



## Investigating recent trends in the U.S. teen birth rate



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### ABSTRACT

We investigate trends in the U.S. rate of teen childbearing between 1981 and 2010, focusing specifically on the sizable decline since 1991. We focus on establishing the role of state-level demographic changes, economic conditions, and targeted policies in driving recent aggregate trends. We offer three main observations. First, the recent decline cannot be explained by the changing racial and ethnic composition of teens. Second, the only targeted policies that have had a statistically discernible impact on aggregate teen birth rates are declining welfare benefits and expanded access to family planning services through Medicaid, but these policies can account for only 12.6 percent of the observed decline since 1991. Third, higher unemployment rates lead to lower teen birth rates and can account for 16 percent of the decline in teen birth rates since the Great Recession began.

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### 1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, the teen birth rate in the United States has exhibited a stunning decline. It peaked at 61.8 (births per 1000 women between the ages of 15 and 19) in 1991, before falling 49 percent, reaching a low of 31.3 in 2011. Over one-third of that decline took place in just the last four years of that period. The longer term decline for black, non-Hispanic teens has been even more dramatic, falling from a rate of 118.9 in 1991 to 51.5 in 2010, a 57 percent decline. These trends can be seen in Fig. 1, which plots the number of births to women between the ages of 15 and 19.<sup>1</sup> Understanding the factors that have contributed to these aggregate trends is an important question for economic demography; it is critical in developing a better sense of what drives rates of teen childbearing.

This paper empirically investigates the role of state-level demographic changes, economic conditions, and targeted policies in driving aggregate teen birth rate trends between 1981 and 2010.

It is crucial to understand the factors that lead teens to alter their decisions and behaviors in order to inform policy discussions about how to alter teen childbearing outcomes. Policy observers offer many potential explanations for the recent decline, with advocates across the political and policy spectrum making competing claims. Some analysts have cited the Great Recession as a potential cause of the decline in the last few years.<sup>2</sup> Others reference the success of newer types of sex education programs,<sup>3</sup> abstinence only education programs,<sup>4</sup> and improved access to contraception.<sup>5</sup> While casual observers and advocates are content to make such claims, to date there is a lack of rigorous research verifying the

<sup>2</sup> Carl Haub of the Population Reference Bureau told CBS News: "I don't think there's any doubt now that it was the recession. It could not be anything else" (Jaslow, 2011)

<sup>3</sup> Leslie Kantor, Vice President of Education for the Planned Parenthood Federation of America takes this view, stating: "Whether it's in the public school system or community-based venues, we've really learned over the last 20 years what kinds of programs help young people to really change their behavior." (Tulumello, 2011)

<sup>4</sup> Valerie Huber, executive director of the National Abstinence Education Association in Washington, states "The one thing we know for certain is more teens are waiting to have sex, which tells us 'abstinence only' is a message that's resonating with them" (Tulumello, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Kost of the Guttmacher Institute states: "The recent declines in teen pregnancy rates are great news . . . It is time to redouble our efforts to ensure that all teens have access to the information and contraceptive services they need to prevent unwanted pregnancies" (Guttmacher Institute press release, 2/8/2012, available at: <http://www.guttmacher.org/media/nr/2012/02/08/index.html>, accessed 3/14/2012).

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<sup>1</sup> Aggregate teen birth rates are obtained from the National Center for Health Statistics. Estimates by race and ethnicity are provided in bound volumes of *Vital Statistics of the United States: Volume I, Natality*, for years up through 1993. After that, they are available electronically from annual reports, *Report (or Advance Report) of Final Natality Statistics*, for 1994 through 1996 and from *Births: Final Data* beginning ever since 1997. Race and ethnicity are not separately identified in birth data prior to 1989.

