

Behind the Boom in Adult Single Motherhood

By Amy Sullivan

Somewhere Dan Quayle is clenching his fists. Two decades after the then Vice President [bemoaned single motherhood](#) — calling out the sitcom *Murphy Brown* for having its eponymous main character choose to have a child on her own — the latest data on U.S. births show that a full 40% of babies are now born to unmarried mothers. ([Read about the Quayle/Murphy Brown controversy here.](#))

The findings, released Wednesday by the National Center for Health Statistics and covering the 2007 calendar year, also revealed a general increase in fertility rates across nearly every age category. That rise included teen birth rates, which jumped 4% between 2005 and 2007, after a startling 45% decline from 1991 to 2005.

This turnaround of what had been an enormous public health advance has policymakers worried — and culture warriors pointing fingers. Within a half hour of the data release on Wednesday, the National Abstinence Education Association released a statement calling for greater use of abstinence — only sex education programs in public schools. At the same time, supporters of so-called comprehensive sex education, like columnist Bonnie Erbe at U.S. News & World Report, said abstinence education is the problem; they blamed the rising teen birth rate on the fact that federal funding for sex education over the past eight years has been restricted to programs that encourage kids to postpone sex until marriage. ([Read How to End The War Over Sex Ed.](#))

But though the prospect of more and more high school students becoming parents is worrisome, school-age teens still represent a small percentage of unmarried mothers. The birth rate for teenagers ages 15 to 17 is around 22 per 1,000, while their older peers ages 18 and 19 are having three times as many babies, almost 74 for every 1,000. Even higher is the rate for unmarried women in their twenties, who now make up the majority of single mothers.

The rising birth rate among those 20-something women — sometimes referred to as the “Knocked Up” phenomenon — caught the attention of researchers a few years ago. The numbers were sufficiently alarming that the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, knowing that 7 of 10 pregnancies to single women in their twenties are unplanned, decided to expand its mission to include young women in this vulnerable age group. Says Sarah Brown, CEO of the newly named National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy: “We first started to notice this trend [because] when teen birth rates went down, those for women in their twenties were going up. His-

torically, those rates all track together — they all went up and down together. This was an aberration.” ([Read A Brief History of Abstinence.](#))

Brown and her colleagues found that while extensive public-policy resources have been devoted to preventing teen pregnancy, very few have focused on women once they graduate from high school. Sexuality workshops are popular on college campuses, but they deal primarily with getting pleasure from sex and not on information about contraception or healthy sexual decision-making. By the time adults are in their twenties, they have even fewer resources. The National Campaign is conducting a survey of young adults in their twenties that will be released later this year, and Brown says she’s been shocked by some of the findings so far.

“We’re learning that a lot of young adults don’t know as much about the basic facts and the birds and the bees as most of us think they do,” she says. “If you’re 24, the last time you had sex ed was probably in the 10th grade. You wouldn’t have been taught about some of the newer methods of birth control like the ring or IUDs. There’s a large amount of simple misinformation or ignorance.”

There’s also the problem of what Brown calls “magical thinking” among men and women in their twenties. “Many of them have had some unprotected sex and haven’t gotten pregnant,” she explains. “The longer they go without a pregnancy, the more tempting it is to think that it can’t happen to them.” Women are also vulnerable to the misconception that a pregnancy — even unintended — can cement a relationship and bring a couple closer together. In fact, all of the statistics show that babies stress relationships; more couples end up splitting (see: [Bristol Palin and Levi Johnston](#)) than marrying (see: Ashlee Simpson and Pete Wentz).

The rise in unmarried mothers is just part of what amounts to a new baby boom; the 4.3 million births in 2007 was the highest number ever registered in the country. That’s good news for Babies ‘R Us and the daycare industry. But the rise in births to unmarried mothers could become a policy challenge, even for those who disagree with Dan Quayle. Study after study has shown that babies born to unmarried mothers are at higher risk of ending up in poverty, and that the mothers themselves face educational and economic hurdles. “And in this economy, where attachment to the labor force and jobs are so precarious,” says Brown, “the need for teen and young adult years to be used for education and training has never been more pressing.”