Our Study

The Young Parents Study documented the experiences of parents between the ages of 15-24 with a variety of health, education, and social service programs and policies. Using longitudinal interviews and fieldwork at a number of Young Parent Programs in Prince George (PG) and Greater Vancouver (GV), the study aimed 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.

Participants
When answering this question, participants could choose more than one category.

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**Ethnicity**

- 43 young mothers (38%) and 14 young fathers (12%) identified themselves as Indigenous
- 39 young mothers (35%) and 8 young fathers (7%) identified themselves as white (Caucasian)
- 18 young mothers (16%) and 3 young fathers (3%) identified as at least one of the following: South East Asian, South Asia, Latino, Filipino, Chinese or Black

**Sexual Orientation**

Sexual orientation data is based on intake interview.

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**Educational Attainment**

- Prince George:
  - 39% PG young mothers
  - 13% PG young fathers
  - 1% GV young mothers
  - 9% GV young fathers

- Greater Vancouver:
  - 44% GV young mothers
  - 22% GV young fathers
  - 11% PG young mothers
  - 4% PG young fathers
  - 2% Some college or university
  - 1% Graduated high school
  - 2% Graduated college or university
  - 4% Some high school
Key Findings

Attitudes Towards Young Parents

Many young parents in our study told us that they frequently encounter stereotypes from others in their community. Young parents reported that people often make assumptions about their maturity, parenting skills, and sexuality. This stigma is often based on a young parent’s age, as well as perceived ethnicity, family background, or social class. These negative experiences take place in a variety of contexts – at school, while shopping, on public transit, at work, and while accessing health care and social services.

“I went to go visit my grandma once and this lady, she’s like, ‘Aw, how old is she?’ ‘Eight months.’ And then she’s like, ‘And how old are you?’ I’m like, ‘Nineteen. And that just means I get to love her longer,’ and I smiled and walked away. Like, you are not going to faze me. I don’t care, what does your opinion matter? Does your opinion change my future? No.” – Rascal North, young mother, Prince George

Some parents spoke about how Young Parent Programs (YPPs) can provide a safe space in which the stigmatizing attitudes they encounter in their daily lives are left behind. This kind of non-judgmental understanding and support was one reason why many young parents continue to attend YPPs:

“I just needed some support and a place to go hang out and...you know, [sighs] to kind of forget about all that outside stuff, right. I didn’t need to come into an environment where I’m, like, don’t feel completely comfortable.” – Tiffany, young mother, Greater Vancouver

One critical event in young parents’ lives where it is especially important for them to be treated with respect and autonomy is when they experience labour and birth. Health care providers and family members who respect the wishes and decisions of young mothers can help to create a positive birth experience and reinforce a young woman’s confidence in her ability to be a good mother. Incorporating cultural traditions into the birth process was also important to some young mothers.

“[My doctor] was really amazing. She made me so calm. [...] Yeah she was really good. [...] Like, when she walked away from me, I got anxiety and when she came back, I was like ‘Oh, it’s fine.’” – Brittany, young mother, Greater Vancouver
In both Prince George and Greater Vancouver, young parents face significant barriers to finding and keeping safe, affordable, well-maintained housing that is located close to public transit, school, and other services. Young parents also frequently encounter discrimination from landlords (e.g., they are denied housing because they have children or because of their age). Access to resources and services was difficult to attain for many young parents, especially in time-sensitive situations such as moving at the end of the month. Poor housing conditions (e.g., black mold, pests) that are not addressed in a timely manner (if at all) by landlords compel many young parents to move, which can negatively affect their schooling, work, or childcare.

“The place we were living in was an unhealthy place and the back window was broken. And the landlord wasn’t fixing it. He wasn’t doing anything much about it. And when we decided to move somewhere [else] in that building, we started to get earwigs. And it was getting quite bad and we’re like, ‘We’re going to move.’” – Beth, young mother, Prince George

Affordable social housing units are limited in both communities and many young parents are not eligible to apply due to age or other restrictions (e.g., women-only housing can force a young mom to choose between affordable rent or being able to live with both her child and her male partner). This can create significant challenges for young fathers who are trying to secure housing supports for themselves and their children. Short-term, supportive housing for young parents who want to cohabit is also in short supply.

