

The Characteristics and Circumstances of Teen Fathers: At the Birth of Their First Child and Beyond

By Mindy E. Scott, Ph.D., Nicole R. Steward-Streng, M.A., Jennifer Manlove, Ph.D., and Kristin A. Moore, Ph.D.

June 2012

Overview. Research and policy in the United States have focused much more on teen mothers than on teen fathers. One reason for this discrepancy is that birth certificates contain limited information on the birth fathers, which makes it difficult to even get an accurate count of teen fathers.¹ However, new Child Trends' estimates show that 9 percent—or 900,000—young men between the ages of 12 and 16 in 1996 (reflecting the group of young men examined in this brief) became fathers before their twentieth birthday.²

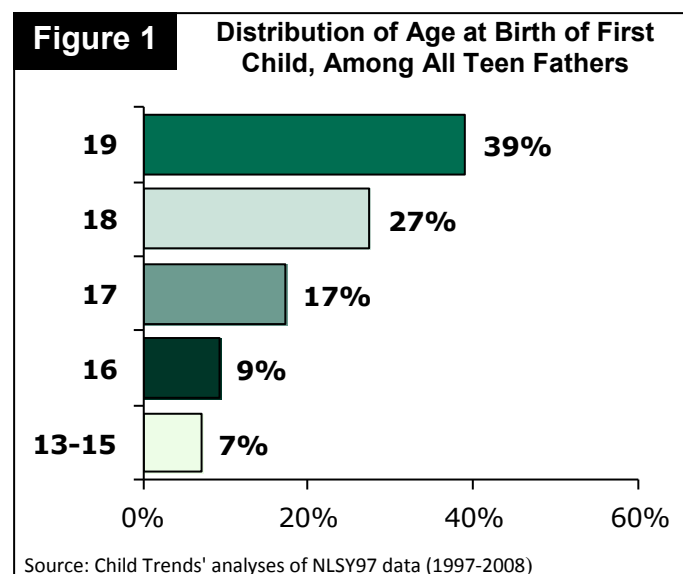
Despite the size of this group, relatively little is known about the characteristics and circumstances of teen fathers, either when they first have a child or later in life. To fill in some of that missing information, this Research Brief presents a statistical portrait of teen fathers' characteristics at the time that their first child was born; their union status at the birth of that child (i.e., whether they were married, cohabiting, or not in a relationship); their subsequent experience fathering a child, if any; and their residential status at birth and in young adulthood (i.e., whether they were or were not living with their children).

To produce this brief, Child Trends analyzed data from a sample of young men in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1997 cohort (NLSY97) who experienced the birth of their first child while still in their teens. Overall, teen fathers who lived with their child at the time of the birth were more likely to be living with that child when they were in their early twenties, compared to teen fathers who did not live with their child at birth. Additionally, almost half of men who fathered children as a teen had at least one additional child by the time they were ages 22-24, sometimes with a different mother. Both of these findings, as well as others present below, have implications for children's well-being.

CHARACTERISTICS OF TEEN FATHERS AT THE BIRTH OF THEIR FIRST CHILD

Most young men who father a child during their teens are 18 or 19 years old.

- Two-thirds (66 percent) of the respondents in our sample fathered their first child at age 18 (39 percent) or 19 (27 percent), whereas one-third (33 percent) did so before their 18th birthday (See Figure 1).
- Among the fathers in our sample who reported the age of the mother of their first child, 62 percent had a partner who was 19 or younger.



ABOUT THE DATA SOURCE FOR THIS BRIEF

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth—1997 cohort (NLSY97), sponsored and directed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, is a nationally representative survey of U.S. youth who were between the ages of 12 and 16 on December 31, 1996. The first round of data collection took place in 1997 and consisted of both youth and parent interviews. Youth continue to be interviewed on an annual basis. Data collected in the survey include detailed relationship, residence, and fertility histories for each respondent. Specifically, our research sample included 490 young men who were between the ages of 13 and 19 at the birth of their first child and whose child was still living when the men were between the ages of 22 and 24. (We excluded five fathers with children who died from the study sample).

