

SCIENCE

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Says:**The Relationship between
Teenage Motherhood and Marriage**

 *Teenage childbearing is associated with many adverse consequences for teen mothers, their families, and children. Many of the negative consequences for teen mothers are due to the disadvantaged situations in which many of these girls already lived before having a teen birth. While the disadvantaged backgrounds of most teen mothers account for many of the burdens that these young women shoulder, having a baby during adolescence often restricts economic and educational opportunities, and these disadvantages tend to be passed on to the next generation. Children born to teen mothers are often worse off than children born to older mothers.¹ They are at higher risk of poverty, low educational attainment, problem behavior, early sexual activity, and becoming a teen parent themselves.²⁻⁴ Marriage, or more specifically, the absence of marriage, helps explain this cycle of disadvantage.*

Many family-related factors affect how children fare and develop over time, and marriage is one of them. Research suggests that children do best when they are raised by two parents who have a stable marriage.⁵ Yet only 20 percent of teen births occur within marriage,⁹ and teen pregnancy itself is associated with a lower likelihood of marriage. Teen mothers are unlikely to marry the biological fathers of their children, and those teenage mothers who do wed often end up in unstable marriages.^{6,7} For their part, the unmarried fathers are less likely to be involved in their children's lives, and reduced paternal involvement is associated with lower child well-being.⁸ For all of these reasons, helping more women reach adulthood before they have children would go a long way toward ensuring that more children grow up in stable, married families. And considering the large body of research on the benefits to children of growing up in such families, the link between reducing teen pregnancies and improving overall child well-being is clear.

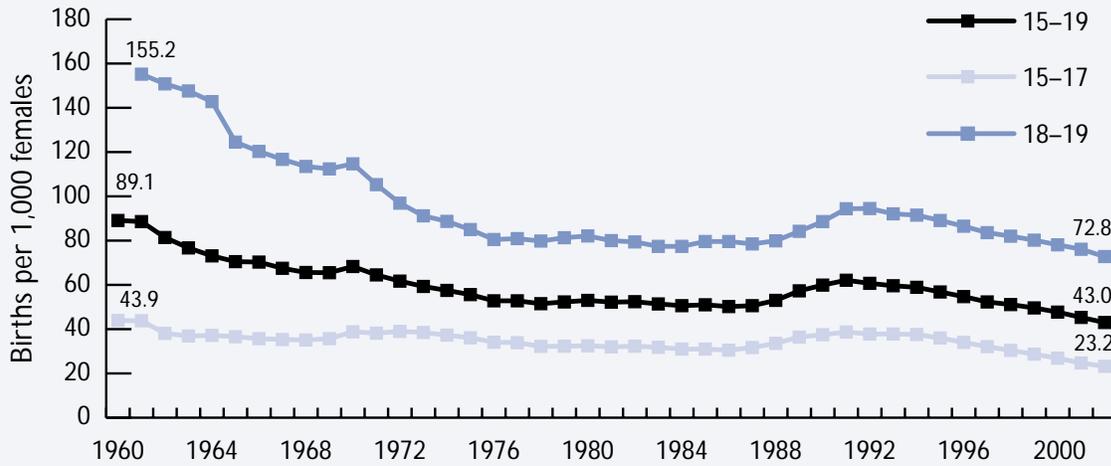
What Research Shows**Overall Trends in Teen Births and Marriage**

U.S. teen birth rates have declined at the same time that the median age of first marriage has risen. Therefore, teens are less likely to be married than in the past, whether or not they become teen parents.

■ **Teen birth rates have declined.** The dominant trend in the teen birth rate has been a steady and dramatic decline over the past 40 years, with the exception of an aberrant five-year increase between 1987 and 1991 (see Figure 1).^{9,10} In 1960, the teen birth rate in the United States was quite high, at 89 births per 1,000 teens aged 15 to 19. The teen birth rate has fallen steeply

since then, to a low of 43 births per 1,000 teens in 2002. Since 1991, the teen birth rate has fallen by 30 percent. It has been estimated that this reduction has contributed to a 26 percent decline in poverty rates for children under age six and an 82 percent decline in the number of children under age six living in single-parent homes.¹¹ These improvements demonstrate

FIGURE 1: Births per 1,000 females aged 15–19 (1960–2002)



Sources: Martin et al. 2003; Papillo et al. 2003



the strong link between teen childbearing and overall child well-being.

