

# TRENDS Child FACT SHEET

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## Diploma Attainment Among Teen Mothers

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**OVERVIEW.** Recently released government data show that in 2006, the U.S. teen birth rate began to increase, marking the end of a 14-year period of decline. More specifically, these data show that between 2005 and 2007, the teen birth rate climbed five percent.<sup>1,2</sup> This trend reversal is a cause for concern, given the negative consequences of teen childbearing for the mothers involved and for their children especially. For example, research indicates that children of teen mothers fare worse on cognitive and behavioral outcomes than do their peers with older mothers. Teen mothers are more likely than older mothers to be dependent on public assistance after giving birth and to experience turbulence in their family structures—even taking into account the fact that teen mothers tend to be from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>3</sup> In addition, teen mothers are at a particularly high risk of dropping out of school,<sup>3</sup> although previous research has found that they are more likely to be having problems in school prior to their pregnancy.

In light of teen mothers' heightened risk of becoming high school dropouts, Child Trends used recently released national survey data to explore high school diploma and GED attainment among women who had given birth as teens. Particularly, we looked at whether they had earned these educational credentials by the time that they reached their early twenties.

Our findings show that slightly more than one-half of young women who had been teen mothers received a high school diploma by the age of 22, compared with 89 percent of young women who had not given birth during their teen years. Furthermore, results of our analyses show that young women who had a child before the age of 18 were even less likely than were those who had a child when they were 18 or 19 to earn a high school diploma before the age of 22, although the rates of GED attainment in the former group were slightly higher. We also found differences in educational attainment among teen mothers by race/ethnicity.

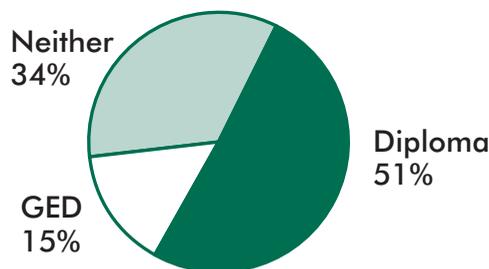
### FINDINGS

#### Teen mothers have lower high school diploma attainment than those who did not have a teen birth.

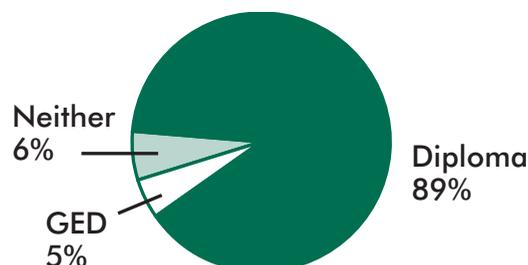
- Young women who had been teen mothers were less likely than other young women to earn a high school diploma by the age of 22 (see Figure 1). Almost nine in 10 (89 percent) young women who had not given birth as a teen earned a high school diploma before the age of 22. By comparison, only about one in two (51 percent) young women who had been a teen mother earned a high school diploma by that age.

**Figure 1**

#### Diploma/GED Attainment by Age 22



**Teen Birth (age 19 or younger)**



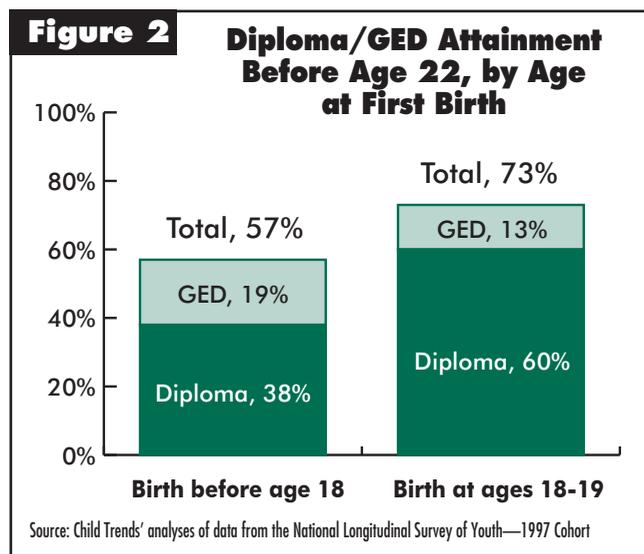
**No Teen Birth**

Source: Child Trends' analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth—1997 Cohort

- A higher proportion of young women who had been teen mothers earned a GED (15 percent) than did their counterparts who had not experienced a teen birth (5 percent).
- One in three (34 percent) young women who had been teen mothers, however, earned *neither* a diploma or a GED, compared with only 6 percent of young women who had not had a teen birth.