We used Round 1 (1997) youth interviews to construct the demographic measures of teen fathers. We measured characteristics of the men in the round after their first child was born, or the round in which the father first reported the child (Rounds 1-7, 1997-2008). We measured union status in the month in which the first child was born, recording whether the father was married, cohabiting, or outside a union at that time. Some fathers who were in a union at the time of the birth of their first child may have been married to or cohabiting with someone other than the biological mother of that child, although we could not distinguish between these groups. We obtained information on characteristics of men between the ages of 22 and 24 who had been teen fathers from the round in which they first reported on each outcome (within that age range, Rounds 5-12, 2001-2008).

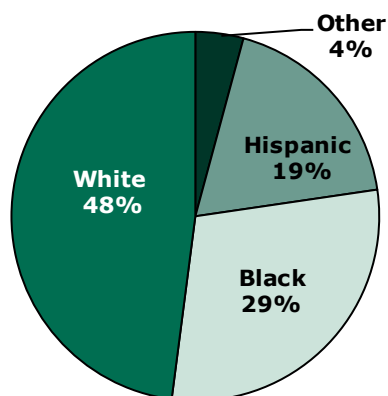
We weighted all analyses to present population-level estimates, and all differences presented in this brief are significant ($p < .05$).

We also compared our sample of teen fathers to a nationally representative sample of teen mothers whose first child was born in 2009, using birth data from the National Center for Health Statistics to understand how the characteristics of teen fathers compare to those of teen mothers.³

Approximately one-half of teen fathers are members of racial/ethnic minority groups, and most teen fathers were born in the United States.

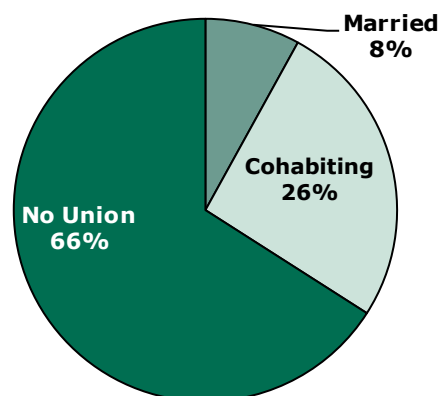
- Forty-eight percent of teen fathers in our sample were white, 29 percent were black, 19 percent were Hispanic, and 4 percent reported some other race/ethnicity (See Figure 2).
- Only 3 percent of teen fathers were born outside of the U.S. (analyses not shown).

Figure 2 Distribution of Teen Fathers' Race/Ethnicity



Source: Child Trends' analyses of NLSY97 data (1997-2008)

Figure 3 Union Status at Birth of First Child, Among All Teen Fathers



Source: Child Trends' analyses of NLSY97 data (1997-2008)

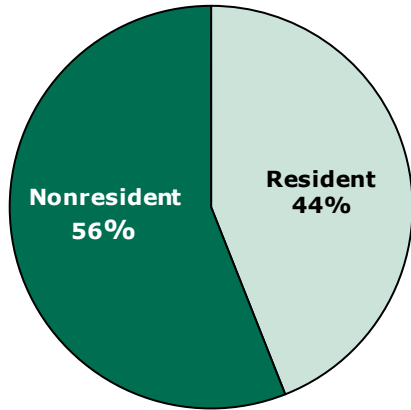
Most teen fathers are not living with a partner at the time their first child is born.

- Fewer than one in 10 (8 percent) of the teen fathers in our sample was married, and about one-quarter of teen fathers (26 percent) were cohabiting at the birth of their first child.
- Sixty-six percent of teen fathers were not living with a spouse or partner (See Figure 3).

Less than one-half of teen fathers live with their first child at the time of the birth.

- Forty-four percent of teen fathers in our sample were living with their first child at the time the child was born, whereas 56 percent of teen fathers were not living with their child at the time of the birth (See Figure 4).

Figure 4 Teen Father Residential Status at Birth of First Child, Among all Teen Fathers*



Source: Child Trends' analyses of NLSY97 data (1997-2008)
*Reported for teen fathers with information available the year after the birth of first child

CHARACTERISTICS OF YOUNG ADULTS WHO WERE TEEN FATHERS

We assessed young adult outcomes when men who had fathered a child in their teens were between the ages of 22 and 24. We looked specifically at whether they had subsequent children, whether they lived with that first child, and whether they were married or cohabiting.

