

Changes in Births to Unmarried Women Since 1975

What's the main conclusion?

The percentage of births to unmarried women in the United States has steadily increased since 1955, especially among young women 15-25 years old. In 1955, almost 5% of births were to unmarried women; in 2004, this percentage increased to nearly 36%. Several reasons help explain this trend:

- Over the past decades, more and more women have postponed marriage but still had babies. The number of unmarried couples living together and having children also has increased.
- At the same time, births to married women have decreased.

The result is that births to unmarried women have grown as a percentage of all births.

What else do the data tell us?

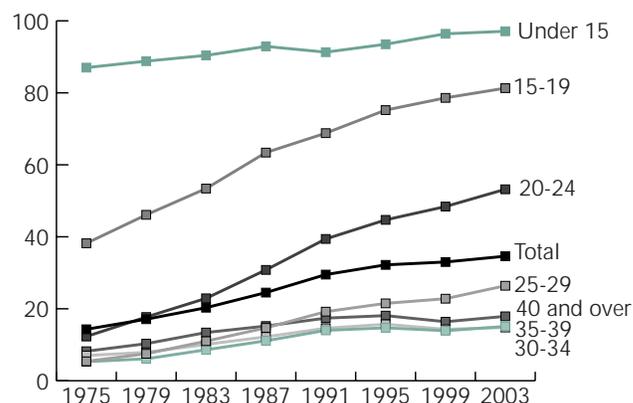
- We need to pay particular attention to births among unmarried teens. More than 80% of births in this group are to unmarried teens, even though these births make up less than 30% of all births to unmarried women. Many groups are working hard to reduce teenage birth rates, and rates have come down over the past 10 years.
- U.S. rates of non-marital births are similar to some other countries but different from others. More than 30% of all births in Denmark, France, and the United Kingdom are to unmarried women. In contrast, in Germany, Italy, and Japan, less than 15% of births are outside of marriage.

Why is this an important issue?

- Children born to unmarried mothers are more likely to grow up in single-parent households. They are more likely to have unstable living arrangements, be poor, and have social and emotional problems.
- On average, teens from households with unmarried parents don't do as well in school, have sex at a younger age, and have babies without being married, compared to teens from households with married parents.

- As young adults, children born outside of marriage are less likely to be in school or employed, are more likely to have lower occupational status and income, and have more troubled marriages and divorces than those born to married parents.

Percentage of Children Born to Unmarried Women, by Age Group



- Women who give birth outside of marriage generally have lower incomes, lower education levels, and greater dependence on welfare assistance than do married mothers. Economic problems may even extend into old age. Women who are single mothers for a period of at least 10 years during their life are at greater risk of being poor at ages 65 through 75.

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- Unmarried mothers also have reduced marriage prospects compared to single women without children.

Do population groups differ on this issue?

Births to unmarried women vary a lot by age, race, and ethnicity:

- Teens have the highest percentage of births outside of marriage compared to other age groups. However, all age groups have shown an increased percentage of non-marital births since 1950.
- Historically, non-marital birth rates have been highest among black women. However, birth rates among unmarried Hispanic and black women have declined steadily since 1995, and rates among unmarried white women rose before stabilizing in the mid-1990s. In 1999, 40% of non-marital births were to non-Hispanic white women, 32% to black women, 25% to Hispanic women, and 4% to women of other races.

- The percent of non-marital births also differs by the mother's birthplace. In 1998, 34% of non-marital births in the United States were to mothers who were born in the U.S., and 29% of non-marital births were to women born in foreign countries. This gap can be seen across all population groups.

Defining the terms

Data on births to unmarried women were based on information on birth certificates in each state and the District of Columbia. Births to unmarried women were identified by questions on birth certificates asking the mother's marital status.

For more detailed information on this topic, visit www.healthymarriageinfo.org.