**Younger teen mothers are less likely than older teen mothers to earn a diploma.**

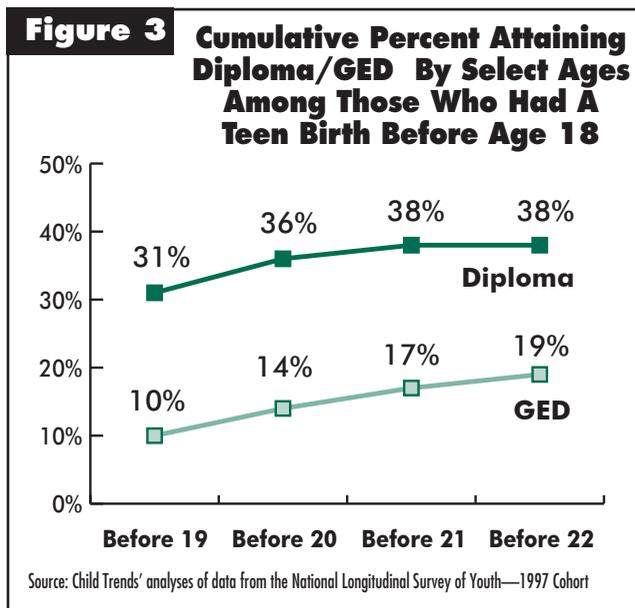
- Young women who gave birth before the age of 18 (traditionally the age at which an adolescent completes high school) were far less likely than were those who gave birth between the ages of 18 and 19 to earn a high school diploma. Among young women who had a child before the age of 18, only 38 percent earned a high school diploma by the age of 22, compared with 60 percent of those who were 18 or 19 at the time that they had their first child (Figure 2).
- Young women who gave birth as a younger teen were more likely than those who gave birth as an older teen to earn a GED. Almost one in five (19 percent) young women who had a child before the age of 18 earned a GED, compared with 13 percent of those who were between the ages of 18 and 19 when they first gave birth. Nevertheless, young women in the younger age group were less likely than were those who gave birth at 18 or 19 to have earned any educational credential by the age of 22. Specifically, 43 percent of young women who were under the age of 18 when they first gave birth had earned neither a diploma nor a GED by the



age of 22, compared with 27 percent of young women who were between the ages of 18 and 19 when they first became mothers and only 6 percent of young women who did not have a child in their teen years.

**Some teen mothers attain credentials after a school-age birth.**

- Some young women who had a child before the age of 18 earned a diploma or GED after the child was born.<sup>4,5</sup> For these women, a slightly higher proportion earned a GED than earned a high school diploma between the ages of 18 and 22 (see Figure 3). Specifically, the proportion earning a high school diploma rose 7 percentage points between the ages of 19 (31 percent) and 22 (38 percent). In comparison, the proportion earning a GED rose by 9 percentage points—from 10 percent before the age of 19 to 19 percent before the age of 22. Thus, almost one-half of former teen mothers who completed a GED did so after the age of 18.



**Black teen mothers are more likely than Hispanic or white teen mothers to earn a diploma/GED by age 22.**

- Teen childbearing is more prevalent among black and Hispanic teens than among white teens. In our sample, 31 percent of black women and 28 percent of Hispanic women gave birth before the age of 20, compared with 15 percent of white women (analyses not shown).
- Black women who gave birth as teens were more likely to earn a high school diploma or GED by the age of 22 than were their white

and Hispanic peers. Among those who had a child before the age of 18, 46 percent of black young women earned high school diplomas, compared with 35 percent of white and 34 percent of Hispanic young women (see Figure 4).

