



Arkansas Department
of Health
George Harper
Acting Director

Arkansas Health Counts

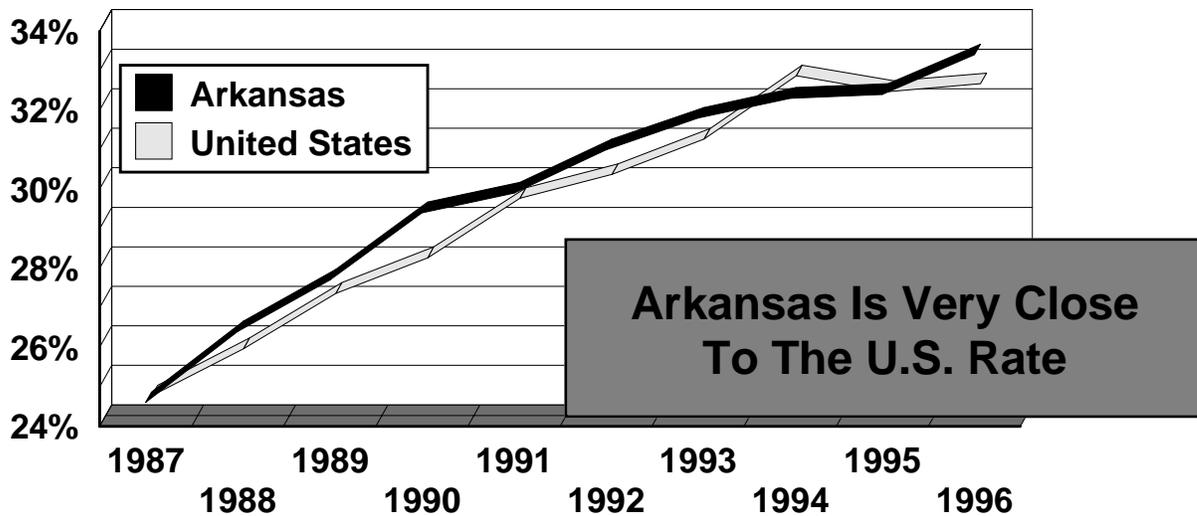
A publication of the Arkansas Center for Health Statistics

Fall, 1998

Volume 4, Issue 3

Arkansas Health Statistics Homepage <http://health.state.ar.us/statshp.htm>

Percent Unmarried Births Arkansas and U.S., 1987-1996

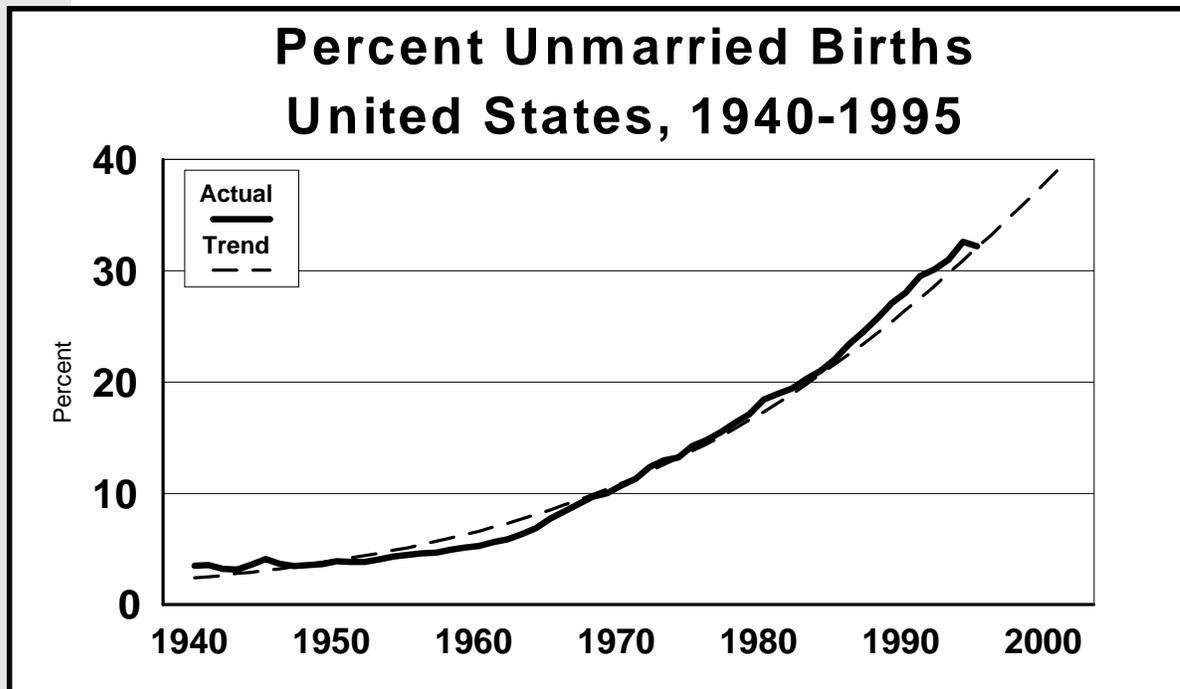


Children of unwed & teen moms face more health, social setbacks

Children born to teenaged mothers, especially single teen mothers, are more likely than others to die before their first birthday, more likely to be born dangerously underweight and to end up blind, deaf or mentally retarded.