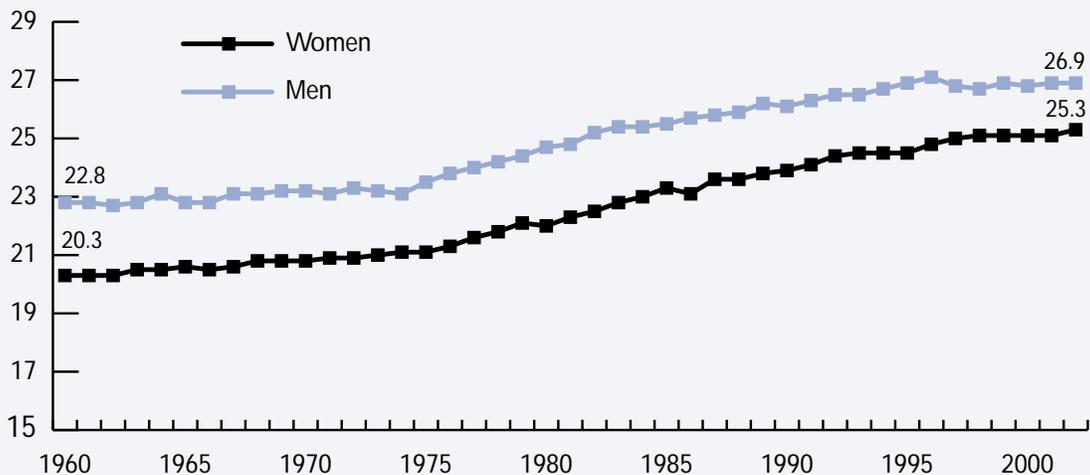
- **Teen marriage is rare.** Marriage among teenagers is rare in today's society. In 2002, only 2.5 percent of teens aged 15–19 had ever been married, compared to 11 percent in 1975.¹² The trend

over time has been towards getting married at a later age. The median age of first marriage has increased from approximately 20 years old for women and 23 years old for men in 1960, to 25 and 27 years old for women and men, respectively, in 2002 (see Figure 2).¹³

Marital Status of Teen Mothers

Marriage and birth patterns among teens have changed over time, shifting from a general trend of marrying *before* pregnancy, to marrying as a *result* of pregnancy, to becoming pregnant and *not* marrying. Marriage is especially unlikely

FIGURE 2: Estimated median age at first marriage, by gender (1960–2002)



Source: U.S. Census Bureau 2003.



among younger teens and among those teens with *one* child.

- **Most teen births are to unmarried mothers.** The association between marriage and teen fertility has changed over time. In the past, the expectation and pattern was for teens who married to marry first and then become pregnant. Over time, however, a dramatic shift took place as the proportion of teen births occurring within marriage declined. In 1960, 85 percent of all teen births were to married teens. Even as recently as 1980, the majority of teen births (52 percent) were marital births. However, by 2002 only 20 percent of teen births occurred within marriage (see Figure 3).^{9,14-16}
- **Pregnancy is no longer a strong impetus for marriage.** Declines in marital births to teens are partly due to a decreasing percentage of

teens who marry because they are pregnant. In the early 1960s, nearly 70 percent of white teens and 36 percent of black teens aged 15–19 who became pregnant got married before their child was born. By the 1990s, those percentages had decreased to 20 percent and 7 percent respectively.¹⁷ (Note: Data are not available for Hispanics.)

- **First births are less likely to occur within marriage than subsequent births.** In 2002, one in five teen births occurred to women who already had at least one child, and marital births were more common for those higher order births. Among first time mothers aged 15–19, 18 percent were married when they gave birth, while 27 percent of 15–19 year old mothers who had at least two children had the child/children within marriage (see Figure 4).

