

Young Mothers at the Margin

Why pregnant teens need support

A commentary by
Jeannette Y. Pai-Espinosa



PHOTO COURTESY OF BOB MADDEN

Nadia had good reasons for being mad at the world. “I was so angry,” she says, “especially with my drug-addicted mother who was in and out of jail so much that she couldn’t take care of my four younger siblings or me.” Nadia lived with different relatives, but her bad temper meant those stays didn’t last long. She was separated from her siblings and placed in foster care. She stayed in different foster and group homes and then, at 17, she became pregnant while still in state care.

Charese also lived with relatives growing up. In her case, it was to escape the sexual, physical, and emotional abuse from her father that began when she was 5. She spent most of her life feeling like no one loved her. By the time she was in fifth grade, she was thinking about how to end her life; in eighth grade, she made her first attempt at suicide. Her teen years were marked by relationships with much older men, drug use, and other risky behavior. By the age of 16, Charese was homeless, pregnant, and alone.

The full stories about young mothers like Nadia and Charese aren’t always told, because they are invisible in our families and communities. Sometimes, they are even invisible to the agencies charged with supporting them. At the National Crittenton Foundation, we call them “young mothers at the margin” because we want to be clear that for them, pregnancy is the result of a complex set of personal, social, financial, and political factors brought to bear on the lives of girls and young women. They don’t marginalize themselves—society does.

Jessie and her son share a special moment. In April, The National Crittenton Foundation launched a campaign to provide a venue through which the voices and stories of “young mothers at the margin” can be heard. To see more stories, visit WWW.ATTHEMARGIN.ORG.

The majority of young mothers at the margin are victims of child sexual, physical, and emotional abuse and persistent neglect; they often grew up in homes with domestic violence and they continue to experience violence in their adult lives. As a result, they bear the lifelong burden of healing from trauma and face significant challenges like profound social isolation, addiction, depression, and low educational achievement. They tend to live in poverty; to be disproportionately young women of color; and be the children of young mothers. Many have experienced foster care, juvenile justice, homelessness, or commercial sexual exploitation and domestic trafficking.

In 2006, there were more than 370,000 unmarried teen mothers in the United States aged 14 to 18. This is more than the total number of teens (boys and girls) in foster care and far more than the 90,587 teens in the United States who are currently incarcerated, according to the 2008 report *Youth at High Risk of Disconnection*. While we believe many of the 370,000 unmarried teen mothers have been involved in systems including child welfare, juvenile justice, and mental health, actual data is largely unavailable. I’ve asked professionals in these systems how many young mothers they serve. They often answer that while they are just beginning to collect data, they believe the number is high.

In the end, what we don't count doesn't count. These young mothers remain marginalized often even to the systems and agencies charged with supporting them.

What Child Welfare Can Do

Let's take a closer look at young mothers at the margin and the child welfare system. I have spoken to many child welfare professionals about young mothers in care and their children, and nearly all the professionals acknowledge that this population constitutes a huge gap in the field. I recall that during a focus group on what youth need for a smooth and stable transition out of care, a young woman simultaneously expressed her sense of accomplishment and extreme frustration. On the one hand, she had learned how to manage her money, locate community resources, and go grocery shopping. On the other hand, she was now pregnant and didn't know who was going to teach her how to be a good mother. She was suffering from sleeplessness, worrying because she didn't want her child to end up in foster care, continuing the cycle of her own childhood.

Why have young mothers been invisible in the child welfare system, particularly in foster or kinship care? Most parents aren't prepared for the day their daughter tells them she is pregnant; the state may be no different. Perhaps as a field, child welfare has been acting like the surprised parent—taking care of basics on a case-by-case basis, yet not dealing with the issue in a substantive way. Our society has been hiding it, however unintentionally, for many years. It would serve those in our field well to place a more concerted priority on ensuring that young mothers and their children have opportunities to develop the skills and supports that will enable them to thrive. To move toward that goal, I suggest these steps:

- **Collect more comprehensive data on young parents in and from care.** To fully understand the scope of the issue, accurate data about the numbers of young mothers in and from care—and the factors in their lives (violence, sexual abuse, racism, sexism, access to education, job skills, and family wage jobs)—is key. Let's be a national model for other systems of care and work together to craft questions and get answers.
- **Shift the perspective of the field** so that we see supporting young mothers in care as a strategy that enables us to simultaneously do prevention and intervention, targeting the reduction of children and youth coming into care and increasing permanence. Working with young mothers and

their children provides us with the opportunity to intervene at a point in time when the mother may be most open to changing her life. A recent British study called *Teenage Parenthood: What's the Problem?* by researchers Claire Alexander, Simon Duncan, and Rosalind Edwards argues that policymakers and child welfare professionals often overlook research showing that teenage parenthood may actually be a positive turning point in young people's lives.

