
Child Abuse, Teenage Pregnancy, and Welfare Dependency: Is There a Link?

Executive Summary

A recent study conducted in Washington State of young women who were pregnant or parenting teens found that 66 percent of the young women surveyed who became pregnant as teenagers were sexually abused (Boyer and Fine 1992). The high rate of abuse found in this study prompted new questions, relating to physical and sexual abuse, to be asked in the Family Income Study's fifth year interviews of public assistance and at risk comparison samples.

This paper reports on findings concerning the physical and sexual abuse of women on public assistance in Washington State while they were growing up. **Sexual abuse** in the Family Income Study questionnaire was defined as: *unwanted touching, sexual assault, or rape* by a family member or others. **Physical abuse** was defined as: *being hit, kicked, punched, or beaten up, other than the occasional spanking*, by parents or guardians.

Childhood Sexual Abuse

- percent of the women on public assistance in Washington State were sexually abused while growing up, compared to 30 percent for the at risk comparison sample and 27 percent nationally (Finkelhor 1990, 21).
- For women on public assistance in Washington State who were sexually abused, the median age of first sexual abuse was 8 years (*half of those who were sexually abused were abused by the age of 8*); the national median age of sexual abuse was found to be 9.6 years (Finkelhor 1990, 21).

Childhood Physical Abuse

- percent of the women on public assistance were physically abused while growing up, compared to 15 percent for the at risk comparison sample.
- Two-thirds of the Family Income Study respondents who were abused physically were also abused sexually, in both the public assistance and at risk comparison samples (67 percent and 64 percent, respectively).

Key Findings

Childhood abuse is linked to many factors that increase the risk of welfare dependency for young women: 91 percent of the women on assistance who were sexually abused and who were also sexually active before the age of 15 became pregnant teenagers. There is an equally strong link between early sexual activity and dropping out of school with teenage pregnancy: 71 percent of the women on assistance who were sexually active at an early age dropped out of school; of those who dropped out, almost all (93 percent) became pregnant teenagers.

Women who were abused while growing up were more likely to: engage in early sexual activity (*sexual intercourse before age 15*), drop out of school before graduating, and become pregnant teens and teenage mothers. 52 percent of the women on public assistance in Washington State were teenage mothers (Webster and D'Allesandro 1991).