

KNOCKING ON THE DOOR:

BARRIERS TO WELFARE AND OTHER ASSISTANCE FOR TEEN PARENTS

A THREE-CITY RESEARCH STUDY

Deborah L. Shapiro and Helene M. Marcy
CENTER FOR IMPACT RESEARCH

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Executive Summary

The 1996 welfare reform legislation, which established the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, sought, among other purposes, to move recipients off of welfare and into work and to prevent long-term welfare receipt. Policymakers recognized that concentrating on teen parents was an important part of tackling the problem of long-term receipt of welfare: although teen parents represent only about five percent of the overall TANF caseload, historically about 50 percent of adult welfare recipients began parenting as teens. The legislation adopted a new approach for minor teen parents, creating two major requirements — commonly known as the “living arrangement rule” and the “stay-in-school rule.” The first required unmarried, custodial teen parents under age 18 to live at home or in an adult-supervised setting, and the second required that they participate in school or approved training until obtaining a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) equivalency diploma.

In the years since 1996, some states have reported greater declines in the number of teen parents receiving TANF relative to the general caseload declines. Limited qualitative information indicated that some teens were being turned away at local TANF offices, without having the opportunity to complete applications — that is, they were knocking on the door but not getting in. Because TANF can have an important role in helping low-income teen parents stay on track towards economic independence, this information alarmed teen parent advocates and led the Center for Impact Research (CIR) to conduct a collaborative survey project in Chicago to determine what was happening to teen mothers who were in need of assistance. The Chicago survey was replicated in Boston and Atlanta, and this report highlights the collective findings across the three sites. In conducting the survey, CIR intended that about half of the respondents in all three sites were current recipients of TANF assistance and half were not.

FINDINGS

Teen Parents Have Trouble Accessing and Keeping TANF Benefits

The three surveys found that some teen parents were not getting the opportunity to apply for TANF benefits and others were having trouble keeping TANF benefits once they received them.

- ▲ Between 16 percent and 46 percent of those not receiving TANF who had tried to apply were “turned away at the door” and did not complete applications. Another 12-19 percent completed applications but were never contacted by the TANF agency. Approximately 50-60 percent of those who applied and were determined to be ineligible reported that it was due to not meeting school participation, living arrangement, or other requirements (besides income).
- ▲ About 18-25 percent of those respondents currently receiving TANF had previously had their assistance cut off or reduced; reasons most often cited included missing school or appointments with their caseworker. Many of these teen parents reportedly missed school or were unable to attend appointments due to illness or lack of child care.

Overall, results indicate that some needy teen parents are not receiving assistance due to a combination of two main factors: (1) caseworkers not always being fully familiar with teen parent-specific TANF policy and (2) teen parents not being allowed time to come into compliance with TANF requirements.

Many Teen Parents Are Not Staying “On-Track” with School

Helping teen parents stay in school and complete their education is critical to their ability to gain the skills necessary to succeed in the labor market. However, the surveys found that many older teen parents (generally 18- and 19-year-olds) have not received a high school diploma or GED, and some minor teens are not in school.

- ▲ In Chicago and Atlanta, close to one-fourth of minors were not in school at the time of the survey, and one-half of them were not on track with their education. Over 90 percent of the minors who *were* in school were on track.
- ▲ In Atlanta, only one-half of the older respondents (over age 18) who were not in school had a high school diploma or GED.
- ▲ Having a high school diploma or GED was associated with greater employment opportunities and higher pay.

Teen Parents Are Not Accessing Assistance Programs

Besides having problems obtaining TANF benefits, some teen parents in these surveys do not access other health and social services that they may be eligible for — and which they may need to ensure their economic self-sufficiency.

- ▲ Teens who were receiving TANF were more likely than those not receiving TANF to be accessing other assistance programs, such as medical assistance, child care, food stamps, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).
- ▲ Many assistance programs appear to be under-utilized by teen mothers, regard-less of TANF receipt.
- ▲ In one city, as many as 31 percent of the respondents who had never applied agreed with the survey question that TANF was “too much hassle.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

While there have been worthwhile efforts directed at helping low-income teen parents (including some noteworthy models in the three states profiled in this report), it is evident that there is still much work to be done. Based on the findings from the three sites, CIR recommends the federal TANF reauthorization efforts include pro-provisions to:

- ▲ Help teen parents meet TANF requirements by providing a transitional compliance period and by training local TANF office caseworkers as teen specialists;¹

Many teen parents are apparently being viewed as ineligible for TANF when they walk into the local office or at the time of application. By providing a transitional compliance period, teen parents who do not already meet TANF requirements can be helped to access needed assistance and to comply with program rules. In addition, it is important that some caseworkers be trained to work specifically with teen parents.

- ▲ Extend the focus on education to older teen parents by not starting the time-limit clock for teen parents participating in education or training;

Because parenting usually disrupts a teen's schooling, teen parents should receive additional encouragement and support to complete their education/training or GED, even if it means staying in a school or program past age 18. These older teens should not have their TANF time-limit clock ticking while they are participating in educational activities — educational activities that will make them more likely to reach economic self-sufficiency.

- ▲ Increase access to TANF and other assistance programs, particularly for needy teen parents, by requiring state plans to include outreach efforts.

In addition to having trouble accessing TANF benefits, some teen parents are apparently not gaining access to other assistance programs such as WIC, food stamps, Medicaid, and child care subsidies. Eligible low-income families, including those of teen parents, would benefit from improved outreach and education in order to increase access to these important programs.

- ▲ Conduct a federally-funded study of a representative sample of teen parents (both those who are receiving TANF benefits and those who are not) to examine a variety of questions about access and participation in TANF and related assistance programs.

If we learn more about how teen parents are faring, we will be able to develop better policies and programs to respond to their needs and those of their children. In fact, the preliminary findings of the CIR Chicago study and other local qualitative data² contributed to efforts by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) to make adjustments to its programs, including the appointment and training of intake specialists to work with teens in local TANF offices throughout Illinois.

¹ "Teen Specialist" refers to a TANF intake worker or caseworker who has received training on adolescent development and teen parent-specific public assistance programs and policies.

² See Kevin Roy and Glibel Gomez, *Teen Parents and Welfare Reform in Illinois: A Public Policy Report*. Chicago, IL: The Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health, 1999.

Availability of Individual Reports

Both the three-city report and the detailed Chicago report are available at the Center for Impact Research website.

Center for Impact Research

926 N. Wolcott
Chicago, IL 60622
(773) 342-0630
(773) 342-5918
www.impactresearch.org

For copies of the Boston report, contact Jamie Strausz-Clark at:

Alliance for Young Families

105 Chauncy Street, 8th Floor
Boston, MA 02111
(617) 482-9122
(617) 482-9129 fax
www.youngfamilies.org

For copies of the Atlanta report, contact Katilia Harden at:

Georgia Campaign for Adolescent

Pregnancy Prevention
100 Auburn Avenue, Suite 200
Atlanta, GA 30303
(404) 524-2277
(404) 523-7753 fax
www.gcapp.org