

WHY IT MATTERS

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TEEN CHILDBEARING, SINGLE PARENTHOOD, AND FATHER INVOLVEMENT

By Alison Stewart Ng and Kelleen Kaye

Reducing teen pregnancy can improve child wellbeing by increasing the chances that children are born into two-parent families and, in particular, families with married parents. Although teens account for a minority of non-marital births overall, the teen years are frequently a time when unmarried families are first formed—a strong rationale for focusing on teens in any broad effort to strengthen families. Reducing teen pregnancy also increases the odds that young adults are in healthy relationships when they start a family.

KEY DATA

- The majority of teen mothers (88% in 2010) were unmarried when their child was born.
- Of those teen mothers who were not married when their child was born, only about one-third (34%) went on to marry by the time their child reached age five.
- Furthermore, more than one-third (38%) of teens who were married when their child was born split up by the time their child reached age five, and 42% of those

who were cohabiting when their child was born split up by then.

- Teen mothers living apart from the father of their child report that half of the nonresident fathers met with their child in the past month, and, among those who did, about half visited at least weekly.

WHEN THE BABY IS BORN

Teens and non-marital childbearing. The likelihood that a child is born to unmarried parents increases substantially if the mother is a teen compared to women who have delayed childbirth for even a few years. The number of births to unmarried teen mothers remains alarmingly high because, while teen childbearing overall has fallen dramatically over the last two decades, trends in childbearing among *unmarried* teens have been less encouraging.

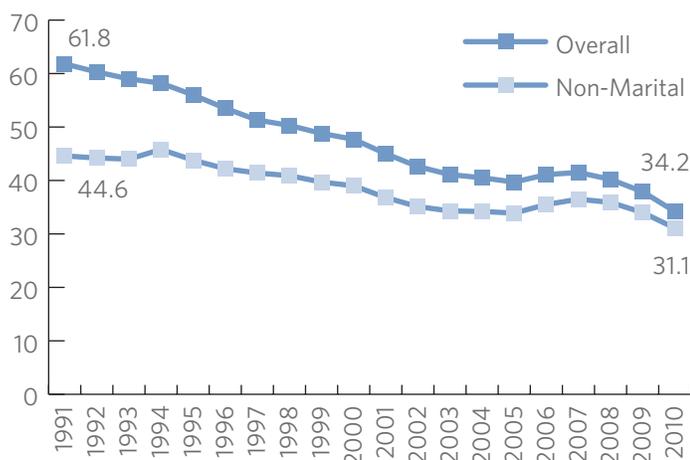
As of 2010, the vast majority (88 percent) of teen mothers were unmarried when their child was born—this compares to less than two-thirds (63 percent) among women age 20 to 24 when their child was born and roughly one-third

(34 percent) among women age 25 to 30 when their child was born.¹ The share of teen births that are outside of marriage has increased nearly six-fold since 1960.^{1,2} Non-Hispanic black teens (98 percent) are more likely than Hispanic teens (86 percent) and non-Hispanic white teens (84 percent) to be unmarried at the birth of their child.¹

Teen mothers account for one-fifth of all non-marital births in the United States. Furthermore, they account for more than one-third (35 percent) of all non-marital first births—second only to 20-24 year-olds.¹

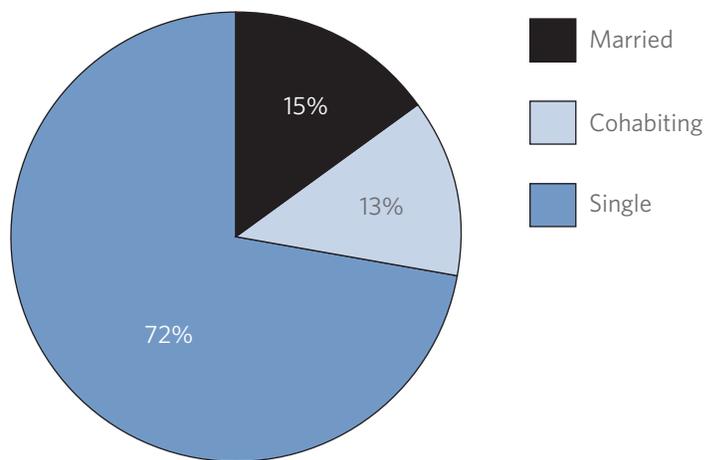
The rate of non-marital births to teens (that is, births per 1,000 unmarried teens) is falling, but at a much slower rate than for the teen birth rate overall (Figure 1).¹ Because declines in the teen birth rate for unmarried teens have been rather modest, and because the number of unmarried teens has increased, the number of non-marital teen births is only slightly below its historic high reached in 1994 (324,000 births in 2010 compared to 381,000 in 1994).^{1,2,3}

