NSW GOVERNMENT

Impact of maternal age on children coming into contact with the child protection system

Snapshot

- Over 400,000 children are currently known to the NSW child protection system. This is equivalent to more than one in five children in NSW. Mothers of these children are on average three years younger than the total NSW population – 26 years old versus 29 years old at the time of the child's birth.

- Young maternal age is a risk factor for child protection. Children born to younger mothers are significantly more likely to be known to the NSW child protection system than children born to older mothers. For example, there is a 60% chance a child born to a 20-year old mother will be known to child protection, a one in three chance they will be reported at risk of significant harm (ROSH) and a one in 20 chance of being in out-of-home care (OOHC). For children born to mothers younger than 20 years of age, the chance is even higher.

- The maternal age of 27 appears to be the tipping point up until which point children are more likely than average to be known to the NSW child protection system, be reported at ROSH and to be in OOHC.

- Even controlling for maternal age, Aboriginal children are more likely than non-Aboriginal children to have contact with the child protection system.

Introduction

Young maternal age has been shown to be a significant risk factor for children's engagement with child protection systems. This is just one of many factors that have the potential to increase the vulnerability of children. Other parental risk factors include involvement with the justice system, mental health, alcohol and other drug use, and domestic and family violence. This Evidence to Action Note reports findings from analysis of NSW Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) child protection data on maternal age and child protection contact.

Improved data capture relating to the child protection dataset has allowed us to link DCJ clients with their parents. This has made it possible to analyse the linkages between a client's child protection history and their mother's[*] characteristics, in particular maternal age (the age at which the child was born).

To complete this analysis we have supplemented the child protection data with the NSW and Aboriginal birth numbers provided by the ABS.[1,2] These data were used to understand the distribution of maternal ages for the general NSW population, as well as to understand the proportion of the community who are clients of the NSW child protection system.

---

[*] Our focus on maternal characteristics was due to the lower quality (or lack) of paternal data in the dataset.

Why is maternal age important?

Previous Australian studies have investigated the importance of a variety of factors on the likelihood a child will enter OOHC. The main contributing factors include parental death, maternal mental disorder, mother or father in custody, maternal criminal charges and the presence of home environment problems.[3] Young maternal age (less than 25 years old) has also been identified as a contributing factor. Other risk factors experienced by parents involved in the child protection system include alcohol and other drug use, and domestic and family violence.[4]

In addition, a FACSIAR brief published in 2019 *NSW child protection reports involving children with teenage parents in 2016-17* found that children of teenage parents are more likely to require intensive services than children of older parents. The brief examined the children who were reported at ROSH during 2016-17 and who had at least one teenage parent (aged 15 to 19). Teenage parents and their children are a high-risk vulnerable group, due to higher prevalence of emotional problems and drug and alcohol use. They are also more likely to experience poor education and employment outcomes further escalating risk.

While maternal age is just one of the many factors which influence the likelihood of a child being known to child protection services, understanding this in the context of all risk factors can assist child protection services to identify the children who should be prioritised for follow-up, or who should be offered more intensive services earlier.

By providing additional support to families where it could have a large potential impact we can perhaps help to weaken the chain of intergenerational dependency on the child protection system. This would result in improved outcomes for children and their families, as well as longer-term savings to DCJ in the expected cost of providing services.

About our analysis

Our analysis considers the impact of maternal age on the likelihood a child will be known to the NSW child protection system, as well as the likelihood a child will be found at ROSH or enter OOHC. A child who is known to child protection, but is not at ROSH or in OOHC, is generally the result of the child being the subject of a concern report or being assessed but found to be not at risk of significant harm.

The likelihood that a child will be known to child protection, be found at ROSH or enter OOHC vary significantly by maternal age, with a more pronounced impact for children at ROSH or entering OOHC. We have considered the maternal ages of 15 through to 49, although some of the charts are cut off at the maternal age of 44 as data beyond this age become scarce.

Our analysis is based on maternal age at the time of the birth of each child who has touched the NSW child protection system. We have restricted the analysis to the birth years from 2007 to 2016. No adjustment has been made for multiple children born to the same mother.

What did the study find?

