

Ten Reasons to Still Keep the Focus on Teen Childbearing

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Overview. Seven years ago, Child Trends drew on statistics and research findings to produce a report called *Ten Reasons to Keep the Focus on Teen Childbearing*.⁴ That report took note of the steady decline in the nation's teenage pregnancy and childbearing rates, beginning in 1991. But the report also acknowledged that "this good news isn't good enough news," citing multiple reasons to continue to be worried about teen childbearing. These reasons have taken on greater urgency in light of data showing that the teen birth rate in the United States increased in 2006 and 2007. This reversal has spurred renewed concerns about the problem of "kids having kids" on the part of parents, policy makers, service providers, researchers, and others—for good reason.

Being a parent is not an easy job, but when the parent is a teenager, the job is tougher still. When teens become parents, they face formidable obstacles on the road to a better life for themselves and their children. Moreover, teen parenthood imposes huge financial and other burdens on society as a whole. Thus, it remains important to keep the focus on teen childbearing and seek to reduce the number of unintended teen pregnancies and births in the nation. This Research Brief updates Child Trends' 2002 report to make the case for why teenage childbearing deserves continued attention.

1. The human costs of teen childbearing are substantial, both for the children and for their parents.

■ Implications of teen childbearing for the child:

- Compared with children born to older mothers, children of teenage mothers are more likely to have a low birth weight and to be born prematurely.^{16,17}
- These children are also at a higher risk of having academic and behavioral problems in school.¹⁴
- In adolescence, these children are more likely to be sexually active at an early age¹⁴ and to become teen parents themselves.^{7,19}
- The sons of teen mothers are also more likely to end up in prison.²³

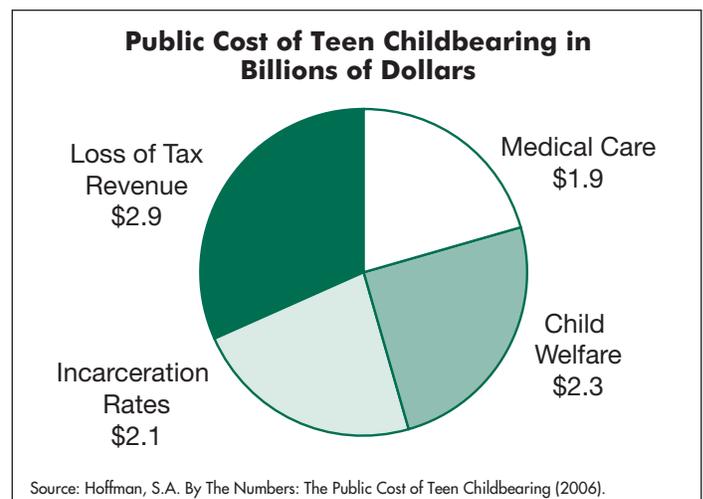
■ Implications of teen childbearing for the mother:

- Compared with women who delay childbearing, teen mothers are more likely to drop out of high school and to never graduate.¹¹

- These mothers are at a higher risk of receiving public assistance and living in poverty.¹⁹
- These mothers are less likely to be married at 35.¹⁵

2. The financial costs of teen childbearing are stark.

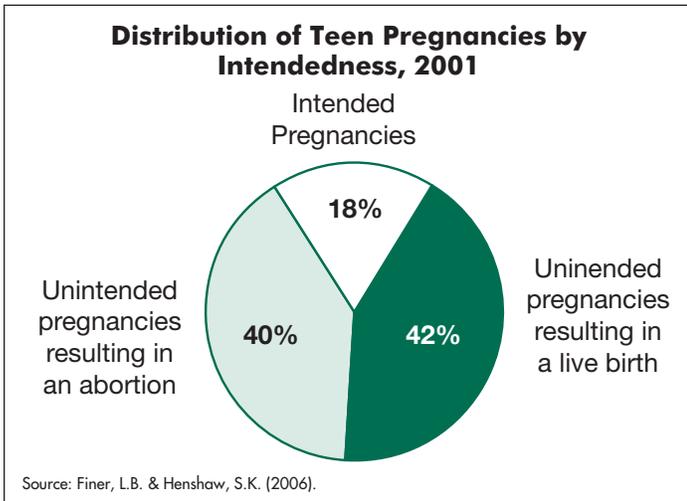
- In 2004, researchers estimated that the total public cost of teen childbearing was \$9.2 billion a year.¹⁰



- Included in this estimate were such expenses as medical care (\$1.9 billion), child welfare (\$2.3 billion), incarceration (\$2.1 billion), and the loss of tax revenue (\$2.9 billion).¹⁰
- Conversely, the steady decline in teen birth rates from 1991 to 2005 saved taxpayers an estimated \$6.7 billion in 2004 alone.¹⁰
- However, some of these costs were offset by the entry of parents into the workforce sooner than if they had delayed childbearing, as well as other contingent factors.¹⁸

