

Facilitators & Barriers to Successful Independent Living for Young Mothers in Toronto

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

YOUNG PARENTS NO FIXED ADDRESS

FALL 2015

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Thank you to the following YPNFA affiliated agencies for participating in this research project:

Birkdale Residence
Children's Aid Society of Toronto
Catholic Children's Aid Society
Central Intake
Central Toronto Youth Services
Covenant House
East Metro Youth Services
Evergreen Centre/Yonge St. Mission
Family Residence
Hospital for Sick Children - Young Families Program
Humewood House
Jean Tweed Centre / Pathways to Healthy Families
Jessie's –the June Callwood Centre for Young Women
LAMP Community Health Centre
Literature for Life
Macaulay Child Development Centre
Massey Centre for Women
Mothercraft / Breaking the Cycle
Oolagen Community Services
Parkdale CHC
Planned Parenthood of Toronto
Queen West CHC
Regent Park CHC
Robertson House
Rosalie Hall
Rouge Valley Health System
St. Michael's Hospital
Toronto Public Health
Women's Habitat of Etobicoke
Woodgreen Community Services - Homeward Bound
Working Women's Community Centre
YMCA –YSA Program
Yorktown Child & Family Centre
Youth Unlimited; Time Out for Young Moms

Thank you to the following agencies for supporting this research investigation:

Young Parents No Fixed Address Network
University of Toronto

Introduction:

This report presents the results of a research investigation into the factors influencing the success of young parents living independently in Toronto. A Masters of Public Health Student from the University of Toronto along with the Coordinator of the Young Parents No Fixed Address network conducted this research. Young Parents No Fixed Address is a network of Toronto organizations dedicated to building strong community partnerships to identify and address the challenges faced by young, street involved/homeless pregnant and parenting youth and their children.

Purpose:

The YPNFA network agencies have identified that not much is known in regard to the specific challenges experienced by young parents after moving out on their own. From the perspective of front line staff members of the network, there is a lack of long-term transitional supports and services available to meet the specific needs of young parents in Toronto. Young mothers were recruited to speak on behalf of their own experiences, positive and negative, with moving on to independent living. Frontline staffers who work with young mothers related to this process were consulted as key informants about their experience and expertise on the needs of young parents after transitioning to independent living. The results are presented to help service providers enhance youth participation, increase empowerment as well as improve policy and practice relevant to young mothers. The primary research question was: *“What are the various facilitators and barriers to maintaining independent living for young mothers?”* The following objectives were used to guide our research project:

Key informant data will:

- Establish the various protective and risk factors that affect young parents who live independently
- Recognize the gaps in existing services for young mothers who have transitioned to independent living
- Recommend some strategies to address existing service gaps for young mothers living independently

Young mother participant data will:

- Determine what information, education and supports young mothers received while living on their own that helped them with independent living
- Describe any supports, services or skill sets that young mothers wish they had that would help them live independently
- Determine the biggest surprises or unexpected challenges young mothers faced in the first few months of living independently
- Identify young parent’s perceptions of how service providers can be more useful in supporting independent living

Methods:

This study employed a largely qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. Young mothers, either single or coupled, between the ages of 18 and 25 and who have recently moved out on their own for at least three and up to twenty four months were recruited through the network member agencies connected with the YPNFA. A total of 10 young mothers were interviewed, all of who had previously or are still currently utilizing the services of a network member agency of the YPNFA. Interviews lasted anywhere between twenty and seventy minutes, discussing questions formulated based on our research objectives. Young mothers were compensated with a \$10 gift card and two public transit tokens for their time.

Working and communicating members of the YPNFA network were recruited to complete our anonymous, online key informant questionnaire. A total of 22 frontline workers and other practitioners from various agencies who provide support for young mothers inputted their responses.

Responses from both young mothers and key informants were sorted separately into relevant themes to determine which concepts or experiences were more prominent in the raw data. The research objectives were used to organize the study findings.

