

## African American Male Risk for Teen Fatherhood

African American males face significant challenges in South Carolina and across the country. **African American males are more likely to become teen fathers than white males**<sup>1,2</sup>. The risk factors for teen fatherhood among African American males are related to sexual behavior, family structure, academic performance, and environmental characteristics. **79%** of African American males in South Carolina public high schools report having had sexual intercourse compared to 53% of comparable white males<sup>3</sup>. In South Carolina, African American adolescent males are **more likely to live in low income households**, to have repeated a grade level, and have experience with the juvenile justice system. These risk factors are related to teen fatherhood but also represent the broad challenges facing young African American men as they navigate schools, family, relationships, and peers. Given the complexity of the barriers confronting these young men, strategies to help them must **build on the strengths of African American males** and draw on the various organizations and institutions intended to serve them. In this publication, risk factors associated with teen fatherhood are described and recommendations are offered.

### **METHODS**

The purpose of the project was to gain a better understanding of the status of teen males, with particular emphasis on African Americans. The South Carolina Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (SC Campaign) identified studies on risk factors for teen fatherhood and other related risk factors and requested data from

the South Carolina Office of Research and Statistics (ORS). A cohort of over 84,000 15-18 year old males enrolled in South Carolina public school during the 2009-2010 school year was analyzed by ORS. Data were incorporated from several sources, including South Carolina Department of Education (SCDOE), Medicaid, South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice (SCDJJ), South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (SCDHEC), South Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (SCDHHS), and South Carolina Department of Social Services (SCDSS).

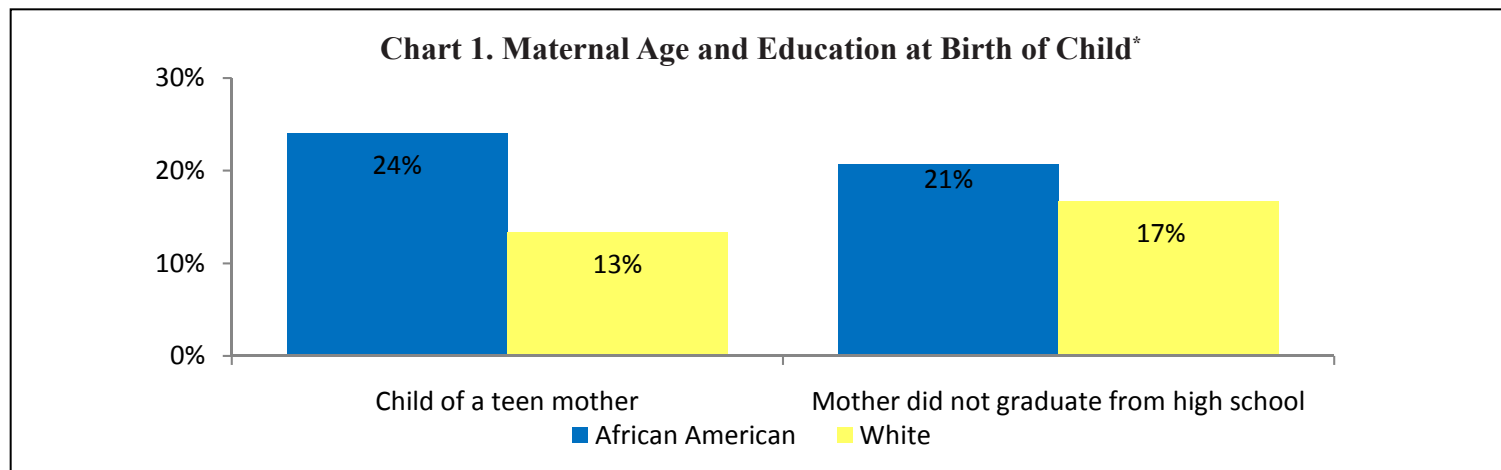
The data included 1) family structure, defined as maternal age and education when the cohort member was born and history of foster care; 2) academic performance, defined as testing below basic on standardized tests of language arts and math, and the 'Potential Performance Report' (PPR) which is a composite variable created by the SCDOE that includes measures of poverty, attendance, grades, and disciplinary actions; and 3) environmental risk factors such as low income status, defined by enrollment on Medicaid, eligibility for free or reduced lunch, and residential mobility, defined as changing schools at least five times. Sexual risk behaviors were identified using Youth Risk Behavior Survey data from 2011.

