



## Adolescent health brief

## Extended Foster Care for Transition-Age Youth: An Opportunity for Pregnancy Prevention and Parenting Support



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## A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** This analysis examined California county birth rate variations among girls in foster care. The objective was to generate data to assess potential intervention points tied to federal legislation extending foster care beyond age 18 years.

**Methods:** Child protection records for all adolescent girls in foster care at age 17 years between 2003 and 2007 (N = 20,222) were linked to vital birth records through 2011. The cumulative percentage of girls who had given birth by age 21 years was calculated by county and race/ethnicity.

**Results:** One in three (35.2%) adolescent girls in foster care had given birth at least once before age 21 years. Although significant birth rate variations emerged, even at the low end of the county range, more than one in four girls had given birth by age 21 years.

**Conclusions:** Child welfare systems are now charged with coordinating transitional services for foster youth beyond age 18 years. Extended foster care provides new opportunities for pregnancy prevention work and targeted parenting support.

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## IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

A growing number of states are coordinating transitional services for foster youths beyond age 18 years. Linked data indicate that in addition to adolescents already parenting, a significant share will have a first birth between 18 and 21 years. Extended foster care provides an opportunity for targeted pregnancy prevention and parenting supports.

During the last 25 years, teen birth rates in the United States have steadily declined. Still, in 2013, roughly one in 14 children was born to adolescent mothers [1]. Research has indicated that girls in foster care have heightened rates of early sexual debut, pregnancy, and childbirth during their teens and into young adulthood [2,3]. Yet, most jurisdictions have limited data to document and track cross-sectional or cumulative birth rates for these adolescents. Information on births is increasingly relevant given that California and at least 21 other states have adopted

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policies that extend foster care services beyond age 18 years [4]. In addition to supports intended to improve outcomes in the areas of health, housing, education, and employment, this transitional period also provides an opportunity to engage youth who are among the most vulnerable next generation of parents. Extended foster care may serve as a vehicle for health care systems and community programs to deliver targeted pregnancy prevention and parenting supports to high-risk youth during a period in which many become first-time parents.

In a 2014 analysis from California, researchers used linked child protection and birth records to document that 11.4% of adolescent girls in foster care had given birth at least once before age 18 years and 28.1% had given birth as a teen (before age 20 years) [5]. The current brief builds on this earlier study by

lengthening the examination of cumulative birth rates through age 21 years, providing data needed to understand prepolicy birth rate patterns through the age at which youth may presently remain in foster care. In addition, this analysis moves from state-to county-level data. California is defined by vast socioeconomic and geopolitical diversity and operates a county-administered child welfare system. State data may mask significant county variations that could be used to better understand birth rate dynamics among youth in foster care.

## Methods

Child protection and vital birth records were obtained from California's Department of Social Services and Department of Public Health. Child protection records from 2003 to 2007 were extracted to identify all girls who were in child welfare supervised foster care at age 17 years. These records were then linked to birth records from 2001 to 2011 to identify whether a first birth had occurred before age 21 years. Probabilistic matching algorithms were used to generate potential record pairs based on a combination of unique (i.e., Social Security Number) and nonunique (i.e., first, middle, and last name; date of birth) personal identifiers.

Clerical (or human) reviews of computer-generated record pairs were conducted by two members of the research team. This review process was used to establish lower- and upper-bound thresholds for deeming a record pair to be a true or false match; all record pairs falling between established thresholds were reviewed with match status manually assigned. Once data were linked, all records were deidentified for analysis. Data were stratified by the county supervising the child welfare episode on each girl's 17th birthday. Births tracked statewide could have occurred before, during, or after this episode in care. The linkage and analysis of records for this project were reviewed and approved by California's Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects and the University of Southern California's Institutional Review Board.

## Results

Statewide, 20,222 girls were in foster care at age 17 years between 2003 and 2007. As shown in Figure 1, 11.4% had a first birth before age 18 years. The percentage of girls who had given birth increased to 19.0% when all births before age 19 years were included and 28.1% inclusive of all births before age 20 years. Cumulatively, 35.2% of female foster youth had given birth at least once before their 21st birthday. Among counties included in the subanalysis, birth rates before age 18 years ranged from a low of 6.7% to a high of 17.2%; rates of teen births by ages 19 and 20 years spanned 14.0%–26.1% and 22.7%–38.6%, respectively. By the 21st birthday, rates ranged from 28.9% to 45.9%.

