

Childbearing Outside of Marriage: Estimates and Trends in the United States

By Elizabeth Wildsmith, Ph.D., Nicole R. Steward-Streng, M.A., and Jennifer Manlove, Ph.D. November 2011

Overview. *Having children outside of marriage—nonmarital childbearing—has been on the rise across several decades in the United States. In 2009, 41 percent of all births (about 1.7 million) occurred outside of marriage, compared with 28 percent of all births in 1990 and just 11 percent of all births in 1970.^{12,20} Preliminary data suggest that this percentage has remained stable in 2010.⁶ There are several reasons to be concerned about the high level of nonmarital childbearing. Couples who have children outside of marriage are younger, less healthy, and less educated than are married couples who have children.¹⁴ Children born outside of marriage tend to grow up with limited financial resources; to have less stability in their lives because their parents are more likely to split up and form new unions; and to have cognitive and behavioral problems, such as aggression and depression.¹³ Indeed, concerns about the consequences of nonmarital childbearing helped motivate the major reform of welfare that occurred in 1996,¹⁷ and continue to motivate the development of federally funded pregnancy prevention programs among teenagers and marriage promotion programs among adults.^{17,19}*

This Research Brief draws from multiple published reports using data through 2009, as well as from Child Trends' original analyses of data from a nationally representative survey of children born in 2001, to provide up-to-date information about nonmarital childbearing; to describe the women who have children outside of marriage; and to examine how these patterns have changed over time. As nonmarital childbearing has become more commonplace, the makeup of women having children outside of marriage has changed, often in ways that challenge public perceptions. For example, an increasing percentage of women who have a birth outside of marriage live with the father of the baby in a cohabiting union and are over the age of twenty.^{7,21} Moreover, the percentage of women having a birth outside of marriage has increased faster among white and Hispanic women than among black women.^{7,20}

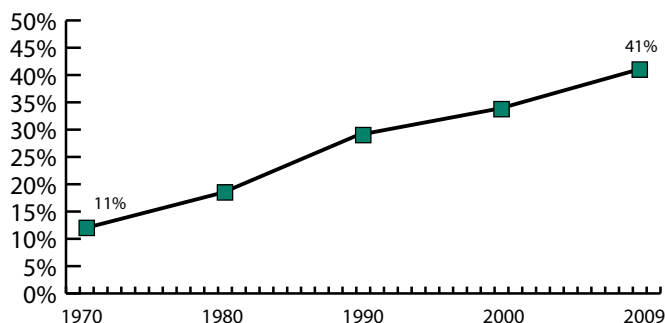
TRENDS IN NONMARITAL CHILDBEARING

The percentage of births outside of marriage rose steeply from 1970 to 2009 for all age groups. Between 1970 and 2009, the percentage of all births that took place outside of marriage (the nonmarital birth ratio) increased from 11 to 41 percent (see Figure 1). This increase occurred within every age category (see Figure 2).^{12,21}

- Nonmarital births to teens rose from 30 percent in 1970 to 67 percent in 1990, to 87 percent in 2009.
- Nonmarital births to women ages 20-24 rose from 9 percent in 1970 to 37 percent in 1990, to 62 percent in 2009.

Figure 1

Percent of Births to Unmarried Women, 1970-2009



Source: 1970-1999, Ventura SJ, Bachrach CA. Nonmarital childbearing in the United States, 1940-1999. National vital statistics reports; vol 48 no 16. Hyattsville, Maryland: National Center for Health Statistics. 2000.

Martin JA, Hamilton BE, Ventura SJ, Osterman MJ, Kirmeyer S, Mathews TJ, Wilson EC. Births: Final data for 2009. National vital statistics reports; vol 60 no 1. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2011.