Teen sons born to mothers who first gave birth when they were 15-17 years old are almost three times more likely to spend time in prison than the sons of mothers who first gave birth in their early twenties, according to *Kids Having Kids*, a report published by the Robin Hood Foundation. That report concludes that not only do families started by teen mothers have it tough, those started by moms 15-17 years old have it much tougher than those who delayed

Continued on page 2



Continued from page 1

motherhood until they were 20 or 21. More about that later.

Arkansas' High Rates

The question of teen pregnancy is important to Arkansans because the state has one of the highest rates of children born to teen mothers—married or not—in the country. The U.S. has the highest teenage pregnancy rate among industrialized nations, and in 1996, only Mississippi had a higher rate than Arkansas. Arkansas has the country's highest rate of teen pregnancy among non-Hispanic whites.

A third of the 36,356 children born to Arkansans in 1996 were born to single mothers, according to birth certificate records. Teenagers and women in their twenties accounted for about 90 percent of the unmarried births. That's just about the national average.

Only 11 other states had higher rates of out-of-wedlock births than Arkansans.

Births to Arkansas females in the 15-19 age group declined from 80 per 1,000 population in 1991 to 75 in 1996. That's about a 7 percent decrease. Nationally, the decrease was 13 percent as the rate declined from 62 to 54 births per 1,000 during those years.

"People are becoming sexually active earlier, but getting married later," according to Donnie Smith, state Maternal and Child Health director, who works with Health Department programs intended to reduce teen and unwed

pregnancy rates. Smith says that nationally, about 85 percent of all teen births aren't planned.

Arkansas is concentrating its resources on reducing unwed teen births because the consequences are grim for those families and for society as a whole, Smith says. In its Unwed Birth Prevention Project, the state Health Department is providing money and oversight to local groups in the 16 hardest-hit counties.

The state administers abstinence education grants, Smith says, and is creating a media campaign. Arkansas was granted the country's first Medicaid waiver making about 30,000 more people eligible for family planning services.

Consequences

Children raised by single moms, including many teen mothers, are twice as likely to drop out of high school, 2.5 times as likely to become teen mothers, and 1.4 times as likely to be both out of school and out of work, according to "The Consequences of Single Motherhood," by S.S. McLanahan. They have lower grades, lower college aspirations and worse school attendance records than their counterparts. They are 50 percent more likely to be held back a year. As adults they have higher rates of divorce.

Further, studies show that adolescent mothers (those who give birth to their first child between the ages of 15-17) and their kids face much greater difficulties than mothers that delay childbirth until they are 20. That three-to-five

Continued on page 3

Continued from page 2

year delay in giving birth can make a world of difference. For instance:

Children of adolescent moms are more likely to run away and twice as likely to be abused as the children of moms 20 and 21 years old. Only about three-quarters of them earn high school diplomas by early adulthood, compared to nine out of 10 children born to the older moms, according to *Kids Having Kids*. The females are 83 percent more likely to become adolescent mothers themselves.

Although they are less healthy than kids of the 20- and 21-year-old mothers, they receive only half the medical care and treatment their counterparts do, the report says.

The Challenge

Reducing the prevalence of births to unwed mothers, particularly teens, is one of the biggest challenges facing Arkansas and the nation. The recent U.S. decrease in percentage of births attributable to unwed mothers is encouraging after 50 years of steady increases.

Teen birthrates in the U.S are nearly twice as high as in Great Britain, the next highest industrial country, and 15 times higher than in Japan. In the U.S., four out of every 10 girls will get pregnant at least once before age 20, according to *Whatever Happened to Childhood*, a report issued by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. Between 1995 and 2010, the number of girls in the 15-19 age group will increase by 2.2 million. Even a declining teen pregnancy rate, when applied to the ballooning number of teen girls, leaves researchers predicting a 26 percent increase in the number of teen pregnancies and births by then.

“Changes in teen pregnancy and teen birth rates do not happen in a vacuum,” according to *Whatever Happened to Childhood?* “Underlying these changes have been shifts in marriage patterns, sexual norms, contraceptive practices, the availability of abortion and the size and composition of the teenage population.”