For California overall, birth rates by age 21 years (or up until the 21st birthday) were highest for Hispanic youth (43.1%), a dynamic that emerged consistently in most counties. Statewide, black and white youth had cumulative birth rates of 33.0% and 29.4%, respectively. Across counties, cumulative birth rates by age 21 years ranged from 30.0% to 56.2% for Hispanic youth, 20.0% to 48.0% for black youth, and 14.3% to 41.4% for white youth (see Figure 2).

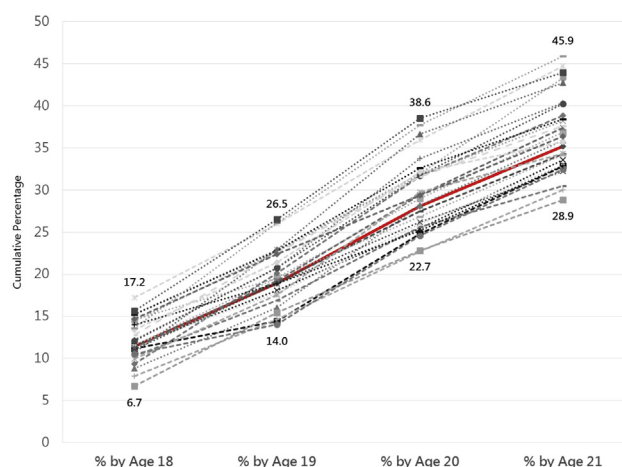
## Discussion

Early data from California indicate that >60% of youth in placement at age 17 years are opting into extended foster care [6]. Research suggests that remaining in care through extended foster care may protect against early pregnancy [2]; therefore, simply allowing youth to remain in care beyond age 18 years may translate into birth rate reductions. If historical patterns hold, however, more than one in three (35.2%) adolescent girls currently in California's foster care system will give birth at least once before age 21 years.

