

The Relationship Context of Births Outside of Marriage: The Rise of Cohabitation

By Lisa Mincieli, M.P.P., Jennifer Manlove, Ph.D., Molly McGarrett, Kristin Moore, Ph.D., and Suzanne Ryan, Ph.D.

May 2007

Overview. The proportion of births that occur outside of marriage in the United States has climbed over the past 30 years, reaching 37 percent in 2005.⁹ This pattern is a cause for concern because children born to unmarried mothers fare worse, on average, than do their peers who are born to married parents.^{5,10} The context of this pattern also is changing, with some experts reporting that the increases in childbearing outside of marriage result almost completely from increases in births to couples who live together (or cohabit).³ Given evidence of high rates of break-up among parents who cohabit, and the potentially negative consequences for children born into cohabiting unions, it is important to examine trends in these births. This Research Brief examines the rise in nonmarital childbearing and the number of births to cohabiting couples, as well as the characteristics of women who have births within cohabiting relationships, compared with women who have births within marriage or births outside of any union. We find that older women, white women, and women with greater educational attainment are the least likely to have a birth outside of marriage, but if they do, they are most likely to do so within—rather than outside—a cohabiting union.

TRENDS IN NONMARITAL CHILDBEARING

The number, percentage, and rate of births to unmarried women in the United States have been increasing. For example, in 2005, 37 percent of births occurred outside of marriage, compared with 22 percent in 1985.^{9,13} In addition, the nonmarital birth rate (number of nonmarital births per 1,000 unmarried women) has increased from 32.8 in 1985 to 47.6 in 2005.⁹ These increases have been seen over several decades for all age groups, with younger women experiencing the most rapid rate of growth in nonmarital childbearing over the past 20 years.¹³

The remainder of this brief distinguishes between two types of living situations in which children of unmarried parents may be born:

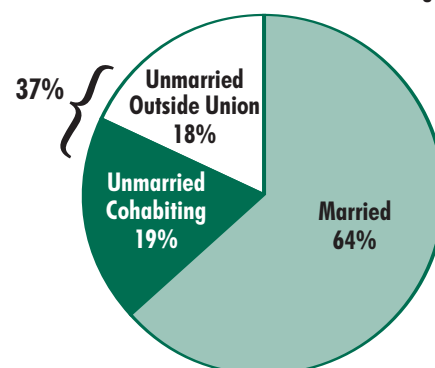
- **Cohabiting:** The data that we use for this brief define cohabitation as a man and woman living together in a marriage-like relationship. We include both cohabitation between two biological parents and between a biological parent and a stepparent in our analyses.
- **Outside of a union:** We use this term to describe a situation in which the mother and father are neither legally married nor living together in the same household.

THE COHABITATION CONTEXT

Although most childbearing still occurs within marriage, births outside of marriage now make up more than one-third of total births. Thirty-seven percent of children who were born in 2001 were born to unmarried parents (see Figure 1). Of these nonmarital births, more than one-half were to cohabiting women (as opposed to women who were outside any union), which translates into 19 percent of all births.

The proportion of nonmarital births that occur within cohabiting unions has been increasing over time. Between 1980 and 1984, less than one-third of nonmarital births occurred within cohabiting relationships. However, by 1990-

Figure 1 More than one-third of births occur outside of marriage and one-half of those births are to cohabiting couples, 2001*