Findings:

Key Informants

Occupations of Key Informants

The key informant questionnaire was sent to 96 members of the YPNFA network. Out of 34 individuals who commenced the study, a total of 22 respondents submitted answers to the questionnaire. Key informants were asked to identify their current job title in order to determine the diversity of young mother service providers who were participating in this study [Figure 1]. The occupations of the 22 key informants were widespread and thus professionals who work with young mothers in various capacities provided their expertise.

Potential Protective & Risk Factors

Key informants identified numerous protective factors that influence a young mother's ability to successfully live independently, including the presence of family, friends and other more formal supports. As identified by these service providers, the ongoing nature of such supports was very important to maintaining the sustained progress of young mothers. Also, key informants describe young mothers who possess characteristics such as "adaptability", "resilience" and "resourcefulness" as vital to ensure the permanence of independent living. Other less commonly acknowledged protective factors include the access of education, employment or training opportunities, familiarity and proximity of services, income security and child care as well as the attainment of various life skills such as cooking, cleaning, and the ability to manage time and finances.

Alternatively, the most common risk factors identified by key informants as having an influence on a young mother's ability to live independently were surrounding financial challenges, the lack of accessibility to various supports and services as well as the lack of safe and affordable housing options. Some key

informants include isolation from community resources as well as the experience of discrimination and stigma in the way of independent living. Other less frequently identified risk factors include the presence of dysfunctional relationships with family and friends, a young mother who is unwilling to accept help, the experience of poverty and also the presence of mental health or addiction issues.

Gaps In Existing Services

Key informants have identified numerous gaps and limitations to the existing services out there for young mothers to access. These include: restrictive operational hours, lack of affordable housing options, long waiting lists, the lack of acknowledgement or support for generational poverty, the lack of flexibility or acknowledgement of individual needs, the lack of acknowledgement for transportation issues as well as the lack of services for reunification with your child after your child has been apprehended by Children's Aid Society (CAS).

Recommendations for Practice as identified by Key Informants

Key informants identify a variety of strategies and recommendations for frontline workers and other service providers working with young mothers to practice. These include the need for alternative housing options through the creation of more live-in mentoring programs as well as an increase in rent geared to income housing. Providing free or affordable childcare, and more respite childcare services in Toronto was commonly acknowledged as a gap in existing services.

Less commonly recommended was the need for services to offer more individual and case management type support, providing safe alternatives for young mothers in abusive environments, expanding the age limit of services, offering more parenting skills and support, more formalized mentorship services, increasing the welfare rates, ensuring that the support provided is ongoing and finally supports that teach young mothers how to communicate with landlords and learning about their rights as a tenant.

Young Mothers

Characteristics of Young Mother Participants

Although initially we sought to interview twenty young mothers for our research, our time for data collected was limited and we were only able to recruit ten young mothers. This group of young mothers ranged from 18 to 24 years old, 80% of the mothers had one child and 20% had two, while 70% lived entirely on their own with their children when 30% lived with their partners. The majority of young mothers recruited had completed their high school education or equivalent; one young mother was currently in college and another had completed a college program while one young mother had completed grade eleven thus far. Main sources of income for young mothers were largely government assistance; 6 participants were reliant on Ontario Works and 1 on the Ontario Disability Support Program for income support while three young mothers were living off income from paid employment. [Table 1]

Effective Strategies & Supports

To begin with, many young parents identified personal attributes such as patience and resilience as important to maintaining independent living. In addition, various coping strategies that young parents

utilized for handling stressful situations include breathing exercises, trying to ignore negative surroundings, releasing the stress by crying it out, maintaining a positive outlook, by taking things one day at a time and taking a step back to look at the bigger picture. While some young mothers opt to cope in introspective ways, many others also described more outward expressions of personal coping strategies. These strategies include singing and dancing to music, taking time out of one's day for self care such as getting your nails done without your child being there, getting your hair done, exercising or even taking walks in the park. When young mothers felt overwhelmed, they gravitate towards spending time with their loved ones, accessing organizational and community supports (e.g. church), calling their social worker or talking with a counselor.