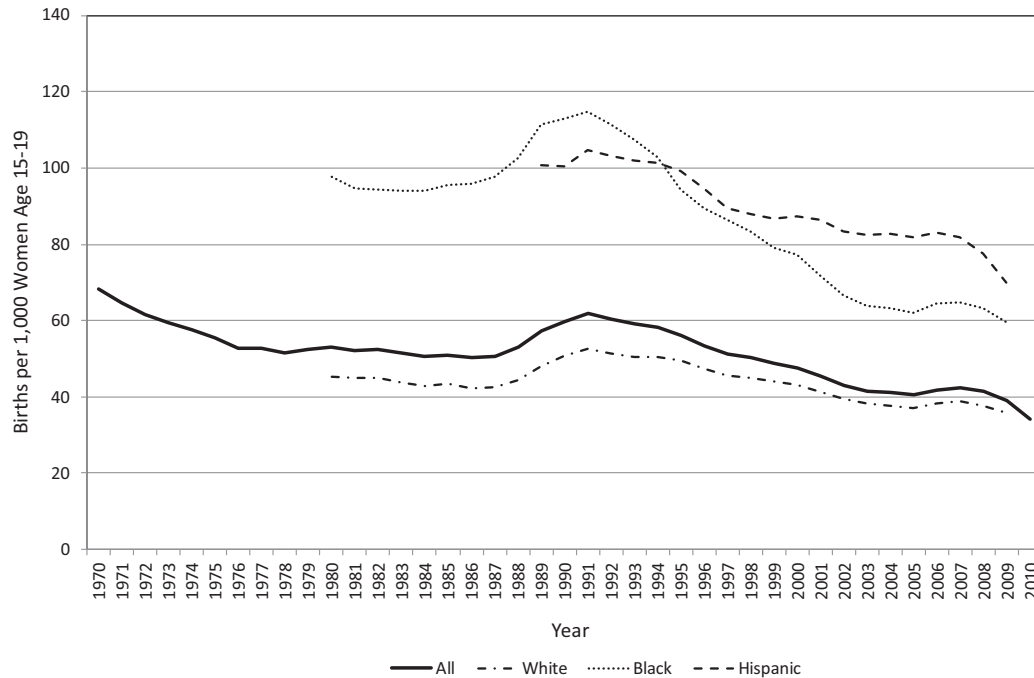


Fig. 1. Trend in the Teen Birth Rate. Source: Martin et al. (2011)

empirical importance of these factors in explaining changes in teen birth rates.

Our investigation of the role of state-level factors in driving aggregate trends is built conceptually on the recognition that environmental and policy factors shape individual's decisions and behaviors. This conceptualization is ubiquitous in the economics of fertility literature, which models fertility decisions within a cost/benefit framework of a utility maximizing individual. This focus stands in contrast to the focus on "mechanical" or "proximate" drivers of teen birth rates among many who work in public and reproductive health circles. We present descriptive information about trends in sexual activity and contraceptive use over the relevant period, which leads to the observation that teenagers have achieved lower birth rates through a combination of less sex and more contraception, and not through increased reliance on abortion. But, we emphasize that these facts inform us only about the mechanisms through which teens achieved lower birth rates, and by themselves do not speak to the relevance of various policies.

Our paper leads to the following conclusions. First, the observed decline in teen childbearing over the past twenty years is even more surprising given the demographic changes that have taken place. A growing share of Hispanic teenagers – who have higher rates of teen childbearing – would, all else equal, have led to a substantial rise in the aggregate rate of teen childbearing. Second, we find little evidence that targeted policies played much of a role in the decline. Declining welfare benefits and expanded access to family planning services through the Medicaid program each had a statistically discernible, albeit small, effect. Our analysis yields no evidence suggesting that other policies, including abstinence only education or mandatory sex education, had any role in driving aggregate teen birth rates over this period. Third, our results indicate that the dramatic rise in the level of unemployment since 2007 can explain a portion of the lower teen birth rates between 2007 and 2010.

## 2. Background: trends in teenage sexual activity and contraceptive use

It is a matter of biology that a fall in the teen birth rate has to be mechanically driven by a decline in sexual activity, greater contraceptive use, or an increase in the use of abortion (assuming that miscarriages are reasonably fixed in their likelihood). For descriptive purposes, it is useful to know the role that each of these factors played in the historical trend experienced in the United States over the past several years. It is critical to note, however, that an exercise along these lines does not inform us directly about whether particular policies are effective at leading teens to change their behaviors. To know that teenagers used contraception at higher rates, for example, does not tell us anything about whether policies that promote contraception are effective. Teenagers might have made different choices with regard to contraception for reasons having nothing to do with particular policies around contraception at that time.<sup>6</sup>

The data rule out abortion as a contending explanation for the decline in teen childbearing rates. Historical statistics reported by Kost and Henshaw (2012) on pregnancies, abortions, and births indicate that abortions among teens have dropped considerably, largely because pregnancies have fallen. In 2008 (the most recent year for which abortion data are available), 26 percent of teen pregnancies were aborted, down from 32 percent in 1991.

<sup>6</sup> Yet previous authors have made such claims. Boonstra (2002, p. 8) provides an example: "If recent declines in teen childbearing are the result of fewer teens getting pregnant in the first place, the obvious next question is: why? Are fewer teens avoiding pregnancy by abstaining from sex, or are those who are having sex using contraception more successfully? Not surprisingly, the answer is: both. But deconstructing that answer is critical, because it goes to the heart of a number of relevant and timely public policy questions, among them the debate over public funding for abstinence-only education and for more-comprehensive approaches." Santelli et al. (2007) express similar views.

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