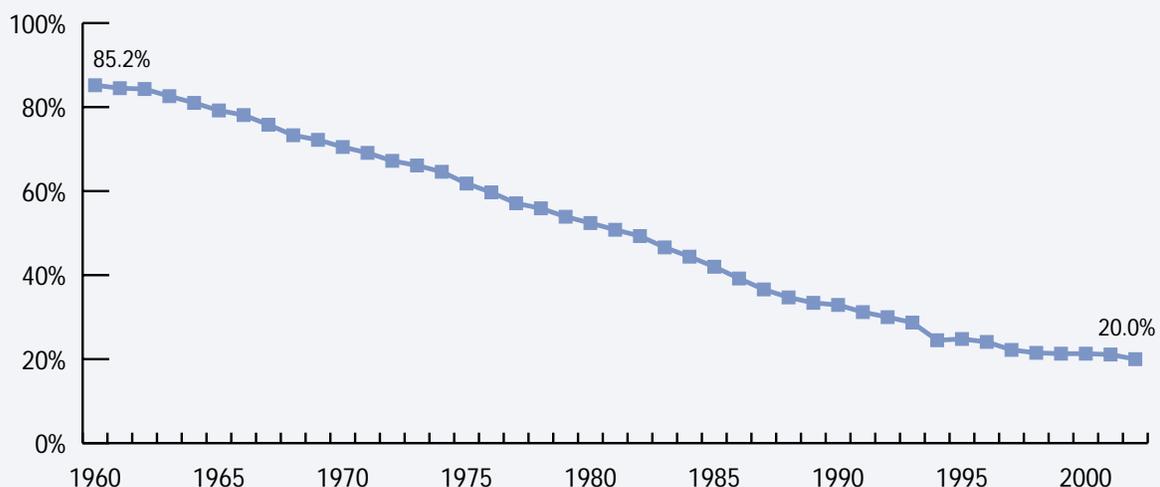
- **Marital births are less common among young teen mothers.** For teens aged 15–17 in 2002, only 11.5 percent were married when they gave birth (see Figure 5). In comparison, more than twice (24.2 percent) as many older teens (aged 18–19) who gave birth were married. Still, only one in four births to older teen mothers occurred within marriage.

Teen Mothers' Marital Hopes and Realities

Although unmarried teen mothers often have high expectations for eventually marrying the father of their child, few ever do. And those teens who do marry tend to have very unstable marriages.

- **Many teen mothers have unrealistically high expectations for marriage.** Based on analyses of Fragile Families data (a nationally

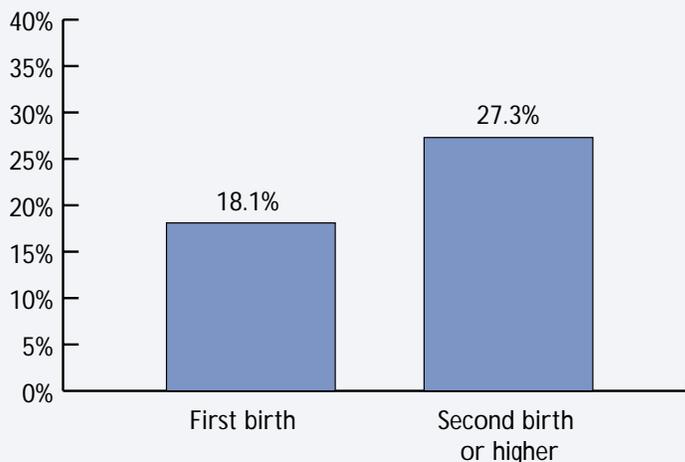
FIGURE 3: Percentage of teen births that occur to married teens aged 15–19 (1960–2002)



Source: Martin et al. 2001, 2002a, 2002b; Ventura et al. 2001

Child TRENDS

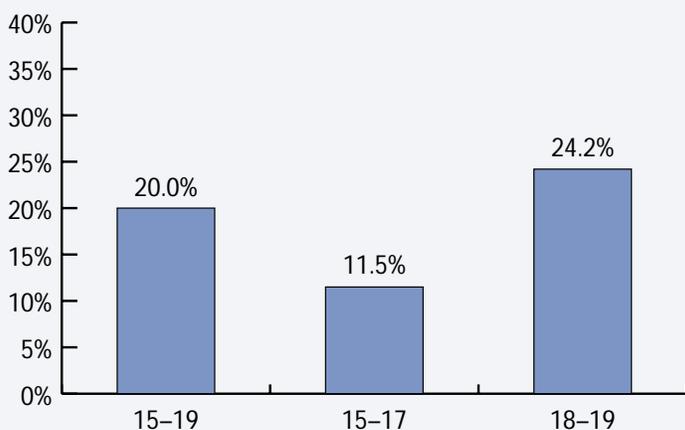
FIGURE 4: Percentage of teen births (ages 15–19) that occur within marriage, by parity (2002)



