

Births to Unmarried Women in Oklahoma, 2007

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background

In Oklahoma, public and policy interest in births to unmarried women has focused on the impact to family structure and the economic implications for women and children.¹ National attention to nonmarital births was reflected in the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) *Report to Congress on Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing*² and with a provision of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996.³ This legislation established an additional benefit program for states demonstrating a decline in the number of out-of-wedlock births without a concurrent rise in the number of abortions. Primarily, concern has centered on the public costs of nonmarital births through claims on social services. Women who experience childbirth outside of marriage have higher rates of poverty and lower educational achievement.⁴ These effects may be lasting as social and economic opportunities may be curtailed by nonmarital childbearing.² Newborns of unmarried women have elevated rates of low birthweight, preterm birth, and infant mortality.⁵⁻⁷ As children they are more likely to live in circumstances of hardship as a consequence of limited household resources associated with female single parenting.⁸

methods

Birth data included in this report were drawn from the Oklahoma Vital Records Division. The Oklahoma birth registry includes information on all births occurring in the state. Three measures of births to unmarried women were examined: the number of births to unmarried women, the percent of births to unmarried women, and the rate of births to unmarried women. Registered births for each of the years 1975 to 2007 have been used to enumerate the number of nonmarital births and to calculate the percentage of all births to unmarried women. For birth rates, data are shown only for the years 2000 to 2007 due to the unavailability of population data prior to this time span. The percent of births to unmarried women reflects that proportion of all births that were to women who were not married any time between the conception and the birth of the child. Birth rates to unmarried women indicate the number of births to unmarried women per 1,000 population. These rates measure the likelihood that an unmarried woman

will give birth in a given year. Population data were obtained from the American Community Survey, U.S. Bureau of the Census.⁹

Marital status of the mother is included on the birth certificate and is based on the question, "Mother married? (At birth, conception, or any time between) (Yes or No)." Nonmarital births for resident Oklahoma women are presented by age, race, and county of residence. Maternal age was classified into seven age groups (e.g., 15-17, 18-19, 20-24, 25-29, 30-34, 35-39, and 40-44). Women aged 30 years and older are shown graphically as a single group. Maternal race was categorized as White, Black, American Indian, and Asian or Pacific Islander. Race data included in this report cover the years 1990 to 2007 and are based on bridged racial categories.¹⁰ Nonmarital births for county of residence are shown for the three-year periods 1975-1977 and 2005-2007. Aggregated county-level data were used to address single-year data volatility. National and other states natality data were obtained from the National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).¹¹

results

trends

For 2007, there were 22,703 births to unmarried women in Oklahoma, an increase of 2.8 percent from the previous year, and 33.3 percent higher than the number reported in 2000 (17,026) (Figure 1). The total number of births to unmarried women reported for Oklahoma in 2007 was 4.7 times higher than the number reported in 1975 (4,826).

More than 4 in 10 births in 2007 were to women who were not married. The percentage of births to unmarried women was 41.3 percent in 2007, rising from 34.3 percent in 2000 and 11.4 percent in 1975.

In 2007, the rate of births to unmarried women was 61.7 births per 1,000 unmarried women in the childbearing ages 15-44 years. The rate has risen 4.1 percent from 2006, when the rate was 59.2 births per 1,000 unmarried women aged 15-44 years, and more than 20 percent since 2000, when the rate was computed to be 51.2 births per 1,000 unmarried women aged 15-44 years.

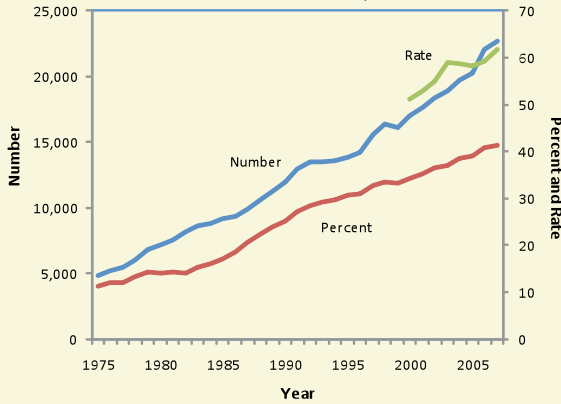


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Figure 1. Number, percent, and rate* of births to unmarried women: Oklahoma, 1975-2007



