

## SCAA Releases New Report on Foster Care Youth

SCAA released a new report, [\*Risking Their Future: Understanding the Health Behaviors of Foster Care Youth\*](#), which examines the outcomes of high-risk sexual behavior among adolescents and young adults in the foster care system. This report grew out of two previous publications from SCAA: the 2006 document [\*Growing Up in New York: Charting the Next Generation of Workers, Citizens and Leaders\*](#), and the 2008 report, [\*Teenage Births: Outcomes for Young Parents and Their Children\*](#). Both documents showed that youth in foster care face major challenges at the time they become sexually active.

According to the report, most children arrive in the foster care system with health, social-emotional and educational problems. Most have endured poverty and many suffer from abuse and neglect. All of these experiences shape their physical and social development as well as their behavior. The foster care system should be a refuge but, as the report shows, adolescents can get drawn into a pattern of risky behavior that threatens their well-being and future success. They have sex too early and often, leading to sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy or both. Too many foster care youths exit the system with young children of their own and no road map to navigate the challenges of parenthood or adulthood.

While all teens exhibit risk-taking behavior, the past experiences of foster care youth make them particularly apt to engage in activity that could cause teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

- Nearly one-third of young women in foster care reported that they had been pregnant at least once by age 17 and that number rose to almost 50% by age 19.<sup>i</sup>
- About half of 21-year-old men aging out of foster care reported having gotten someone pregnant.<sup>ii</sup>
- Nearly one-third of youth in or transitioning from foster care had at least one child.<sup>iii</sup>
- Foster care has been associated with being younger at first conception and having more sexual partners.<sup>iv</sup>
- One study on sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) found that foster care youth had almost twice the infection rate of other youth.<sup>v</sup>
- In at least one study, a high percentage of pregnant foster care youth reported that they had been the victim of forced sexual activity or other physical abuse.<sup>vi</sup>

New York State can – and must – help these young adults break the cycle by closing gaps in the foster care system, investing in additional education, health and mental health services for foster care youth, and collecting data to monitor the sexual and reproductive trends among this population.

In the report, SCAA urges the state to create a work group to develop a plan to reduce teen births and improve outcomes for teen parents and their children with a special emphasis on the needs of high-risk foster care youth. Given the state’s budget situation, it would be easy to delay efforts to address the needs of teen parents and their children but there are things that can be done now and it is unwise to wait. The state can begin by reviewing, aligning and ensuring that existing efforts are being maximized. As the report shows, the needs of these young people are so great and cross so many systems that there is much to be gained by state level collaboration. The children of these young parents can’t wait – and they won’t get a second chance at a good start in life.

In addition to the work group, SCAA advocates other policy changes to improve the lives of pregnant and parenting teens in foster care. The following bullets summarize the recommendations in the areas of prevention, access to services and information:

- **Provide comprehensive training to adults who work with foster care youth on the sexual risk-taking behavior found in this population.**
- **Ensure that all foster care teens have access to needed mental health services.**
- **Develop strong connections between comprehensive home visiting programs and pregnant and parenting foster care teens.**
- **Replicate successful models that provide an array of services for parenting teens in foster care and their children.**
- **Use the National Youth in Transition Database to capture needed information on pregnant and parenting youth and youth who have aged out of foster care.**

The full report can be downloaded from the [SCAA website](#).

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<sup>i</sup> “Opportunities to Help Youth in Foster Care: Addressing Pregnancy Prevention in the Implementation of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008,” The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, July 2009.

<sup>ii</sup> Mark E. Courtney and Amy Dworsky, “Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Age 21,” Chapin Hall Center for children at the University of Chicago, December 2007: 10

<sup>iii</sup>Courtney and Dworsky, 11.

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<sup>iv</sup> Sara C. Carpenter and Robert B. Clyman, “The Association of Foster Care of Kinship Care with Adolescent Sexual Behavior and First Pregnancy,” *Pediatrics*, Vol. 108, No. 3, September 2001: 2

<sup>v</sup> Reproductive Health Outcomes Among Youth Who Ever Lived in Foster Care,” The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, July 2009.

<sup>vi</sup> “Reproductive Health Outcomes Among Youth Who Ever Lived in Foster Care.”