Mothers of children known to the NSW child protection system are on average younger than the total NSW population

For children born between 2007 and 2016 we compared the distribution of maternal ages of all children born in NSW with those children who were born in this period and became known to the NSW child protection system. These distributions are shown in Figure 1. During this 10-year period the median maternal age for all children born in NSW is 29 years. This drops to 26 years for all children who are known to child protection.[†]

Figure 1: Distribution of maternal ages, for births from 2007 to 2016
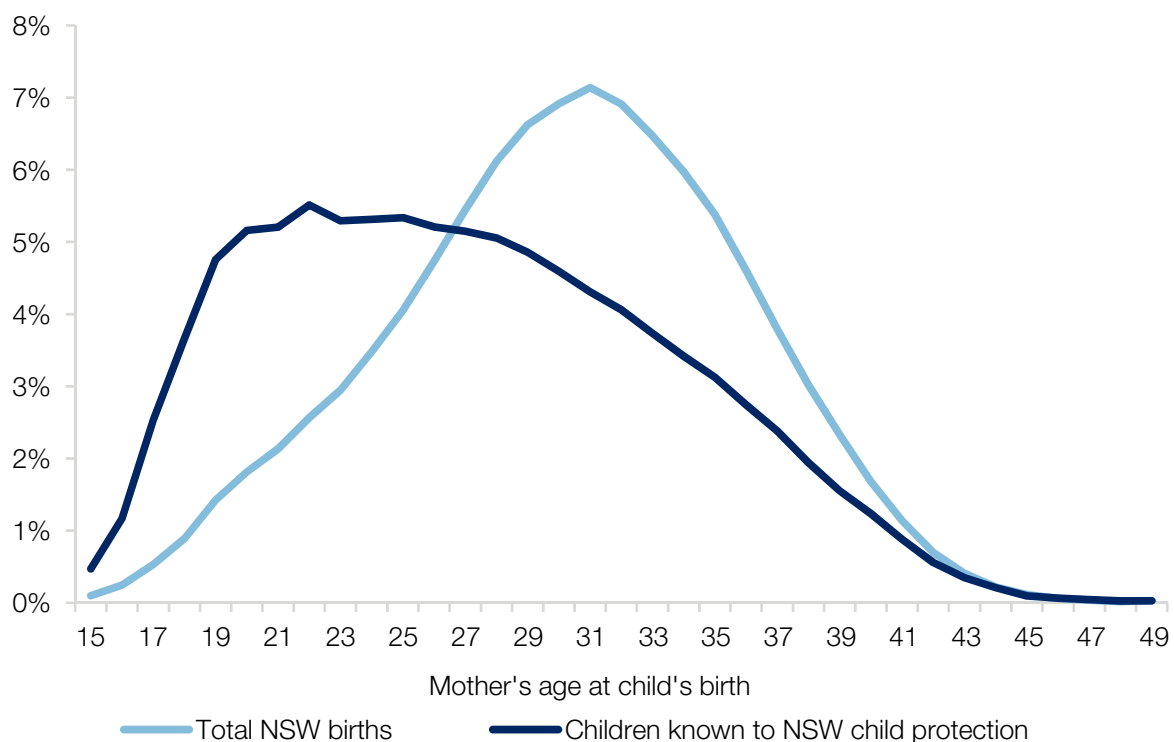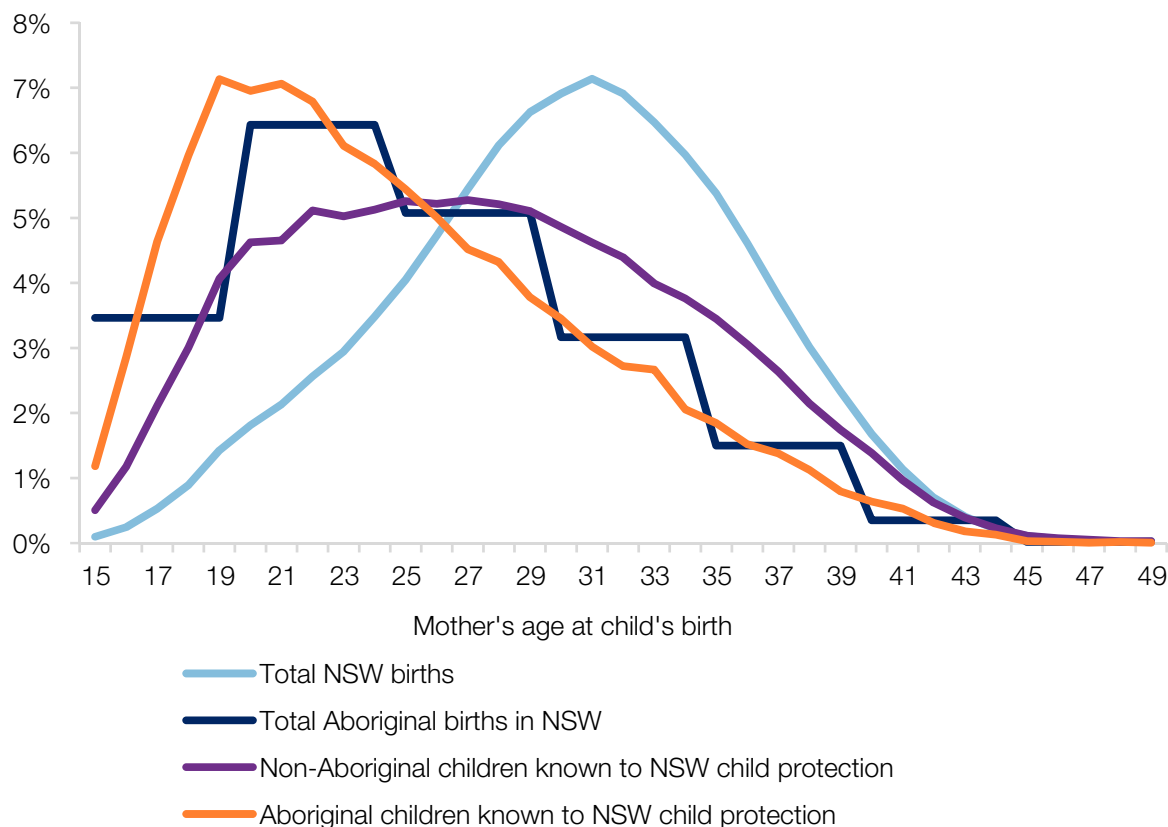