For young mothers, having family is especially useful as it can be provided in different forms such as emotional support, financial support, material support (e.g. furniture), day-to-day childcare and/or respite care. For young mothers without any family of their own, one participant established her own surrogate family member that provides similar types of support.

When asked which individuals they turned to for support, young mothers often relied a combination of people rather than just one [Figure 2]. Most commonly, young mothers cited family members (30%), workers (25%), friends (20%) and counselors (10%) as individuals who they turned to for support. Nurses, godparents and partners were also less frequently identified as people that young mothers turned to for support. A few participants had multiple individuals that they could call on for support while other participants felt that their support system was limited.

Inconsistent / Underutilized Supports

Multiple participants explicitly state that having a judgmental or unsupportive worker pushes them away from talking to them about their issues as well as the lack of flexibility in daycare services when it comes to unforeseen circumstances. One participant praised her daycare service for their flexibility when unforeseen circumstances occurred, while another young mother was burdened with excessive late fees in a similar situation.

Furthermore, young mothers were able to get on the priority-housing list received housing within the year, while others young mother participants have been on the list for years, one currently on the list for the last five years. Building management was also identified as providing emotional support for one particular young mother however the majority of the other participants report a lack of interaction with their management or interaction that is more focused on the maintenance issues that have been plaguing their apartment.

In addition, transitional and supportive housing for young mothers is a unique service that seeks to address the needs of young women who are either pregnant or parenting. Some participants learned independent living skills during their time at these services while others had a difficult time and decided leaving earlier than anticipated.

Food banks were rarely used by this sample of young mothers, and although most young mothers accessed the furniture bank, they were generally disappointed by the options available to them. Also, financial

supports to aide young mothers with independent living are typically received well however the need for more sustainable financial supports was identified. Not only financial, but the removal of community supports also creates an extra burden on young mothers who must now adapt to the loss of that support or seek alternative supports to replace it.

Services that Young Mothers Wish Existed

When asked about the usefulness of a support group for women who are trying to find or maintain independent living, many of the young mothers were receptive to the idea. Many young mothers were also interested in respite care however were unable to access it due to the child being too young, the location being too far away or even due to a mother's fear regarding her child's safety.

A few young mothers expressed their disappointment with not being able to afford the cost of housing in Toronto. Young mothers identified the need for more financial support, the large majority of participants were living off welfare rates, and while some were employed only one had a full time job. Young mothers also expressed their interest in getting more incentives for attending various programs and services.

Sometimes young mothers just want continued access to the services that they have been coming to all this time that provided them with effective support. Becoming "too old", agency protocols regarding service provision length, as well as moving on to independent living were all reasons that young mothers cited as restricting their access to services they used previously. Some young mothers described the burden they felt with leaving the support system that they have established for themselves and their children.

A couple young mother participants in our study identified the value of having regular daycare hours extended to accommodate those parents who do not work a nine-to-five job. Other ideas for service provision include more summer specific programs for their child or more opportunities to get daycare subsidy for the summer.

Surprises & Challenges with Independent Living

Challenges that young mothers identified include the inability to find both safe and affordable housing, having to juggle multiple roles, dealing with the numerous maintenance problems, the ability to remain organized and most importantly the challenge of finding and sticking to a routine.

Surprises that were experienced due to the transition to independent living include the loss of friends, having an improved relationship with their own mothers, not having an extra pair of hands for support when needed, the insensitivity or inflexibility of some support services, as well as the unexpected surprise of their child getting sick.

When asked what advice they would give to young mothers like them who were moving out on their own for the first time, out of 10 participants 6 expressed the desire to live at home with their parents longer. The majority of these young women felt that living at home was no longer an option that was available to them.