### **PREVALENCE OF RISK AMONG SC TEEN MALES**

Literature suggests the most important risk factors among African American males include chronic drug use, childhood behavioral problems, a high number of sexual partners, early sexual initiation, gang membership and delinquency, a low GPA, parental academic achievement, and neighborhood characteristics. Overall, behavioral and environmental factors were the most significant risk factors for teen fatherhood and research suggests that risk is compounded when multiple risk factors are present<sup>1</sup>. Data from ORS showed that African American teens experience several risk factors at higher rates than white males in South Carolina.

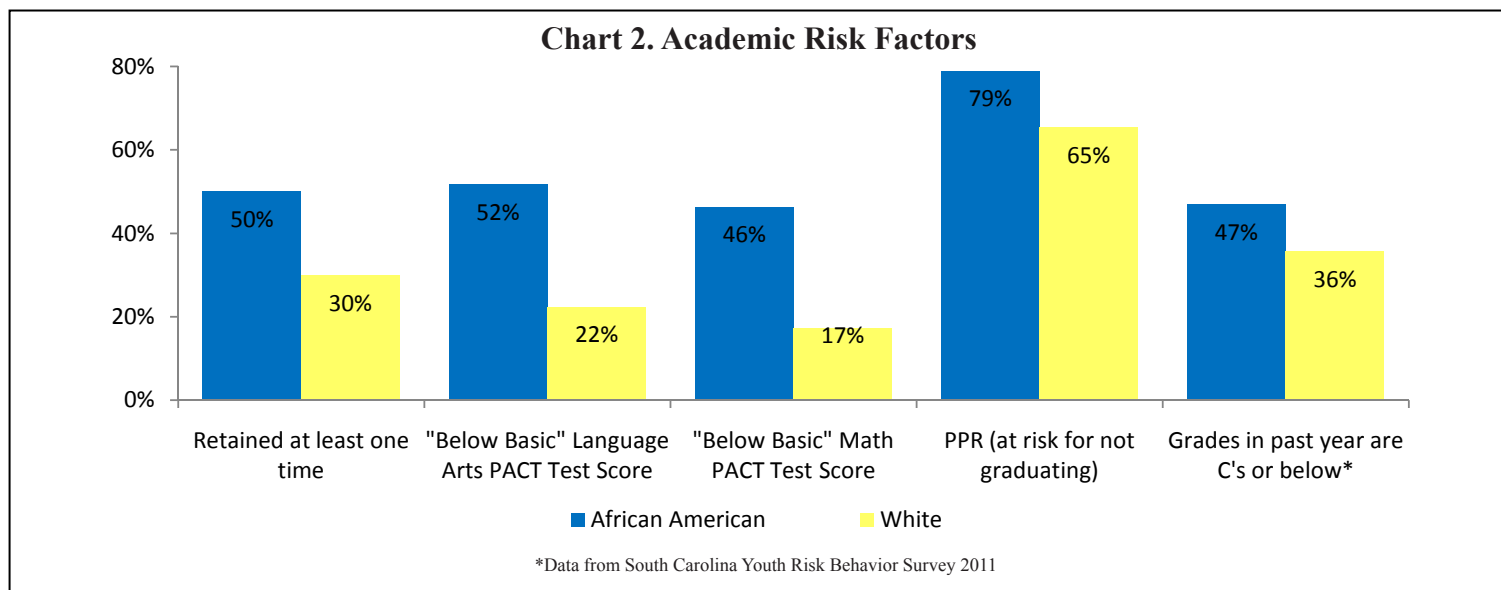
## Family structure and characteristics

Being from a highly involved family and having well-educated parents can protect against teen fatherhood<sup>1, 4, 5,6,7,8</sup>. Moving frequently, experiencing many changes in family structure, being the child of a teen parent, and not having a strong father-son relationship increases risk for teen fatherhood<sup>1,6,9,10,11</sup>. Being from a single parent family is a risk factor, but appears less significant for African American teen males compared to females or males of other races<sup>10</sup>. While South Carolina data were not available for all risk factors indentified in the literature, African American males were more likely than white males to experience family-related risk factors such as having a mother who did not graduate from high school and being the child of a teen mother (Chart 1). African American males were more likely (4.8%) to have been in foster care at least once compared to white males (2.1%).



