

Unwed mothers set a record for births

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A record 1.3 million babies were born out of wedlock in 1999, marking the first time that a full one-third of all U.S. births were to unwed mothers, the federal government said yesterday. The increases are the result of demographic changes and an increasing tolerance for couples to have children without marrying, said analysts.

The 1999 data also demonstrate that the number of unwed births hasn't declined, despite high hopes associated with the 1996 welfare reform law, which made curbing illegitimacy a primary goal. A major reason unwed births have hit a new high is that the number of single women who are of child-bearing age has also grown, the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) said in its final report on 1999 birth data, released yesterday. "Most of the 4 percent increase in the number since 1997 is due to the concurrent 3 percent growth in the population of unmarried women," said the NCHS report.

There is also a lack of national and political willpower to tackle illegitimacy, said Heritage Foundation analyst Robert Rector. "The greatest failure of welfare reform is that the governors have grievously neglected the issue of marriage," said Mr. Rector, adding that only four governors, including President Bush during his the governorship of Texas, have promoted marriage in any way. "The sole reason that welfare exists is the collapse of marriage," Mr. Rector said. "It is a huge national tragedy that this country spends \$1,000 subsidizing single parenthood for every \$1 it spends trying to promote marriage and prevent illegitimacy."

"It's true there is not leadership at the state level or in local communities in reducing rates of nonmarital childbearing, except among teen-agers," said Kristin A. Moore, president of Child Trends Inc., a nonprofit research group. "It's also true that we're not sitting on a set of tried and true demonstration projects that would suggest how states and localities might do this," she said.

One of the problems of addressing unwed childbearing is that the American people typically view teen childbearing and nonmarital childbearing as one and the same, Mrs. Moore said. But most unwed mothers are in their 20s, and a program that tries to discourage pregnancies among unmarried adult couples has to be "very different" from one aimed at high school students, she said. Without models to guide local leaders regarding unwed childbearing by adults, "they've been reluctant to intervene."

Yet another reason for the high unwed birthrate is the rise in cohabitation, added Jennifer Manlove, a senior researcher at Child Trends. "Fertility trends have been fairly consistent over time, but what is changing is marriage," she said. Couples are delaying marriage, but not delaying childbearing.

In 1999, according to the NCHS, which is part of the Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- Out of 3,959,417 births, 1,308,560 were to unwed mothers, the highest number ever recorded. This compares with 1,293,567 unwed births in 1998 and 1,257,444 unwed births in 1997.
- Unwed birth rates were highest for black women, with 69.1 percent of births to black women occurring out of wedlock, compared with 42.2 percent for Hispanics and 22.1 percent for non-Hispanic whites. However, the report noted, while the percentage of unwed births has declined slightly for blacks in recent years, that percentage has increased for whites and Hispanics.
- The birthrate for single women rose to 44.4 births per 1,000 women ages 15 to 44 years old. In 1998, the birthrate was 44.3 births per 1,000 fertile women. The highest unwed birthrate was 46.9 births per 1,000 fertile women in 1994.
- Thirty-three percent of all births were out of wedlock. This is a slight increase from the past five years, which saw an average 32.4 percent of births out of wedlock.