Framework for Successful Independent Living:

The themes and patterns uncovered throughout this research were organized into concepts and used to create a conceptual framework with successful independent living placed in the center. This framework can be used as a reference to consider all aspects that influence living on your own when practitioners are working with young mothers to provide skills or supports that help maintain independent living.



Recommendations for Practice:

Based on the data, we have selected some recommendations for service providers to practice/implement.

Recommendation 1: Advocate for Alternative Housing Options

Although most mothers were settled into their independent living situation, when asked if they had any advice or suggestions for another young parent like them who was moving out on their own, many of our participants immediately replied with variations of one answer which was basically telling them not to make the transition to independent living. Many of them recommended that the young mothers stay with their parents for as long as possible, one participant recommended getting a roommate to alleviate the financial burden but most spoke very decisively when they suggested that young mothers out there should not move out on their own.

The frequency with which this answer was provided suggests that there needs to be more options beside living at home and total independent living. Although there are a few transitional and supportive housing services across Toronto, there seems to be multiple restrictive elements to each of these housing options. Factors that influence a young mother's decision not to access transitional or supportive housing include location, the fact that none of these services allow couples to stay together, if the housing is long-term or time restricted, how old your child has to be, the types of services and supports offered within and nearby the facility, as well as the incentives for moving into such a facility. If these young mothers had less restrictive transitional and supportive housing options to choose from, it would provide an excellent opportunity for young mothers to learn the knowledge and skills required for independent living. A supported housing environment can also help young mothers to save up rather than put forth the majority of their income towards housing.

Furthermore, key informants were also united in the need for alternative housing options. Some of these alternatives that were identified include housing that is appropriate, affordable, safe, LGBT specific housing, housing that allows couples to live together, foster care for young mothers and children to live together as well as live-in mentorship programs and more rent geared to income housing.

Recommendation 2: Advocate for Sustainable Supports & Services

In Toronto, there are a few young parent community resource centers which offer a variety of supports and services to pregnant or parent youth however continued access to services like these are limited based on various reasons. Young mother participants described feeling burdened or stressed when they no longer are eligible to continue accessing a service or when service length comes to an end. One young mother participant discusses her perceptions regarding ending support.

"I shouldn't even be here, I graduated two years ago but I still come here with my sister... just the fact that there is a cut-off age I think that's, it's a bit discouraging because there are mothers who are just a bit older than that who actually do need help and I see, I don't see it a lot in Canada, but I see it even in the states, It's heart wrenching to see young mothers, they go through post partum depression and end

up killing their babies or doing some sort of act that's unlawful to themselves you know", Young Mother, 24 years old.

Due to either funding or agency protocols some young mothers find they can no longer access certain agency supports once they have moved to independent living. Support workers may be encouraged or told to close client files within 3 months of them locating housing. In addition, young mothers can become "too old" for example, participation to many young parent services are often restricted to 21 or even 18. It isn't always about the services that do not exist which need to be created; often is the case that young mothers want continued access to the services that they have already been utilizing for effective support.

Even though young mothers become older and their children grow up, they still have to constantly learn how to parent a child at each developmental stage. Organizations should do more to appease the burden that young mothers experience when transitioning out of supports. Whether it be by expanding inclusion criteria to extend service use, adding more follow up services to ease the transition, or deciding a service end date for young mothers on a case by case basis, more needs to be done regarding this transition period.

Recommendation 3: Help Young Mothers to Expand their Support System

Supporting young mother to achieve successful independent living includes expanding their support system. Young mother need to establish and maintain a village of people and supports that are necessary for raising a child. By helping to create a wide-ranging and sustainable support system, practitioners enable young mothers to thrive.

Although we typically search for emotional support in friends as well as relatives, when these options are lacking, talking to a counselor can also provide some needed emotional support. One young mother discussed the value of speaking to a counselor as opposed to a family member and credits her counselor as helping her reconnect with her family.