Source: FACSIAR Economics Supply Model and Intergenerational subsidiary table, 1 July 2004 to 30 June 2018. ABS cat.no 3301.0: Fertility, by age, by state.

Maternal age is a powerful predictor of contact with the child protection system. The children known to the NSW child protection system are 3.5 times more likely to be born to a mother aged 20 and under, compared to the total NSW population (18% of those known to NSW child protection compared to 5% of the NSW population). Further, they are twice as likely to be born to a mother aged 26 and under compared to the NSW population (50% compared to 25%). The maternal age of 27 appears to represent a turning point between the over and under-representation in the child protection system. The risk to children of being involved in the child protection system who are born after this age drop substantially.

---

† This is further supported by the NSW Mothers and Babies 2018 report, which shows that the proportion of mothers who were aged 19 and under has dropped from 2.7% in 2014 to 2.2% in 2016 and again to 1.9% in 2018, although these proportions vary widely across NSW. NSW Health 2019, NSW Mothers and Babies 2018, viewed 25 May 2020, https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/hsnsw/Pages/mothers-and-babies-2018.aspx

Maternal ages for mothers of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children also differ. Figure 2 shows the different maternal age distributions for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children who are known to the NSW child protection system, as well as the distributions for all NSW births and all Aboriginal births in NSW. The navy blue line showing the distribution for Aboriginal births is stepped as the Aboriginal birth numbers provided by the ABS are only available in age groups. In order to prepare this chart, we have taken the number of births provided for each age group and spread them evenly between the individual ages within each group.

Figure 2: Distribution of maternal ages, for births from 2007 to 2016, by Aboriginality

Mother's age at child's birth

——— Total NSW births

——— Total Aboriginal births in NSW

——— Non-Aboriginal children known to NSW child protection

——— Aboriginal children known to NSW child protection

Source: FACSIAR Economics Supply Model and Intergenerational subsidiary table, 1 July 2004 to 30 June 2018.
ABS cat.no. 3301.0: Fertility, by age, by state.
ABS cat.no. 3301.0: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fertility, by age, by state.

For children known to the NSW child protection system, the median maternal age for Aboriginal children is 23 years, compared to 26 years for non-Aboriginal children. For Aboriginal children there is a smaller difference between the median maternal age for all births and that for the children who are known to NSW child protection.