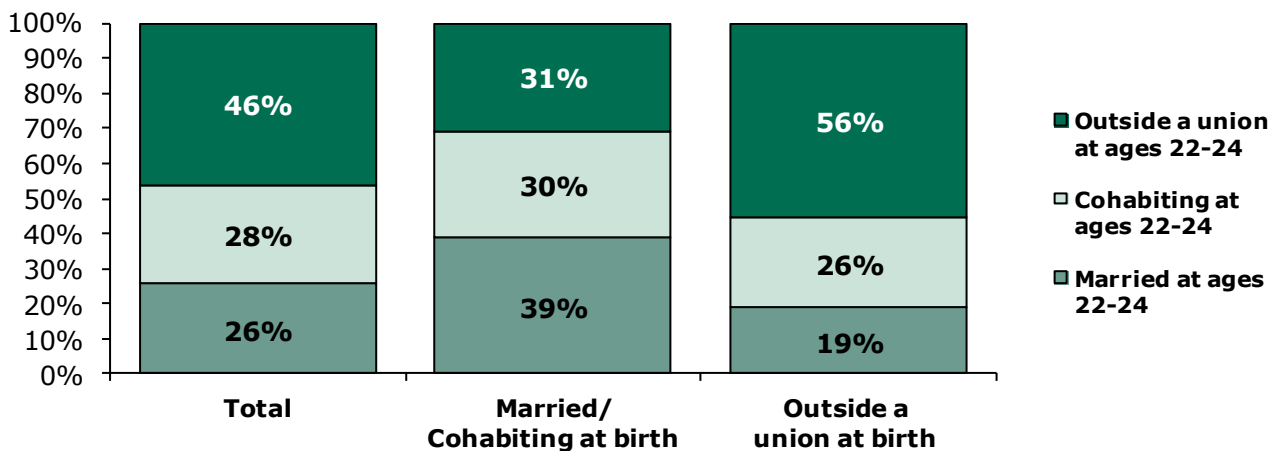
More than one-half of the young men who had been teen fathers are living with a spouse or partner by their early twenties. Twenty-six percent of fathers in our sample were married by ages 22 to 24, 28 percent were cohabiting, and 46 percent were neither (See Figure 5). However, these estimates differ based on teen fathers' union status at the birth of their first child.

- Among fathers who were married or cohabiting at the birth of their first child, 39 percent were married, 30 percent were cohabiting, and 31 percent were not in a union by ages 22 to 24 (See Figure 5).
- Among fathers who were not in a union at the birth of their first child, only 19 percent were married, one-quarter (26 percent) were cohabiting, and more than one-half (56 percent) were in neither situation in their early twenties (See Figure 5).

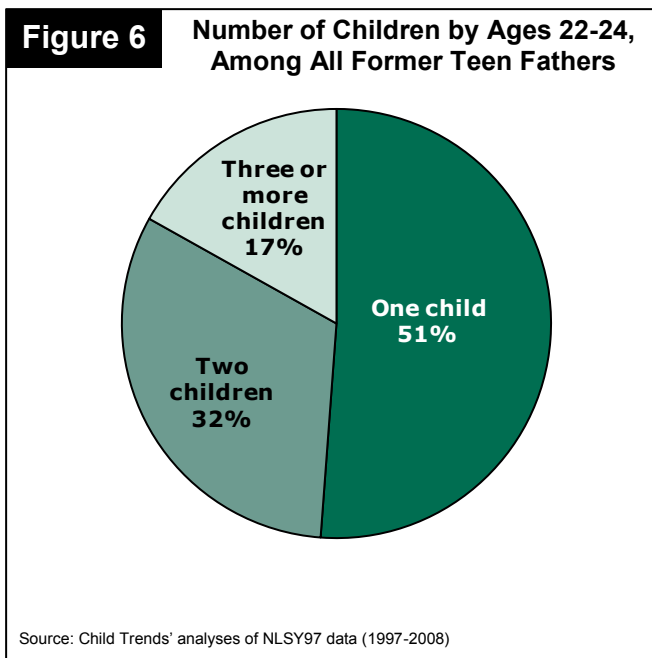
Almost one-half of the men who fathered a child as a teen have more than one child by the time they are between ages 22 and 24.