Source: Child Trends' analysis of 2002 Natality Data Set CD Series 21, No. 16, National Center for Health Statistics.



FIGURE 5: Percentage of teen births that occur within marriage, by age (2002)



Source: Child Trends' analysis of 2002 Natality Data Set CD Series 21, No. 16, National Center for Health Statistics.



representative sample of births in large cities in the United States), at the time of their child's birth, almost one-third of unmarried teen mothers say that they are "certain" that they will marry the biological father of their child (see Figure 6).¹⁸ An additional 23

percent say their chances of marrying are "good." In reality, however, not even eight percent of unwed teen mothers are married to the baby's father within one year of giving birth. Even so, teen mothers maintain marriage hopes. One year after giving

birth, almost one-quarter of unmarried teen mothers still believe they are "certain" to marry their child's biological father. Another 11 percent believe their marriage chances are "good."

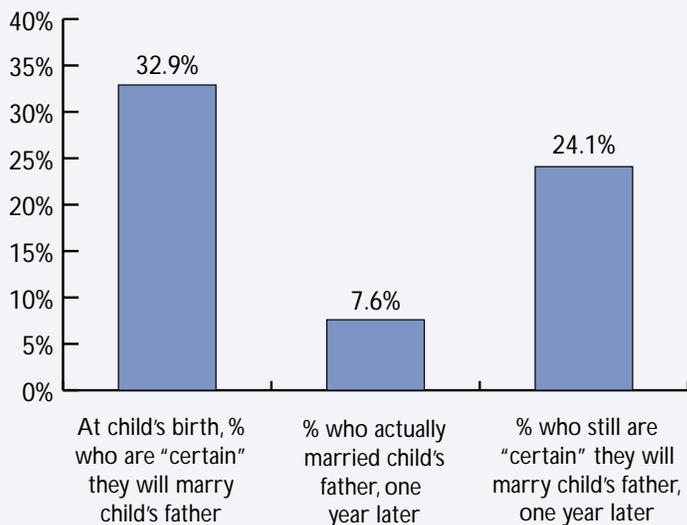
■ **Marriage expectations and rates among unwed teen mothers vary by race and ethnicity.**

Among unmarried teen mothers, non-Hispanic whites have substantially higher expectations for marriage than other racial and ethnic groups. Almost two-thirds of non-Hispanic whites say they are "certain" they will marry their child's father, compared with 35 percent of Hispanics and 20 percent of non-Hispanic blacks (see Figure 7). One year later, however, only 12 percent of both non-Hispanic whites and Hispanics had actually married their child's father, as had only two percent of non-Hispanic blacks. One year after giving birth, unmarried non-Hispanic whites show more moderate marriage expectations, with only 38 percent expecting to marry the child's father. Among unmarried Hispanics, 32 percent expected to marry the father a year later, as did 15 percent of unmarried non-Hispanic black mothers.

■ **Teenage mothers have reduced chances of ever marrying.**

Research has shown that child-bearing outside of marriage is associated with a decreased likelihood of ever marrying and an increased risk of divorce among those who eventually do marry.^{6,7} Since most teen births are non-marital, it follows that

FIGURE 6: Marriage expectations and behaviors of unmarried teen mothers aged 15–19 (2002)



Source: Child Trends' analyses of data from Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, baseline and one-year followup



women who give birth during their teenage years face reduced chances of marriage, compared with women who do not.

