

CREATE's Position

Young people preparing to transition from care face numerous challenges; some experience the additional concern of early pregnancy and the need to look after their own children. Although there is limited data in Australia, studies indicate that young people with a care experience are likely to exhibit a higher rate of pregnancy than their peers in the general population and to parent younger (AIHW, 2022; McDowall, 2020; Purtell et al., 2019).

Based on what young parents with a care experience report, CREATE argues that prevention through education and social support should be the first approach so that young people transitioning to independence are fully informed of the implications of early and/or unwanted pregnancies. For those who become parents while in care or immediately after ageing out, targeted antenatal, perinatal, and neonatal support must be provided. Initially, this support generally will focus on health services, but later will include education and social services (e.g., accommodation and employment assistance; life-skills training; childcare) and support to mitigate possible stigma surrounding young parenting.

Evidence

- International data from the USA suggests that young women with a care experience are twice as likely to become mothers than their counterparts in the general population (see Purtell et al., 2020 for a summary of Courtney and colleagues' work in the US that shows from various studies that, at ages 19 through 26, this ratio holds). CREATE's 2020 Transitioning to Adulthood Report found that 16% of young people transitioning from care were parents (McDowall, 2020).
- Research demonstrates that care leavers often experience negative life outcomes, such as homelessness (30% of care leavers in first year after care), unemployment, criminal justice involvement, and poor mental health after they leave care (McDowall, 2020).
- Unfortunately, when considering young parents with a care experience there is a lack of consistent and reliable data on which to base policy and service development. This deficit led the Australian Human

Rights Commission (2017) to advocate (Recommendation 16) that all governments should "collect nationally consistent data on children receiving child protection and care services who have teenage parents and on young people receiving child protection and care services who have children as teenagers themselves" (p. 19).

- Pregnancy and early parenthood complicate the leaving care process and create additional stressors, such as hormonal changes and poor sleep effecting overall health. The Australian Human Rights Commission (2017) showed that young mothers (particularly those of First Nations descent, with a care experience, or involved with youth justice) were likely to find difficulty accessing education, be welfare dependent, have lower levels of employment, and be homeless or live in sub-standard accommodation.
- Young parents with a care experience may be reluctant to access formal support services as a result of stigma and feeling stereotyped by health professionals and social workers as being irresponsible and incompetent on top of additional stigma as a result of their out-of-home care history (Roberts et al., 2019; Denzel & MacDonald, 2014).
- Further, young parents may be reluctant to utilise support services due to fear of repercussions such as their child being taken into care, particularly when considering evidence of a "surveillance bias" for care experienced young people who are parents with connection to child protection services (Armfield et al., 2021; Purtell et al., 2021).
- It is important to acknowledge that young parents with a care experience most often perceive having a child as a positive experience that provides a sense of purpose. Similarly, qualitative research identifies that young parents with a care experience are motivated to meet the needs of their children in a manner their parents could not for them (Aparicio, Gioia, & Pecukonis, 2018; Aparicio, Pecukonis, & O'Neale, 2015).
- Also, evidence shows that continued support and connection to their community of care helps ensure better outcomes for young families with a care experience (Eastman & Putnam-Horstein, 2019; Shpiegel et al., 2021).

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- Programs such as the *Young Parents Program* (<https://www.redcross.org.au/services/young-parents-program-nsw/>) conducted by Red Cross that provide wrap-around support including residential and outreach services should be supported by governments.
- As an example of a proactive strategy, the Wungurilwil Gaggapduir Children and Families Agreement in Victoria encourages referrals to ACCOs for all unborn children from First Nations people to reduce the number of unnecessary child removals (Liddle et al., 2021).

Actions

CREATE calls on Commonwealth, state and territory ministers with responsibility for child protection to provide non-judgemental support for young parents. Support that builds upon their existing resilience and motivation to provide for their children. This should include helping the young person access financial and relationship assistance, source stable accommodation, and facilitate the development of parenting skills. This should commence early as part of their transition to independence planning.

Further, federal, state and territory governments should target interventions to reduce stigma and introduce prioritisation for young care leavers in accessing health services. This will minimise barriers to support seeking for young parents. Open discussions about the importance of education regarding young people's health, relationships, services and assistance available for them (especially childcare) should also be included as part of casework practice. The needs of young parents and the interventions to support them are well documented in Barker et al.'s (2022) report.

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