- Thirty-two percent of the fathers in our sample had a second child by the time they were 22 to 24, another 17 percent had three or more children by their early twenties, and the remaining 51 percent still had only one child (See Figure 6).
- Among former teen fathers who experienced a subsequent birth by their early twenties, 9 percent had a child with a woman who was not the mother of their first child, illustrating "multiple-partner fertility."

Figure 5 Union Status of Former Teen Fathers at Ages 22-24, by Union Status at Birth of First Child



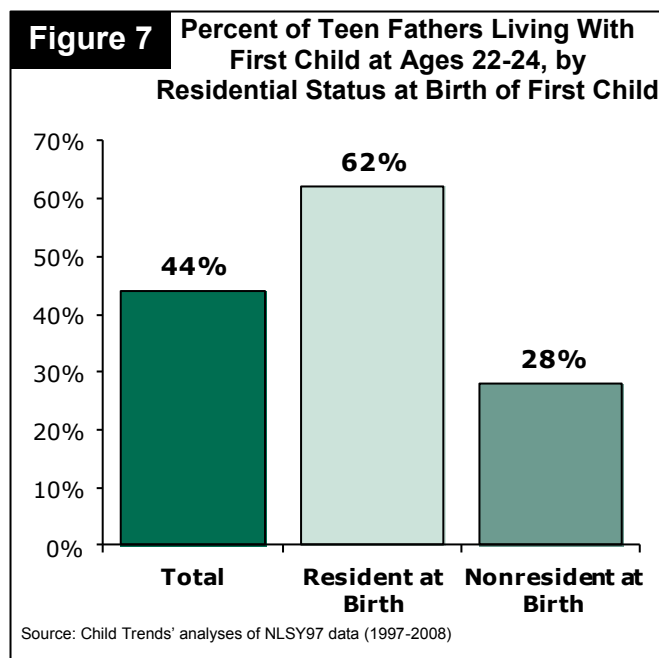
Source: Child Trends' analyses of NLSY97 data (1997-2008)



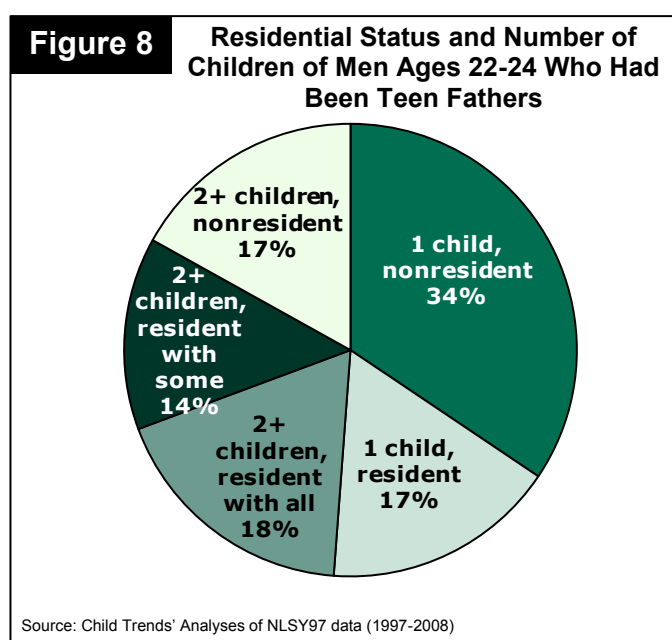
The residential status of teen fathers at the birth of their first child is linked to whether they live with their children during young adulthood. Overall, 44 percent of the men in our sample who had fathered their first child while in their teens were living with that child at ages 22 to 24 (See Figure 7). A higher percentage of former teen fathers who were living with their first child at the time of the birth were living with that child during their early twenties, compared with those who were not living with their first child at birth.

- Among former teen fathers who were living with their first child at birth, 62 percent were resident fathers in their early twenties (See Figure 7).
- Among former teen fathers who did not live with their first child at birth, 28 percent were resident fathers at ages 22 to 24 (See Figure 7).

