

Teen births decline, report shows

Researchers are alarmed by increase in out-of-wedlock pregnancies

By Cheryl Wetzstein
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A new federal report on birth statistics shows a "thrilling" 12-year decline in teen births — and a "very alarming" jump in the portion of births that occur out of wedlock.

The report, "Births: Preliminary Data For 2003," released yesterday shows "two competing trends," said Wade F. Horn, assistant secretary for children and families at the Department of Health and Human Services.

"The report shows that we are doing a much better job at convincing young people that it's not a good idea to have, or father, a child while you're a teenager," said Mr. Horn, referring to the 3 percent drop in teen births from 2002 to 2003.

At the same time, he said, the rise in giving birth to children

out of wedlock to 34.6 percent shows "that we still need to do a better job at helping them understand that there are advantages, both to waiting until you're older to become a parent and waiting until you're married."

Other highlights from the new birth report, released by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), are a marked 6 percent increase in births by Caesarean-section delivery and increases in births among older mothers.

In 2003, for the first time, births to women ages 40 or older topped 100,000 in a single year, said a spokesman for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which oversees the NCHS.

The latest 3 percent drop in teen births is "a real decline" and "simply thrilling," said

Sarah Brown, director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

Teen birthrates have fallen 33 percent since their 1991 peak, and this represents "a very profound change in America," she said.

To Heritage Foundation analyst Robert Rector, the more important — and "very alarming" — number is the portion of unwed births, which has risen from 33.5 percent in 2001 to 34.6 percent in 2003.

When it comes to child poverty and other family problems, he said, "it does not matter very much at all" whether a woman is 18 or 20, when she has a child out of wedlock. "What matters is whether she's married at the time at birth."

The unwed-birth data, however, didn't worry Marshall Miller, a co-founder of the Al-

ternatives to Marriage Project in Albany, N.Y., a group for unmarried persons.

"If you just read numbers on a paper, you don't necessarily know" why people decide to have a child or marry or not, Mr. Marshall said.

"I think hand-wringing about births to unmarried parents, as opposed to looking at what's going on in their lives, misses the point," he said, adding that many of unwed births are to older, single career women who have chosen to have a child, long-term cohabiting couples and same-sex couples who can't "marry."

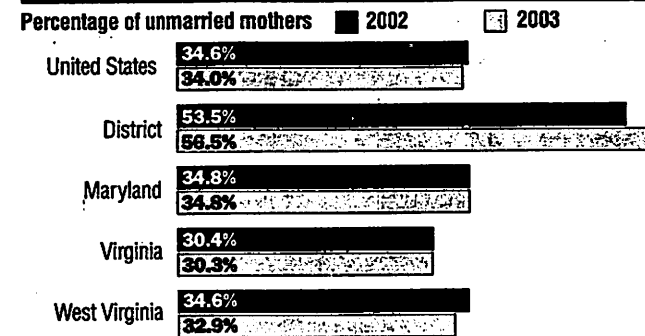
Other highlights of the NCHS report:

- The number of U.S. births rose by less than 1 percent, to 4.1 million.

- The number of unwed births rose from 1,365,966 in 2002 to 1,415,804 in 2003.

UNWED BIRTHS CLIMBING

The portion of births to unwed mothers last year rose in 40 states, including in the metropolitan Washington area, according to preliminary data from the federal government.



Source: "Births: Preliminary Data for 2003," National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Department of Health and Human Services

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- The teen birthrate of 41.7 births per 1,000 teens in 2003 marks a 33 percent decline in teen birthrates since 1991.

- The youngest group of mothers, ages 10 to 14, had 6,665 births in 2003 — the fewest in 45 years.

- Women in their late 20s remain the most likely to have ba-

bies (115.7 births per 1,000 women ages 25 to 29).

- The highest portion of unwed births was in the District of Columbia (53.5 percent of births unwed), followed by New Mexico (48.4 percent of births unwed). Utah had the lowest amount of unwed births (17.2 percent of births unwed).