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Does a Mother's Age and Marital Status at Birth Affect the Probability that Her Child Will Have a Juvenile Court Record?

The Washington Legislature in 1994 directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to study juvenile violence, teen pregnancy, and other at-risk behaviors of youth.¹ The Institute was instructed to analyze trends in these behaviors and evaluate the cost-effectiveness of Washington's efforts to achieve measurable reductions in violence and at-risk behaviors. This research brief is part of the Institute's plan to provide the Legislature and other interested persons with up-to-date findings on these topics.

Background Our recent report analyzed long-run trends in at-risk behaviors of youth in Washington, and provided statistics on three specific behaviors: juvenile violence, teen pregnancy, and the percentage of births to unmarried women.² The report showed that the rate of juvenile criminal violence in Washington increased substantially from 1983 to 1994: the arrest rate of 10- to 17-year-old juveniles for serious violent offenses more than doubled, increasing 165 percent.

The report also showed that the rate of births to teenagers in Washington has been fairly stable over the last quarter century. The major demographic change in recent decades has not been the teenage birthrate; rather, the significant shift has been the increase in the percentage of births to teenagers who are unmarried. For 15- to 17-year-old females giving birth in 1960, 18 percent were not married; by 1994, the unmarried rate had climbed to 87 percent for this age group. For 18- and 19-year-old females giving birth in 1960, 6 percent were not married; in 1994, 66 percent were not married.

Two Study Questions This research brief addresses two questions pertaining to juvenile violence:

1. Does a **mother's age** and her **marital status** at the time she gives birth affect the chance that her child will subsequently have a juvenile court record, especially for violent offenses? In particular, do the children of teenage or unmarried mothers get into more trouble with the law than the children of older or married mothers?
2. Can information on a mother's age and her marital status at the time of birth be used to **predict** whether her child will subsequently have a juvenile record? How accurate would such a prediction be?

¹ RCW 70.190.050.

² Steve Aos, Roxanne Lieb, and Robert Barnoski, Washington State Institute for Public Policy, (January 1996), *Trends in At-Risk Behaviors of Youth in Washington*.

Approach The University of Washington’s School of Public Health, working in collaboration with the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, undertook a research study into these questions. Data were gathered from the Washington State Department of Health on the birth certificates issued in this state from 1971 to 1975. These birth records were then “matched” to information from the Office of the Administrator for the Courts on the juvenile court records of youth in Washington from 1984 to 1993. Tabulations were made between the characteristics of mothers at the time of birth (from the birth certificates) and whether a child subsequently had an adjudicated offense as a juvenile (from the court records). An analysis of the statistical significance of the relationships was performed.

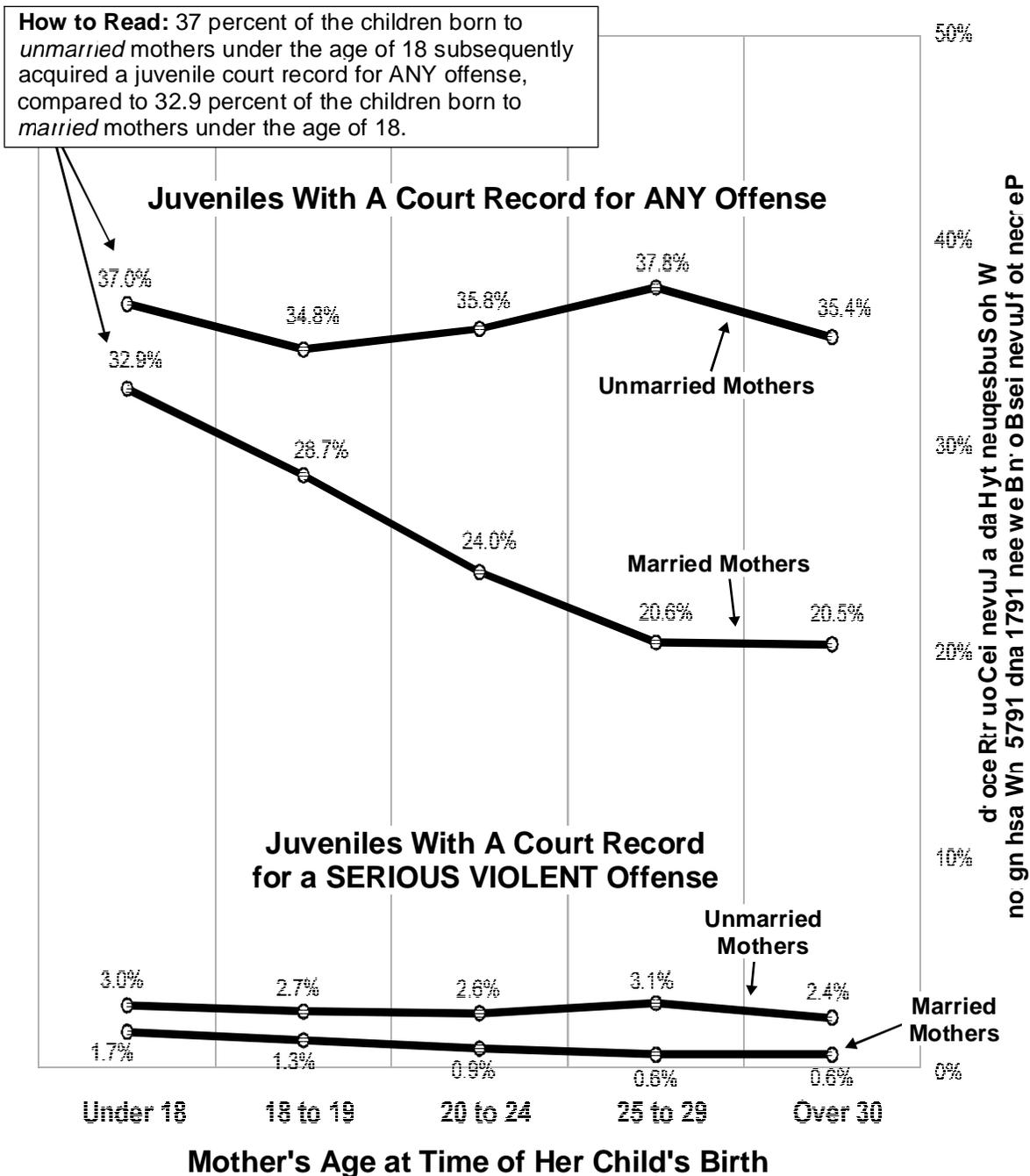
Two classes of juvenile offenders are examined in this research brief: juveniles with ANY type of offense adjudicated by a juvenile court, and juveniles with a SERIOUS VIOLENT offense adjudicated by a juvenile court. In this study, “serious violent” offenses are defined as murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault—the categories of offenses the FBI uses to define violent crime.