We also examined fathers' residential status with each child at ages 22 to 24 by their total number of children to better understand the complexity of teen fathers' fertility and residential patterns in young adulthood. Overall, when they were in their early twenties, almost one-half (49 percent) of fathers in our sample lived with at least one of their children (See Figure 8).



- Fifty-one percent of the men who had been teen fathers only had one child by ages 22 to 24; 34 percent did not live with their child, and 17 percent did. (See Figure 8).
- Forty-nine percent of men who had been teen fathers had two or more children by ages 22 to 24. Fewer than one in five of these fathers (17 percent) did not live with any of their children, 18 percent lived in the same household with all of their children, and 14 percent lived in a household with some, but not all of their children (See Figure 8).



SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This *Research Brief* provides information on characteristics of teen fathers, both at the time their first child was born and later as they become young adults. Knowing more about the union formation and fertility histories for these young men can help us to better understand the circumstances of early fatherhood and the implications for children.

Teen fathers in our study share similarities with teen mothers in terms of age and marital status. Comparing our sample to a national sample of teen mothers, we found that teen fathers are similar to teen mothers in a number of ways. Approximately two-thirds of teen parents experienced the birth of their first child between ages 18 and 19 (66 percent of teen fathers in our sample and 65 percent of teen mothers). Further, more than one-half of the teen fathers in our sample who reported the age of their partner said that she was also a teen. Previous research suggests that having two teen parents elevates the negative effects of teen childbearing for both parents and children.^{4,5}

Only one in 10 teen parents was married (8 percent of teen fathers in our sample and 11 percent of teen mothers). Prior research suggests that, compared with children born to married parents, children born to unmarried parents may experience more instability in family structure, as partners move in and out of the household. Growing up in such fluctuating circumstances has been linked to negative outcomes for children.⁶ Even though more than one-quarter of the teen fathers in our sample were cohabiting at the birth of their first child, these relationships also tend to be less stable and shorter-term than marital unions, resulting in greater instability for children.⁷

Many men who were teen fathers go on to have more children before they reach their mid-twenties. Almost one-half (49 percent) of the fathers in our sample had more than one

child by the time they were between the ages of 22 and 24. Research suggests that subsequent births in adolescence and young adulthood decrease young fathers' opportunities for educational attainment and economic stability.⁸ Further, among respondents in our sample who fathered additional children, 9 percent did so with more than one woman (that is, they experienced multiple-partner fertility). Prior research finds that 17 percent of fathers between the ages of 16 and 45 have experienced multiple-partner fertility, and nearly one-third (36 percent) of these fathers were teens when their first child was born.⁹ Multiple-partner fertility has been found to affect parents, children, and families negatively, possibly resulting in even greater subsequent disadvantage for teen fathers and for their children.¹⁰

Teen fathers who lived with their first child at the time of the birth are more likely than are those who did not to be living with their children in young adulthood. By the time the young fathers in our sample were between the ages of 22 and 24, nearly one-half of these former teen fathers lived with at least one of their biological children, and one-third lived with all of them. This proportion was higher among teen fathers who were living with their first child at the first child's birth. Although a number of fathers may move in and out of their child's household in the years following the birth,¹² these findings suggest that some teen-father households may be more stable than others. The findings also indicate that teen fathers who live with their children at the time they are born may be more committed to being involved in the lives of these children after the birth, as well as in the lives of any subsequent children. Prior research has found that co-residence with the father is positively associated with child well-being¹¹ and that father involvement is more beneficial for children when the father lives in the household.¹²

CONCLUSION

The negative consequences associated with early parenting are well documented, although much more is known about both the circumstances and consequences of teen parenthood for women than it is for men. To support teen fathers and to make male involvement more central to current pregnancy prevention approaches, as well as to inform father engagement and child support efforts, it is important to understand who becomes a teen father and what their trajectories are after they become parents. Our results suggest that many teen fathers go on to have more children by the time they reach their early twenties and many are not living with their children by this time. Further, some men who had fathered children in their teens go on to have more children with different women by young adulthood.