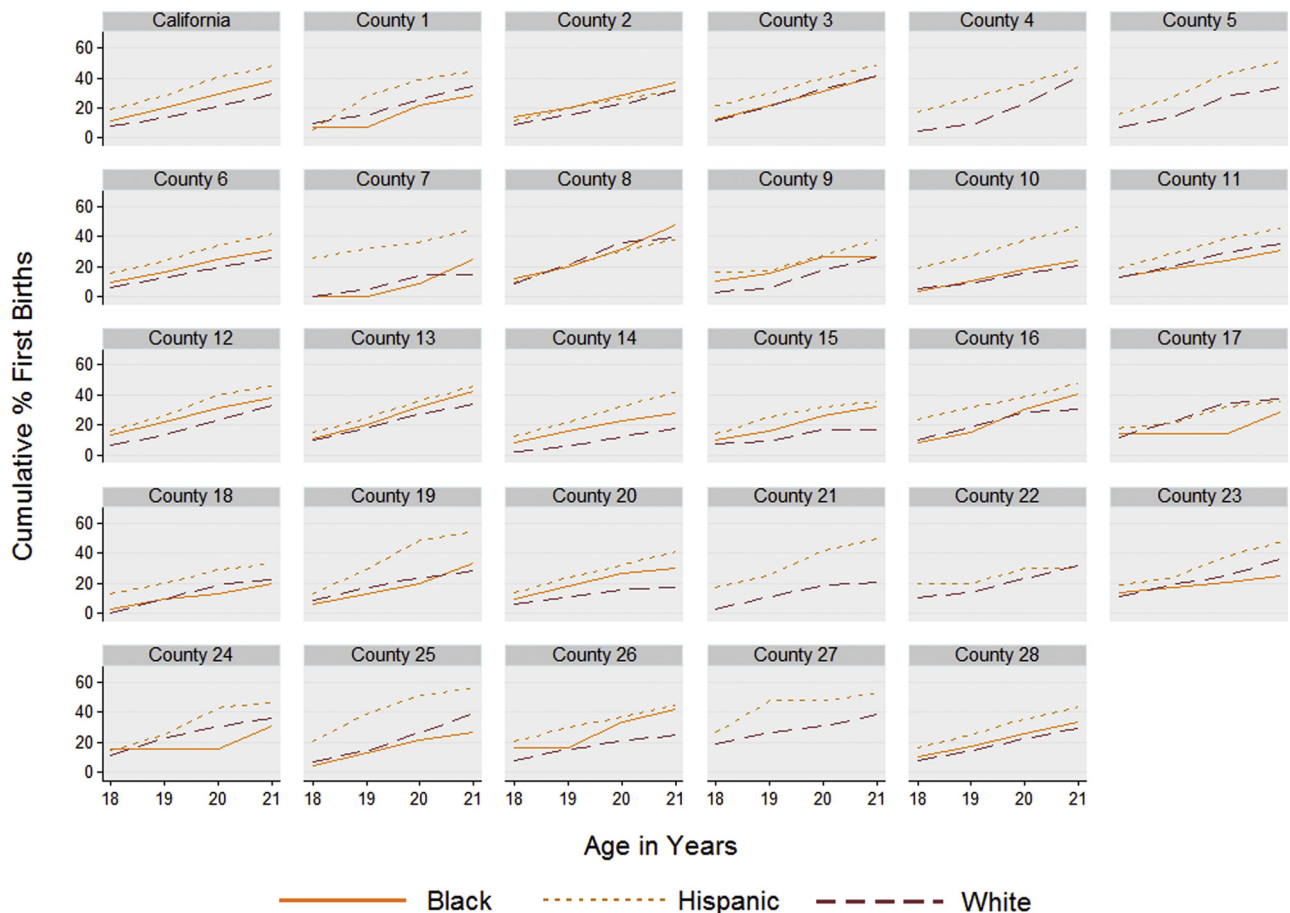
A consideration of births is relevant to service delivery and program design for at least three reasons. First, approximately two thirds of all first births by age 21 years occurred after age 18, when youth would have historically aged out of care. Although future research is needed to better understand whether adolescents are differentially selecting into extended foster care, data from the present brief suggest there is a window for intentional efforts to delay first births. Data highlight that this period after age 18 years may be a critical period when family planning services could be particularly impactful.

Second, the extension of foster care through age 21 years means that in any given year, the child welfare system will likely have more dependent adolescents and young adults who are parenting than it has had in the past. Housing, child care resources, and other transitional supports may need to be reconsidered and reorganized to reflect changing demographics.

Third, young and first-time mothers may be more amenable to engaging in parenting programs and other services because they are less familiar with pregnancy, labor, delivery, and care [7]. Young maternal age is strongly correlated with poor outcomes for both mothers and children [8,9]. Children born to adolescents who were themselves maltreated face a risk of abuse and neglect that is three times that of children born to demographically similar adolescents who were not maltreated [10]. The extension of foster care means that a vulnerable population of young, first-time mothers can be identified and targeted for services that enhance parenting capacity in an effort to improve next-generation outcomes.



**Figure 1.** Cumulative percentage of female adolescents in foster care at age 17 years between 2003 and 2007 who gave birth by age 21 years: California and county subanalysis by age. It presents the cumulative percentage of female adolescents in foster care who had a first birth before ages 18, 19, 20, and 21 years for 28 counties and the state overall. Thirty counties were excluded from this figure because of small cell sizes, but their data were included in the statewide rates. California data are reflected by the red line.



**Figure 2.** Cumulative percentage of female adolescents in foster care at age 17 years between 2003 and 2007 giving birth by age 21 years: California and county subanalysis by race/ethnicity. It presents the cumulative percentage of female adolescents in foster care who had a first birth before ages 18, 19, 20, and 21 years for the three largest racial/ethnic groups in California's foster care system (black, Hispanic, and white). Rates for black youth were excluded from the figure in six of the 28 counties included in the subanalysis because of small cell sizes.

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