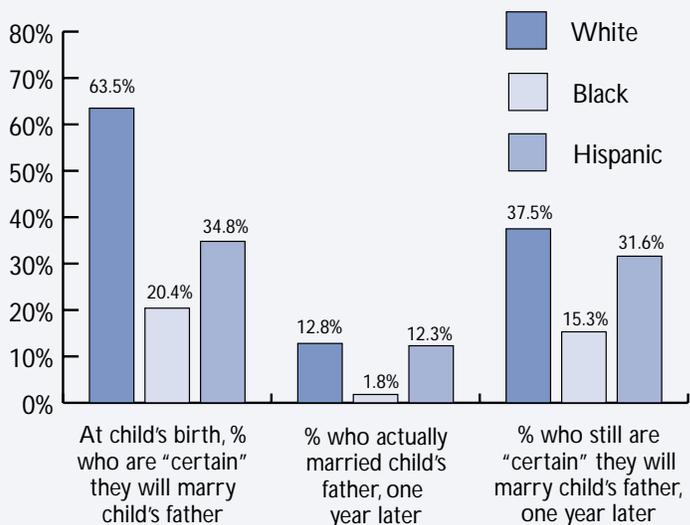
- **Teenage marriages typically are unstable.** One-third of teenage marriages formed before the bride is 18 years old end in divorce within five years, and almost half dissolve within 10 years (see Figure 8). For teens who marry later at age 18 or 19, the likelihood of divorce is 25 percent within five years and 38 percent within 10 years. This is considerably higher than for women who delay marriage until they are in their early twenties, as shown in Figure 8.¹⁹

Teen Mothers, Marriage, and Consequences

Given that teen mothers are less likely to ever marry than other teen girls, it is important to consider the consequences associated with remaining an unmarried mother.

- **Unmarried mothers are at a greater risk of poverty.** In addition to reduced marriage prospects, women who give birth outside of marriage have lower educational attainment, lower incomes, and are more likely to receive public assistance.^{20,21} Since teen mothers are less likely to ever get married, they are clearly at greater risk for long-term single motherhood and, consequently, of being poor later in life. Indeed, women who are single mothers for at least 10 years during their lifetime have an increased risk of living in

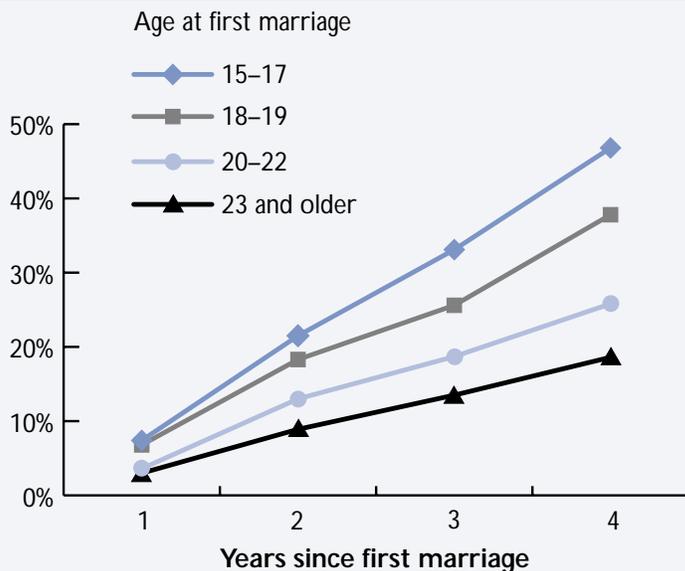
FIGURE 7: Marriage expectations and behaviors of unmarried teen mothers aged 15–19, by race/ethnicity (2002)



Source: Child Trends' analyses of data from Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, baseline and one-year followup



FIGURE 8: Percentage of marriages that dissolve, by age of woman (1995)



Source: Abma et al. 1997



poverty even when they are 65–75 years old.²²

- **Children born to unmarried teen mothers are at higher risk for poor outcomes.** Such children face higher risks of poverty, low educational attainment, early sexual activity, and are more likely to engage in problem behavior and become teen parents themselves.²⁻⁴ Also, children in single-parent families headed by mothers of all ages typically receive less supervision and fathers are less involved in their lives.^{5,8}

- **Teen mothers who do marry are more likely to have a closely-spaced subsequent birth.**²³ Short birth intervals increase the risk of a premature birth, a low birthweight baby, and lower the quality and quantity of parental time, since parents must divide resources

among the children.²⁴⁻²⁶ For mothers, closely spaced second births may increase the physical, emotional, and economic stress already present from the first child.^{27,28} Also, given that most teenage marriages are already unstable, the combined high risks of divorce and rapid subsequent childbearing for teen mothers can result in more single-mother households with greater numbers of children.