"It's different from your family, some who is a stranger to your life and they haven't seen everything that you have gone through but they can give you advice they can give you support that you need and I feel like every time I go whenever I leave I have steps that I can take to if I do something wrong, steps that I can take to you know make myself better as a parent as well as personal I wasn't able to do that with my family because we had a downfall but I am, after a year, I am able to go to my mom and say you know talk to her about stuff and you know she can watch my son, I have reached out to her after a year of being on my own, being able to set boundaries now yeah and counselors and everyone here has helped me, has a part of helping me through my big leap", Young Mother, 20 years old.

Not only did this counselor provide this young mother with emotional support, but she also helped the young mother to reconnect with her family, expanding the support system that was available to her.

Furthermore, when asked about the usefulness of a support group for women who are trying to find or maintain independent living, many of the young mothers were receptive to this idea. One young mother did not feel comfortable in the other available support groups that were offered to young mothers.

“There was only a pre-natal group at the time when I did move out and there was a post natal group but I didn’t feel comfortable going and I just wanted to talk to someone about the struggles that I was going through and I couldn’t do it in an open discussion... I guess a group with single parents who have recently moved out here would be something that could happen” Young Mother, 20 years old.

This young mother also felt that such a support group could have aided her in making a decision about whether or not to move out on her own. Creating support groups and expanding existing support groups to include discussion around housing issues and the challenges of living on your own can provide an opportunity for young mothers to gain more expansive and effective support from other young mothers.

Recommendation 4: Improvement and Expansion of Childcare Supports

Although daycare is a facilitator to successful independent living, the lack of daycare availability outside of regular working hours presents limitations for young mothers. A couple young mother participants in our study identified the value of having regular daycare hours extended to accommodate those parents who do not work a nine to five job.

“Well to continue living independently, I wish there was a daycare that was open later or maybe into the night hours because a lot of parents are working night shifts or you are going to school in the day and you’re working in the evening pretty much like [D] and then you are kind of screwed when it comes to child care...” Young Mother, 20 years old.

Young mothers often have to rely on other supports such as family members to accommodate this barrier. If daycare fee subsidy could be provided to family members who currently help young parents to accommodate this barrier, they would be more accessible to provide continual support. Whereas extending daycare service hours can be more complicated and less efficient in addressing this gap in service.

Furthermore, many young mothers were also interested in respite care but were unable to access it due to their child being too young, the location being too far away or even due to a mother’s fear regarding her child’s safety. Young mothers have indicated that using respite care when unforeseen circumstances arise can be helpful, rather than constantly relying on one person.

“Sometimes I have to fight for someone to watch, I have to fight my mom to watch my son for me and like my boyfriend got really sick the other day, and if it wasn’t for daycare and if it was at a later time like in the evening you know and I really needed to be there for that person, and I had to fight for someone to watch him like that’s hard when you are trying to deal with this and your trying to deal with that and what if you just need that support in that moment and you don’t have it”, Young Mother, 20 years old.

Other young parents, who don’t have access to daycare, see the usefulness of having respite care for the entire day once in a while to accomplish certain things.

“I want, at Jessie’s they do Respite Care, I really want to do that but I breastfeed so its kind of harder. Even then, it’s the whole weekend like sometimes I don’t need the whole weekend I just need the whole day. That’s kind of hard because no one really does that, where someone can just watch your baby for the entire day. I wish that that were something that was available on a weekday so that I can get like laundry done, I can clean up the place, and I can clean the dishes so that it doesn’t pile up. When I try

to he will start crying and then guess I am not doing the laundry because I cant put him down. My boyfriend he's at work so I don't have someone to watch the baby so I can't clean up the place. It just gets overwhelming when I think of all that stuff. “Young Mother, 18 years old.

An increase in respite care services in and around Toronto can also support young mothers in their success with independent living.

