Nonmarital Childbearing in the 1980s: Assessing The Importance of Women 25 and Older

By E. Michael Foster and Saul D. Hoffman

Nonmarital births to women in their late 20s and 30s have attracted increasing attention in recent years. Marital and birth history data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics confirm that births to unmarried women aged 25 and older accounted for a larger proportion of all nonmarital births in the 1980s than in the 1970s (36% vs. 22%). Most of these births were to women who had been previously married or who had other children: Births to never-married, first-time mothers aged 25 and older accounted for only 9% of all nonmarital births to older women in the 1980s. The majority of nonmarital births to older women in the 1980s—58%—involved women who began having children as teenagers. (Family Planning Perspectives, **28:**117–119, 1996)

W omen aged 25 and older now account for a higher percentage of nonmarital births (35%) than do women younger than 18 (13%) or even younger than 20 (30%).[1] Indeed, the nonmarital-birth rate among women in their 20s is considerably higher than the rate for teenagers, and rose at a faster rate in the 1980s. Nonmarital births now account for more than two-fifths of all births to 20–24-year-olds and one-fifth of all births to 25–29-year-olds.

The mass media have given these trends a great deal of coverage.[2] They have been used to conjure images of a radical change in the demography of nonmarital childbearing, with older, never-married, first-time mothers replacing teenage mothers as the prototypical unmarried mother.

The accuracy of such a picture of nonmarital childbearing is unclear. The older, single mothers identified in the vital statistics data in fact may have been previously married or may have had prior births, either marital or nonmarital. Indeed, many nonmarital births among older women may be higher parity births to women who were originally teenage mothers. If so, the rise of nonmarital childbearing among older women need not necessarily imply that nonmarital childbearing among teenagers has become any less of a problem.

Unfortunately, the cross-sectional nature of vital statistics data does not allow them to be used to answer these questions, since births are described only in terms of a mother's current age and marital status. Without marital and fertility histories, the picture is incomplete at best, and many interesting questions cannot be answered.

In this research note, we use recently released data files from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), a nationally representative sample of U. S. households and individuals, to describe nonmarital childbearing in the 1980s. We examine nonmarital childbearing among women aged 25 and older, with special attention to their prior marital and fertility experience.

Methodology

The PSID, an annual demographic and economic survey begun in 1968, is fielded by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan.[3] The nationally representative PSID includes approximately 7,000 families; nearly 40,000 individuals in those families have participated in at least one interview. The annual interviews have been supplemented sporadically by special modules. These include marital and fertility histories that were first collected in 1985 and have been updated annually since then. The data used here come primarily from two recently released data files for the period 1985–1991—those on childbirth and adoption history and on marriage history.

These files provide complete marriage and fertility histories for all women who were heads of households or married to or cohabiting with the head of a household over the period 1985–1991. Histories are also available for females in the household aged 12–44 who were classified as "other family members."* In 1985, both the husbands and their wives or partners were interviewed for these histories. In all other years, however, one person in the household provided updated information for all respondents in that household.

The data include the dates of all births (up to the 15th birth) and the dates at which all marriages (up to the eighth) began and ended. Information is also available on whether the marriage ended in divorce, separation or widowhood. Thus, by combining information from the birth and marital histories, we could determine a woman's marital status at the time of each birth.†

The recent rise in cohabitation makes it important to understand how the PSID treats cohabitation, and how this treatment affects data collection and whether births are labeled as marital or nonmarital. First, couples who had cohabited for two consecutive survey dates were treated as married; thus, marital and fertility histories were collected for women in these stable relationships, regardless of

E. Michael Foster is assistant professor of public policy and economics, Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tenn. Saul D. Hoffman is professor of economics in the Department of Economics, University of Delaware, Newark, Del.

*These were typically daughters or other relatives still living in the PSID household. Marital and fertility histories were not taken for other female family members who were not aged 12–44.

†We assigned a marital status at birth for a handful of cases that had missing data on this variable, but otherwise had sufficient overall information in the marriage histories.

