

## Socio-Economic and Family Characteristics of Teen Childbearing

### Introduction

It is widely believed that teen childbearing is, by and large, limited to poor and disadvantaged teens. Nearly seven in 10 (67%) adults believe that most teen mothers are from homes below the poverty threshold, according to the results of a new public opinion survey conducted for The National Campaign in 2009. About the same percentage of adults (70%) believes that most teen mothers come from single-parent homes.

However, to date there has been little empirical evidence to determine whether this is an accurate portrait of teens who give birth or father a child. To help fill this gap, this fact sheet presents new findings on the socio-economic and family characteristics of teens who experience a teen birth. The findings paint a quite different picture from the commonly-held beliefs described above. Teen parents are, in fact, a diverse group with respect to family structure and family income level. In particular, teen childbearing is *not* limited to poor and disadvantaged teens.

The findings from this first-of-its-kind analysis are based on the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a nationally representative longitudinal survey of students. The Add Health project began in 1995 with funding from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

### Methodology

Findings in this fact sheet are based on a new analysis conducted by colleagues at [Child Trends, Inc.](http://www.childtrends.org), using a sample of 14,322 respondents, including 6,767 males and 7,555 females. Add Health began with a survey of students who were in grades 7-12 in the 1994-95

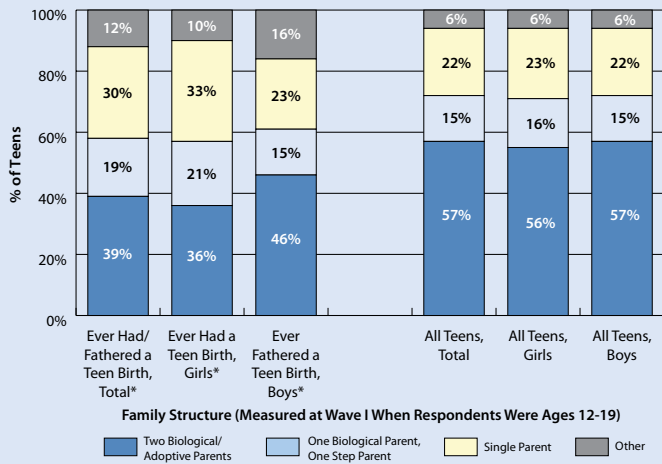
**FIGURE 1.** In your opinion, do you think that most teen mothers are from homes below the federal poverty level or above the federal poverty level?

Adult Responses to Question			
Below the federal poverty level	Above the federal poverty level	Don't know	Refused
67%	20%	12%	1%

**FIGURE 2.** In your opinion, do most teen mothers come from two-parent homes or single-parent homes?

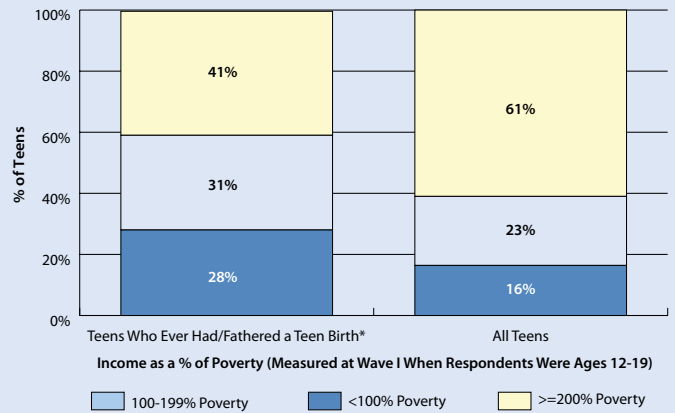
Adult Responses to Question			
Two-parent homes	Single-parent homes	Don't know	Refused
15%	70%	14%	1%

**FIGURE 3.** Percent of Teens Living Within Each Family Structure



\* Family Structure measured at Wave I. Teen births measured retrospectively at Wave III (respondents age 18-26).

**FIGURE 4.** Percent of Teens by Family Income (as a % of Poverty)



\* Family Structure measured at Wave I. Teen births measured retrospectively at Wave III (respondents age 18-26).

school year (Wave I). Since then, three additional rounds of in-home interviews have been conducted—in 1996 (Wave II), in 2002 (Wave III), and in 2008 (Wave IV). Results presented here draw from Wave I and III interviews (that is, from 1994-1995 and 2002).

More specifically, family structure and income were measured at Wave I when respondents were between the ages of 12-19. Teen birth outcomes reported in this fact sheet are based on retrospective reports provided by the same respondents in Wave III when they were aged 18 to 26.<sup>a</sup>

Readers should note that this fact sheet presents information about teen births, not teen pregnancies, due to greater data reliability for reports of births as compared to pregnancies. Measured at Wave III, 15% of young women and 5% of young men report that they had given birth or fathered a birth as a teenager (of course, since some kids in Wave III were still teens, our estimates are not fully complete).<sup>b</sup>

### Public Opinion

- According to 2009 public opinion polling data, the overwhelming majority of American adults (67%) believe that teen mothers are from homes below the federal poverty level (see Figure 1). In fact, more than 6 in 10 adults—regardless of race or household income—believe that teen moms are from homes below the federal poverty threshold. For example, 72% of adults with household incomes of \$25,000 or less and 66% with incomes of \$75,000 or more believe teen moms are from homes below the poverty level. Fully 67% of non-Hispanic white, 75% of non-Hispanic black, and 71% of Hispanic adults believe that most teen moms are from homes below the poverty threshold.

