

Women 30-34 see largest increase in '07 U.S. birth rate

By Sharon Jayson, USA TODAY

Birth rates are up for women in their 20s, 30s and early 40s as well as for teens 15-19, according to a government report based on 2007 birth certificates.

Most of the age-related increases were 1% or less, but the largest bump was 2.3% for women ages 30-34, says Stephanie Ventura, a demographer at the National Center for Health Statistics, which released the preliminary data.

So who are these women who in 2007 had a record 4.31 million babies?

Some are teens, others are in their 20s. Some are "older mothers" in their 40s. The data show marked changes over time.

"Teens used to account for 50% of births to unmarried women in 1970. It's gone down to just 23% now," Ventura says. "That shows the increases are driven by adult women 20 and older."

And more and more aren't married.

"We know most American teens initiate sex about age 17. That's nine years difference between the average age of first sex and first marriage," says John Santelli, an adolescent-medicine specialist at Columbia University. "That's going to result in a lot of non-marital births."

Kelly Musick, an associate professor at Cornell University, is conducting research on cohabitation and childbearing among non-marital families. "There is a lot of childbearing outside of marriage, and a good portion nowadays is in cohabiting relationships," she says.

Some women may be having babies because they have not found Mr. Right but are mindful of their ticking biological clocks. And celebrities make unmarried motherhood more acceptable, says Gary Hoppenstand, a

professor at Michigan State University in East Lansing who is editor of *The Journal of Popular Culture*.

"Young people see their favorite actresses getting pregnant without serious commitment, and it's cool for them."

He adds that they "don't realize there is a powerful financial component to raising children. Typically young women rely on their own parents or immediate family to help raise the child, whereas celebrities hire nannies."

Teen motherhood is a particular concern for the non-profit Child Trends, a research group based in Washington, D.C., which has just completed a state-level analysis of teen childbearing.

The report uses 2006 data, which was the most recent available, and estimates that 18% of teen girls nationwide will become teen mothers. States levels vary from 8% to 30%, but in nine states, mostly in the South and Southwest, 25% or more are projected to have a child before age 20. The estimate was less than 10% in three states, New Hampshire, Vermont and Massachusetts.

Santelli, who will present new research findings next week at a meeting of the Society for Adolescent Medicine, says his study — to be published later this year — shows a downturn in contraceptive use since 2003. He suggests stagnant or rising teen birth and pregnancy rates through 2008.

Sarah Brown of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, says the U.S. teen birth rate is extremely high.

"So the biggest picture of all is that rates of teen pregnancy and births in this country far exceed what other developed countries report," she says.