Table 1. Proportion of nonmarital births among women aged 25 and older, by characteristic of mother at time of nonmarital birth, according to decade and race, Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 1985–1991

Characteristic	1970–1979	1980–1989		
	All births (N=117)	All births (N=280)	White (N=56)	Black (N=220)
Ever married	46	43	58*	31
Had ≥2 nonmarital births	46*	63	52*	73
Age at 1st birth				
<18	18	18	7	25
<20	32	33	28	36
Ever had marital birth	32*	19	23	14
Had prior marital and				
nonmarital births	10	7	9	6
Was first-time mother	33	25	35*	19
Was never-married,				
first-time mother	25*	16	17	15

*Differences by decade or by race are statistically significant at p<.05. *Notes:* All data are weighted. Data reflect births to 96 women in the 1970s and to 217 women (47 whites and 166 blacks) in the 1980s.

their age. If the couple had not been co-habiting at the preceding survey date, however, the woman was treated as an "other family member," and supplied marital and fertility history data only if she was aged 12–44. (However, just 40 women were excluded because they did not meet this definition and age requirement.)

While women in stable cohabiting relationships were treated as married for purposes of data collection, their births were generally categorized as nonmarital; this was true at least to the extent that the mother labeled the birth as nonmarital.

The sample includes 733 nonmarital births to 595 women from 1970–1979 and 933 nonmarital births to 741 women from 1980–1989. Our analysis concentrates on the births to women aged 25 and older—117 births to 96 such women in the 1970s and 280 births to 217 such women during the 1980s. (These Ns reflect the unweighted data.)

Because the PSID initially oversampled minorities and low-income families, all analyses presented here are weighted. (Sample weights, which adjust for both initial differences in selection probabilities and subsequent differences in attrition, are designed to yield unbiased estimates of population means.[4])

We caution that the marriage and fertility histories represent the past experiences only of those women who provided them. If the fertility data are related to sample attrition because of mortality or other reasons (in ways not accounted for by the PSID weights), the experiences of

*Since the total of second-order nonmarital births (63%) plus prior marital births (19%) exceeds the total of any second-order or higher orders births (75%), that difference—7%—is the proportion of all nonmarital births that followed previous marital and nonmarital births.

the selected women may provide an inaccurate picture of fertility and marriage during the past decades. For the age ranges of our sample, however, this problem is unlikely.

One indication of this is that fertility rates for the 1970s and the 1980s calculated for the overall PSID sample are very close to those based on vital statistics data: For 1970–1979, the PSID fertility rate was 69.2 births per 1,000 women aged 15–44, while the vital statistics rate, computed as a weighted average over the decade, was 71.0 births per 1,000.[5] For the 1980s, the comparable PSID rate was 64.3 births per 1,000 women, while the vital statistics rate was 66.9 births per 1,000.

We use births, rather than women, as the unit of analysis; thus, women who had two births are counted twice in these tabulations, women with three births are counted three times, and so on. Our calculations are directly comparable to vital statistics data, which also employ births as the unit of analysis.

Findings

According to the PSID, the distribution of nonmarital births changed significantly (p<.05) between the two decades: In the 1970s, women younger than 20 and those aged 20–24 accounted for equal proportions of nonmarital births (39% each), and women aged 25 and older were responsible for the remaining 22%. By the 1980s, however, the distribution shifted toward older women, with 30% of nonmarital births occurring to women younger than 20, 34% to 20–24-year-olds and 36% to women aged 25 and older. This percentage distribution is very similar to that found in comparable vital statistics data for 1992—30%, 35% and 35% for each of the three age-groups, respectively.

Table 1 presents information on past births and marriages for women aged 25 and older. In both decades, more than two-fifths of nonmarital births to women in this age-group were to women who had ever been married. During the 1980s, 63% of these nonmarital births were second or higher order nonmarital births. One-third of the nonmarital births were to women who had first given birth as teenagers, and nearly one-fifth were to women who had

first given birth before age 18.

According to the PSID data, 19% of the nonmarital births to women 25 and older in the 1980s occurred among those who had had a previous marital birth, and 7% were to women who had had both a previous marital birth and a previous nonmarital birth. As a consequence, only a small minority of nonmarital births to women in this age-group were first births (25%),* and an even smaller proportion were first births to never-married women (16%).

Contrasting these figures with those for the previous decade reveals that the proportion of nonmarital births to women 25 and older who were ever married was fairly constant over time (46% in the 1970s vs. 43% in the 1980s), as was the proportion of nonmarital births to women who began childbearing as teenagers (32% vs. 33%).

Striking changes occurred, however, in the proportion of nonmarital births to women aged 25 and older that were first births to never-married women; such births fell by one-third, from 25% of nonmarital births in the 1970s to 16% in the 1980s. This change was driven largely by a significant increase in the likelihood that women would have more than one nonmarital birth: The proportion of nonmarital births that were at least the woman's second birth increased from 46% in the 1970s to 63% in the 1980s. At the same time, the proportion of nonmarital births among women 25 and older that occurred after a marital birth fell from 32% to 19%. Overall, the likelihood that a nonmarital birth to an older woman was not her first birth increased slightly over the period; 67% of nonmarital births followed a prior birth in the 1970s, compared with 75% in the 1980s (not shown).