Unplanned teen pregnancies result from accidents, ambivalence, confusion about preventing pregnancy and sometimes failure to make any clear decision about abstinence, sexual activity or contraception, according to *Whatever Happened to Childhood?*

“The increase in out-of-wedlock births is largely due to earlier onset of menses and a

national trend towards marrying later,” the report says. “It also reflects a marked decline in marriage after pregnancy is detected.”

Society Pays

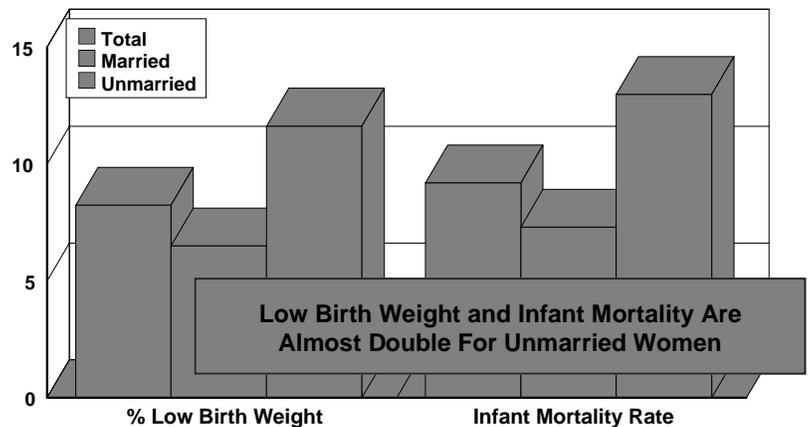
The children are not the only victims. Society often picks up the tab for medical treatment, incarceration, special training and welfare.

The mothers are less likely to receive enough education for good jobs. In fact, seven out of 10 mothers in the 15-17 year age group will drop out of high school.

Within five years of the birth of their first child, half of all teen mothers and three-quarters of unmarried teen mothers begin receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)—that’s the program often called “welfare.”

Kids Having Kids says more than 80 percent of teen mothers end up in poverty.

Poverty and single parenthood are interwoven, according to Susan Phillips, of the Centers for Youth and Families in Little Rock. She says laws and conventions account for at least part of the difficulty facing single moms and their children, and fears they are being scapegoated.

Marital Status, Low Birth Weight and Infant Mortality, Arkansas, 1994-1996

“While having a child tends to limit the future of an unmarried teenage mother, it is not as if all teen mothers were doing well before giving birth, and then sank into poverty and difficulty only as a result of having a child,” according to *Whatever Happened to Childhood?* “Many of these girls already lived in disadvantaged situations before giving birth, but early parenting limits a young

Continued on page 4

Continued from page 3

mother's likelihood of completing high school and postsecondary education necessary to qualify for a well-paying job."

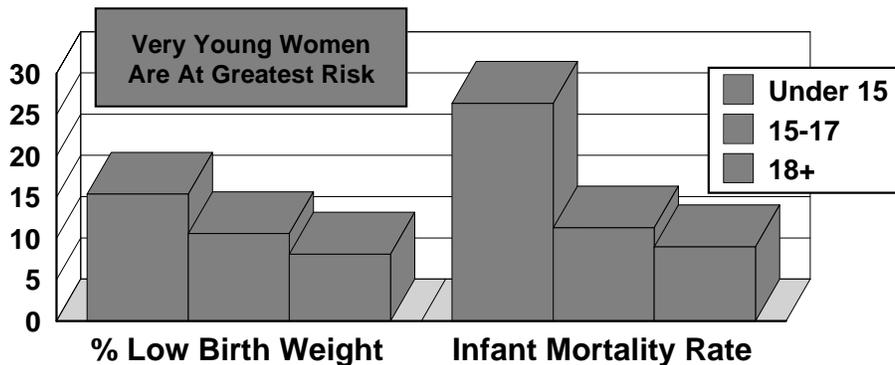
Furthermore, they live in poorer quality homes, according to a study of the amount and quality of attention kids get from their parents and the presence of books, educational toys and games in the home.

Teen pregnancy is not a random event, says Douglas Kirby in "No Easy Answers: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy (Summary)" another publication of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. Youths most likely to become teen mothers tend to live in

areas with high poverty rates, low levels of education, high residential turnover and high divorce rates. Their parents are likely to have experienced these same difficulties.

Smith, who works with Arkansas' response to teen and unwed births, says he thinks time will show that the state's multiple-front approach of supporting local programs and encouraging abstinence education and family planning will succeed in further reducing those pregnancy rates.

Teenagers, Low Birth Weight and Infant Mortality, Arkansas, 1994-1996



Bulk Rate
U.S. Postage Paid
Little Rock, AR 72205
Permit No. 2641

Arkansas Health Counts

The Center for Health Statistics
 4815 West Markham St., Slot 19
 Little Rock, AR 72205-3867
 (501) 661-2842