- Similarly, most adults (70%)—again, regardless of race or household income—believe that teen mothers are the product of single-parent homes (see Figure 2).

### Family Structure

- Nearly 4 in 10 (39%) respondents who reported ever having given birth or fathered a child as a teen were living with two biological or adoptive parents prior to the birth. An additional 19% reported living with one biological and one step parent. Three in ten (30%) said they were living with a single parent. This compares to 57%, 15%, and 22% respectively among all teens. As Figure 3 indicates, while respondents who have had a teen birth are disproportionately more likely to be from single-parent families compared to teens in general, it remains the case that more than half of teen parents were from two-parent families.
- Among respondents who ever had or fathered a teen birth, girls were more likely than boys to report having lived in a single-parent home before the birth as compared to boys (33% compared to 23%).<sup>c</sup>

### Family Income

- The federal poverty threshold is a government measure used to determine if a particular household is living in poverty, and it varies by family size. Among respondents who ever had a teen birth, the largest share (41%) lived in families whose income before the birth was *greater than or equal to 200% of the federal poverty threshold*. Fully 31% lived in families with income between 100% and 200% of the poverty level and 28% had family incomes below the poverty line.

(See Figure 4. Note that in 2008, the federal poverty threshold was \$14,800 for one parent with one child, \$17,346 for one parent with two children, and \$21,834 for two parents with two children<sup>1</sup>, not including non-cash assistance such as food stamps or tax-related transfers such as the earned income tax credit<sup>d</sup>).

- This compares to 6 out of 10 (61%) respondents overall whose reported family income as a teen was greater than or equal to 200% of the federal poverty line. These data indicate that while respondents who have had a teen birth are disproportionately more likely to be from families whose income was below 200% of the federal poverty level compared to teens overall, childbearing is not limited to teens in poverty.
- There was essentially no difference between teen girls' and boys' family income regardless of whether respondents had reported a teen birth or not (data not shown).

## Summary

These results show that, contrary to public opinion, teen parents are not a monolithic group. The majority of teen parents come from households that were not in poverty and households that were not headed by single parents. These findings point to an important conclusion: The prevalence of teen childbearing in the United States is simply too high to be limited to a particular income group or family structure.

Nonetheless, it is also true that a disproportionate share of teen parents *are* from households with incomes either below poverty or just above poverty, as well as from households lacking one or both biological parents. Thus, family income and family structure remain important risk factors associated with teen childbearing.

Taken together, these results suggest both reason for concern as well as targets of opportunity. Clearly, efforts to prevent teen pregnancy and childbearing are appropriate and important for all teens, regardless of socio-economic status, and should be the responsibility of all parents, communities leaders, practitioners, and policymakers. *And* there is also reason for extra effort to reach teens in low-income and/or single parent households.

## Methodology for Public Opinion Data

Data on American public opinion presented in *Science Says #41* (see Figures 1 and 2) are drawn from a survey with 1,002 adults aged 18 and older. The public opinion polling was conducted by International Communications Research (ICR), an independent research company. The survey was conducted via telephone by ICR and is weighted to provide a nationally representative estimate of the adult population, aged 18 and older. Interviews for this survey

were conducted between from June 3 – June 7, 2009. The margin of error for total respondents is +/- 3.10 at the 95% confidence level. The public opinion polling was done as part of a national telephone omnibus survey using a fully-replicated, stratified, single-state random digit dialed sample of households with telephones. Sample telephone numbers are computer-generated.

## Acknowledgements

The National Campaign gratefully acknowledges valuable data analyses contributed by Child Trends, Inc. This research brief was supported by Grant Number U58/CCU324968-04 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The contents of this brief are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of CDC, nor of Child Trends, Inc.

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## About The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization supported largely by private donations. The National Campaign's mission is to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and responsible policies in both the public and private sectors.

## Notes

- a. Based on Wave III reports of the teens' current age and their age at first birth, the teen births reflected in this analysis occurred largely during the mid to late 1990s.
- b. This is similar to others findings. See [Briefly: Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Teen Pregnancy](#).
- c. Note that family structure was measured as of the time of interview in Wave I, which preceded the reported time of first birth for all but 155 of the 1,452 teen births reported in Add Health. These 155 cases were excluded for the purposes of these analyses, however dropping these cases did not substantially alter the results.
- d. The total value of these benefits and transfers will decrease as income rises, and varies by state, family size, and other factors. For an illustrative example of available benefits by family income level, See Carasso, A and Eugene Steuerle, The Hefty Penalty on Marriage Facing Many Households with Children, *The Future of Children*, vol 15, Fall 2005. [http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/15\\_02\\_09.pdf](http://futureofchildren.org/futureofchildren/publications/docs/15_02_09.pdf) [August 2009].

## References:

1. U.S. Census Bureau, Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division, Poverty Thresholds for 2008 by Size of Family and Number of Related Children Under 18 Years. <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/threshold/thresh08.html> [August 2009].