*Rate per 1,000 female population aged 15-44 years

maternal age

Examining births by age reveals large shifts in the marital status of women giving birth in Oklahoma. All age groups have seen an increase in the proportion of births to women who are not married (Table 1). In 1975, 37 percent of teen births aged 15-17 years were to unmarried women. By 2007, 90 percent of births in the age category were to unmarried women. In absolute terms, this group had the highest proportion of births that were to unmarried women. Yet in relative terms, teen women aged 15-17 years experienced the smallest growth in nonmarital births of all age groups. Women aged 25-29 years recorded the largest relative gain in the proportion of births that were to unmarried women, increasing to 29.2 percent in 2007 from 3.6 percent in 1975.

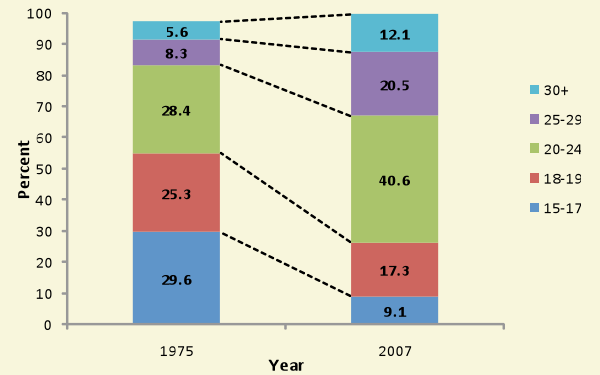
Table 1. Percent of Births to Unmarried Women by Age

Age	1975	1980	1990	2000	2006	2007	% change
15-17	37.3	43.5	69.2	82.9	89.1	90.1	+141
18-19	20.5	26.0	49.0	66.1	75.0	75.1	+267
20-24	8.3	13.1	28.6	41.8	51.0	51.4	+516
25-29	3.6	6.0	14.0	20.8	28.9	29.2	+706
30-34	4.4	5.9	10.9	14.8	19.7	20.2	+358
35-39	8.0	7.7	10.7	16.0	19.0	20.9	+163
40-44	6.7	8.9	15.2	19.7	22.5	21.3	+220

Another view of nonmarital births can be obtained by examining the contribution to those births made by each age group. As an example, rather than reviewing the percentage of teen births that were to unmarried women, we look at the percentage of nonmarital births that were to teens. In 1975, nearly 57 percent of births to unwed mothers were to teen women aged 15-19 years (Figure 2). Since the mid-1970s, the percentage of nonmarital births that occur to teens has dropped with each decade such that by 2007 the contribution made by this age group amounted to 26.5 percent, a decline of more than half. In contrast, that portion of nonmarital births made up of women over the age of 20 increased

over the same period. Women in the age group 25-29 years experienced the largest gain in the share of births to unmarried women, followed by women aged 30-34 years, accounting for 20.6 percent and 7.9 percent, respectively. While teen women comprised the largest group of births to unmarried women in 1975, in 2007 the biggest share of nonmarital births went to women aged 20-24 years (41 percent).

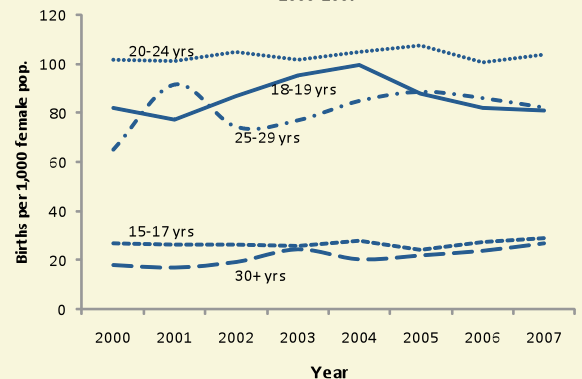
Figure 2. Age distribution of births to unmarried women: Oklahoma, 1975 and 2007



Birth rates for unmarried women have varied by age (Figure 3). Rates were lowest for women 30 years and older, followed by rates for teen women. Birth rates were highest for women between the ages of 20 and 24 years.

