



Evidence Brief: A Study of the Impact of Teen Parent Units on Young Mothers' Educational Outcomes

About Teen Parent Units

Teen Parent Units (TPUs) are special purpose units hosted by mainstream secondary schools. The units are designed to improve access to schooling and to promote positive educational outcomes for teenagers who are pregnant or parents. They are often on the same site as the governing secondary school, but in some cases are off-site. In addition to the standard school curriculum, TPU students generally receive wrap-around support, early childhood education for their children (often on-site), and links with health and social services.

The first TPU was set up in Porirua in 1994. Since then, units have progressively been established in other parts of the country. Before a new TPU is set up, there needs to be interest from a potential governing school, evidence that a minimum of 15 students are ready to enrol, evidence of roll sustainability, space available to accommodate a TPU and links with an early childhood education service. The Ministry of Education is the final arbiter on resourcing a new TPU. At the time this study was undertaken, 23 TPUs were in operation.

There have been multiple reports on TPUs by the Education Review Office (ERO). These have looked closely at performance, process and governance issues, and document a range of practices that would be expected to improve the educational, social, and health outcomes of students and the children. At the same time, however, they highlight difficulties with student attendance and retention, and while most TPUs are assessed as performing well, some are not. Small studies have provided evidence that young mothers who attend TPUs often report that this has been helpful in changing their lives for the better.

To date there has been no quantitative study that establishes whether TPUs are effective in improving educational outcomes, and internationally, there have been few robust studies of the effectiveness of such schools. In consultation with the Ministry of Education and other social sector agencies, the Ministry of Social Development commissioned this study with the aim of filling this gap in the evidence base.

The Study

The study used new linked research data from across education and other social services. Quasi-experimental impact evaluation methods were applied to estimate the difference that TPUs make. These methods used the "natural experiment" created by the fact that TPUs are not available nationwide.

Key Findings

Study results suggest that access to a TPU in the local area had large positive impacts on teenage mothers' school enrolment rates and school qualifications.

The baseline school enrolment rate after birth for the teenage mothers studied was 35 percent. Those who had access to a TPU within 20 km were estimated to be 4 percentage points more likely to enrol in a school after giving birth (statistically significant at the 5 percent level). Those who had good access to a TPU by virtue of being enrolled at conception in a school that hosted a TPU were an additional 11 percentage points more likely to enrol (significant at the 1 percent level) and were estimated to be more likely to attain NCEA Level 1 and 2 qualifications post-birth (significant at the 1 and 5 percent levels respectively).

The study estimates that for teen mothers without qualifications who enrolled in school post-birth, enrolling in a school with a TPU increased the probability of attaining NCEA Level 1 by 22 percentage points from 37 to 59 percent (significant at the 5 percent level).

Robustness tests provided no evidence that the positive results could be explained by schools that host TPUs being associated with better educational outcomes for young women overall, or by ready access to a TPU altering teenage birth patterns.

Impact evaluations using quasi-experimental methods and based on administrative data have a number of limitations. They do not allow all of the outcomes sought by programmes like TPUs to be measured, and errors in data linkage and data limitations inevitably result in some degree of imprecision in the estimation of true impacts. Nevertheless such studies can make a useful contribution, especially when randomised trials are not feasible or are unable to be justified on ethical grounds.

The study points to opportunities for future study to examine the impact of TPUs on longer-term outcomes, including mothers' post-school educational participation and earnings, and on children's health and early childhood education participation.

An important topic for future study is whether the impact of TPUs has altered with changes introduced in late 2012 which made enrolment in education, training or work-based learning compulsory for young parents aged 16 to 18 receiving social welfare benefits, once their children reach 6 or 12 months of age (6 months if a place at a TPU is available).

Upcoming evaluation of the "Teen Parents in Mainstream Schools" pilot

In 2014, the Ministry of Education set up the "Teen Parents in Mainstream Schools" pilot programme to provide additional support to schools and students in areas where a TPU was either not available, or an existing unit did not have the capacity to take on additional students. This pilot programme is currently undergoing evaluation.

Together, the new evaluation studies will help build the evidence base to support future policy and funding decisions.

For a copy of the study, see Vaithianathan, R., Maloney, T., Wilson, M., Staneva, A., and Jiang, N. (2017). *Impact of School-Based Support on Educational Outcomes of Teen-Mothers: Evidence from New Zealand's "Teen Parent Units"*. Working Paper. Ministry of Social Development. <http://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/working-papers/index.html>