What It All Means

Teen childbearing is associated with reduced marriage prospects and marital instability for those who do wed, both of which are linked to poor outcomes for the children of teen parents. Therefore, reducing rates of teen pregnancy and preventing too-early parenting is a critical step towards ensuring

healthy marriages and improving child-well-being.

- **Old issue, new context.** Teen childbearing is not a new phenomenon, or even a worsening one. Teen birth rates are at their lowest levels in 40 years. What has changed is the context in which teens are having babies. Only one in five births to teens occur within a marriage, compared to nearly 4 out of 5 in 1960. Still, since 1994, the reduction in the teen birth rate has contributed to the leveling off of the overall proportion of children born outside of marriage.²⁹

- **Preventing non-marital first births is particularly important.** While only 25 percent of non-marital births are to teenagers, nearly half (48 percent) of all nonmarital first births occur to teens, the largest single group.^{9,30} And teen mothers are likely to have a second birth relatively soon—about one-fourth do so within 24 months.²³ Clearly, reducing the percentage of teens who become parents in the first place will result in a decrease in the overall proportion of children who are born outside of marriage.

- **Teen moms seldom marry.** Not only are a higher proportion of teens having babies when they are single than in the past, they are less likely than their non-parenting peers ever to get married. This is true despite the fact that unmarried teen mothers have high expectations of getting married. Consequently, a higher percentage of teen mothers are raising one or more children on

their own, a troubling trend given that two-thirds of families begun by a young, unmarried mother are poor.*³⁰ The vast majority of teens want to marry some day, so programs that highlight long-term relationships and family formation goals (including both abstinence and comprehensive sex education programs) can help emphasize how teen childbearing dramatically reduces the chances of marriage. Emphasizing this may provide teens with additional motivation to avoid pregnancy.

- **Teen marriage is not a cure-all.** Teens who marry face higher rates of divorce than older couples, whether or not they are parents. When parenthood is added to the equation, the odds of success for these young couples decrease even more. For that reason, marriage alone cannot be viewed as the solution to the problems that are associated with teen childbearing, such as poverty and low educational attainment. In cases where teen parents really want to marry, programs might consider helping them develop the knowledge and skills to sustain a healthy marriage³¹ and to delay subsequent pregnancies until they are ready to manage their responsibilities.
- **It's about sequencing.** It is not simply the pregnancy or disadvantaged backgrounds that cause the myriad problems experienced by teen mothers. It's the timing. If more teenagers first completed their education, then secured employment, married, and estab-

lished stable home lives before becoming parents, they, their children, and society would fare much better. While a substantial proportion of teen mothers were economically disadvantaged and behind in school *before* having a birth, careful research controlling for background characteristics has found that teen parenthood is associated with a greater likelihood of dropping out of high school, lower economic productivity, higher poverty, greater reliance on public assistance, as well as single parenthood.^{1,27} This underscores the strong connection between teen parenthood and many other important social issues—marriage being just one of them. Simply put, if more children were born to parents who were ready and able to care for them, this nation would see a significant reduction in a host of social problems—from school failure to poverty.

About the Putting What Works to Work Project

Putting What Works to Work (PWWTW) is a project of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy and is funded, in part, by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Through PWWTW, the National Campaign is translating research on teen pregnancy prevention and related issues into user-friendly materials for practitioners, policymakers, and advocates. As part of this initiative, the *Science Says* series summarizes recent research in short, easy-to-understand briefs.

Author Information

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About the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization supported largely by private donations. The National Campaign's mission is to improve the well-being of children, youth, and families by reducing teen pregnancy. Our goal is to reduce the rate of teen pregnancy by one-third between 1996 and 2005.

About Child Trends

Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization dedicated to improving the lives of children by conducting research and providing science-based information to improve the decisions, programs, and policies that affect children.

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* Note, however, that teenage pregnancy and poverty may both be due to other background factors.

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