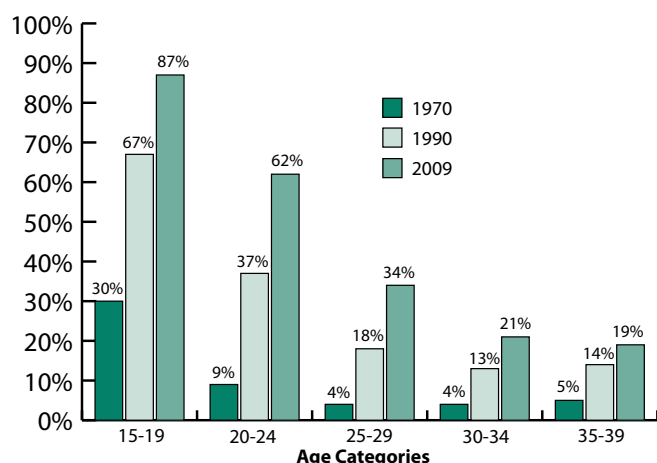
ABOUT THE DATA SOURCE FOR THIS BRIEF

Statistics used for this brief came from two primary sources: birth data (through 2009) that were collected and reported by the National Center for Health Statistics as part of the National Vital Statistics Reports,^{12,21} and data Child Trends analyzed from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) that were collected by the National Center for Education Statistics within the U.S. Department of Education. The ECLS-B is a nationally representative sample of approximately 10,700 children born in 2001. The study was designed to gather information on children's early life experiences from birth through kindergarten entry. The analyses presented in this brief used data from the first phase of data collection, a sample of about 10,500 children who lived with their biological or adoptive mothers, who answered the nine-month parent survey. All analyses of the ECLS-B were weighted and accounted for survey design effects. Statistically significant differences presented in this brief are significant at $p < .05$.

Two of the most common measures of nonmarital childbearing are the nonmarital birth ratio, i.e., the percentage of all births that occur to unmarried women; and the nonmarital birth rate i.e., the number of births for every 1,000 unmarried women between the ages of 15 and 44 (or within specific age categories) in any given year. Although different from one another, these two measures are closely related.

Figure 2

Percent of Births to Unmarried Women, 1970, 1990, & 2009



Sources: Ventura SJ and Bachrach, CA. Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States, 1940-99. National vital statistics reports; vol 48 no 16. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2000. Martin JA, Hamilton BE, Ventura SJ, Osterman MJ, Kirmeyer S, Mathews TJ, Wilson EC. Births: Final data for 2009. National vital statistics reports; vol 60 no 1. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2011.

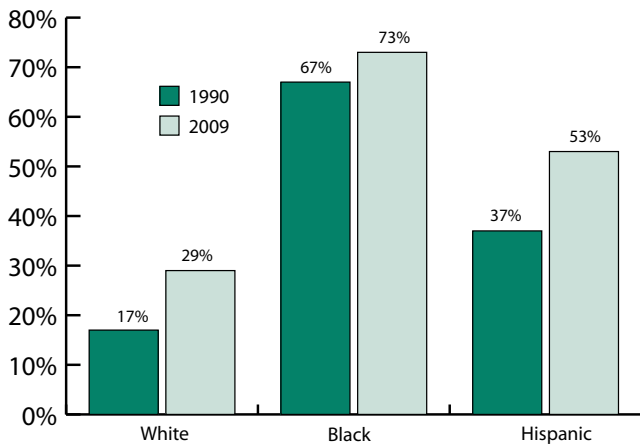
- Nonmarital births to women ages 25-29 rose from 4 percent in 1970 to 18 percent in 1990, to 34 percent in 2009.
- Nonmarital births to women ages 30-34 rose from 4 percent in 1970 to 13 percent in 1990, to 21 percent in 2009.
- Nonmarital births to women ages 35-39 rose from 5 percent in 1970 to 14 percent in 1990, to 19 percent in 2009.

The percentage of births outside of marriage also increased for all major racial and ethnic groups. Since 1990, the percentage of all births occurring outside of marriage increased for all major racial and ethnic groups. Although the percentage of nonmarital births is still highest among black women, the greatest increases were seen among white and Hispanic women (see Figure 3).¹²

- In 1990, 17 percent of births to white women, 67 percent of births to black women, and 37 percent of births to Hispanic women were nonmarital.
- In 2009, 29 percent of births to white women, 73 percent of births to black women, and 53 percent of births to Hispanic women were nonmarital.