Figure 1: Teen Birth Rates by Marital Status, 1991-2010¹



Of course teen mothers who are unmarried when their child is born are not necessarily on their own. Figure 2 further describes teen mothers' relationship status based on whether they were married, unmarried but cohabiting, or single (neither married nor cohabiting) shortly after their child was born (measured among women having a teen birth any time within the past 12 months).⁴ These results indicate that, in addition to 15 percent of teen mothers who were married, an additional 13 percent were living with an unmarried partner (primarily the father of their child), while nearly three-quarters (72 percent) were single.

Figure 2: Relationship Status of Teen Mothers Having a Birth in the Past Year, 2008-2010⁴



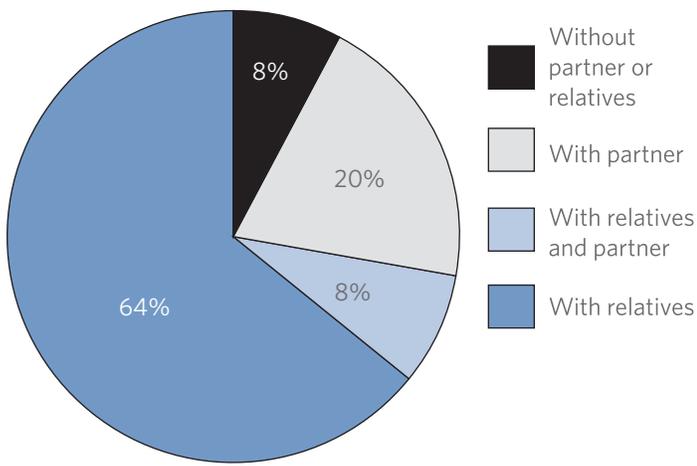
The table below shows how relationship status varies by race/ethnicity. The proportion of recent teen mothers who are single is similar among non-Hispanic white and Hispanic women, but it is notably higher among non-Hispanic black women. Even so, regardless of race/ethnicity, the majority of teen mothers are neither married to nor living with their partners shortly after the baby is born.

	Total	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Hispanic
Married	15%	15%	9%	19%
Cohabiting	13%	20%	2%	13%
Single	72%	65%	89%	69%
	100%	100%	100%	100%

Living arrangements. Given their young age and the fact that most teen mothers are unmarried, it's not surprising that most are living with their parents or other adult relatives shortly after the birth of their child. Among women who had a teen birth within the past year, nearly three-quarters (72 percent) are living with relatives (Figure 3). This includes eight percent who reported their romantic partner was also living in the household, either married or cohabiting, and 64 percent who did not. Another 20 percent had moved out of their relatives' household and were living with their romantic partner, either married or

cohabiting. Only eight percent were living on their own (with neither relatives nor partners).⁴

Figure 3: Living Arrangements of Teen Mothers Having a Birth in the Past Year, 2008-2010⁴



The table below shows how living arrangements vary by race/ethnicity. Compared to their non-Hispanic white and Hispanic peers, non-Hispanic black teen mothers are somewhat less likely to be living with a partner and more likely to be living on their own shortly after their child is born. Regardless of race/ethnicity, it remains the case that most teen parents are living with their relatives shortly after their child is born.

Living Arrangements of Teen Mothers Having a Birth in the Past Year, by Race/Ethnicity⁴				
	Total	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Hispanic
With Relatives	64%	60%	73%	61%
With Relatives and Partner	8%	7%	1%	12%
With Partner	20%	28%	9%	19%
Without Partner or Relatives	8%	5%	17%	7%
	100%	100%	100%	100%