- **Focus on mothers while remembering the importance of fathers.** The *Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth: Outcomes at Ages 23 and 24* released this year reveals that more than 65% of the young women in the study and almost half of the young men reported that they had at least one child. Yet, while nearly all of these young women reported that one or more of their children were living with them, this was true for less than half of the young men. This focus on

young moms in no way indicates that fathers are not important in the lives of their children or that fatherhood support ought not be a priority. Rather, our position is that because of the reality of who raises the children, the intergenerational nature of young motherhood, the prevalence of repeat pregnancies, and the

rates of poverty for women and children, our best investment of scarce resources is in focusing on young mothers. If this were done effectively across all systems of care, our country could break the cycle of young parenthood in families for generations to come and have a measurable impact on reducing poverty.

- **Reduce the number of children coming into care.** Even without solid numbers, we know that children of teen mothers have increased chances of involvement with the child welfare system. Chapin Hall cites a study in *Kids Having Kids: Economic Costs and Social Consequences of Teen Pregnancy*, which revealed that 60% of children entering foster care in Illinois were children of young mothers. If we want to reduce the number of children coming into care, we must support young mothers in making the right decision for themselves and their children, whatever that may be. Once the choice is made, we must move quickly to support them in being successful.
- **Support permanence.** There is no debate about the need for permanence; we all want and need a family for life. While the preference for permanence is with a biological or adoptive family, that is not always possible. For many

“I take pride in where I am now. I just needed a place where I could heal, learn to believe in myself, develop skills, and learn how to be a good mother. I have ambitions to help others because of my experiences.”

— Nadia

of the young women supported by Crittenton and other agencies serving young mothers, the enduring connections they make may be with nonfamily members and the familial permanence they experience is with their child. As child welfare professionals, we need to suspend our judgment and perspective and help them create a strong and stable permanent family in these circumstances.

- **Advocate for a full continuum of services and supports for young mothers in care.** The continuum of services and supports young mothers at the margin need to break the cycles into which they were born is significant. Young mothers need a variety of services that enable them to heal, learn, and grow. This must include residential care/treatment, mother-baby foster homes, in-home and community-based services, and extensive support for biological, foster, and adoptive parents who are parenting young mothers. The services and supports must be gender and culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and strength-based, and must recognize the placement and custody legal rights of young mothers and also include family planning. From parent training to goal setting and education to mental health, the array of topics should be extensive.



Charese (right) turned her life around when she faced pregnancy as a teenager. To hear more about her and her daughter, visit WWW.ATTHEMARGIN.ORG.

Breaking the Cycle

Most young mothers at the margin choose to parent their children, but this is not always the case. While not every story has a happy ending, many do. Success stories don't all look the same and, in the end, it's about young mothers having the time, space, support, and skills to make the right decision for themselves and their children. For examples of this, let's revisit the stories of Nadia and Charese.

When Nadia was eight months pregnant, she was placed by her caseworker at Florence Crittenton Service (FCS) in Baltimore, Maryland. A month later, she delivered a healthy

baby boy. She took parenting classes and attended school. "I shocked myself when I made the honor roll," she says. "I was also taking life skills classes and got a job working on campus as a teacher's assistant. I had my fair share of ups and downs at FCS, but I knew I had to make a better life for my son." Nadia stayed at FCS for two years. When she finished high

school, she and her son moved into foster care. She eventually enrolled in a workforce program that helped her get a job. Nadia is now a corrections officer for the state of Maryland and lives in her own apartment with her son, who is in school and doing well. "I take pride in where I am now," Nadia says. "I just needed a place where I could heal, learn to believe in myself, develop skills, and learn how to be a good mother. I have

ambitions to help others because of my experiences."

Through a referral from a teacher, Charese found her way to Crittenton Services, Inc., in Wheeling, West Virginia, in the early 1990s. She was in residential care and took advantage of every opportunity offered to her. She delivered a healthy daughter—now a 15-year-old aspiring dancer who has placed three times in the top tier of the Math/Science Olympiad. Today Charese holds a job in sales and works with million-dollar clients. She's thinking about graduate school. Charese is proud to have broken the cycle of abuse, teen pregnancy, and poverty in her family. She is equally proud that she remains connected to her parents and extended family. She credits her time at Crittenton as being the turning point in her life and the first safe place she ever lived.

Nadia and Charese had access to services and supports that helped them succeed. The right interventions and supports can make the difference between success for young mothers at the margin and their children and the continuation of cycles of young pregnancy, poverty, and system involvement—being passed down from generation to generation. Our country has some choices to make; let's work together to choose the right ones.