

Births to Unwed Mothers Increase to Record Proportion in U.S.

By Elizabeth Lopatto

July 13 (Bloomberg) -- More than a third of all U.S. births in 2005 were to unwed women, the highest level ever reported, according to data released today by the Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics.

The increase to 37 percent may be due to more unmarried couples living together, people getting married later in life, restricted access to birth control and concern among older women that fertility declines with age, experts said. Pregnancy among teenagers fell as fewer had sex and more used contraceptives, the report's authors said.

Unwed mothers are more likely to have children with lower birth weights and a higher infant mortality rate, and their offspring are at higher risk of living in poverty, according to the report. Even after controlling for the mother's age, the children are at greater risk, said report co-author Stephanie Ventura, the chief of reproductive statistics at the National Center for Health Statistics in Hyattsville, Maryland.

"In many cases, there's a socio-economic situation that's not as favorable," Ventura said in a telephone interview on July 11. "Many of these women don't have the same nutritional opportunities, even before they're pregnant."

Single moms with significant economic resources don't all have the same problems, Ventura said. Still "it's an important factor to identify if you're looking at children who might need more supports to balance out the family situation."

Most cases of unwed motherhood used to be accidental, said Stephanie Coontz, a professor of history and family studies at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. The increase in older unwed mothers suggests that women in poor areas may have less access to birth control, or that women are cohabiting without marrying.

Failed Relationships

"You may have women with a failed relationship who ended up pregnant," said Coontz, who wasn't involved in compiling the report, in a telephone interview yesterday.

The data is incomplete without information about the economic resources of the women, Coontz said.

“You may have women whose biological clock was ticking, who had good economic and educational resources and the support of their friends and family,” she said. “That’s a big distinction.”

Those who have economic difficulty or who didn’t think through their pregnancies are more likely to drink and smoke when pregnant, Coontz said.

The statistics on unwed mothers may be somewhat deceptive, said Marie McCormick, a professor of maternal and child health at the Harvard School of Public Health in Boston who wasn’t involved in preparing the report.

False Counts

“In California, they used to look at the birth certificate, and if the mother’s last name and the father’s last name were different, they declared the women unmarried,” McCormick said yesterday in a telephone interview. Some women opt to keep their name after marriage, and might be falsely counted as unmarried, she said.

Domestic partnerships may account for the rise in unwed mothers, she said. This was the first time she’d seen an increase in births among unwed mothers over age 25.

“This looks more like things in Europe,” she said. “We’re seeing less marriage.”