Young maternal age is a risk factor for child protection

Figure 3 below shows the likelihood that a child in NSW will be known to the NSW child protection system, be reported at ROSH or in OOHC based on maternal age.[‡] This is irrespective of Aboriginality. We calculated this by dividing the number of children in the child protection system by the number of children born in NSW between 2007 and 2016, for each maternal age.

---

‡ A child can become known to DCJ by being the subject of a concern report but subsequently not be assessed to be at ROSH. We selected these three different levels (known to DCJ, reported at ROSH, and in OOHC) to illustrate the varying levels of service intensity within the child protection system.

Figure 3: Children known to the NSW child protection system as a proportion of all children born in NSW from 2007 to 2016
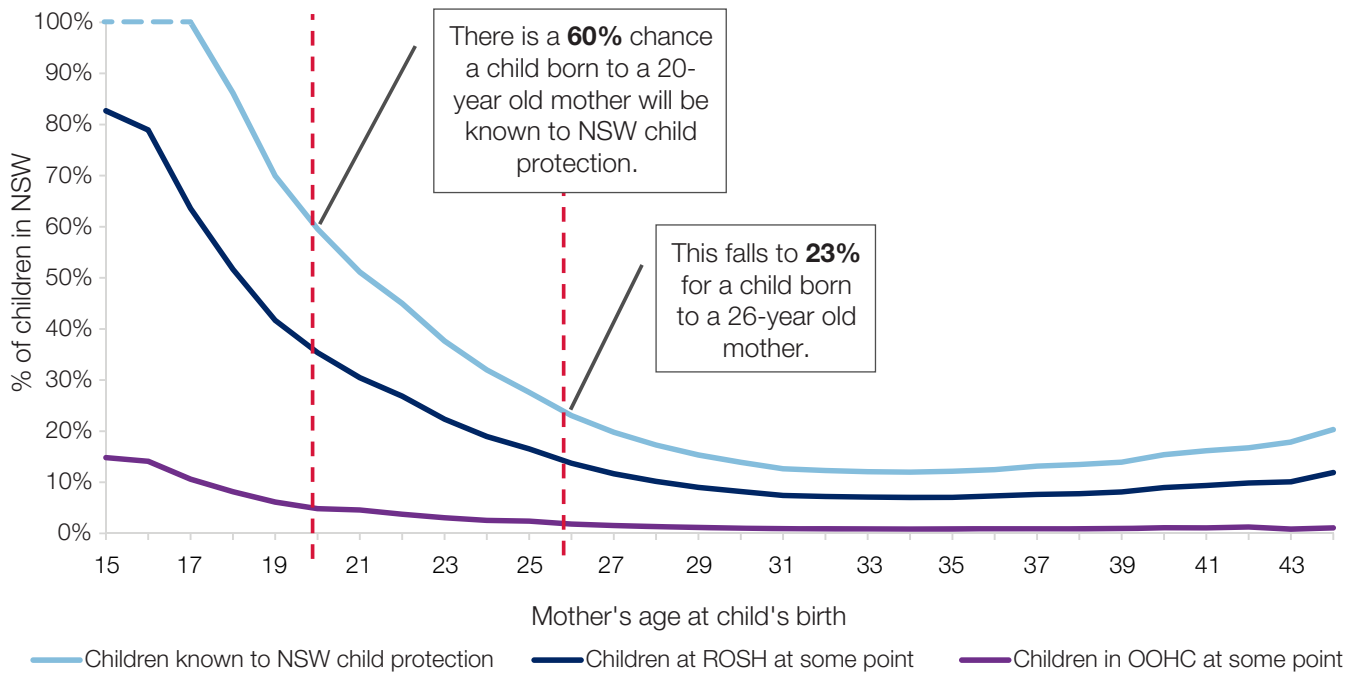
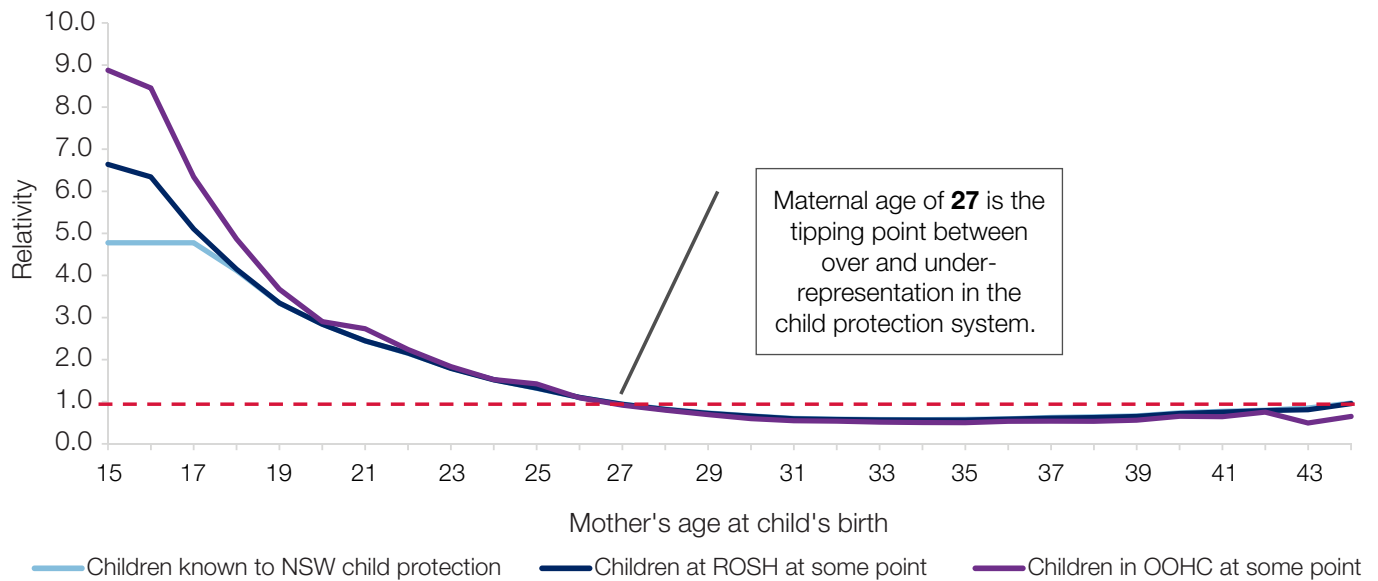Source: FACSIAR Economics Supply Model and Intergenerational subsidiary table, 1 July 2004 to 30 June 2018. ABS cat.no. 3301.0: Fertility, by age, by state.
Note: Dashed line indicates lower data quality.