For teen women aged 15-17 years, the birth rate has risen from 26.7 births per 1,000 unmarried female population to 29.1 births per 1,000 unmarried female population, an increase of 9 percent between 2000 and 2007. Over the same period, modest changes were evident for teen women aged 18-19 years (-1.5 percent) and for the age group 20-24 years (+2.0 percent), although both groups experienced fluctuations in the birth rate on this time interval. The largest increase in birth rates was found among women aged 30 and older (+46.8 percent), rising from 18.1 births per 1,000 unmarried female population in 2000 to 26.6 births per 1,000 unmarried female population in 2007.

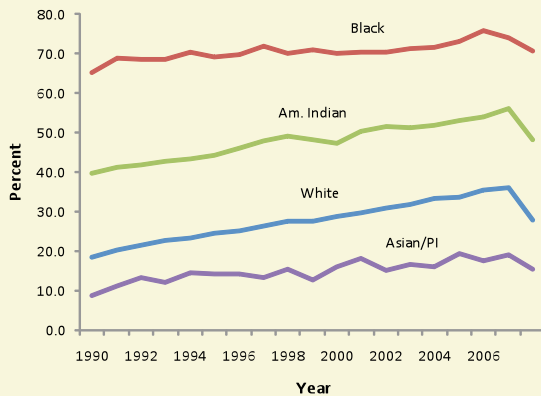
Figure 3. Birth rates to unmarried women by age: Oklahoma, 2000-2007



race

Growth in the number and percent of births has been evident for all racial groups (Figure 4). The number of births for Asian or Pacific Island women has quadrupled since 1990, while the numbers for White and American Indian women have each doubled over the same period. The frequency of births to unmarried Black women has grown (+12 percent) but at a much slower rate. In relative frequency terms, the percent of births to unmarried Asian or Pacific Island women increased by three-quarters to 15.3 percent in 2007 from 8.7 percent in 1990. White women experienced a relative rise of more than half, increasing from 18.5 percent in 1990 to 27.7 percent in 2007. Black women had the slowest percentage growth of all racial groups, yet still maintained by far the highest percentage of births that were to unmarried women (70.5 percent). Between 2006 and 2007, each of the racial groups recorded a drop in the percentage of nonmarital births. Birth rates to unmarried women by race are not presented due to the imprecision in the estimates by race of Oklahoma unmarried women.

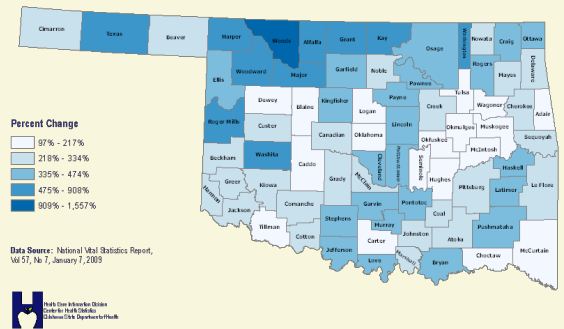
Figure 4. Percent of births to unmarried women by race: Oklahoma, 1990-2007



county of residence

The increase in the percentage of nonmarital births has been widespread in Oklahoma (Figure 5). The relative change in the percentage of births to unmarried women ranged from 97 percent (Okfuskee County) to 1,557 percent (Woods County) between the three-year periods 1975-1977 to 2005-2007. The number of nonmarital births in Woods County increased 13-fold during these three decades, while the number doubled in Okfuskee County. Only Tillman County (1.7 times higher) had a smaller growth rate in the number of nonmarital births. In 2005-2007, Canadian County (27.6 percent) had the lowest percentage of nonmarital births and Choctaw County (55.5 percent) recorded the highest percentage of nonmarital births. Thirty-two counties, or 41.6 percent of all counties, had a percentage of nonmarital births that was higher than the 2007 state average.