“I moved back [to PG] because [my son’s] mom wasn’t fit to watch him or take care of him and I seriously have nobody here for support in any way possible. They have halfway houses for women that are evading abusing relationships or their things just didn’t work out, they got kicked out of their house or whatever. There’s places like that for women to go to but there’s not one single place in town for a guy to go to with his child. So I had to stay in a shelter, get a place, and then get furniture and everything – started seriously with nothing.” – ‘Darren’, young father, Prince George
Transportation

Reliable, affordable transportation is a major challenge for many young parents who need to get to school, work, or various services. Most participants in our study were on limited incomes and could not afford their own vehicles, so they relied on public transportation or rides from family, friends, and partners to get around.

In Prince George, the local bus system has a limited range and most routes run once every 30 to 60 minutes. This can create considerable challenges for young parents who do not have access to a vehicle and rely on the bus to get everywhere.

“I feel so stuck here all the time. Like, I’m relying on a bus that only comes every hour so I have to be really early for appointments. Like, say I have a chiropractor appointment at 11:00, for example. To get to the bus stop at the mall at 10:30 I have to leave at 9:45 for an 11:00 appointment. Whereas if I just had a car, it’s like a 15, 20-minute drive, not an hour-long commute.” – Ally, young mother, Prince George

Although Greater Vancouver has a much larger, well-developed transit system, participants reported regular difficulties finding space on buses for a stroller during rush hours. In both communities, young parents often encounter stereotypes when they take public transit. Many participants told us that some bus drivers and passengers make critical comments about their age and parenting skills.

“Bus drivers and people that are on the bus— I don’t like encountering rude people. I just avoid it. So, like, at times I would walk to school 45 minutes ‘cause I don’t want to be around other people. I’ve had someone say some rude things to me like [mocking tone] ‘Phew, all these teen moms,’ right to my face and I was pregnant with my second and had my daughter and I was like, ‘Excuse me?’” – Sarah, young mother, Greater Vancouver
A number of young parents reported experiencing a variety of concerns regarding their personal safety and security, as well as that of their children. This was especially a concern for young mothers. This ranged from interpersonal conflict with difficult housemates or neighbours, to experiences with abusive intimate partners. After their relationships ended, these women sometimes endured ongoing harassment from their ex-partners, which occasionally included stalking and threats to their safety. Many young mothers also expressed concern and frustration with the criminal justice system’s inability to prevent ongoing harassment from ex-partners.

“My son’s father breached one of his conditions so the [RCMP] were called. I have three restraining orders on him. He just shows up. He’s really weird. So a social worker always shows up for that, which makes me really reluctant to call the RCMP, ‘cause as soon as I call the RCMP, then a social worker’s there too. It’s like, ‘Whoa…’ like, it’s really scary as an Indigenous person.” – Maria, young mother, Prince George

Securing affordable, high-quality childcare is a key challenge that a majority of young parents in both communities faced. Many young parents were able to access on-site daycares at Young Parent Programs (YPPs) while they worked toward completing their secondary schooling, and these parents were grateful for the quality, affordable childcare provided. However, most YPP daycares typically do not provide childcare outside of school or business hours, which restricts young parents’ ability to do homework uninterrupted outside of school hours or work part-time.

“The daycare at my school, it’s only while I’m in school. So if I have a spare, I’m supposed to be taking care of her. The moment I leave school, I’m supposed to take her back. And I’m, like, “Where am I going to get time to do homework?” She needs my constant 24-hour attention ‘cause she is three months old. Where am I supposed to be able to do my homework?” – Mary, young mother, Greater Vancouver

Other high-quality childcare options (particularly licensed daycares) typically have lengthy waitlists and high fees that exceed many young parents’ budgets. Some parents were fortunate enough to have family or friends who could provide childcare, but this kind of support was not always available. These limitations created barriers for some young parents’ educational trajectories and job opportunities. The new increased childcare subsidy for young parents\(^1\), which was announced by the provincial government in May 2018, will help young families secure daycare at facilities which may otherwise be unaffordable.
Some young parents also found that they were ineligible for certain supports because they were too young. These barriers limited their ability to live and parent independently.