## Academic Performance

Low grade point average was one of the most strongly correlated risk factors for teen fatherhood and early sexual initiation, but commitment to school and college aspirations were not as strongly correlated as researchers expected<sup>1,5,6,9,11,12,13,14</sup>. In South Carolina, African American males were more likely than white males to experience academic risk factors such as below basic scores on standardized tests, school retention, and grades of C's and below (Chart 2). Students were identified by SCDOE as at risk for not graduating using the PPR Risk Indicator based on a combination of academic and economic factors; 79% of African American males have received this designation (Chart 2).

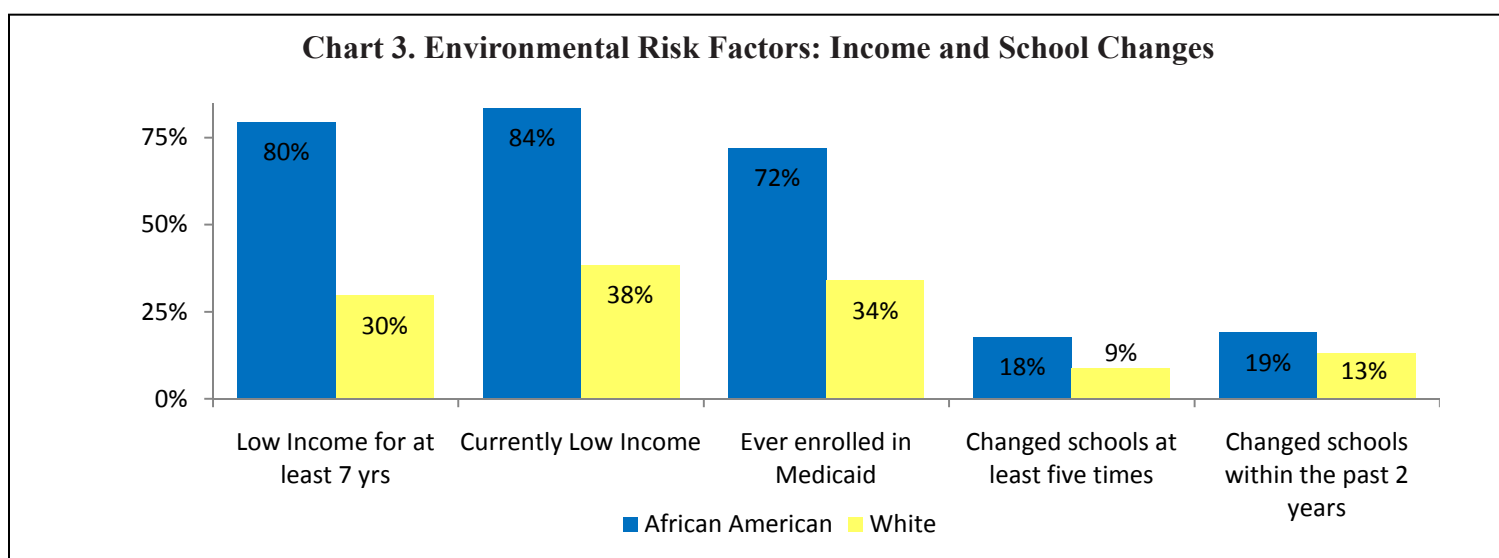


\*Note: maternal age and education based on birth certificates, which were available for only 5,562 males (or 7% of entire cohort)

## Environmental Characteristics

Many studies find that poverty is a less significant risk factor than expected, and the total number of years a child spends in poverty may be more predictive than poverty at any one point in their lives<sup>1,6,8,11,14,15</sup>. Residential mobility and neighborhoods that are disorganized, highly segregated, have high arrest rates, and have widespread drug use are environmental risks for teen fatherhood<sup>1,6,8,12,15,16,17</sup>.