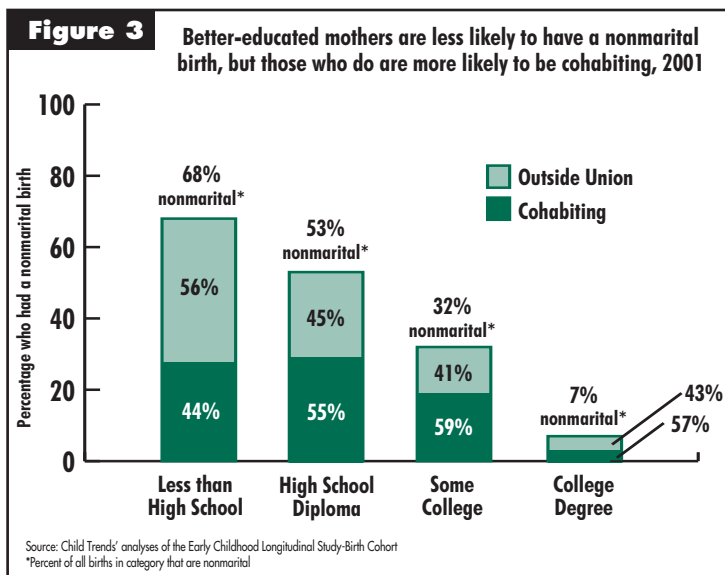
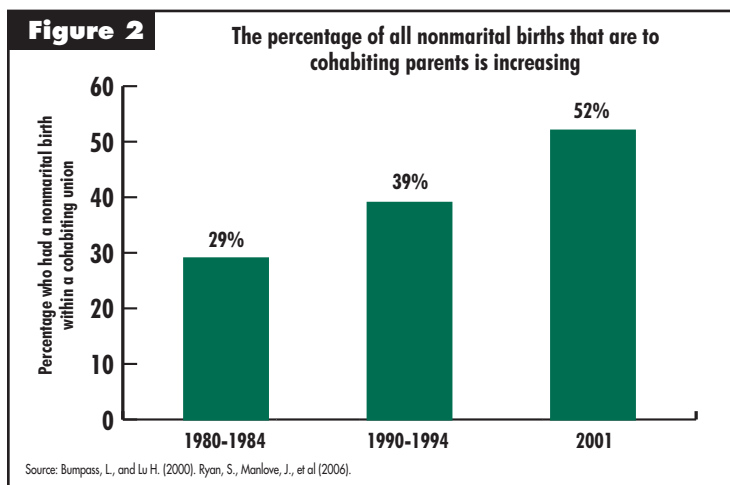
Source: Ryan, S., Manlove, J., et al (2006).
 *Numbers may not equal 100% due to rounding

ABOUT THE RESEARCH SOURCES FOR THIS BRIEF

All the 2001 data on relationship status at birth in this brief were obtained from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study - Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), gathered by the National Center for Education Statistics within the U.S. Department of Education. The ECLS-B is a nationally representative study of 10,688 children born in 2001. Unless otherwise noted, the analyses presented in this brief refer to a sample of 10,040 children who lived with their biological or adoptive mother at the time of the ECLS-B baseline interview, and whose mothers provided information on their marital or cohabitation status at the child's birth. Findings in this brief are drawn from two papers,^{3,12} and are supplemented by original analyses by Child Trends.

1994, this proportion had increased to almost 40 percent; and in 2001, a majority (52 percent) of nonmarital births occurred within cohabiting unions, representing an all-time high using nationally-representative data (see Figure 2).

marriage in 2001, compared with 53 percent of births to women with a high school diploma, 32 percent of births to women with at least some college education, and 7 percent of births to women with a college degree or higher (see Figure 3).



DEMOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOTS

Hispanic and non-Hispanic white women are more likely than are non-Hispanic black women to have a nonmarital birth within a cohabiting union. Overall, 25 percent of white women in 2001 gave birth to a child outside of marriage. This proportion was relatively low compared with Hispanics, among whom 46 percent of births occurred outside of marriage. At 72 percent, non-Hispanic black women had the highest proportion of nonmarital births that year.¹²

- Almost two-thirds (65 percent) of Hispanic women and 61 percent of white women who had nonmarital births did so within cohabiting unions.¹² In contrast, a relatively low proportion (30 percent) of black women had nonmarital births within cohabiting unions. Thus, a significant majority (70 percent) of nonmarital births to black women occurred outside of a union.

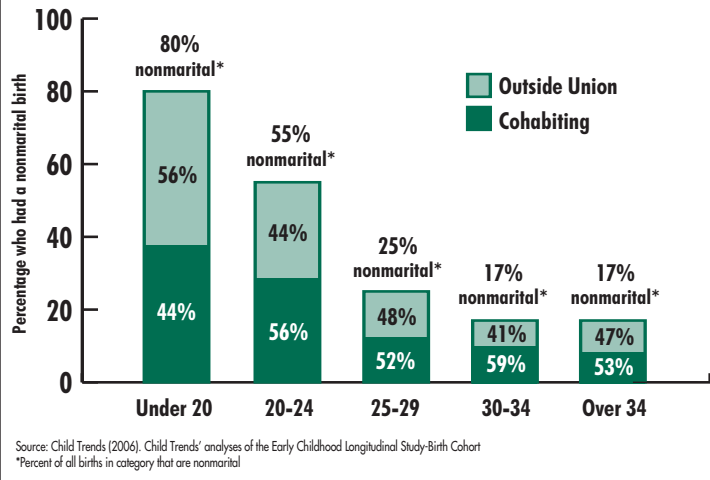
Women with high educational attainment are much less likely to have a birth outside of marriage, but if they do, it is likely that the birth occurred within a cohabiting union. Among women with less than a high school diploma, 68 percent of births occurred outside of

- Less than one-half (44 percent) of the nonmarital births to women with less than a high school diploma in 2001 were within cohabiting relationships. In comparison, cohabiting births accounted for 55 percent of nonmarital births among women with a high school diploma and 59 percent and 57 percent of nonmarital births among women with some college education and a college degree, respectively.

