

Number of Unwed Mothers Has Risen Sharply in U.S.  
Women in 20s, 30s Are Driving Trend, Report Shows  
By Rob Stein and Donna St. George  
Washington Post Staff Writers  
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Heidy Gonzalez lives with her two children, including 5-year-old Marilyn Soto, and their father in Mount Rainier. Marriage isn't a priority, she says. Heidy Gonzalez lives with her two children, including 5-year-old Marilyn Soto, and their father in Mount Rainier. Marriage isn't a priority, she says. (By Marvin Joseph -- The Washington Post)

Katrina Stanfield, 25, is raising her 3-year-old daughter in Middletown, Md., without a husband because she and her boyfriend decided that marriage would not work for them.  
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Unmarried Mothers on the Rise

Heidy Gonzalez, 21, is living with her two children and their father in Mount Rainier, but tying the knot is not a priority for them now.

Emily Smatchetti, 38, is a single mother of a toddler in Miami because she had not found the right man and worried that time was running out. So she found a sperm donor.

The mothers are part of a far-reaching social trend unfolding across the United States: The number of children being born out of wedlock has risen sharply in recent years, driven primarily by women in their 20s and 30s opting to have children without getting married. Nearly four out of every 10 births are now to unmarried women.

"It's been a huge increase -- a dramatic increase," said Stephanie J. Ventura of the National Center for Health Statistics, which documented the shift in detail yesterday for the first time, based on an analysis of birth certificates nationwide. "It's quite striking."

Although the report did not examine the reasons for the increase, Ventura and other experts cite a confluence of factors, including a lessening of the social stigma associated with unmarried motherhood, an increase in couples delaying or forgoing marriage, and growing numbers of financially independent women and older and single women deciding to have children on their own after delaying childbearing.

"I think this is the tipping point," said Rosanna Hertz, a professor of sociology and women's studies at Wellesley College. "This is becoming increasingly the norm. The old adage that 'first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage' just no longer holds true."

The trend has unfolded despite decades of political and social hand-wringing over the issue, such as Vice President Dan Quayle's attack on the unmarried television mother Murphy Brown, President Bill Clinton's revamp of welfare and President George W. Bush's focus on "family values." President Obama has said that one of his priorities is reducing abortions, in part by helping women who become pregnant and want to keep their children.

Some experts said the trend represents a positive change for many women, allowing them to avoid becoming social outcasts, being forced to give up their babies for adoption or having abortions, and letting them raise children in nontraditional families.

"Women can have children on their own, and it's not going to destroy your employment, and it's not going to mean that you'll be made a pariah by the community," Hertz said. "It's much more socially acceptable."

But others said the trend is disturbing because children who grow up without stable, two-parent families tend not to fare as well in many ways.

"I look at this and say, maybe this trend is what young adults want or stumble into, but it's not in the best interest of children," said Sarah Brown, chief executive of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

About 1.7 million babies were born to unmarried women in 2007, a 26 percent rise from 1.4 million in 2002 and more than double the number in 1980, according to the new report. Unmarried women accounted for 39.7 percent of all U.S. births in 2007 -- up from 34 percent in 2002 and more than double the percentage in 1980.

"If you see 10 babies in the room, four them were born to women who were not married," Ventura said.

Although experts have been concerned about a recent uptick in births to older teenagers after years of decline, that is not the driving force in the overall trend but more likely a reflection of it, Ventura said. Instead, much of the rise is due to significant increases in births among unmarried women in their 20s and 30s. Between 2002 and 2006, the rate at which unmarried women in that age group were having babies increased between 13 percent and 34 percent, the report found.

The rates increased for all races, but they remained highest and rose fastest for Hispanics and blacks. There were 106 births to every 1,000 unmarried Hispanic women in 2006, 72 per 1,000 blacks, 32 per 1,000 whites and 26 per 1,000 Asians, the report showed.

The percentage of babies born to unmarried women in the United States is starting to look more like that in many European countries, the data shows. For example, the proportion of babies born to unmarried women is about 66 percent in Iceland, 55 percent in Sweden, 50 percent in France and 44 percent in the United Kingdom.

In many of those countries, couples are living together instead of getting married, which is also the case in the United States. Previous research indicates that about 40 percent of births to unmarried women occur in households where couples are cohabitating.

Gonzalez, the mother who lives with her children's father in Mount Rainier, said marriage has not loomed as a necessity for them. "Time goes by and we think about other stuff -- and we think about rent," she said. This holds true, she said, for most of her friends. "Most of the people I know just live with their baby's father or boyfriend and don't get married," she said.

Other couples today feel less compelled to marry just because they are having a child.

"It seems to be more wrong to be in a marriage with someone who you don't love and consider to be your best friend than not to be in a marriage at all," said Barbara Katz Rothman, a professor of sociology at the City University of New York. "It's not that people care less about marriage. In some ways, it's because they care more."

Stanfield and her boyfriend tried living together after she got pregnant, but he moved out when it became clear to both of them that they were not compatible, she said.

"He's a good dad and a good person, but he's just not right for me," Stanfield said.

In New Carrollton, Natrice McKenzie, 25, a teller supervisor at a bank, said she did not set out to become a single mother but has no regrets.

"Getting married was something I had in mind, but that basically was not what happened," said McKenzie, pregnant with her third child. She said it can be difficult, and she knows she is far from unique. "Nowadays it's becoming more like, single moms are everywhere," she said.

Alana Hill, 33, sees family history as an important influence. A single mother in Silver Spring who works as a dancer and a dance teacher, Hill was raised by a single mother and was part of a large extended family in which most of the mothers were not married. Except for grandparents, "I didn't have a role model of a husband and a wife who were married for years," she said. Even when she was very young, her foremost wish, she said, was motherhood, not marriage. "I knew I wanted a child," she said.

Smatchetti, who works as a U.S. attorney in Miami, said she is glad that she had the option of using a sperm donor after a long-term relationship ended.

"I didn't want to pick the wrong person just to have kid, so I just decided to go ahead and do it and work on the relationship later," she said. "It's hard, but in a good way."

