

# Why It Matters



## Teen Pregnancy, Out-of-Wedlock Births, Healthy Relationships, and Marriage

**R**educing teen pregnancy will decrease out-of-wedlock childbearing and increase the percentage of children born to married couples. While the majority of non-marital births are to adult women, the teen years are frequently a time when unmarried families are first formed—a strong rationale for focusing on teens in any broad effort to reduce out-of-wedlock childbearing and strengthen marriage.

- Although only three out of ten non-marital births in the United States are to teenagers, nearly half (48 percent) of all non-marital first births occur to teens—the largest single group.<sup>1</sup>
- More than 80 percent of teen births are to unmarried teens, up from only 15 percent in 1960.<sup>2,3</sup>
- Men and women today marry, on average, four to five years later than did their counterparts in the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> As a result of later marriage, earlier menarche, and earlier age of first sex, on average, teens today begin having sex approximately eight to ten years before marriage.<sup>4,5</sup>
- In contrast with the 1960s and 1970s, when most of the growth of single-parent families was caused by increases in divorce or separation, nearly all of the growth in the past several decades has been driven by increases in out-of-wedlock childbearing.<sup>6,7</sup>
- Despite a reduction in the teen birthrate, which contributed to the leveling off after 1994 of the proportion of children born outside marriage, in recent years the proportion of non-marital births has increased. In 2004, the number of births to unmarried women reached a record high.<sup>2,6</sup>

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- Teen mothers spend more of their young adults years as single parents than do women who delay childbearing.<sup>8</sup>
- Only 30 percent of teen mothers who marry after their child is born remain in those marriages at the age of 40.<sup>9</sup>
- Teen marriages are twice as likely to fail as marriages in which the woman is at least 25 years old.<sup>10</sup>
- Teenagers who have a non-marital birth are significantly less likely to be married by the age of 35 than those who do not have babies as teens.<sup>11</sup>
- Children in single-parent families are more likely to get pregnant as teenagers than their peers who grow up with two parents.<sup>12</sup> In fact, teen girls without fathers are twice as likely to be sexually active at an early age and are seven times more likely to get pregnant than their peers with both parents.<sup>13</sup>
- For teen boys, living with two parents decreases the odds of early sexual initiation by 70 percent.<sup>13</sup>
- Since twenty-nine percent of teen pregnancies end in abortion, and teens account for approximately 17 per-

cent of all abortions performed annually, preventing teen pregnancy also has the advantage of reducing the need for abortions.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that since 1990, the teen pregnancy, birth, and abortion rates have all declined steadily, and in fact, abortion rates among teens have declined 45 percent compared to only 13 percent for women aged 20-24.<sup>15-17</sup>

When asked about their aspirations for marriage and childbearing, most teens would like to get married and have children within marriage.

- A majority of teens say that they want to get married and stay married during their lifetime.<sup>1</sup>
- Less than eight percent of teen mothers marry their baby's father within one year of the birth.<sup>18</sup>
- A study of first births found that almost one-third of cohabitating couples had broken up five years after the birth of their child compared to 16 percent of married couples.<sup>19, 20</sup>
- Approximately two-thirds of teen boys agree that it is better to get married than to go through life single compared to just over half of teen girls. Slightly more than four in ten teen boys approve of divorce as a remedy for a troubled marriage compared to about half of teen girls.<sup>20</sup>
- Teen boys are also less likely than teen girls to approve of non-marital childbearing.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, helping more women reach adulthood before they have children would go a long way toward ensuring that more children grow up in stable, married families. And considering the large body of research on the benefits to children of growing up in such families, the link between reducing teen pregnancies and improving overall child well-being is clear.

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