Women in their twenties have the highest rate of births outside of marriage. A common misperception is that teen women have the highest nonmarital birth rate. However, the number of births among unmarried women in their twenties and thirties increased substantially over the past 20 years, while births to teens have declined overall (in spite of an increase in the mid-2000s). In 2009:

- Women aged 20-24 had a nonmarital birth rate of 74.6 births per 1,000 unmarried women.
- Women aged 25-29 had 72.7 births per 1,000 unmarried women.
- In comparison, teen women aged 15-17 had 19.3 births per 1,000 unmarried women and teen

Figure 3**Percent of Births to Unmarried Women by Race and Ethnicity, 1990 & 2009**

Source: Martin JA, Hamilton BE, Ventura SJ, Osterman MJK, Kirmeyer S, Mathews TJ, Wilson EC. Births: Final data for 2009. National vital statistics reports; vol 60 no 1. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2011.

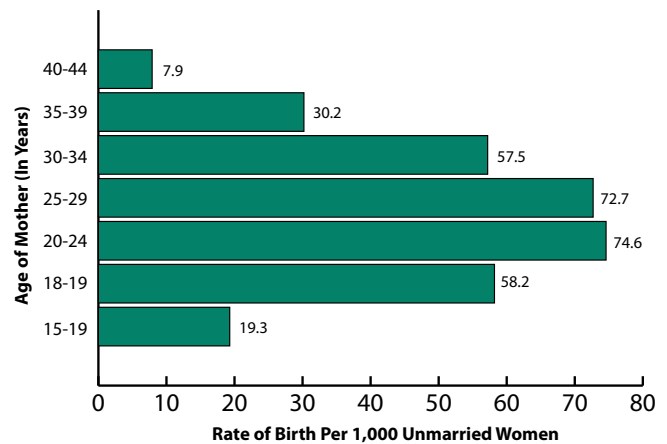
women aged 18-19 had 58.2 births per 1,000 unmarried women.

- Although nonmarital birth rates for women 30 and older are increasing, these rates remain lower than rates for women in their twenties: 57.5 among women aged 30-34, 30.2 among women aged 35-39, and 7.9 among women aged 40-44 (see Figure 4).

Teen women account for a diminishing share of all births outside of marriage. Although teen women accounted for almost one-half (49 percent) of all nonmarital births in 1970, by 2009 they were responsible for less than one-quarter of nonmarital births (21 percent). By contrast, in 2009, women in their twenties accounted for the majority (62 percent) of nonmarital births^{12,21} (see Figure 5).

- Women aged 20-24 accounted for 33 percent of nonmarital births in 1970 and 38 percent in 2009.
- In 1970, slightly less than one-fifth (18 percent) of all nonmarital births were to women aged 25 and older; however, by 2009 women in this age group accounted for 41 percent of all nonmarital births.

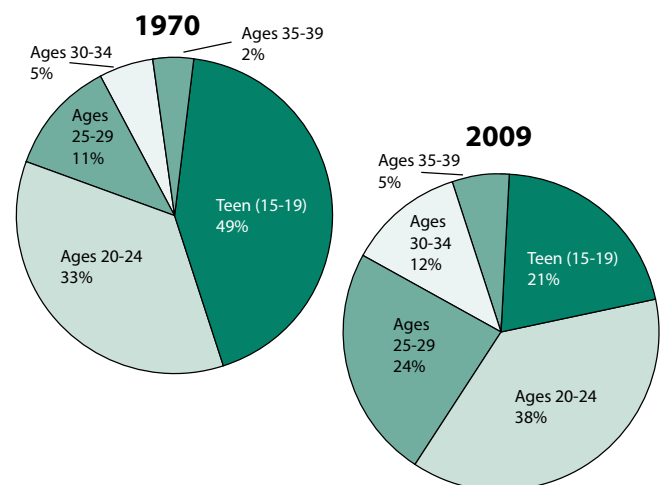
Less than one-half of all nonmarital births are first births. Despite the common perception that firstborns account for most nonmarital births, more than one-half of all births in 2009 that

Figure 4**Nonmarital Birth Rate (per 1,000 women) by Age, 2009**

Source: Martin JA, Hamilton BE, Ventura SJ, Osterman MJK, Kirmeyer S, Mathews TJ, Wilson EC. Births: Final data for 2009. National vital statistics reports; vol 60 no 1. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2011.

occurred outside of marriage (59 percent) were second- or higher-order births (results not shown).¹⁶

- Fifty-seven percent of births to unmarried women aged 20-24, three-quarters (75 percent) of births to unmarried women aged 25-29, and

Figure 5**Percent of Nonmarital Births to Women in Each Age Category, 1970 and 2009**

Sources: Ventura SJ and Bachrach, CA. Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States, 1940-99. National vital statistics reports; vol 48 no 16. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2000. Martin JA, Hamilton BE, Ventura SJ, Osterman MJK, Kirmeyer S, Mathews TJ, Wilson EC. Births: Final data for 2009. National vital statistics reports; vol 60 no 1. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2011.