“There were a lot [of scholarships] available when I started the [post-secondary program] but I didn’t qualify for most of them because you had to be 21. Didn’t really make sense. All the [scholarships for single moms, I didn’t reach the age requirement. I was too young. I was 19 when I was applying for them.” – Meredith, young mother, Greater Vancouver

“[In the Young Parent Program], you have to be 19 or younger and then once you hit 20, you have to go upstairs to [the Adult Education Program]. And then for their daycare, they accept newborns all the way up [to] three years old. And now that [my daughter’s] three, she can’t go there anymore. It kind of sucked ‘caused when I first enrolled into school this year, I was hoping to put her back into daycare and I forgot that she had to be three or younger.” – Violet, young mother, Prince George

Ageing In and Out of Services

Young parents’ access to services (e.g., Young Parent Programs, Youth Agreements\(^2\)) was frequently determined by their own age or the age of their children (e.g., specific childcare programs). Our study participants repeatedly stressed how valuable these programs are as they learn to parent while also working toward completing their secondary school education and pursuing post-secondary training, and most understood why these age limits are necessary. However, many young parents and some service providers told us that more transitional supports are needed to assist some youth as they (and their children) “age out” of these programs.
Educational Opportunities

Young parents report receiving key supports from school-based Young Parent Programs (YPPs). Subsidized on-site daycare, meals, flexible schedules, and supportive staff play a critical role in helping many young parents to obtain their high school diplomas and work toward post-secondary education goals.

“The [YPP] is very flexible. If it wasn’t as flexible as it was it’d be kind of harder to come ‘cause, like, you have so many things to do at home with your child. You’re so tired so sometimes you come a little late and they’re accepting of it and, like, they’re more accepting of you not being there for an appointment or something. They’re very understanding if your child’s sick and stuff like that.” – Crystal, young mother, Greater Vancouver

At some YPPs, participants said they would appreciate a wider range of course offerings, which would help them qualify for college or university admission. Introducing such courses within school-based YPPs could eliminate the need to “upgrade” their skills after completing high school in order to qualify for college or university.

“I am upgrading my Math and English because according to the Ministry of Education, I did not graduate. Basically my whole time through high school was just me trying to catch up on what I missed out in elementary school. So I just had a leaving certificate. So now I’m trying to go for my Dogwood [diploma] at [college].” – Nanaboo, young mother, Prince George

Many young moms and dads in our study struggle to afford the costs associated with going to trade school, college, or university. The reinstatement of free tuition for Adult Basic Education courses by the BC Ministry of Education in September 2017 will help young parents who need to upgrade their marks in order to be eligible for a post-secondary education program. In addition, the establishment of the Provincial Tuition Waiver Program for former youth in care in BC last autumn should also assist more young parents who have been in foster care (and qualify for this program) to access post-secondary education.

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Food Security

Accessing affordable, nutritious food was a significant struggle for many young families in both Prince George and Greater Vancouver. Many young parents told us that they do not have adequate income to cover the high cost of food, especially those who have food allergies (or have children who do). Many young parents in our study accessed food through school, community programs, or food banks. School-based Young Parent Programs provide many young parents and their children with healthy meals as well as

Employment Opportunities and Income Supports

Young mothers and fathers in our study who were able to find employment often worked for a minimum wage (or slightly above). These jobs rarely provided extended health benefits. Other young parents were unable to find work opportunities with flexible working hours and employers who understand their parental responsibilities.