Among women over age 20 who have nonmarital births, more than one-half do so within a cohabiting relationship. Teen births in 2001 were much more likely to occur outside of marriage than were births to older women, and nonmarital teen births were less likely to occur within cohabiting unions (see Figure 4).

- Eighty percent of births to teens occurred outside of marriage, compared with 55 percent to women aged 20-24, 25 percent to women aged 25-29, and 17 percent to women age 30 or older.
- The majority (56 percent) of nonmarital teen births occurred outside a union, rather than within a cohabiting relationship.

Figure 4 Among women over 20 who have births outside of marriage, more than one-half have cohabiting births, 2001



- In all other age groups, more than one-half of nonmarital births were within cohabiting unions, notably 56 percent among women aged 20-24 and 59 percent among women aged 30-34.

DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The proportion of births outside of marriage that occur within cohabiting unions is at an all-time high. Children born into cohabiting unions are often better off economically than are children born into single-mother households,¹ in part because these children are more likely to live in dual-income households,⁶ and their mothers are older, on average, and better educated.

However, it is important to note that children born into cohabiting unions face greater risks than children born into marital unions. For example, children in cohabiting households are more likely to be poor, to have inadequate access to food, to be read to infrequently, and to display problem behaviors, compared with children in married couple households.¹ Children born into cohabiting unions are at a greater risk of experiencing instability in their family structure, even if their parents later marry, than are children born into marital unions.⁸

Whereas cohabitation could be viewed as a step towards providing a more stable and advantageous environment for children, the poorer outcomes to children born into cohabiting unions—compared with children born into marital unions—illustrate that, from the lens of the child, family formation within cohabitation is *not* a substitute for family formation within marriage. Potential approaches to address these concerns include:

- **Targeting programs to meet the needs of diverse populations.** The demographic characteristics of women who have nonmarital, cohabiting births and those who have nonmari-

tal births outside of cohabiting unions show sharp differences in patterns of family formation. Women who have children within cohabiting unions are more likely to be older, Hispanic or non-Hispanic white, and to have greater educational attainment than are women who have children outside of any union. Thus, it is important for programs to target the needs of these specific populations.

- **Support to help couples who want to marry form stable, healthy marriages.** Many cohabiting parents expect to marry their partners,¹⁴ however few actually do.^{2,15} Resources should be available to help all unmarried couples who wish to marry to form healthy marriages¹¹ and healthy, supportive environments for their children.
- **Prevention of unintended pregnancies and births that occur outside of a union.** Three-quarters of pregnancies that occur outside of any union were not intended. Thus, one set of prevention efforts should help these women avoid unintended pregnancies by abstaining from sex or focusing on consistent and effective contraceptive use.
- **Prevention of unintended pregnancies and births to cohabiting couples.** The majority of pregnancies that occur within unmarried cohabiting relationships (70 percent) are also unintended.⁴ Thus, programs should address couple-level decisions about contraception, pregnancy and childbearing in these cohabiting relationships.

This *Research Brief* has focused on the increasing number of nonmarital births to cohabiting couples and the characteristics of women who have births within cohabiting unions. Expanding our knowledge on this topic is important in order to promote healthy relationships and environments for parents and children.

Child Trends is indebted to the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation for its support of the research on which this *Research Brief* was based, as well as the writing, editing, production, and dissemination of this publication. The authors also thank Susan Brown, and Elizabeth Terry-Humen for their careful review of and helpful comments on this brief.

Editor: Harriet J. Scarupa

ENDNOTES

^a Research consistently shows that growing up with two married biological or adoptive parents who are in a low-conflict relationship is the best environment for children's development. However, rigorous research is as yet unavailable on the proportion of nonmarital births that occur to same-sex couples or the implications of these family structures for children.

^b See Manning and Brown (2006),⁷ however, for more detailed information looking at different types of cohabiting unions.

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ISBN 0-932359-51-5



4301 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 100
Washington, DC 20008

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