The likelihoods for each category all have a similar shape, with relatively high likelihoods for the youngest maternal ages, then dropping to relatively flat levels for mothers aged 30 and upwards. A child born to a 20 year old mother has around a 60% chance of being known to NSW child protection, around a one in three chance of being reported at ROSH and a one in 20 chance of being in OOHC. For children born to mothers younger than 20, the risk is even higher.

We can compare these likelihoods at each maternal age to the average likelihood across all maternal ages. This gives us the relative likelihoods, which are shown in Figure 4. The values on the vertical axis represent the number of times more likely than average a child is to be known to NSW child protection, be reported at ROSH or be in OOHC during their childhood. For example, a child born to a 20-year old mother is around three times more likely than average to be known to NSW child protection, to be reported at ROSH and to be in OOHC. These relativities highlight the impact of young maternal age. As before, these figures do not adjust for Aboriginality.

Figure 4: Likelihood a child will require services, relative to average likelihood, by maternal age for births between 2007 and 2016

Source: FACSIAR Economics Supply Model and Intergenerational subsidiary table, 1 July 2004 to 30 June 2018. ABS cat.no. 3301.0: Fertility, by age, by state.

For all three groups of children, the age of 27 appears to be the maternal age up until which point children are more likely than average to be known to the NSW child protection system, to be at ROSH and to be in OOHC.

Generally, younger parents and their children are a vulnerable group. Younger mothers are at higher risk of poverty, malnutrition, pregnancy complications, emotional and mental health problems, and drug and alcohol use. Their children are also at higher risk of physical, cognitive and emotional problems. These issues, and not simply a younger maternal age, all contribute to the higher prevalence of children with these characteristics coming into contact with the child protection system.

Even controlling for maternal age, Aboriginal children are more likely to have contact with the child protection system

Maternal age is still a significant, but less powerful predictor for Aboriginal children. As described earlier, there are many factors contributing to the over-representation of Aboriginal children in the NSW child protection system. Being Aboriginal in itself is not a contribute risk factor, however Aboriginal people are more likely to experience disadvantage across a range of domains.