“\text{I have not been able to find a job. I’ve been applying everywhere for the last two months and nobody wants to hire you when you can only work 8:00 to 5:00. One [employer] literally said, ‘Why would I hire you if you’re never going to work?’ I’m like, ‘That’s like 40 hours a week. It’s not like I can’t work.’ And he’s like, ‘No, you need to be able to be on-call and come in whenever I call you.’ I’m like, ‘I have two kids at home. I’m a single mom.’ He’s like, ‘Then why would I hire you?’”} – Kezia, young mother, Prince George

Many study participants relied on Income Assistance for support. A few young mothers lived apart from the working fathers of their children for fear that they would lose Income Assistance, which led to families being separated.
important information about where they could access free and low-cost food from local agencies (e.g., food banks, community kitchens). Unfortunately, most participants in both communities were not aware of programs like bulk grocery buying clubs or Good Food Boxes, which could provide them with low-cost, healthy, and often organic food.

Young parents reported a number of challenges accessing food banks in both communities. Sometimes young parents found the food accessed through local agencies to be poor quality or close to expiration.

“The food bank] wasn’t helpful for us ‘cause everything that they gave you expired, like, that day. So it wasn’t like they gave you food that was going to last you. They literally gave you food that you had to eat within the next three or four days.” – Riley, young mother, Greater Vancouver

In Prince George, recent changes at the city’s largest food bank (e.g., requiring clients to apply for and present identification issued by the food bank instead of government-issued ID; introducing a points-based system that limits the amount of food one can receive each month; and moving the food bank to a larger facility outside of the downtown core) have made it more difficult for many young parents to access this service. Other local agencies that provide free food have fewer barriers but restrict the number of food hampers clients can receive (e.g., one every two months) because of limited funding. Although there are more agencies in Greater Vancouver that provide free and low-cost food, some young parents had difficulty even being able to access these services because of transportation challenges.

“There was a point when I was, like, embarrassed packing lunches for fresh food – I didn’t have fresh foods so I was sending, like, the canned stuff in containers and stuff and I was kind of, like, ‘Oh, I hope her teachers don’t notice’ type thing, right? ‘Cause growing up, my parents lived through a lot of difficulties with making sure there was enough to eat. Um, and I remember my teachers, you know, they would kind of like, ‘Don’t you have food?’ type thing. And I’m worried about them thinking the same thing about [my daughter] and me.” – Rachel, young mother, Greater Vancouver
Infant and Child Feeding Decisions

Many young mothers in our study told us that they want to breastfeed their newborns, but sometimes they encountered difficulties doing so, particularly in the first few days and weeks of their newborn’s life. In some instances, receiving additional support from Labour and Delivery ward nurses before they left the hospital would have helped. Others told us that having a home visit from a public health nurse who is trained to provide lactation support would have helped them to continue breastfeeding their baby because they would not have to wait for an appointment with a lactation consultant at a Health Unit. Many young mothers also used formula but often felt judged by others, despite their varied reasons for doing so. For example, some mothers could not produce adequate breastmilk, experienced ongoing issues with pain and latching on, or needed the flexibility that formula feeding provided in order to meet their work and school commitments.

“My baby wasn’t gaining as much weight as she was supposed to be when I was nursing. Like, she was latching on perfect. She was doing everything she’s supposed to do but my body wasn’t doing – wasn’t meeting her halfway so I took pills to help myself meet her halfway and it still wasn’t happening. So I just quit nursing and all and I got her formula.” Keisha, young mother, Greater Vancouver

Young parents in our study found it both exciting and challenging to introduce their toddlers to solid foods. It was sometimes difficult to get reliable, trustworthy information about when to introduce their children to new foods. Many young mothers reported feeling judged by some service providers (e.g., public health nurses, childcare staff) for feeding their children certain foods that were deemed “inappropriate”. A family’s cultural traditions regarding infant and child feeding practices were sometimes discounted by service providers in favour of what are the “best” solid foods to introduce to toddlers and when to do so.

Cost was also a concern for some young parents when making infant and child feeding decisions. Some low-income young mothers who were unable to breastfeed found it very challenging to afford the cost of formula.