3. Most teens who give birth did not intend to have a baby.⁸

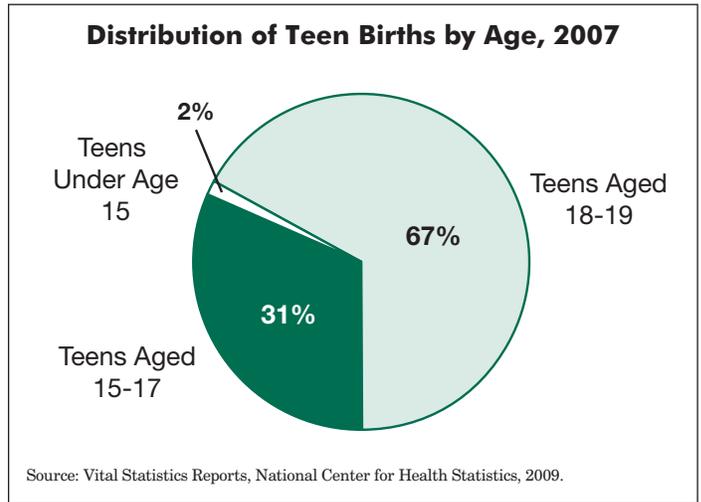
- In 2001, 82 percent of teen pregnancies were unintended at the time of conception, compared with only 18 percent that were intended.⁸



- That year, 40 percent of teen pregnancies ended in abortion. Thus, reducing unintended pregnancies will help to reduce abortion rates.⁸
- For women of all ages, unintended pregnancies are linked to poorer educational and physical and mental health outcomes for the child, as well as a less close mother-child relationship.^{5,6,12,24}

4. In 2007, there were 451,263 teen births in the United States, with the majority of these births occurring to older teens.

- This total represented more than one in 10 U.S. births.
- The majority (67 percent) of these births—or 304,405—occurred to 18-and 19-year-olds.⁹
- In addition, 31 percent of these births—or 140,640—occurred to 15- to 17-year-olds.⁹



- Finally, 2 percent—or 6,218—occurred to teens under the age of 15.⁹
- Births to teens who are still in school, in particular, are linked to high rates of dropping out.

5. The United States continues to have higher teen birth rates than do other industrialized nations.

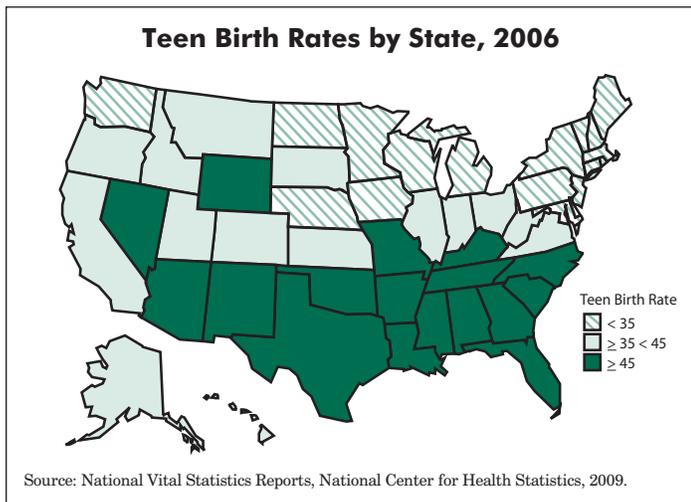
- The World Bank reports adolescent fertility rates for 95 countries around the world, based on data from 2004. Of all the industrialized nations, the United States had the highest birth rate, one that was higher than the rates of more than 20 developing countries.²¹



- The U.S. teen birth rate was nearly one-and-one-half times England's rate and more than two times Canada's rate. Furthermore, the U.S. teen birth rate was four-and-one-half times Sweden's rate and 10 times greater than Japan's rate.²¹

