

Report: Babies Increasingly Born to Unwed Mothers

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The number of babies being born out of wedlock has increased sharply in the United States, driven primarily by significant jumps in women in their 20s and 30s having children without getting married, according to a federal report released today.

More than 1.7 million babies were born to unmarried women in 2007, a 26 percent rise from 2002 and more than double the number in 1980, according to the report from the National Center for Health Statistics. The increase reflected a 21 percent jump in the rates of unmarried women giving birth, which rose from 43.7 per 1,000 women in 2002 to 52.9 per 1,000 women.

That means that unmarried women accounted for 39.7 percent of all U.S. births in 2007 -- nearly four out of every 10 newborns -- 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," said Stephanie J. Ventura, who led the analysis of birth certificate data nationwide. "It's been a huge increase -- a dramatic increase. It's quite striking."

Although the report did not examine the reasons for the increase, Ventura and other experts said the trend has been driven by a combination of factors, including the 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 who decide to have children on their own after delaying childbearing.

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"It's many factors," Ventura said. "Certainly the social disapproval factor has diminished. That's just not a factor that unmarried women once faced. And a lot of women are postponing marriage."

Some experts said the trend represents many positive changes for some women -- women are less likely to be

shunned if they have children by themselves or to be forced to give their children up for adoption.

"We've seen a transformation of social norms," said Rosanna Hertz, a professor of sociology at Wellesley College. "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."

But others said that while the shift may represent some positive changes, the trend is disturbing because studies have shown that children generally tend to fare better when they grow up in stable households with two parents.

"We know that babies and children do best with committed, stable adult parents -- preferably married," said Sarah Brown of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. "That tends to be the arrangement that produces the best outcome for children. 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.'"

The trend has been indicated in previous reports, but the new analysis is the first to examine the dramatic social shift in detail, exploring differences in age and ethnicity as well as comparing the United States to other countries.

Although experts have been concerned about a recent uptick in births to older teens 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 increase 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 were having babies increased by 13 percent among women ages 20 to 24, by 21 percent for those ages 25 to 29, by 34 percent for women 30 to 34 and by 29 percent for those 35 to 39, the report found.

"Those are really big increases," Ventura said, noting that the increase among women in their 20s was the most important factor because they have the highest birth rate. "It's really what's happening for women in their 20s that is the dominant factor."

Compared to 1980, the rate of births among unmarried women more than doubled from 41 per 1,000 among women ages 20 to 24 to 80 per 1,000 in 2006, and nearly tripled for women ages 35 to 39 -- from 10 per 1,000 in 1980 to 27 per 1,000 in 2006, the report showed.

In 2007, 45 percent of women who gave birth in their 20s were unmarried. Sixty percent of those who had babies between 20 and 24 were single, up from 52 percent in 2002, and nearly one-third of those giving birth at ages 25 to 29 unmarried, up from one-fourth in 2002. Nearly one in five women who gave birth in their 30s were unmarried, compared with one in seven in 2002.

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, 72 per 1,000 blacks, 32 per 1,000 whites and 26 per 1,000 Asians, the report showed.

The rate of babies being born to unmarried women in the United States is starting to look more like that of some European countries, the report showed. For example, the percentage of babies born to unmarried women is about 66 percent in Iceland, about 55 percent in Sweden, about 50 percent in France and about 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, Ventura noted. Previous research indicates about 40 percent of births to unmarried women occur in households where couples are cohabitating, she said.

"We're seeing a big drop in emphasis on marriage," Hertz said. "There are more people living together without being married -- look at Brad and Angelina."