.¹ Parenting youth are significantly hindered by lack of childcare, as it keeps them from furthering their education or earning wages.

Youth also have need of access to temporary income assistance. While most homeless parenting youth meet basic eligibility requirements for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits, many unaccompanied youth do not know it. Those who do know have significant difficulty accessing the TANF program.⁴ Lengthy bureaucratic processes and frequent denial of applications dispirit homeless young parents who often lack the confidence and experience to effectively self-advocate and persevere. Many are also discouraged from applying due to inadequate case management, lack of information, and general difficulty negotiating the benefits system.⁹

Many shelters require that habitants remain on temporary assistance in order to stay there. In these cases, continuing education becomes impossible because public assistance requires that recipients over the age of majority work full-time. This is restricting to homeless teen parents, as most have not even completed high school. These youth are limited to low-paying jobs with no way to obtain an education that might increase opportunities for better employment. As a result, youth are unable to work themselves out of homelessness because they struggle to find reliable jobs that pay livable wages⁴ that would allow youth to be self-supporting. Many youth in this situation turn to prostitution to make additional income. Homeless young families on public assistance find themselves trapped in a cycle that consumes most of their time, resources, and hope. Leaving this cycle would mean leaving their source of shelter and childcare.⁹

The effects of the homeless cycle are not limited to the parents. Children who are raised by homeless young mothers have significantly higher chances of experiencing homelessness numerous times during their lives.⁸

Further Statistics Concerning Pregnant and Parenting Unaccompanied Youth

- About 50 percent of street youth have had a pregnancy experience compared to about 33 percent living in shelters. Less than 10 percent of household youth have had a pregnancy experience.¹⁰



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- A national study of homeless youth found the pregnancy rate of 13-15 year old homeless girls to be 14 percent, versus 1 percent for non-homeless girls.¹
- A Minnesota study found that 94 percent of homeless youth have had sex, and 32 percent have been pregnant.¹
- 53 percent of homeless teen mothers were daughters of teenage mothers themselves.⁸
- 32 percent of these women were homeless before age 18 and 42 percent have been homeless more than once.⁸
- About two-thirds of homeless youth seeking shelter are female, and most of the youth became homeless because of a family conflict and most that were pregnant gave birth while living on the streets.⁵
- The percentage of homeless youth ages 12 to 21 in Illinois who say they have been pregnant has more than doubled from 33 percent to 68 percent over the last 20 years.⁵
- In one year alone, the number of homeless mothers in New York City who first gave birth in their teens rose sharply from 37 percent to 47 percent.⁸
- Nearly 50 percent of parenting youth, and over 90 percent of youth both pregnant and parenting, cited childcare as a current need.¹
- Homeless young mothers showed a profound lack of knowledge or interest regarding birth control and reproductive health. 50 percent did not believe birth control was important; 41 percent did not know they were pregnant until the second trimester.⁸
- Between 21 percent and 60 percent of homeless youth reported sexual abuse, compared to only 3 percent to 12 percent of the general population.¹
- A report published by the Department of Health and Human Services in November 2002 found that between 21 percent and 40 percent of runaway youth had been sexually abused, compared to between one percent and three percent of the general youth population.²
- Most homeless parenting youth would likely meet the basic eligibility requirements to receive TANF benefits. In fact, 84 percent of homeless parenting youth surveyed who applied were eligible. Fourteen of 20 service providers surveyed said that the homeless parenting youth they served had problems accessing TANF. Further, 36 percent of homeless parenting youth who had received TANF reported having been sanctioned or terminated from the program, although most thought they were complying with program rules.⁴
- 41% of homeless young mothers were placed in foster care as children and were 34% more likely to report witnessing domestic violence in their homes compared to homeless adult mothers.⁸
- Children of homeless young mothers are three times more likely to experience homelessness numerous times, and 60% more likely to be removed from their parents care and placed into foster care.⁸



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Affordable Housing, Childcare: Services that will Help Pregnant and Parenting Unaccompanied Youth Become Independent

High pregnancy and parenting rates among unaccompanied youth present serious ongoing problems. Certain measures should be taken to assist these youth as they work to become independent and successful. Policymakers should undertake the following reforms:

1. Affordable Housing

Communities should offer safe and affordable housing to homeless young families. Housing options must exist for pregnant and parenting youth who are seeking emergency shelter, transitional housing, or permanent housing that can accommodate youth with children, including two-parent young families.

2. Childcare

Government and communities should offer more affordable childcare services, and offer easier access to subsidized childcare. Unaccompanied youth in need of childcare services should be offered assistance in procuring identification and other documents that are required for enrollment in subsidized childcare services. Homeless young families should have presumptive access to childcare services while such documentation is being secured.

3. Access to Supportive Services & Income Assistance

Government should offer more affordable services to pregnant and parenting homeless youth; Communities should offer integrated service sites. Unaccompanied youth need assistance applying to, understanding, and navigating public temporary income assistance programs. Temporary income assistance policies should be simplified so that they are easier to understand. Youth should have access to people who can assist them with the process. Rules should be revised so that homeless youth trying to continue their education are not hindered by full-time work requirements. Ideally, other needed supportive services (including health services, pregnancy prevention services, transportation, childcare, parenting classes, substance abuse programs, continuing education services) should be delivered in integrated settings so that they are more accessible to these homeless youth. Immediate access to these supportive services is key to helping homeless young families develop long-term independence and success.

(F) Contact Information and Web Resources

National Network for Youth - www.nn4youth.org

Healthy Teen Network - www.healthyteennetwork.org

Center for Law and Social Policy - www.clasp.org



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National Network for Youth

The National Network for Youth (NN4Y), founded in 1974, is a nonprofit membership organization that champions the needs of runaway, homeless, and other disconnected youth through advocacy, innovation and member services. NN4Y provides its members and the general public education, networking, training, materials and policy advocacy with federal, state, and local lawmakers. NN4Y is committed to ensuring that opportunities for development and permanence be made available to youth who face greater odds due to abuse, neglect, exploitation, homelessness, lack of resources, community prejudice, differing abilities, barriers to learning, and other life challenges.



NN4Y's membership includes community-based, faith-based, and public organizations that provide an array of services to youth and families in the U.S. states and territories as well as some international locations. NN4Y's organization members provide the full gamut of preventive, interventive, and developmental supports to youth and families in high-risk situations, including street-based crisis intervention, emergency shelter, transitional and independent living arrangements, permanent housing, individual and family counseling, lifeskills, parenting, and health and wellness education, physical and mental health treatment and care, and education, workforce development, arts, and recreation services. Collectively, NN4Y member organizations serve over 2.5 million youth annually. In addition, youth, youth workers, and regional and state networks of youth-serving organizations belong to NN4Y.

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