“Kids really aren’t that expensive. The only thing that’s really expensive is formula because I wasn’t able to breastfeed. I went to the breastfeeding clinic and they said my breasts didn’t develop properly during pregnancy. I wasn’t making enough to breastfeed him and he wasn’t gaining enough weight, so the doctor was like, ‘Yeah we have to put him on formula.’ So that’s the main thing that’s really expensive. It’s the formula that really chews at my finances.” – Darkat, young mother, Greater Vancouver
Health

Mental Health

Young parents in our study experienced a variety of stressors, including financial difficulties, stigma about being an early-age parent, and pressures to complete their schooling before they “age out” and no longer qualify for key supportive services. Young parents who had access to counselling said they benefited greatly; however, accessing services was difficult for some parents:

“It’s not, like, my mental health itself, but finding transportation to my appointments and stuff is hard. And having no childcare is hard too. Like, I have group [therapy] this morning that I could have gone to, but I didn’t have anyone to watch the kids so I wasn’t able to go. Being stuck in the house gets me more depressed, but then how am I gonna not be depressed if I can’t go to my [therapy] group and my counselling appointments? Like, ‘cause that’s what those are for.” – Ally, young mother, Prince George

Some new mothers reported experiencing post-partum depression (PPD) but had difficulty accessing supportive services that were tailored to the needs of women experiencing PPD. Many young fathers talked about the anxiety and pressure they felt trying to find and maintain employment and provide for their families (which was repeatedly described as one of the primary roles of a “good” father).

“When my depression kicks in and some of my anxiety, like, some days I feel really crappy, you know? […] It’s becoming even harder without money ‘cause money makes the world go round, right? So you need a job and I just want to get out there and find a job and, like, get fit. I just want something that’s really good for our family, like a healthy family.” – Hans Solo, young father, Prince George

A number of young parents had also previously experienced some form of trauma or abuse; however, they often encountered delays or barriers to accessing mental health supports. Service providers told us that significant cuts to mental health services over the last number of years have resulted in incredibly long waitlists for free and low-cost counseling in both communities. Service providers and young parents looked forward to the recent opening of Foundry Prince George, the city’s new integrated youth wellness centre. They hope that it will be able to assist in addressing some of these barriers and delays to accessing mental health care for youth aged 12 to 24.
Young parents who were fortunate enough to be able to afford (or receive free passes to) fitness and recreation programs told us that this often significantly improved both their physical and mental health. Some secondary students were also able to receive an academic credit to fulfill their physical education course credit requirements by attending these programs.

Dental Care

BC’s Medical Services Plan (MSP) does not cover the cost of dental care services. Consequently, most low-income young parents in our study were unable to afford dental health care. Some families qualify to have their children’s dental services provided under the BC Healthy Kids program6, which covered up to $1,400 in basic dental services every two years for children and youth (under 19 years old) in families receiving MSP Premium Assistance during the time interviews were conducted. Free fluoride treatments and consultations for preschool children are also provided at public health units and occasionally these services are provided on a drop-in basis at Young Parent Programs. However, the cost of many dental services remains out of reach for many young parents and their children.

“We are looking at proactive care, especially for my daughter and I know there is an occasional dentist program that runs out of [the health unit]. So that we have not used but we’re hoping to begin to get [my older daughter] checked and make sure we keep any problems away. You know, to avoid expensive emergency care that we cannot afford at this point. There’s been minor pains my wife has had in the past that we just had to ignore it and, you know, try and clean more and floss more and just ignore it ‘til it went away. I would say that just goes to show how desperate we are at avoiding any costs. We did not go to look at it at all ‘cause we just don’t have the resources to do that at this time.” – Ogre, young father, Prince George

Extended Health and Prescription Drug Coverage

Many young parents said that being able to access extended health services such as physiotherapy, chiropractic care, or mental health counselling would be beneficial. Unfortunately, being able to access programs that provide these services at a reduced cost was often hard because they were not well advertised.