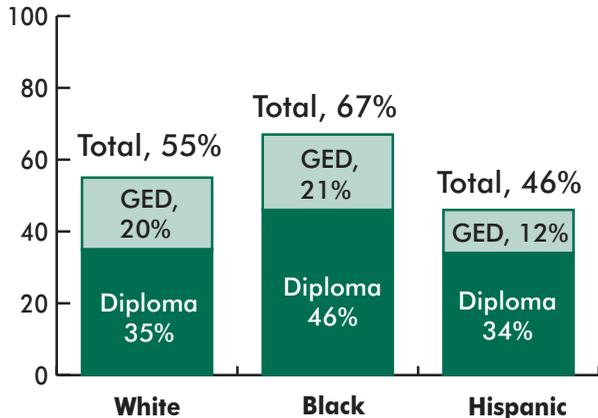
GED, compared with 55 percent of white women and 46 percent of Hispanic women in this category.

## SUMMARY

Only one-half of women in our study sample who had been teen mothers had earned a high school diploma by the age of 22, compared with almost 9 in 10 (89 percent) young women in our study sample who had not given birth as a teen. Our analyses are descriptive, and we cannot make cause-and-effect inferences from the results. Past studies have found, however, that many teens who become mothers lag behind in school academically and that a substantial percentage drop out *before* their pregnancy.<sup>6,7</sup>

Still, previous research suggests that teen mothers' reduced likelihood of attaining a high school education could result in a number of negative consequences for them and for their children. First, completing a high school education (earning a diploma or GED) reduces the risk of subsequent teen pregnancy, which has been linked to even poorer outcomes among teen mothers and their children.<sup>8,9</sup> Second, as the share of the population with a college degree grows, the number of attractive jobs within reach of those with only a high school diploma or GED decreases, while those without either credential are left even further behind.<sup>10</sup> Third, even though 15 percent of all young women in our sample who were teen mothers went on to earn a GED (including 19 percent who had a child before the age of 18), a GED does not seem carry the same weight as a regular high school diploma. For instance, research has found that workers with GEDs earn less money than those with a high

**Figure 4** Diploma/GED Attainment Among Teen Mothers Before Age 22 by Race/Ethnicity



Source: Child Trends' analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth—1997 Cohort

- Among those who had a child before the age of 18, white and black young women earned a GED at higher rates than did their Hispanic peers. Approximately one in five black and white young women (21 percent and 20 percent, respectively) earned a GED before the age of 22, compared with only 12 percent of Hispanic young women.
- Overall, more than two-thirds (67 percent) of black women who had a child before the age of 18 earned either a high school diploma or

## ABOUT THE DATA SOURCE AND METHODOLOGY USED IN THIS FACT SHEET

Data used in this *Fact Sheet* were drawn from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth—1997 Cohort (NLSY97). The NLSY97, sponsored and directed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, is a nationally representative sample of 8,984 young people who were between the ages of 12 and 16 on December 31, 1996 (baseline). Respondents are followed annually, and fertility history and educational attainment information are updated in each round of the survey. To establish whether or not a respondent had earned an educational credential by the age of 22, we used a measure of the date of high school diploma or GED receipt from the last round of available data when all respondents were 22 or older (Round 11, 2007). We used fertility history information provided in each round to establish our sample of teen mothers. We then compared the educational attainment of young women who had a baby before the age of 18 (traditionally the age at which an adolescent would earn her high school diploma) to those who did so when they were 18 or 19. We also compared young women who had given birth as a teen to young women who never had a teen birth for the full sample and across racial/ethnic subgroups.

school diploma.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, GED recipients are less likely to go on to a two- or four-year college than are people with a high school diploma.<sup>11</sup> Finally, higher parental educational attainment is linked to improved cognitive and behavioral outcomes among children 12-14 that may reduce their risk of early sexual activity and teen pregnancy<sup>13</sup> thus reducing intergenerational cycles of disadvantage.

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Editor: Harriet J. Scarupa

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