The Young Parents Study documents the experiences of young parents (aged 15-24) with a variety of health, education, and social service programs and policies. Using interviews and fieldwork at a number of young parent programs in Prince George and Greater Vancouver, the study aims to gather information that can be used to improve services and supports for young parents and their children.

This study is funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and led by Dr. Jeannie Shoveller of UBC's School of Population and Public Health.

133 participants have completed at least one interview since the project began in 2013.
Findings

1. Respecting Young Parents

Young parents encounter stereotypes and negative judgements from other people on a regular basis. Like all of us, they would appreciate being treated with respect in their day-to-day lives, including at work, home and school, on public transportation, as well as within the health and social service systems. In particular, they described their desires to be treated respectfully within the labour and delivery experience – appreciating family members and health care workers who respect their autonomy, privacy and cultural traditions regarding the birth experience.
2. Educational Opportunities

School-based young parent programs provide key supports to young parents, including flexible schedules, subsidized on-site daycare, and meals. Young parents told us that these kinds of supports help them to complete high school – and to pursue education beyond high school. Participants also told us that they wanted course offerings within school-based young parent programs to be expanded, so that the courses offered to them would help them qualify for university or college admission. Introducing such courses within school-based young parent programs could eliminate the need to “upgrade” their skills after completing high school in order to qualify for college or university admissions.

3. Fitness and Recreation Services

Subsidized or free recreation programs and fitness classes are appreciated greatly. Participants told us that this programming helps their physical fitness, contributes to stress management, and offers them additional opportunities to gain confidence. Receiving academic credit related to physical education course credit requirements by attending these programs is also an important benefit to young parents.

4. Food Security

Many young parents in BC do not receive sufficient income to cover the high cost of housing and the high cost of food, especially organic foods. Young parents who experience food allergies (or have children who do) also find it hard to access foods that are affordable and healthy for them to eat. In Prince George, some young parents have difficulty accessing the largest local food bank in the city because of recent policy changes (a new rule requires agency-specific IDs be presented). Other smaller food banks in Prince George can only provide food hampers a few times per year because of limited funding. In Greater Vancouver, many young parents in our study also access food through school, community programs, or a food bank. They spoke about feeling judged by others because of food choices that they were forced to make (e.g., canned rather than fresh fruit in their children’s school lunches), as ‘healthy’ food choices often cost more.

5. Housing

Young parents often have trouble finding affordable, safe, and well-maintained housing that is close to public transit or other services. Young parents also face discrimination from landlords (e.g., they are exposed to negative comments about their personal lives; they are denied access to housing because they have children). This is a long-standing challenge facing young parents in BC and urgent action is required on this issue.
Many young parents have told us that transportation is a major barrier to accessing services, getting to work or school, or completing important daily activities (e.g., grocery shopping). Public transportation also is a space where many young parents are exposed to stereotypes and other negative judgements. Participants have told us that other passengers and bus drivers often make negative comments about their age and parenting skills. During rush hours, it can be especially difficult to find space on a bus for a stroller.

Expanded access to STI/HIV testing services also deserves consideration. In particular, participants in Prince George are concerned about the reduction in services provided at the local health unit and expressed discomfort about being referred to the local syringe distribution program as an alternative site for sexual and reproductive health services.

In April 2016, we concluded data collection in Greater Vancouver. We will conclude data collection in Prince George in Spring 2017. The next stage of the project will focus on making recommendations about policies and programs to better meet the needs of young parents.

For more information about the Young Parents Study, please visit our website: http://youthsexualhealth.ubc.ca.