Recommendation 5: Provide Individualized Service specific to the Young Mother

Some young mothers felt they were totally and completely prepared for independent living, they had the necessary life skills such as cooking and cleaning down as well as the ability to manage money. These young mothers felt that even though services were available that they did not need to access them. Some participants also indicated having difficulty with time management such as struggling to find a routine that would work for her and her child(ren). One participant describes her experience with a service in which she felt they expected her to know more than she actually did.

“So you pretty much have to know what you are doing in order to get positive support from [service provider] which is annoying because they are there to teach you and support you but if you don't know then they don't want to support you. They treat you differently I've noticed ... because at the beginning I didn't know what I was doing and a lot of them were really judgmental and they made me feel stupid kind of for not knowing but they are supposed to be there to teach me ... so teach me so that I'll know and that I can prove to you that your services are helping me instead of bringing me down right? So that was kind of annoying at first and then now they are really supportive if I need something” Young Mother, 21 years old

The skills and capabilities of young mothers prior to pregnancy and parenting are varied and thus service providers should base their expectations on goals that are mutually agreed upon with the young mother. Rather than having a checklist of information or skills that a young mother needs to gather before she is deemed fit to parent, the process needs to be much more self-driven. The young mother needs to understand her weaknesses and based on this, service providers can help the young mother to gain knowledge and supports to accommodate the areas that she feels she is lacking in.

To provide individualized service for a young mother, Wraparound is an excellent service that takes on a holistic approach to client care. The process reflects five core principles, which are; 1) gaining knowledge about a community prior to program creation and implementation, 2) interagency collaboration in service delivery, 3) participant advocacy, 4) adjustment of services based on community and agency dialogue, and 5) feedback following program implementation. One of the factors to its success is Wraparound's ability to create an individualized plan for each parent based on the needs determined with their family (Manji, Maher & Blocki-Radeke, 2007).

Conclusion:

Overall it appears that there are a variety of supports and services available to young parents in Toronto who are moving to independent living as is visible by the multi-service membership within the Young Parents No Fixed Address network. What we observed and would recommend is more alternative housing options, more childcare supports, increased flexibility and sustainability in the supports that are available as well as a specific focus on expanding the young mother's support system that is available to her.

While the authenticity of this research is enhanced with the use of direct quotes from our young mothers, there are some weaknesses to our research that we would like to note. Ten young mothers were recruited for in-depth interviews; it is somewhat likely that young mothers who participated in our study had experiences that differed from young mothers who chose not to be interviewed. Our inclusion criteria was created for the purposes of recruiting young mothers who were stable in their independent living situation, therefore this research may not be totally capturing the support needs of young mothers who are presently experiencing challenges with finding and maintaining housing.

In addition, although there is diversity in this sample of young mothers, ten participants is not quite enough to fully capture the considerable heterogeneity that exists in all of young mothers. Keeping this in mind, reasonable recommendations have been developed based on more common experiences shared in this sample of young mothers. Given the small amount of participants and the exploratory nature of this study, we do not claim that the findings of this research can be generalized to all young mothers. Despite this, we believe that network members of the YPNFA may find this report useful to advocate for change to current services that are provided or the creation of more supports to fill existing service gaps.

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Appendices:

Figure 1. Key Informant Occupation

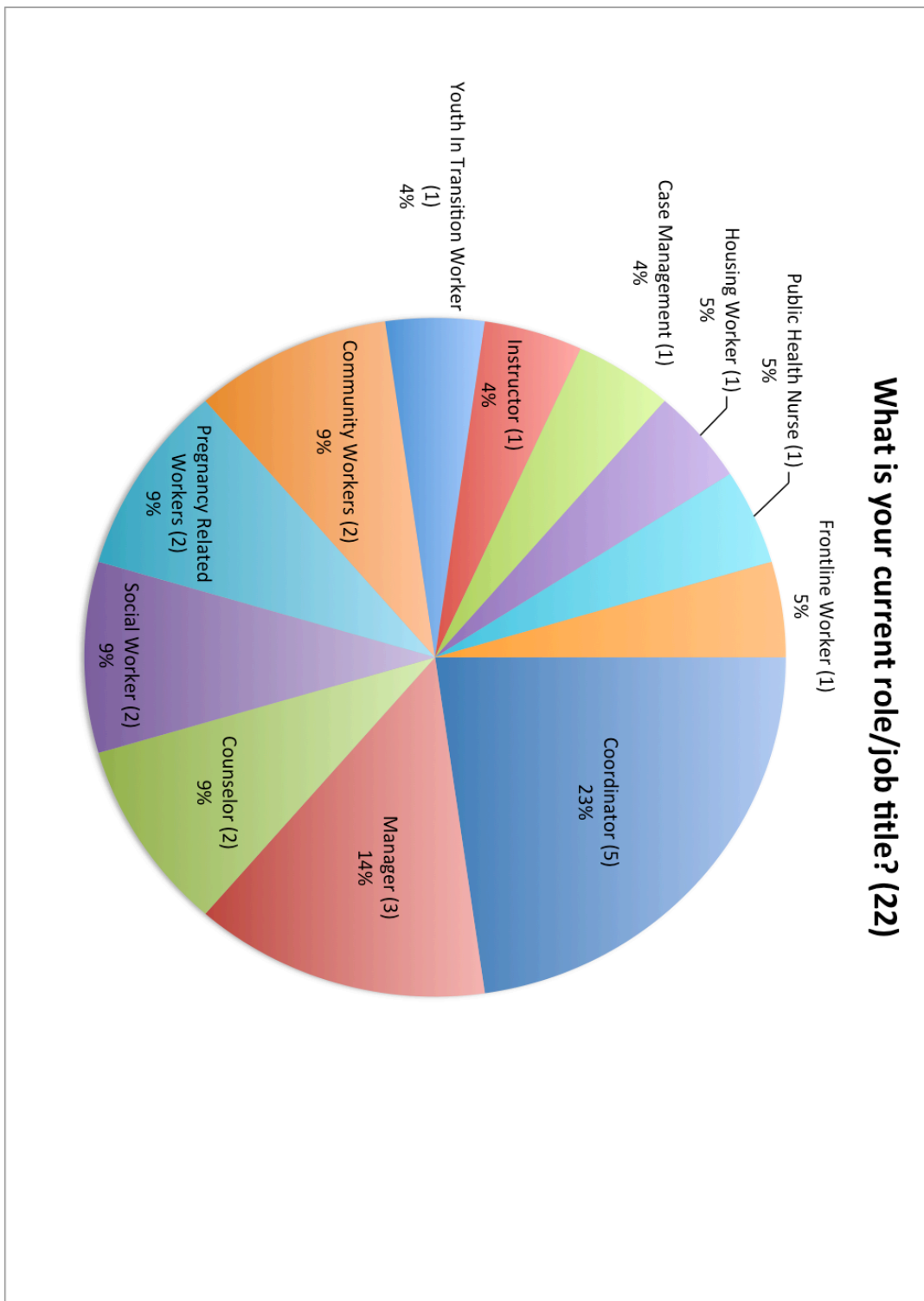


Table 1. Characteristics of Young Mother Participants

	<i>n = 10</i>	<i>%</i>
Age at interview (years):		
18	1	10
19	0	00
20	2	20
21	2	20
22	1	10
23	2	20
24	2	20
25	0	00
Living Arrangements:		
On my own + Dependent Children	7	70
With Partner + Dependent Children	3	30
# Of Dependent Children:		
One	8	80
Two	2	20
Level of Education Completed:		
Grade Eleven	1	10
High School Diploma	6	60
GED	1	10
First Year College	1	10
College Diploma	1	10
Main Source of Income:		
Ontario Works	6	60
ODSP	1	10
Paid Employment	3	30
Length of Time since Moving out on own with child:		
3-5 months	1	10
6- 11 months	4	40
12 – 23 months	3	30
24+ months	2	20

Figure 2. Sources of Support for Young Mothers