While Aboriginal children born to younger mothers are more likely to be in the child protection system, Aboriginal children born to older mothers remain over-represented relative to non-Aboriginal children. The degree of over-representation is shown by the pale blue bars in Figure 5, which refer to the axis on the right-hand side of the figure. Where the pale blue bars are greater than one, Aboriginal children are more likely than non-Aboriginal children to be known to the NSW child protection system. For example, an Aboriginal child born to a mother aged between 25 and 29 is 2.5 times more likely to be known to NSW child protection than a non-Aboriginal child born to a mother of the same age.

Figure 5: Likelihood a child will be known to NSW child protection, by Aboriginality and maternal age for births between 2007 and 2016
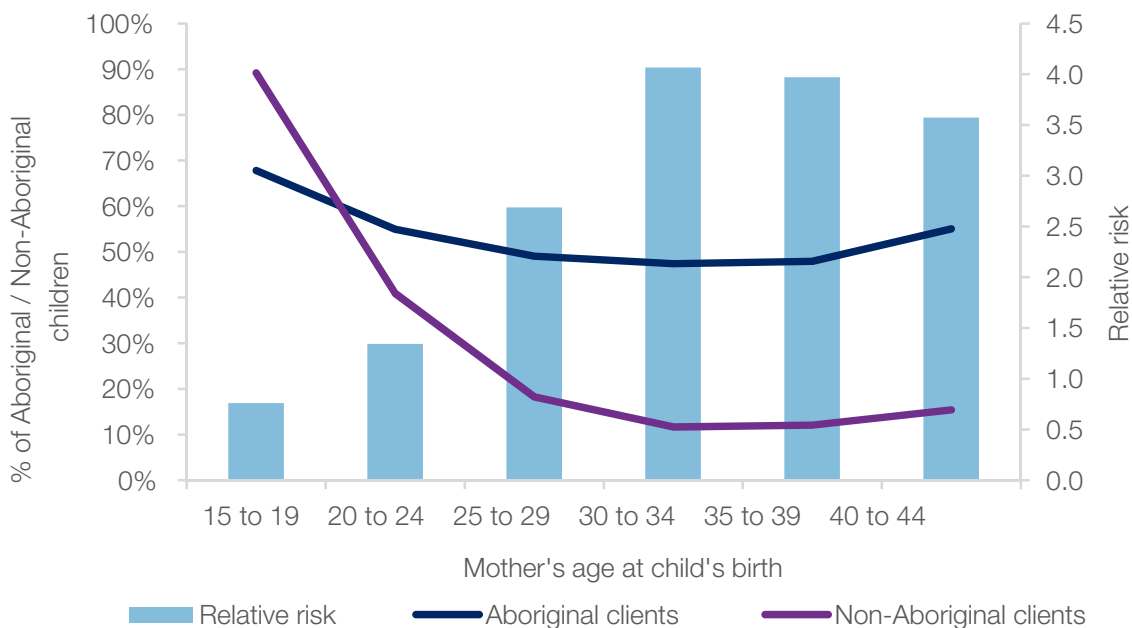
Source: FACSIAR Economics Supply Model and Intergenerational subsidiary table, 1 July 2004 to 30 June 2018.
ABS cat.no. 3301.0: Fertility, by age, by state.
ABS cat.no. 3301.0: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fertility, by age, by state.

The curves for Aboriginal clients are a lot flatter across the different maternal age groups than those for non-Aboriginal clients, indicating that the proportion of Aboriginal clients does not decrease with maternal age as it does for non-Aboriginal clients. It also indicates that there are factors other than those analysed here which contribute to the likelihood that a child will enter the child protection system.

Limitations

The child protection data does not include the mother's date of birth for all children who are known to the NSW child protection system. To adjust for this, when considering the proportion of NSW children who are known to NSW child protection by maternal age we have adjusted and scaled the numbers of children known to achieve the known prevalence rates of accessing services irrespective of maternal age.

There may be a bias in the clients for whom we don't have the mother's date of birth, as generally speaking, the more contact with the child protection system and more intensive services that a child has received, the more likely their mother's date of birth is to become known. This should be intuitive as the more contact a caseworker has with a family, the more opportunities they have to capture this information.