6. Seventeen states, concentrated in the Sun Belt region, have particularly high teen birth rates.

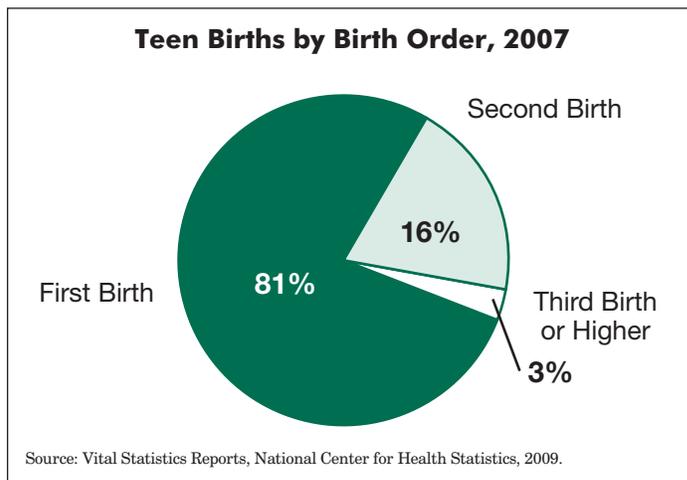
- More than one-quarter of states had teen birth rates that were substantially higher than the national average in 2006.
- The average teen birth rate for the United States was 41.9 births for every 1,000 women in 2006. Yet 17 states, all concentrated in the South, had birth rates exceeding 45.¹⁶



- Mississippi had the highest teen birth rate: 68 births for every 1,000 women.¹⁶
- New Mexico, Texas, Arkansas and Arizona came next, all with birth rates of 62 or higher. Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Nevada, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Tennessee had teen birth rates ranging from 50 to 61, whereas Florida, Missouri, North Carolina, and Wyoming had rates between 45 and 49.¹⁶
- Even the states with the lowest birth rates—New Hampshire (19), Vermont (21), and Massachusetts (21)—all had teen birth rates that significantly exceeded the teen birth rate in Canada. The rate for our northern neighbor in 2006 was just 14 births for every 1,000 women between the ages of 15 and 19.^{16,21}
- Some of these state-level differences result from concentrated minority populations who have higher birth rates, such as Hispanics, African Americans, and foreign-born immigrants.

7. One in five teen births is to a teen who has already had a baby.

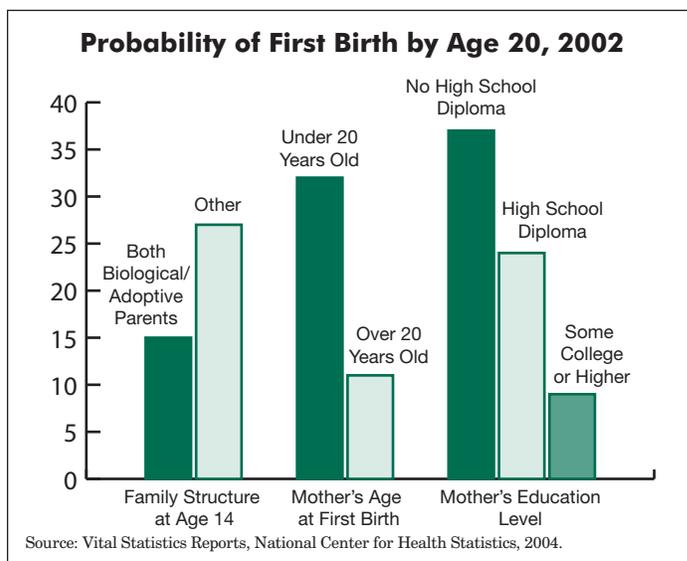
- In 2007, of total births to teens, 16 percent were to teens who already had one child, and another 3 percent were to teens who already had two or more children.⁹



- Giving birth to a second child during the teenage years further compounds the risks associated with any teen birth, such as poorer educational, financial, and health outcomes.^{13,14,16}

8. Having a baby is more common among teens with more family disadvantages.

- On average, the probability of a teen giving birth during her teenage years is 18 percent, based on 2006 data.²² But teens who live in single-parent households, whose families are of a lower socio-economic status, and whose mother had her first child as a teenager are at an increased risk of having a baby themselves.¹
- In contrast, teens who come from families in which both parents were still together when the teen was 14 have a substantially lower likelihood of having a baby during their teenage years. In 2002, just 15 percent of teens from two-parent families have had a baby during the teenage years, compared with 26 percent of those who did not live with both parents.¹

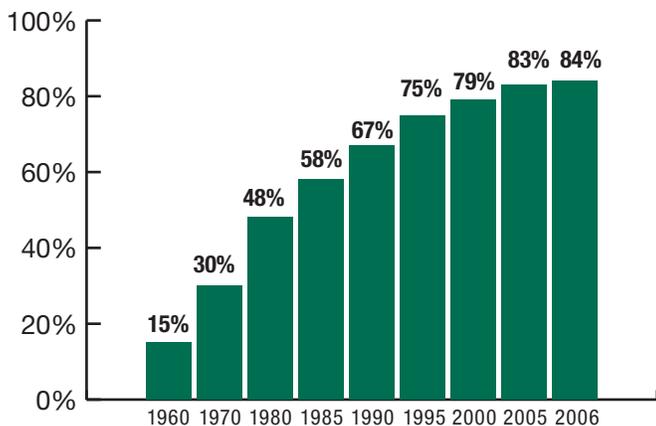


- Teens who are born to teen mothers are also more likely to become teen parents themselves, with 32 percent of these young women giving birth as a teen in 2002, compared with 11 percent of young women not born to teen mothers.¹
- Maternal educational attainment is also linked to the likelihood—or unlikelihood—of a teen birth. In 2002, teens whose mothers did not graduate high school were much more likely to have a child (36 percent) than were those whose mothers graduated from high school (24 percent) or attended college (9 percent).¹