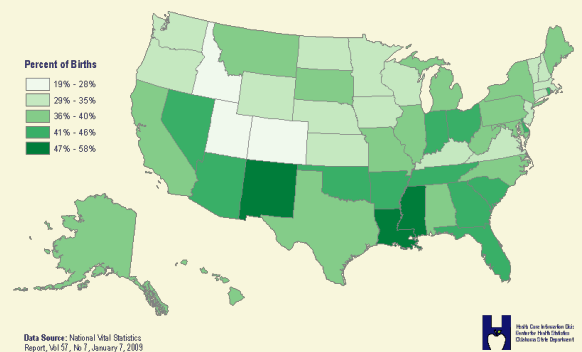
Figure 5: Percent Change in Births to Unmarried Mothers, 1975-77 to 2005-07



national & state comparisons

The Oklahoma experience in the rise in the number and percentage of births to unmarried women has been comparable to that of the nation and other states. Nonmarital childbearing was found to be high in a number of states (Figure 5).¹² In 2006, the latest year for which national data are available, over half of all births in the District of Columbia (57.6 percent), Mississippi (52.8 percent), and New Mexico (51.2 percent) were to women who were not married. Oklahoma was ranked 14th highest among all states and the District of Columbia for the percentage of birth that were to unmarried women. Only two states recorded percentages of nonmarital births that were below 25 percent of all births: Utah, 18.8 percent and Idaho, 24.3 percent. In 2006, the national percentage of births to unmarried women was 38.5 percent.

Figure 6: Percent of Births to Unmarried Mothers, 2006



summary

All three measures of nonmarital childbearing (number of births, percent of births, and birth rate) examined in this analysis have increased over the last 30 years. In 2007, Oklahoma achieved an all-time high in the number of nonmarital births as 22,703, quadrupling since 1975. Only twice over this time span has the yearly number of nonmarital births declined from the previous year's count. In 1993 and 1999, the state experienced marginal declines of 0.1 percent and 1.9 percent, respectively. Beyond those two years, the tally of births to unmarried women has climbed to ever higher numbers. Likewise, the percentage of nonmarital births reached an historic peak in 2007, accounting for 41.3 percent of all Oklahoma births. While the increase for the percentage of nonmarital births has not been as steep as that for the number of such births, the growth has been steady and mainly unabated over the study period. Fewer years of data were available for the calculation of birth rates for unmarried women. Nevertheless, the truncated time series that was examined indicates a sharp rise (21 percent) since year 2000 in the number of births per 1,000 unmarried women.

This study found that increases in nonmarital childbearing were pervasive across age and racial groups as well as geographic location. The age distribution of Oklahoma nonmarital births has undergone a dramatic shift since the mid-1970s. Teenage women aged 15-19 years no longer represent the largest proportion of nonmarital births. In 1975, more than half of births were to teen women. As of 2007, teen women accounted for only 26.4 percent of out-of-wedlock births, with the majority (61 percent) of these births occurring to women aged 20-29 years. With each passing decade a larger proportion of women within each age group were unmarried, suggesting that important cultural and societal shifts have occurred such that women are no longer bound to traditional notions that encourage marriage prior to childbearing. Each racial group experienced growth in the proportion of births occurring to unmarried women, with the steepest growth occurring to Asian or Pacific Island women (rising by 75 percent) and White women (rising by 50 percent). The proportion of births to unmarried Black women rose modestly (8 percent); however, 7 in 10 births in this racial group were to unmarried women. Geographically, nonmarital childbearing has been widespread in Oklahoma. Every county in the state recorded substantial growth in births to unwed women. These changing patterns in the demographic and spatial distribution of nonmarital births are not unique to Oklahoma and have been observed at the national level.¹²

Explanations for the rise in nonmarital childbearing have included delays in marriage, decreases in childbearing of married couples, increases in divorce rates, increases in the number of cohabiting couples, increases in the level of sexual activity outside of marriage, participation in risky behaviors that often lead to sex, improper use of contraceptives, reduced social stigma and improved

acceptance of unmarried mothers, and lack of marriageable partners.¹³ Exploration of these factors and their relationship to unmarried births in Oklahoma is beyond the scope of this analysis. A more thorough analysis should consider carefully these complex issues when making an interpretation about nonmarital childbearing.

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