82 percent of births to unmarried women aged 30-39 were higher-order births.

- Even among teen women aged 15-19, almost one-quarter (24 percent) of nonmarital births were second- or higher-order.

More than one-half of nonmarital births occur within cohabiting relationships. A majority of children born outside of marriage are born into families headed by two unmarried parents. In 2001, 52 percent of all nonmarital births took place within a cohabiting union, compared with 38 percent in the early 1990s.^{7,15} However, the likelihood that a woman will have a baby within a cohabiting relationship varies substantially by race and ethnicity. Results from Child Trends' analyses of data from the ECLS-B show that almost two-thirds of nonmarital births in 2001 to white (61 percent) and Hispanic (65 percent) women took place within cohabiting unions, compared with less than one-third (30 percent) of nonmarital births to black women (see Figure 6).

The majority of nonmarital births are unintended. Unintended births are those that, at the time of conception, were either mistimed (the mother wanted the pregnancy to occur earlier or later than it did) or unwanted (the mother did not want it to occur at that time or any time in the future). Child Trends' analyses of ECLS-B data indicate that 65 percent of births to women who were not living with or married to the father of their baby and 50

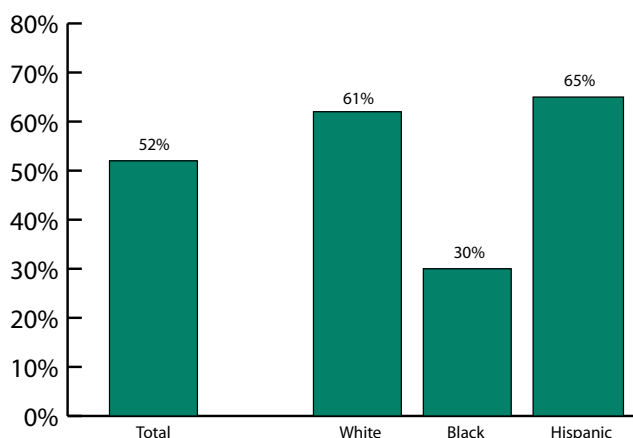
percent of births to women who were living with their baby's father were unintended, compared with just 20 percent of births to married women (see Figure 7). Additional research suggests that men may be more likely than are women to report that births outside of marriage are unintended. For example, 62 percent of unmarried fathers aged 15-24 identified their most recent birth as unintended.¹¹

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This *Research Brief* has highlighted several important trends that have implications for the well-being of children and the parents who bring them into this world.

Nonmarital childbearing has increased substantially, particularly among women in their twenties. Preliminary data from 2010 suggest

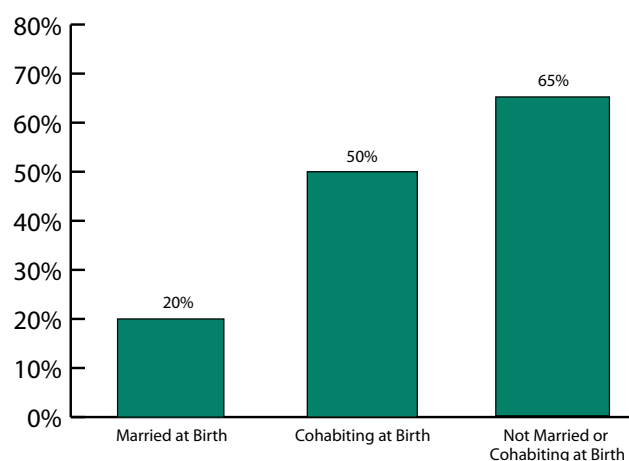
Figure 6
Percent of Unmarried Mothers Cohabiting at Birth of Child, by Race and Ethnicity



Source: Child Trends' analyses of Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), 2001-02

Figure 7

Percent of Women who Report that Their Pregnancy was Unintended by Relationship Status at Birth



