

Study shows 1 in 15 young mothers is involved in care proceedings before their eldest child is 10

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Mothers under the age of 20 are at the greatest risk of being involved in care proceedings in the 10 years after having their first child, finds a [new](#)

[study report](#) led by UCL researchers.

The study examined the hospital and family court data of 3.5 million first-time mothers in England between 2007 and 2021, to understand which social and [health factors](#) increased the risk of care proceedings within 10 years of their first birth.

Care proceedings are brought to family courts by [social care services](#) because of concerns about [child maltreatment](#) (abuse or neglect) or family dysfunction. Of those, 4 in 5 proceedings decide to remove the child from [parental care](#).

The researchers found that 1 in 77 (1.3%) of all first-time mothers were involved in care proceedings within 10 years of their first birth. However, the risks were much higher (1 in 15; 6.7%) for mothers under 20 years old, and 1 in 30 (3.3%) of all mothers aged under 25 at their first child's birth.

Overall, 8 in 10 (78.9%) of the first-time mothers in the study who were involved in care proceedings had their first child before the age of 25.

Mothers with health problems in the three years before a first birth were also more likely to be involved in care proceedings, particularly mothers with [mental health conditions](#) (5.7%), mothers with adversity-related hospital admissions such as substance use, violence or self-harm (12.8%), and mothers with an intellectual disability (30.1%).

Lead author, Dr. Georgina Ireland (UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health), said, "Our findings show that a significant number of first-time mothers are involved in care proceedings in the first 10 years after giving birth, particularly if they are young and live in poorer neighborhoods.

"Putting [support](#) in place to help these parents and their children could improve parents' circumstances and health, reduce the need for care proceedings, and reduce the adverse long-term health, education and employment outcomes experienced by children placed into care."

"Each year, 10,000 families in England are involved in care proceedings and over the last 10 years the number of children being looked after by the state has increased by over one-fifth."

As part of the new report, the researchers also assessed the likelihood of mothers experiencing multiple care proceedings.

They found that, overall, one-third (34%) of mothers involved in care proceedings before their eldest child was 10 years old went on to have a second care proceeding within the next eight years.

Three quarters (75%) of these second care proceedings followed the start of a new pregnancy. And mothers who became pregnant within two years of their first care proceeding had the highest risk of repeat care proceedings.

Senior author, Professor Ruth Gilbert (UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health), said, "Addressing the health and social needs of mothers involved in care proceedings is important, as a placement in care is often temporary and half of mothers will go on to have further children.

"More research is needed to assess which types of support work best and whether [early intervention](#), such as access to [mental health services](#), early intensive home visiting, and support with housing, finance and childcare, could reduce the need for family court involvement, while also improving the health and development of children of vulnerable [first-time mothers](#)."

The study shows the need for better support for young, deprived mothers with a history of physical and mental [health problems](#) at their first birth. Continuing support is also needed after care proceedings as these mothers are seven times more likely to die than their same age peers, with 1.8% (one in 55) dying within eight years of their first care proceedings.

Lisa Harker, Director of the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, said, "Teenage pregnancy rates have more than halved in England in the past 15 years, but there remains a group of highly vulnerable young mothers who need additional support to avoid having their children taken into care. With targeted support, a high proportion of care proceedings could be avoided and the devastating cycle of the repeat removal of children averted."

Jules Hillier, Chief Executive of Pause, a national charity that works to improve the lives of women who have had—or are at risk of having—more than one child removed from their care, said, "The women we work with have difficult and often dangerous lives. Some grew up in care themselves and all have been through [care proceedings](#) and had a child removed from their care, after which they are completely dropped by services.

"We see women stuck in a terrible cycle of repeated pregnancies that result in a child being removed. We also see the transformative change that can be achieved with the right holistic, trauma-informed support. More must be done to ensure this kind of support is available to all women in this position."

More information: The health needs of mothers and children in family court cases: www.nuffieldfoundation.org/pro...n-family-court-cases

Provided by University College London

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