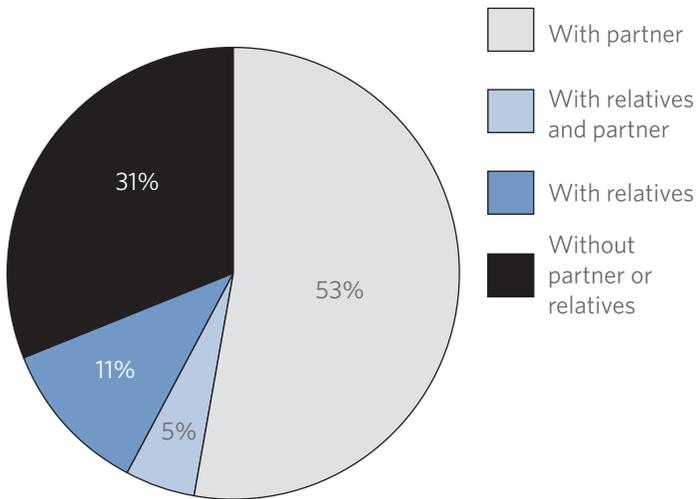
RELATIONSHIP STATUS AND LIVING ARRANGEMENTS IN THE YEARS THAT FOLLOW

Relationships. In the years that follow their child’s birth, teen mothers’ relationships can follow many paths. In particular, some teen mothers who were not married when their child was born go on to marry thereafter. However, this remains the exception rather than the rule. Among teen mothers who were unmarried when their child was born, only about one-third (34 percent), went on to marry by the time their child reached age five. Most of these marriages were to the biological father of their child.⁵

It is also true that many teen mothers who were either married to or cohabiting with the father of their child at the time of the birth subsequently split up. Of those teen mothers who were married at the time their child was born, 38 percent of them were no longer married just five years later. This compares to just 20 percent of marriages overall that have ended within five years. In addition, of those teen mothers who were cohabiting when their child was born, close to half (42 percent) had split up five years later. These results are based on women currently 25 to 29 years old who gave birth as teens.⁵

Living Arrangements. In addition to transitioning into and out of relationships with their child’s father, many teen mothers also transition into different households as they get older. By age 25, only a small share (16 percent) of women who were teen mothers still live with their parents or other adult relatives, including five percent who also report their romantic partner living with them. Just over half (53 percent) live with a romantic partner and no relatives, and about one-third (31 percent) are on their own (that is, with neither relatives nor a romantic partner) (Figure 4).⁶ Note that romantic partners may be married or cohabiting and may or may not be the father of their child.

Figure 4: Living Arrangements of Former Teen Mothers, Age 25, 2008-2010⁶



The table below shows how living arrangements at age 25 vary by race/ethnicity. Compared to their non-Hispanic white and Hispanic peers, non-Hispanic black women who had births as teens are more likely to be living on their own (without family or partners) at age 25. Regardless of race/ethnicity, it remains the case that a substantial share of women who became mothers as teens are without a father figure in the home at age 25, ranging from 28% among non-Hispanic white mothers to 74% among non-Hispanic black mothers. An even greater share does not have the biological father in the home (not shown).

Living Arrangements of Former Teen Mothers at Age 25, by Race/Ethnicity ⁶				
	Total	Non-Hispanic White	Non-Hispanic Black	Hispanic
With Partner	53%	68%	25%	56%
With Relatives and Partner	5%	4%	1%	9%
With Relatives	11%	9%	13%	13%
Without Partner or Relatives	31%	19%	61%	22%
	100%	100%	100%	100%

Clearly, there are many factors that influence the marital patterns and union stability of young adults, such as poverty, employment, and, particularly among young men,

rates of incarceration. Therefore, one cannot assume that the risk of non-marital childbearing, single parenthood, and marriage dissolution would disappear simply by delaying childbearing beyond the teen years. Clearly, challenges with poverty, employment, and the like occur among families headed by teens and older mothers alike. While numerous studies have shown non-marital childbearing to be a barrier to subsequent marriage and stable relationships, and teen childbearing is almost exclusively non-marital, research that examines the direct link between teen parenthood and union formation is limited.^{7,8,9} Even so, those studies that do exist show teen childbearing increases the risk of single parenthood and union dissolution even after controlling for a variety of socioeconomic and demographic factors—for example, one study found that women having a non-marital teen birth were only half as likely as other women to be married later in life, even after controlling for age, race, education, and family background.^{10,11}

Regardless of the extent to which future relationships are affected by teen childbearing vs. other sources of disadvantage in their lives, it is important to understand that, on average, teen mothers are at high risk for single parenthood and especially high risk of parenthood without the biological father in the home.