Finding: A mother’s marital status and age at the time of birth are significantly related to—but are not strongly predictive of—whether her child subsequently acquires a juvenile court record.

- **A mother’s marital status at the time of birth is statistically significant.** Mothers who were *not married* at the time of birth had a greater chance of having a child who subsequently acquired a juvenile court record than mothers who were *married* at the time of birth. *Figure 1* shows that this basic finding prevailed for all age groups of mothers. It also held for juveniles with any type of offense as well as for juveniles with serious violent offenses. For example, *Figure 1* shows that 3 percent of the children born to *unmarried* mothers under the age of 18, subsequently acquired an adjudication for a serious violent offense from a juvenile court—compared to 1.7 percent of juveniles with *married* mothers under 18.
- **A mother’s age at the time of birth is statistically significant in some cases.** For married women, the older the mother was at the time of birth, the lower the chance that her child subsequently developed a juvenile court record. *Figure 1* shows, for example, that 28.7 percent of the children born to married women *18 or 19 years old* subsequently had a juvenile court record compared to 20.6 percent of the children born to married women *25 to 29 years*. However, the age of an *unmarried* mother did not mitigate the chance of her child acquiring a subsequent juvenile court record.
- While a mother’s age and marital status at the time she gave birth were statistically significant, they made only a modest improvement in the ability to predict which children subsequently acquired a juvenile court record and which did not. Of all children born in Washington in 1971 to 1975, 24.4 percent subsequently had a juvenile court record for any offense, and 1.0 percent had a serious violent offense. Therefore, we could accurately predict—without knowing anything about a mother’s age or marital status—that 24.4 percent of children would have a juvenile court record. For *women unmarried or under the age of 20 at the time of birth*, 32.7 percent of their children had a juvenile court record for any offense, and 2.0 percent had a serious violent offense. Thus, knowing a woman’s age and marital status at the time of birth would allow us to improve our predictive accuracy from 24.4 percent to 32.7 percent.

Figure 1

A Mother's Age and Marital Status at the Time of Giving Birth Are Related to Her Child's Chance of Having a Subsequent Juvenile Court Record



Source: Washington State Institute for Public Policy with data from the Washington Department of Health and the Office of the Administrator for the Courts.

Limitations of the Study This study tracked the children born in Washington State between 1971 and 1975 and whether, in their teenage years from 1984 to 1993, they had juvenile court records. The only information used to analyze these juveniles was that recorded on their birth certificates and whether they had a subsequent juvenile court record. No additional information on what happened to this group of juveniles between their birth and their teenage years was available for this study.

Because of this lack of additional data, one should be cautious in interpreting the two factors looked at in this study: a mother's age and marital status at the time she gave birth. For example, it would be helpful to know if married or unmarried mothers at the time of birth subsequently divorced or remarried and how these events influence the future offending activity of their children. It would also be useful to know more about the educational levels of the mothers and the economic backgrounds of the children—which grew up in low income families and which were well off? A mother's age or marital status at the time she gives birth may be measuring some of these missing factors, but we cannot be certain.

This lack of information is the main reason why this study concludes that a mother's marital status and age at the time of birth are significantly related to—but are not strongly predictive of—whether her child subsequently acquires a juvenile court record for any offense, or for violent offenses.

NOTE: In this paper, we analyze how the marital status of mothers relates to subsequent juvenile offending patterns of her child. We do not mean to imply that fathers are excluded from parenting behaviors or responsibilities. We refer to mothers because the information on the birth certificates we collected from the Department of Health only lists the “marital status of mother” and does not contain data on the marital status of the father.

In future research reports, the Institute will present additional information on how changes in the structure of families and other factors affect the rate of juvenile offending and at-risk behaviors of youth in Washington. For further information, contact Robert Barnoski or Steve Aos at the Institute—(360) 866-6000, ext. 6380.

Washington State Institute for Public Policy

The Washington Legislature created the Washington State Institute for Public Policy in 1983. A Board of Directors—representing the Legislature, the governor, and public universities—governs the Institute, hires the director, and guides the development of all activities. The Institute's mission is to carry out practical research, at legislative direction, on issues of importance to Washington State.