Prevention and intervention efforts for teen parents may therefore want to target both men and women, and address issues such as repeat

teen pregnancy and multiple-partner fertility. Research indicates that many men who have children in their teens hope to be good fathers.^{4,13,14} Taking a closer look at teen fathers' unique circumstances and experiences may help to prevent early fatherhood and subsequent teen births, especially with different partners, and may better equip the current generation of teen fathers with the parenting skills they need to succeed.

Child Trends thanks the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, as well as the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) through Grant# 1 P01 HD04561-01A1, for their support of the research on which this *Research Brief* was based, as well as the writing, editing, production and dissemination of this publication. The authors also thank Carol Emig, Marci McCoy-Roth and Kate Welti for their careful review of and helpful comments on this brief.

Editor: Harriet J. Scarupa

REFERENCES

- ¹ Landry, D. J., & Forrest, J. D. (1995). How old are U.S. fathers? *Family Planning Perspectives*, 27(4), 159-161, 165.
- ² U.S. Department of Commerce U.S. Census Bureau Population Division. (2003). *Census population 1970-2000 for public health research*, CDC WONDER online database, from <http://wonder.cdc.gov/natality.html>
- ³ National Center for Health Statistics. (2011). *2009 Birth Data, Health Data Interactive*. Retrieved December 15, 2011, from www.cdc.gov/nchs/hdi.htm
- ⁴ Bunting, L., & McAuley, C. (2004). Research review: Teenage pregnancy and motherhood: The contribution of support. *Child and Family Social Work*, 9, 207-215.
- ⁵ Berrington, A., Diamond, I., Ingham, R., Stevenson, J., Borgoni, R., Hernandez, M., et al. (2005). *Consequences of teenage parenthood: Pathways which minimise the long term impacts of teenage childbearing. Final report - November 2005*. Southampton, UK: University of Southampton. from <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RW52.pdf>
- ⁶ Waldfogel, J., Craigie, T.A., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2010). Fragile families and child wellbeing. *Future Child*, 20(2), 87-112.
- ⁷ Bumpass, L., & Lu, H. (2000). Trends in cohabitation and implications for children's family contexts in the United States. *Population Studies*, 54(1), 29-41.
- ⁸ Center for Prevention & Early Intervention Policy. (2005). *Subsequent pregnancies and births among adolescent mothers*. Tallahassee, FL: Florida State University from http://www.cpeip.fsu.edu/resourcefiles/resourcefile_76.pdf
- ⁹ Manlove, J., Logan, C., Ikramullah, E., & Holcombe, E. (2008). Factors associated with multiple partner fertility among fathers. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 70(2), 536-548.
- ¹⁰ Bronte-Tinkew, J., Horowitz, A., & Scott, M. E. (2009). Fathering with multiple partners: Links to children's wellbeing in early childhood. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71, 608-631.
- ¹¹ Sigle-Rushton, W., & McLanahan, S. (2004). Father absence and child well-being: A critical review. In D. P. Moynihan, T. M. Smeeding, & L. Rainwater (Eds.), *The future of the family* (pp. 116-155). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- ¹² Carlson, M. J. (2006). Family structure, father involvement, and adolescent behavioral outcomes. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 68(1), 137-154.
- ¹³ Savio Beers, L. A., & Hollo, R. E. (2009). Approaching the adolescent-headed family: A review of teen parenting. *Current Problems in Pediatric and Adolescent Health Care*, 39(9), 216-233.
- ¹⁴ Quinton, D., Pollock, S., & Anderson, P. (2002). *The transition to fatherhood in young men: Influences on commitment. Summary of key findings*. Bristol: School for Policy Studies, Bristol University.

Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research center that studies children at every stage of development. Its mission is to improve outcomes for children by providing research, data, and analysis to the people and institutions whose decisions and actions affect children. For additional information on Child Trends, including a complete set of available Research Briefs, visit our Web site at www.childtrends.org. For the latest information on more than 100 key indicators of child and youth well-being, visit the Child Trends DataBank at www.childtrendsdatabank.org. For summaries of more than 300 experimental evaluations of social interventions for children, visit www.childtrends.org/LINKS.