Relationship Quality. Naturally, the mere fact that parents are married or living together does not guarantee that they have a good relationship, and teen parents are no exception. Among teen mothers living with the fathers of their children nine months after the child was born (either married or cohabiting), one in three (33 percent) say they argue *often* about key issues such as relationships, family responsibilities, and/or money, compared to 19 percent of mothers who were older when their child was born. On the flip side, roughly two-thirds (67 percent) of teen mothers report being “very happy” in their relationship with the father of their child, compared to 75% among older mothers.¹²

Among mothers not living with their child’s father, the findings are somewhat parallel. Roughly two-thirds (64 percent) of teen mothers say they get along with the father “pretty well,” 14 percent say they do not get along and/or fight a lot, and 23 percent say they avoid each other altogether, a result that did not differ significantly between teen and older mothers.¹²

These results indicate that the quality of relationship within intact families or within separated families does not differ dramatically between teen mothers and older mothers.

Rather, it may be that the greater consequence of teen motherhood is in determining which of these two categories the parents fall into. Further analyses of these same data indicate that nearly twice as many older mothers live with the biological father of their child compared to teen mothers (82 percent compared to 45 percent).¹²

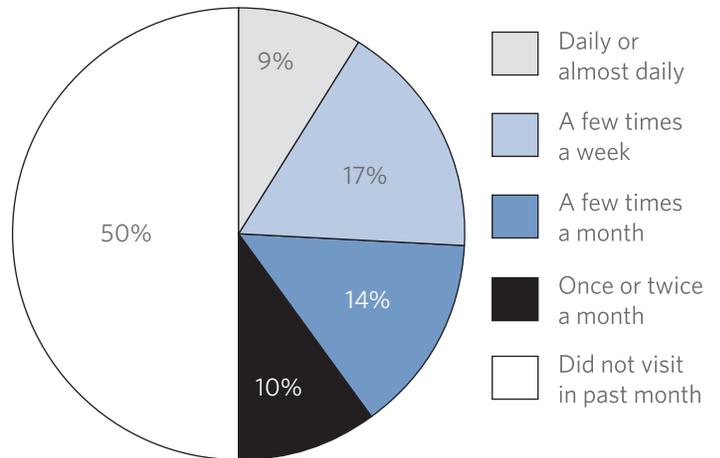
Given this disparity, it's not surprising that when we look at mothers overall—both those living with the biological father of their child and those not—teen mothers are nearly twice as likely than older mothers to be struggling emotionally (defined as feeling either depressed, sad, blue, lonely, or fearful). Among teen mothers, nearly half (44 percent) spent three or more days during the past week feeling this way, including 12 percent who felt this way most of the week (five to seven days). In contrast, only 25 percent of older mothers reported feeling this way three or more days, including five percent who felt this way most of the week.¹²

Non-Resident Father Involvement and Financial Support.

As noted above, teen mothers are more likely to live apart from the father of their child than older mothers. Unfortunately, these mothers get very little in the way of child support. About one-quarter (24 percent) of teen mothers reported receiving any formal or informal child support in the prior year. Among those who did receive child support, payments averaged only about \$2,000 per year.¹³

This is not to say that fathers living away from their children are completely uninvolved. Among families headed by teen mothers, half of nonresident fathers met with their child in the past month. For nonresident fathers who did see their child within the past month, teen mothers said the visits were fairly frequent, with about half of them visiting a few times a month or more (Figure 5).¹² Older mothers reported similar visitation by nonresident fathers (not shown). Nonetheless, even though teen mothers do not appear to fare any worse than older mothers in terms of nonresident father involvement, it remains sobering that half of teen mothers report the father of their child did not visit at all in the past month, and roughly half of those who did visit in the past month did so only a few times.

Figure 5: Frequency of Visits from Nonresident Fathers with Children Born to a Teen Mother¹²



Father attachment and involvement has been demonstrated to have an important influence on child wellbeing.^{14,15,16} For example, studies show that having a high quality relationship with the father can reduce problem behavior among adolescents, and that boys and girls without involved fathers are twice as likely to drop out of school, twice as likely to abuse alcohol or drugs, and more likely to end up in jail.^{15,17} Studies further indicate that while father involvement is important, where the father *lives* is also important. In one study, the benefit of increasing father involvement was more than twice as great when the father lived with the child than when he lived elsewhere.¹⁸ In addition, children who live apart from their fathers are more than three times as likely to be poor than children living with both parents together.¹⁹ Furthermore, teen boys who live with both parents initiate sex at an older age compared to teen boys whose father is absent.²⁰

About the Authors

Alison Stewart Ng is a Research Assistant and Kelleen Kaye is the Senior Director of Research at The National Campaign.

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