In South Carolina, African American males are more likely than white males to be in low income households and change schools frequently (Chart 3). Eighty percent of African American males between the ages of 15-18 have been in low income households for at least seven years compared to 30% of white males (Chart 3). In this publication, 'low income' is defined as receiving at least one means tested benefit such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance, free or reduced lunch and/or Medicaid. Medicaid enrollment was much higher among African American males (72%) than white males (34%). As a proxy for residential mobility, the number of school changes were measured. Twice the percent of African American males had changed schools at least five times (18%) compared to white males (9%) and a higher percentage of African American males had changed schools in the last two years (19%) compared to white males (13%).



## Risk Behaviors

Certain actions or behaviors are associated with increased risk of teen fatherhood among African American males, including behavior problems in school, particularly early childhood aggression<sup>6,11,18</sup>; delinquency, including committing criminal acts; drug and alcohol use; general risk taking behaviors; and dropping out of school<sup>1,11,14,15,18</sup>; having sex for the first time at a young age<sup>1,2,6,7,9,10,14</sup>; having a high number of sexual partners<sup>7,13</sup>; having a history of sexually transmitted disease<sup>7,10,13</sup>; using condoms inconsistently<sup>7,10,13</sup>; having a girlfriend at a young age<sup>1,7,10</sup>; substance use and abuse<sup>1,4,6,14,18</sup>; associating with peers who practice risky sexual behaviors or delinquent behaviors<sup>1,4,10</sup>; and gang membership<sup>1,14</sup>.

South Carolina specific data were not available for all of the behavioral risk factors. However, the available data suggest that a large percentage of South Carolina African American males experience these risks. African American males in South Carolina public schools reported higher rates of riskier sexual behavior, such as having had sexual intercourse, having had sexual intercourse before age 13, and having four or more partners compared to white males<sup>3</sup>. Rates of gang membership and referrals to the Department of Juvenile Justice were about twice as high among African American males<sup>3</sup>.

Category	Risk Behavior	African American	White
Drug Use (YRBS 2011)	Used marijuana 20 or more times in past 30 days	14%	11%
	Used marijuana at least once in the past 30 days	29%	29%
	Used marijuana for the first time before age 13	20%	13%
	Taken a prescription drug (i.e. Ritalin) without a prescription	14%	25%
Delinquency	Gang membership in last year (YRBS 2011)	17%	9%
	Referred to the SC Department of Juvenile Justice (ORS data)	26%	13%
	Have had sexual intercourse	79%	53%
Sexual Behavior (YRBS 2011)	First sex before age 13	33%	9%
	4 or more sexual partners	40%	20%
	Sexually active teens using no form of contraception at last sex	23%	22%

## DISCUSSION

Many of the risk factors associated with teen fatherhood among African American males would be cause for concern even without this association. Disproportionately poor academic performance, persistent low income status, and involvement with juvenile justice and gang activity are barriers to becoming healthy and successful adults. In particular, academic performance is particularly troubling given that the cohort includes only those students who are still enrolled in South Carolina public schools and does not include young men who have dropped out of school.

These data are a sobering reminder of the need to commit to investing resources in South Carolina that may improve the lives of African American males. While these challenges are stark, it is important to remember that many African American males do not create a pregnancy and succeed despite facing these obstacles. The relationship between these risk factors and teen fatherhood suggest that any interventions designed to prevent teen fatherhood should also address related risk behaviors and environmental factors.

Institutionalized racism and poverty create significant barriers for African American males and their families. While there are a few teen pregnancy prevention programs designed specifically for African American males, it is clear from the research described in this report than the risk factors for teen fatherhood influence many other social issues and a holistic response by education, social service, juvenile justice and other youth serving organizations is needed.

## NOTEWORTHY

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