

# Trends in Non-Marital Birth Rates

**The rates of non-marital births have increased.**

## Headline/Trends

The percent of non-marital births in the United States has steadily increased over the past few decades, from an estimated 4.5% in 1955 to 35.6% in 2004.<sup>1</sup> Several factors account for such trends. Over the past decades, an increasing proportion of women has postponed marriage, while increased numbers of unmarried couples cohabit. The rates of non-marital births have increased, while rates of marital births have decreased, contributing to an increased percent of non-marital births.<sup>2</sup>

The teenage population is a particularly important group to monitor for non-marital childbearing. While less than 30% of all non-marital births are to teen mothers, over 80% of teen births are non-marital. Substantial efforts over the past decade have been made to reduce overall teenage birth rates. Non-marital birth rates vary considerably by race and national origin and remain highest among Hispanic women at 92.2 per 1,000 births, followed by black women at 66.3 and white women at 28.6 non-marital births per 1,000 births in 2003.<sup>3</sup>

Children born to unmarried mothers are more likely to grow up in a single-parent household and experience instability in their living arrangements, poverty, and socio-emotional problems.



## Importance

Children born to unmarried mothers are more likely to grow up in a single-parent household and experience instability in their living arrangements, poverty, and socio-emotional problems. Adolescents from households with unmarried parents have on average a lower level of educational attainment, engage in sex at a younger age, and have a non-marital birth. 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. 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 disadvantage 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. In addition, women who have a non-marital birth have reduced marriage

prospects compared to single women without children.<sup>4</sup> While non-marital birth rates have increased in the United States since the mid-1970s, the trend is not unique among industrialized countries. Compared to the United States, Denmark, France and the United Kingdom, maintain higher proportions (over 30%) of non-marital births, yet in Germany, Italy and Japan less than 15% of births are non-marital.<sup>5</sup>

### Differences by Subgroup

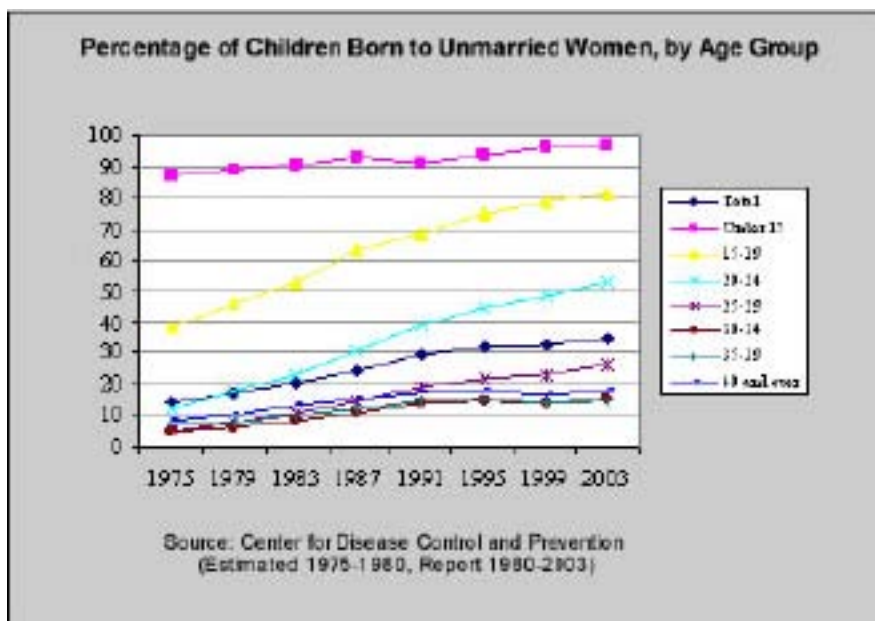
Non-marital births vary substantially by age, race, and ethnicity. A larger percentage of teen births are non-marital compared to other age groups. However, all age groups have shown an increased percentage of non-marital births since 1950. Historically, non-marital birth rates were highest among black women. However, birth rates among unmarried Hispanic and black women have declined steadily since 1995, while 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% were to women of other races. The percent of non-marital births also differs by place of origin of the mother. In 1998, 34% of non-marital births in the United States were to mothers who were born in the US, while 29% of non-marital births were to women born in foreign countries. The gap in non-marital births between foreign- and domestic-born women can be seen across all population groups.<sup>6</sup>

### Definition

Data on births to unmarried women were based 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. Prior to 1980, a data-collection procedure was used which assumed the marital status of the mother based on inference, such as identifying unmarried partners by the miss-matching last names of the father and mother.<sup>10</sup>

The percentage of births to unmarried women in the United States has steadily increased over the past decades, particularly among the 15-24 age range of unmarried women. Source: Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Estimated 1975-1980; Reported 1980-2003).<sup>7,8,9</sup>



## Data Source

Hamilton, et. al. Preliminary births for 2004. Health E-stats. Released October 28, 2005.; Ventura, SJ, & Bachrach, CA. (2000). Nonmarital Childbearing in the

United States, 1940-99 (National Vital Statistics Reports Vol. 48 No. 16). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

**Table 1. Percent of births to unmarried women by age (\*estimated 1975-1980, reported 1980-2003).**

	Under 15 years	15-19 years	20-24 years	25-29 years	30-34 years	35-39 years	40 years and over	Total
1975*	87.0	38.2	12.3	5.4	5.3	7.0	8.2	14.3
1979*	88.8	46.1	17.7	7.5	6.1	7.9	10.3	17.1
1983	90.4	53.4	22.9	11.0	8.6	10.1	13.4	20.3
1987	92.9	63.4	30.8	14.7	11.1	12.2	15.2	24.5
1991	91.3	68.8	39.4	19.2	14.0	14.6	17.4	29.5
1995	93.5	75.2	44.7	21.5	14.7	15.7	18.1	32.2
1999	96.4	78.6	48.4	22.8	13.9	14.3	16.4	33.0
2003	97.1	81.3	53.2	26.4	15.1	14.8	17.9	34.6

\* Source: Center for Disease Control and Prevention <sup>11,12</sup>

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