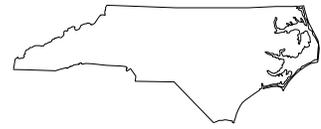

Statistical Brief



State Center for Health Statistics

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TRENDS IN BIRTHS TO UNMARRIED WOMEN IN NORTH CAROLINA, 1940-1995

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One of the most dramatic demographic trends of the past several decades is the rise in the percentage of live births to unmarried women. Single-parent households, most of which are headed by women, are much more likely than others to be living in poverty. Out-of-wedlock status is generally associated with elevated rates of infant mortality and low birthweight, though the strength of the association varies for different population subgroups. Marital status is to a substantial degree a marker for other risk factors traditionally associated with poor birth outcomes.¹

Data from North Carolina live birth certificates (Table 1) show a sharp increase in the percentage of births to unmarried women over the last several decades, especially since 1960. This trend has leveled off since 1990 (Figure 1). The percentage of births to unmarried women increased almost four-fold from 1940 to 1995 from 8.1 percent to 31.4 percent. There have been and continue to be large differences by race, with blacks having a much larger percentage of births to unmarried women. Among whites the rate of increase was greater, with a more than six-fold

increase since 1940 and most of this increase occurring since 1980.

Table 2 shows that the percentage of live births to unmarried women declines steadily with mother's age. While 85 percent of mothers under age 18 were unmarried in 1995, only 13 percent of mothers age 35 and older were unmarried. From the information in Table 2 one can derive that 36 percent of all births to unmarried women were to teenagers and 64 percent were to women ages 20 and older. In 1970, by comparison, 60 percent of births to unmarried women were to teenagers and 40 percent were to women ages 20 and older.

Marital status is also reported on the abortion records collected by the State Center for Health Statistics. About 22 percent of the abortion records have unknown marital status. In 1995, there were 18,128 reported abortions to unmarried women, compared to the 31,903 live births to unmarried women shown in Table 2. Of the 1995 abortions with known marital status, 77 percent were to unmarried women. The number of abortions to unmarried women declined by approximately 5 percent from 1985 to 1995 (adjusting for missing marital status information on the abortion records).



