



What Can We Learn From Marital Birth Rate Trends?

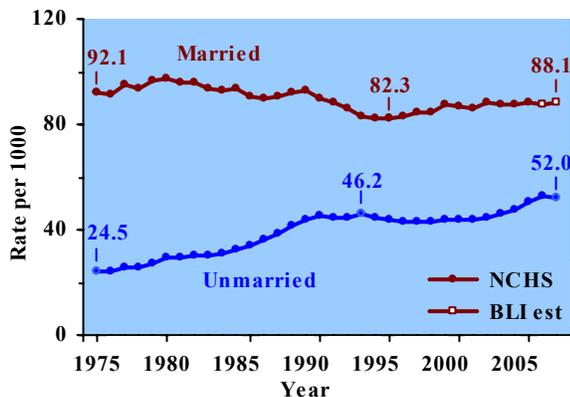
by

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The “Declining Marital Birth Rate” Myth. The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) reported that the birth rate for unmarried women declined by nearly two percent from 52.9 in 2007 to 52.0 in 2008.¹ This decrease was not, however, enough to prevent a further increase in unwed births as a percentage of all births from 39.7 percent in 2007 to 40.6 percent in 2008. Stephanie Coontz, professor of family studies at Evergreen State College and director of research at the Council on Contemporary Families, was quoted in *The Washington Times* as saying, “the big story *may* [italics added] not be that there’s some continuing escalation of unmarried mothers giving births but that the birth rates to married couples have fallen.”² NCHS birth rates for married women are available only through 2006, but from the fertility rate (i.e., the birth rate of all women 15 to 44) and the unmarried birth rates that NCHS reported for 2008, we can deduce³ that the married rate is nearly the same in 2008 as it was in 2006; thus, supposition about a decline in the married birth rate Coontz suggested is not supported by the facts.

From 1996 (when the married birth rate began trending upward) until 2008, the percentage of births to unmarried mothers increased 8.2 percentage points from 32.4 to 40.6. This increase resulted from (i) an unwed birth rate increase from 43.8 per thousand to 52.0 per thousand, coupled with (ii) a 4.4 million increase in the number of unmarried

Figure 1. —Birth Rates of Women 15-44 by Marital Status

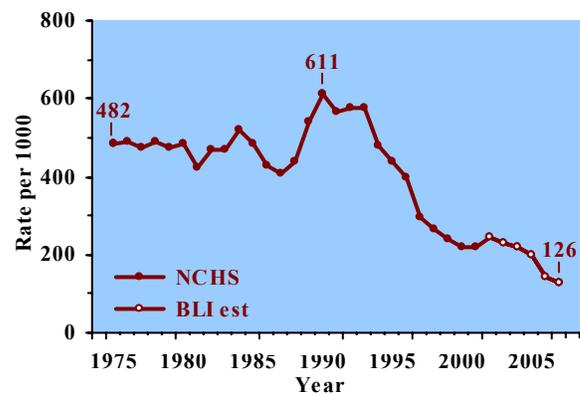


Note: These rates are for women 15-44 in each group.

Source: Birth rates are published by the CDC’s National Center for Health Statistics; The married rates for 2007 and 2008 are inferred from the birth rates reported by NCHS for all women 15-44 and unmarried women 15-44.

women ages 15 to 44; the combined effect was an increase in nonmarital births of nearly 468,000. During this same period, the married birth rate trended upward by close to seven percent, but because of the decrease of three million in the number of married women ages 15 to 44, married births decreased by 108,000.⁴

Figure 2. —Birth Rate of Married Teens 15-17 Years Old



Source: See Figure 1.

The “Too-Little Information” Myth. In a forthcoming article of the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Lawrence B. Finer, the Guttmacher Institute’s director of domestic research, astounds us with the pronouncement that “teens who are sexually active are at higher risk of unintended pregnancy than their adult counterparts.”⁵ Thus, he concludes that it is “imperative that health educators and parents equip teens with the information and tools they need to protect themselves if and when they choose to become sexually active (as virtually all will).”

In our sex-ed saturated society, is there really a shortage of “information and tools” to prevent unintended pregnancies? Figure 2 shows the birth rate for 15- to 17-year-old married teens. These early teens who have chosen — shotgun weddings being a thing of the past — marriage, with its responsibilities and challenges, apparently are not suffering from any information shortage. Though sexually active, their birth rate has fallen by about 80 percent since 1990.

¹ National Center for Health Statistics, “Births: Preliminary Data for 2008,” *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Vol. 58, No. 16, April 2010.

² Cheryl Wetzstein, “Teen birth rate falls, ends upward trend,” *The Washington Times*, April 6, 2010, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/apr/06/teen-birthrate-falls-in-2008-ends-upward-trend/>

³ Denote the marital birth rate as MBR, the unwed birth rate as UBR, the fertility rate of all women as FR, all births as ABS, and unwed births as UBS. Since by definition FR is a weighted average of MBR and UBR, it can be shown that $MBR = FR * (1 - UBS/ABS) / (1 - (UBS/ABS) * (UBR/FR))$. NCHS has published preliminary data for 2007 and 2008 for all the terms on the right-hand side of the equation, so by applying the equation above we can calculate the marital birth rate.

⁴ Married and unmarried population estimates are from the U.S. Census Bureau, “America’s Families and Living Arrangements, 2008,” and earlier editions, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/hh-fam.html>

⁵ LB Finer, “Unintended Pregnancy Among U.S. Adolescents: Accounting for Sexual Activity,” <http://www.guttmacher.org/graphics/lists/update1.gif>