Source: Child Trends' analyses of Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), 2001-02

small declines in the nonmarital birth rate since 2008, as well as no continued increase in the percentage of births that occur outside of marriage.⁶ However, the overall increase over the past several decades in both the nonmarital birth rate and the percent of births that occur outside of marriage indicate striking changes in the context of childbearing in the United States. The most profound change in the prevalence of nonmarital childbearing has been among women over the age of 19. In 2009, women in their twenties were responsible for the largest share of nonmarital births (62 percent) and had the highest nonmarital birth rates.¹² The per-

centage of nonmarital births among teen women, however, has declined substantially, as have teen birth rates. The decline in birth rates among teen women has been attributed to a combination of delays in sexual initiation and increased use of contraception.¹⁸

Increases in nonmarital births have been more dramatic among white and Hispanic women than among black women. Although the proportion of nonmarital births remains highest among black women, the proportion of births occurring outside of marriage has increased the most for white and Hispanic women. This trend may be explained partly by greater economic strains, growing acceptance of nontraditional family forms, and increased barriers to marriage, particularly among people of lower socioeconomic status.^{3,5,14} In fact, some researchers suggest that disadvantaged white and Hispanic women are merely following the pattern of nonmarital childbearing set by disadvantaged black women in earlier decades.⁵

The rise in the number of children being born outside of marriage—among all groups—is linked to broader changes in family structure, most notably cohabitation. More than one-half of all nonmarital births occur to couples who live together in one household, but are not legally married. In fact, much of the increase in nonmarital childbearing since the 1980s reflects a shift from births to married couples to births to cohabiting couples, rather than an increase in births to women who are either in dating relationships or are single.^{7,8} However, although cohabiting couples with children have very high expectations of marriage, the likelihood that these couples will marry remains low.¹³ Additionally, cohabiting unions generally fail to provide the same level of economic security that marriages do and tend to be of shorter duration than marriages.¹³ Thus, children born to cohabiting parents are more likely than are those born to married parents to be poor and to see their parents' union end.

Births that occur outside of marriage are often second- or higher-order births. More than one-half of all babies born to unmarried couples are not firstborns. Some of these babies represent repeat births to the same unmarried couple. However, many children born outside of marriage do not share the same father as their siblings. In fact, research finds that two-thirds (66 percent) of new unmarried mothers with more than one child had at least one child who was fathered by

someone other than the father of the new baby.¹³ This type of family complexity can introduce additional stresses and strains into family life.¹⁴

Births that occur outside of marriage also are often unintended. Child Trends' findings indicate that many nonmarital births are unintended, that is, the woman did not intend the baby at that time and maybe did not want to have a baby. Such circumstances, in turn, are associated with negative outcomes for children. For example, children born to women who did not intend to get pregnant have been found to have lower birthweight, poorer mental and physical health, lower educational attainment, and more behavioral problems than do children whose births were intended.⁹

CONCLUSION

Reducing nonmarital childbearing and promoting marriage among unmarried parents remain important goals of federal and state policies and programs designed to improve the well-being of women and children and to reduce their reliance on public assistance.^{14,17} In general, research suggests that marriage would bring some economic advantages to unmarried women (and their children), particularly for those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.^{8,14} However, research also finds that when unmarried mothers do marry, their marriages are relatively unstable, with particularly negative economic outcomes for women and children if they do dissolve.⁸

Some existing government programs, such as The Healthy Marriage Initiative, aim to promote healthy marriages among currently married couples and couples contemplating marriage by fostering effective communication, respect, and conflict management skills.⁴ For those couples who do not marry, programs focused on promoting healthy relationships may still enhance children's well-being. For example, research finds that the better the quality of the biological parents' relationship at birth, the better the parenting skills they demonstrate one year after the birth; and this pattern holds across all relationship types, even among parents who do not live together.¹ Similarly, positive co-parenting behavior—a component of healthy relationships—is associated with increased involvement of nonresident fathers in children's lives.²

It is likely that many children will continue to be born outside of marriage into a variety of living

situations. Given this likelihood, it is in everyone's best interest to encourage the promotion of healthy relationships among all family members, including those living outside the household, and for the research community to continue to explore factors associated with the positive development of children born to unmarried parents. In addition, efforts to help couples prevent unintended pregnancies continue to be critical; and these efforts need to recognize that many of these couples are not teens—but young adults.

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