Statistical Brief No. 8

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Table 1

**Percentage of Live Births to Unmarried Women by Race
North Carolina Residents, 1940-1995**

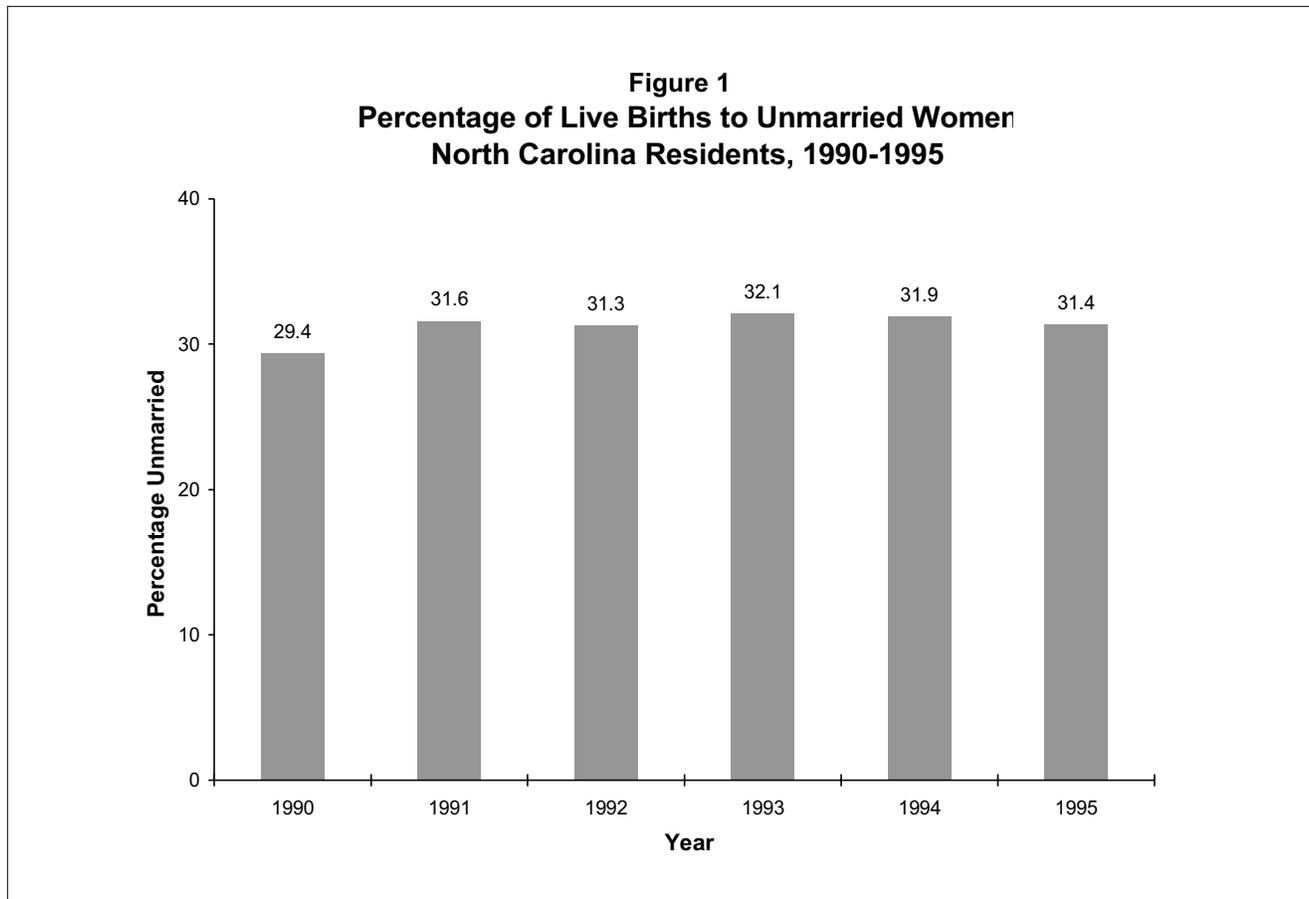
Year	Total	White	Black
1940	8.1	2.7	19.6
1950	8.1	2.4	19.2
1960	9.0	2.3	23.8
1970	12.5	3.7	33.7
1980	19.0	6.4	48.0
1990	29.4	14.2	64.4
1995	31.4	18.1	66.9

Table 2

**Percentage of Live Births to Unmarried Women by Age of Mother
North Carolina Residents, 1995**

Mother's Age	Total Number of Births	Number of Births to Unmarried Women	Percentage Unmarried
Under 18	6,314	5,386	85%
18-19	9,152	6,131	67%
20-34	76,642	19,142	25%
35 and older	9,438	1,241	13%
Total*	101,555	31,903	31%

*Note: Numbers do not add to total due to missing mother's age on a few birth records.



Recent trends have shown a leveling off or even decline in unmarried births. In the United States, 1995 marks the first time since national data were first collected in 1940 that the number and proportion of births to unmarried women and the birth rate among unmarried women all declined at the same time². Figure 1 shows that the percentage of births to unmarried women in North Carolina has changed little since 1991.

What are the reasons for the large rise in the percentage of births to unmarried women since 1960? Have governmental policies contributed to this increase or to associated social and fiscal costs? What factors are behind the recent leveling

off of this trend? New federal law provides large financial incentives for states to reduce out-of-wedlock births while not increasing the abortion rate. This is an important issue for policy makers in North Carolina to address.

References

1. Bennett T. Infant mortality by marital status of mother – United States, 1983. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. 1990; 39:521-523.
2. Guyer B, et al. Annual summary of vital statistics – 1995. *Pediatrics*. 1996;98:1007-1019.

Statistical Brief No. 8

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