This analysis focusses on the importance of maternal age on the likelihood of a child coming into contact with the child protection system. It does not take into account the many other known and often correlated risk factors contributing to the likelihood a child will require child protection services, such as domestic or family violence, alcohol and other drug use, mental health problems and contact with the justice system. The datasets required to perform an analysis on these additional factors are still under development.

Where to from here?

This analysis has quantified how maternal age impacts on the likelihood that a child will be known to the NSW child protection system, be reported at ROSH or be in OOHC. It can be combined with the finding from the earlier FACSIAR brief[5] which identified that 90% of the teenage parents of children who were at ROSH, were themselves at ROSH or in OOHC when they were children. Together these findings can contribute to developing ways to identify the vulnerable children who are more likely to be a part of an intergenerational chain of dependency on the child protection system. Once these children are identified, they can be prioritised for caseworker follow up, early intervention or access to a service. Focusing on these higher risk children will improve outcomes for them and their families, as well as potentially reducing the long-term expected costs of child protection services.

This work, in combination with previously published papers, suggests that providing support to empower at-risk teenage girls and young women, in particular those who have themselves been at ROSH or in OOHC, to avoid pregnancy and focus on education and work as a pathway out of disadvantage. This will also help to reduce the number of vulnerable children who require child protection support. This could also contribute to reducing the impact of intergenerational disadvantage on children in NSW.

The NSW Government has implemented a range of programs and measures to support young parents and their children. Whole of government reforms aim to strengthen the DCJ and Ministry of Health response to the needs of vulnerable children and their families. The NSW Government has acknowledged the importance of the first 2000 days of a child's life in relation to their physical, cognitive, social and emotional development. What happens in the first 2000 days has been shown to have an impact throughout the child's life. In light of this, young parents with known vulnerabilities, or who are experiencing a number of hardships are one of the key groups supported under the DCJ Targeted Early Intervention (TEI) program. This program aims to support families, children and young people earlier, and prevent the escalation of vulnerability. Through the TEI program young parents can benefit from a range of parenting, practical, advocacy and other supports to help them build a nurturing and stimulating home environment for their child, and connect with the services they need to raise their child, secure independence and support themselves and their family.

Young parents are also supported through the Red Cross Young Parents Program, which is aimed towards parents aged 13 to 25 with complex needs. The aim of this program is to help young parents and their children to build independence and resilience through nurturing residential accommodation and outreach programs.

In addition, there are a number of programs which provide support to all parents including young parents:

- SafeCare is a practical in-home 18-week program for families at risk of, or with a history of, child abuse and neglect.

- Functional Family Therapy – Child Welfare (FFT-CW®) is a home-based treatment program for families with substantiated physical abuse and/or neglect of a child or young person aged up to 17 years.

- Brighter Futures is a family preservation program offering early intervention child protection services delivering a range of tailored services.

Produced by
Hannah Kenyon & Mia Hui
Family and Community Services Insights,
Analysis and Research (FACSIAR)
NSW Department of Communities and Justice
320 Liverpool Rd, Ashfield NSW 2131
www.dcj.nsw.gov.au
Email: facsiar@facs.nsw.gov.au

Endnotes

[1] Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018, *NSW births data: Fertility, by age, by state*, ABS cat. no. 3301.0, ABS, Canberra.

[2] Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018, *Aboriginal births data: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fertility, by age, by state*, ABS cat. no. 3301.0, ABS, Canberra.

[3] Green, MJ, Kariuki, M, Chilvers, M, Butler, M, Katz, I, Burke, S, Tzoumakis, S, Laurens, KR, Harris, F & , Carr, VC 2019, 'Inter-agency indicators of out-of-home-care placement by age 13-14 years: A population record linkage study', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, vol. 93, pp.91-102.

[4] Arney, F & Chong, A 2018, *Identifying early intervention and prevention pathways for child protection concerns raised in pregnancy: preliminary findings from child protection departmental case file reviews*, Australian Centre for Child Protection, University of South Australia, Adelaide, SA.

[5] FACS Insights, Analysis and Research, NSW Department of Communities and Justice 2019, *NSW child protection reports involving children with teenage parents in 2016-17*, viewed 6 April 2020, https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/download?file=674192

10-2021_Maternal Age E2A_09-04-21