9. The vast majority of teen births in the United States occur outside of marriage.

- Altogether, 84 percent of teen births occurred outside of marriage in 2006, up dramatically from 15 percent in 1960.¹⁶
- Among teens who do marry, their marriages tend to be short-lived.³ Meanwhile, teens who do not marry have a high risk of having subsequent children with another partner later in life² and are less likely to ever marry.¹⁵

Percentage of Teen Births That Occurred Outside of Marriage, 1960-2006



Source: Vital Statistics Reports, National Center for Health Statistics, 2000, 2002, 2007.

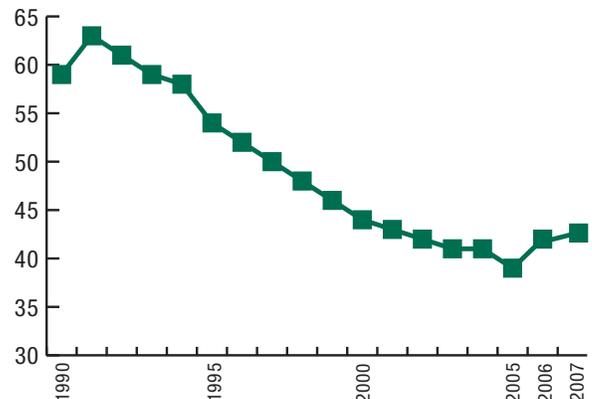
- The majority of teen births occur outside of marriage to teens in all racial/ethnic groups. In 2006, births outside of marriage accounted for 80 percent of births to white teens, 97 percent of births to black teens, and 81 percent of births to Hispanic teens.¹⁶
- An estimated 44 percent of teen births outside of marriage occur among couples who are living together (or cohabiting), based on 2001 data.²⁰ However, many cohabiting relationships are short-term, and this is especially the case among teens.

- These high percentages of teens who are having babies outside of marriage reflect societal trends toward delays in marriage and increases in non-marital births to women of all ages.

10. After 14 years of decline, the teen birth rate increased in 2006 and 2007.

- The teen birth rate declined every year from 1991 through 2005, resulting in a total decline of 34 percent over these years.¹⁶

Teen Birth Rates, 1990-2007



Source: National Vital Statistics Reports, National Center for Health Statistics, 2002 and 2009.

- In 2006, the teen birth rate increased 3 percent to 41.9 births per 1,000 females, up from 40.5 in 2005.¹⁶ In 2007 the rate increased again to 42.5 births per 1,000 females.⁹
- This increase reinforces the need for vigilance to ensure that gains made in reducing the teen birth rate are not lost and that this rate will continue a downward trajectory.

CONCLUSION

This *Research Brief* has highlighted some of the key reasons to remain focused on reducing teenage pregnancy and childbearing in the United States, an imperative given the substantial human and financial costs associated with teen childbearing for multiple generations. The teen birth rate is rising again, which brings with it more adverse outcomes for more children. While we don't yet know whether this recent increase represents a small statistical blip or is an indicator of a longer-term trend, we as a society cannot afford to lose our focus on this problem and the still-pressing need to reduce the relatively high rates of teenage childbearing in the United States.

In this context, this *Research Brief* has identified several populations with especially high risks of teenage pregnancy and childbearing that could benefit greatly from program and policy initiatives targeted at these problems. These vulnerable groups include:

- Teens coping with family disadvantages (including lower parental education levels, intergenerational patterns of young parenthood, and growing up in a single-parent family);
- Middle school as well as high school teens (especially with youth development approaches);
- Teens who have already had a child and are at risk of a subsequent teen birth;
- Teens in the Sun Belt states; and
- Teens in racial/ethnic minority and immigrant populations.

One important line of defense in helping to reduce the large number and percentage of unintended births among teens is to help these young people develop positive future aspirations and motivations so that they want to avoid having or fathering a child during the teen years. Parents, practitioners, community members, and policy makers must continue to be mindful about encouraging teens to postpone childbearing until young men and women are fully prepared for parenthood. Only then will the problem of “kids having kids” be solved. That day is not yet here.

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