“I was taking physiotherapy, but [the physiotherapist] said I was good to go and if my back ever started hurting again just to come back. And so I’ve been thinking about going back, but... I might just stretch more and just see if that works instead of going to physio ‘cause I don’t have the money for that.” – Joe Rogers, young father, Prince George
In instances where a young parent had lost their MSP card or First Nation Status Card it can be especially difficult, if not impossible, to access most health services.

Affording prescription medications is also a significant challenge for low-income young parents and they often aren’t informed that they or their children might qualify for subsidized coverage of prescriptions under BC’s Fair PharmaCare program. Many extended health programs require potential clients to go through a lengthy application process that is complicated and confusing. They would greatly appreciate help learning how to navigate the often-complex application processes to access these services.

“I’m having issues with paying for prescriptions. My daughter was covered under [my Status card] until she was one. And it’s just taking a while to get her registered under [my partner’s First Nations band]. So for the meantime, we have to pay for it ourselves because we’re not currently on social assistance and I’m not really sure where else to access help for paying for prescriptions.” – Sam, young mother, Prince George

**Sexual and Reproductive Health Services**

Being able to afford contraception can be difficult for many low-income young parents. Women who receive BC Income Assistance can have the cost of long-acting reversible contraceptives such as IUDs covered. However, Income Assistance does not cover the cost of other forms of contraception (e.g., oral birth control pills or the patch), which many women prefer to IUDs. Providing low-cost or free contraception for all British Columbians would address this problem.

“Birth control is expensive. We don’t want another child right now ‘cause I just want to focus on my career and kind of building up my life. I’m just wondering what other young moms do in regards to their medical situation. Because for me, I’m under my mom’s [insurance], but I won’t be under her very much longer because I’m getting married and [my fiancé] doesn’t have a [extended health] plan ‘cause he owns his own business, he’s self-employed.” – Sofia, young mother, Greater Vancouver
The recent introduction of STI/HIV testing services at Foundry Prince George, the new integrated youth wellness centre, has the potential to help reduce barriers to access STI testing and treatment services in that community. Prior to this, many young parents and service providers in Prince George expressed frustration about the reduction in services provided at the local health unit in recent years. Young parents were uncomfortable (and unwilling) to visit the local syringe distribution program to access STI/HIV testing. Although we completed our interviews before Foundry Prince George opened, many of our study participants were looking forward to the fact that it would be providing sexual and reproductive health services there.

**Links to Resources**

1. For the childcare subsidy for young parents, see: [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/family-social-supports/caring-for-young-children/running-daycare-preschool/child-care-subsidy/young-parent-program](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/family-social-supports/caring-for-young-children/running-daycare-preschool/child-care-subsidy/young-parent-program)
2. For youth agreements, see: [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/public-safety/protecting-children/youth-agreements](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/safety/public-safety/protecting-children/youth-agreements)
3. For the reinstatement of free tuition for Adult Basic Education courses by the BC Ministry of Education, see: [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/adult-education/adult-upgrading](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/adult-education/adult-upgrading)
4. For the Provincial Tuition Waiver Program for former youth in care in BC, see: [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/post-secondary-education/pay-for-school/provincial-tuition-waiver-program?keyword=tuition&keyword=for&keyword=former&keyword=youth&keyword=in&keyword=care](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/post-secondary-education/pay-for-school/provincial-tuition-waiver-program?keyword=tuition&keyword=for&keyword=former&keyword=youth&keyword=in&keyword=care)
5. For Foundry, Prince George, see: [https://foundrybc.ca/princegeorge/](https://foundrybc.ca/princegeorge/)
6. For BC Healthy Kids program, see: [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/managing-your-health/healthy-women-children/child-teen-health/dental-eyeglasses](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/managing-your-health/healthy-women-children/child-teen-health/dental-eyeglasses)
7. For BC's Fair PharmaCare program, see: [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/health-drug-coverage/pharmacare-for-bc-residents/who-we-cover/fair-pharmacare-plan](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/health/health-drug-coverage/pharmacare-for-bc-residents/who-we-cover/fair-pharmacare-plan)

We are very grateful to the participants who have generously shared their time and stories with us.

**THANK YOU!**