Table 1 also shows that in the 1980s, nonmarital childbearing among women 25 and older differed significantly by race. (Racial breakdowns for the 1970s could not be calculated accurately because the sample sizes were too small.) For example, older black mothers were significantly less likely (p<.05) than similar white mothers to have ever been married: Only 31% of nonmarital births among black women were to separated, divorced or widowed women, compared with 58% among whites.

Further, nonmarital births among white woman 25 and older were significantly more likely (p<.05) to be first births (35%) than were those among similar black women (19%). This difference largely reflects the fact that second nonmarital births were far more likely to occur among black women: Nearly three-quarters (73%) of nonmarital births to older black women

were second or higher order nonmarital births, compared with just over half (52%) of those among white women. Nonmarital births to women who began childbearing as teenagers were also considerably more likely among blacks (36% of nonmarital births) than among whites (28% of nonmarital births).

Interestingly, the proportion of nonmarital births that were first births to never-married women was very similar among blacks (15%) and whites (17%). This balance was probably the result of the increased likelihood of a previous marriage among white women being offset by the increased likelihood of previous nonmarital births among black women.

Breaking down all nonmarital births by the mother's age and marital status at her first birth provides a better sense of the relative importance of never-married, first-time mothers in explaining all nonmarital childbearing. The relative contribution of all nonmarried women who had their first birth at age 25 or older was small, however: While more than one-third (36%, not shown) of nonmarital births were to women 25 or older at the time of the birth, only 15% were to women who had been childless through their early 20s (see Table 2). In contrast, women who began childbearing as teenagers accounted for nearly 58% of nonmarital births in the 1980s.

Relatively few never-married women gave birth for the first time at age 25 or older; births to these women accounted for just 9% of all nonmarital births in the 1980s. In contrast, 46% of all nonmarital births were to never-married women who had begun having children as teenagers.

If older, never-married first-time mothers appear to be relatively unimportant, why have these women received so much attention? The answer is apparent if we examine recent changes. Only 9% of all nonmarital births in the 1970s involved women who had begun having children at age 25 or older; the corresponding proportion for the 1980s, 15%, represents an increase of nearly 60% from the preceding decade. Similarly, births to never-married women who first gave birth at age 25 or older accounted for only 6% of all nonmarital births in the 1970s; this proportion increased by half, to 9%, in the 1980s.

Conclusions

This analysis was motivated by the perception that nonmarital childbearing increasingly involves older women. As the data show, most of these women had either been married before or had had children before; relatively few had never been married *and* were having a child for the first time. Single women who began childbearing at age 25 or older accounted for a small proportion (15%) of all nonmarital births in the 1980s. Only 9% of all nonmarital births were first births to never-married women.

Thus, childbearing among older, never-married women giving birth for the first time is relatively unimportant in accounting for nonmarital childbearing as a whole. Our data also suggest that while unwed motherhood may not just be found among teenagers, teenage childbearing may be something that most unmarried mothers experience.

Nonetheless, never-married first-time mothers aged 25 and older did account for considerably more nonmarital births in the 1980s than they did in the 1970s, and if current trends continue, their role will increase further. There are several possible explanations for this trend. The first involves changes in the pool of single women: Women who want to be mothers may increasingly find themselves single. To some extent, our data refute this explanation, since many older single women who gave birth in the 1980s had already had other children. A second explanation is that women without partners now make fertility decisions differently—unmarried women may consider childbearing to be a more viable option than it was in the past. Finally, a third explanation is that the nature of what constitutes a "single" woman may have changed. In the past, nonmarital childbearing implied an unmarried woman with little involvement with the father of the child; the steep rise in cohabitation suggests that the absence of formal marriage does not necessarily mean the absence of the father.

Table 2. Percentage distribution of nonmarital births by age at first birth, according to decade and marital status

Decade and marital status	Age at first birth			
	All	<20	20–24	≥25
1970s	**100**	**63**	**28**	**9**
Never-married	80	52	22	6
Previously married	21	11	7	3
1980s	**100**	**58**	**28**	**15**
Never-married	74	46	19	9
Previously married	25	11	8	6

Notes: Based on weighted data. Differences over time are significant at p<.05. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

References

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5. S. J. Ventura et al., 1994, op. cit. (see reference 1).