

How Old Are U.S. Fathers?

By David J. Landry and Jacqueline Darroch Forrest

One in every six U.S. birth certificates have no information on the age of the baby's father; for more than four in 10 babies born to adolescent women, no data are available on the father's age. Information from mothers aged 15–49 who had babies in 1988 and were surveyed in the National Maternal and Infant Health Survey indicates that fathers for whom age is not reported on the birth certificate are considerably younger than other fathers. In 1988, 5% of fathers were under age 20, and 20% were aged 20–24. Fathers typically are older than mothers, especially when the mothers are teenagers. Fathers who are unmarried, black or partners of lower income women are younger than other fathers.

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Most research on and policy attention to issues related to pregnancy and childbearing has focused on women. This is not surprising, given women's physical role in pregnancy and social role in childrearing, but as a result, little is known about the men involved. Because data about men involved in pregnancies are usually gathered from the women, such basic information as the age of their baby's father may be missing or inaccurate. When men are asked in surveys to report their involvement in pregnancy and fatherhood, their answers often differ from their female partner's report.¹

The primary source of national data on the age of fathers is birth certificates, which contain questions about both parents' ages at the time the baby was born. However, although birth certificate data are quite complete when the parents are married, father's age is not reported on a high proportion of birth certificates for infants born out of wedlock. In 1988, age of father was missing for 62% of babies born to never-married women aged 15–49 and for 49% of those born to formerly married women; fewer than 1% of certificates for infants born to currently married women lacked this information.² In 1991, age of father was not stated on 17% of all birth cer-

tificates; it was most likely to be missing for children born to women younger than 20 (42%), the majority of whom were unmarried (69%).³

In the last decade, there has been a marked increase in research and programs dealing with male involvement in adolescent pregnancy, childbearing and childrearing. Attention has focused on teenage males particularly, on the assumption that the partners of pregnant teenagers are also predominantly adolescents. This assumption has arisen in part because of the lack of nationally representative data that include both teenage women and their male partners.

To present more complete information than has previously been available on the ages of men who become fathers, we supplement birth certificate information with data from the National Maternal and Infant Health Survey (NMIHS), a survey of mothers conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics in 1989–1991. Data are presented on the age of fathers for births to women of various age-groups and on the age distributions of fathers and mothers by marital status, race or ethnicity and mother's poverty status.

As most information reporting age of the father either is not nationally representative or has a significant amount of missing data, we report information for all ages available in the NMIHS. We focus most analyses on teenage mothers and

their partners because birth certificates for infants born to mothers in this age-group are the most likely not to include the age of the father. In addition, information on the age of men fathering babies with teenage women has important implications for teenage pregnancy prevention efforts and for young mothers' future well-being.

Data and Methods

The NMIHS questioned a sample of women aged 15–49 who gave birth or experienced a late fetal death or infant death in 1988.⁴ The data we analyzed are from the 9,953 mothers who had a live birth and responded to the mailed questionnaire or telephone interview (74% response rate). The questionnaire portion of the NMIHS asked mothers to report information on themselves, as well as several characteristics of their infant's father, including his age. Questions on family income status, which was used to determine poverty level, were asked only for the mother's family; poverty status was measured using the mother's family income during the 12 months prior to delivery. The NMIHS data used in this analysis include information from the birth certificate, as well as the mother's questionnaire responses.

We used the NMIHS weights, which adjust for survey nonresponse and sampling design, to estimate the ages of fathers of all 3,898,922 live-born infants born in 1988 to women 15–49 years of age. Birth certificates for 85% of respondents' infants included father's age, the same proportion as for all birth certificates in 1988.⁵ As expected, the weighted data from these birth certificates have an age-of-mother by age-of-father distribution that is similar to that derived from all birth certificates for 1988.⁶

All but 2% of the respondents reported the current age of their baby's father; missing values were imputed by the National Center for Health Statistics. We used the following adjustment procedure to esti-

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mate the father's age at the time of the birth from the current age as reported or imputed: If the survey occurred six months or less after the birth, we used the father's age at the time of the survey; if the questionnaire was completed 7–18 months after the birth, we subtracted one year from the father's age at the time of the survey; if the survey was 19–30 months after the birth, we subtracted two years from the father's age.

In 68% of cases in which age data were available from both the birth certificate and the questionnaire, the adjusted mother's report of the father's age (in single years) was in agreement with the report on the birth certificate; in the remainder, it was equally likely to be one year older or one year younger. Agreement was even closer for the broader age categories shown in most tables. In the data we present, age of father was taken from the birth certificate for 85% of cases, it came from the mother's report on the survey for 14%, and it was imputed for 1%. For infants born to women aged 15–19, the proportions are 59% from the birth certificate, 39% reported on the questionnaire and 2% imputed.

Fathers for whom age information was not reported on the birth certificate (N=593,055) were considerably younger than those for whom age was reported (N=3,305,867). Among fathers who had no reported age on the birth certificate but for whom questionnaire data were available or age was imputed, 16% were younger than 20, compared with 3% of those for whom age was reported on the birth certificate.

Father's age	Birth certificate	Survey or imputed	Total
15–17	0.6	5.2	1.3
18–19	2.5	10.6	3.7
20–24	17.9	34.1	20.4
25–29	33.0	28.3	32.2
30–34	27.9	12.3	25.5
>35	18.2	9.5	16.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Results

Table 1 shows the ages of fathers of babies born in 1988 to women aged 15–49. Our estimates indicate that 5% of the fathers were teenagers, compared with 12% of the mothers.

Over a half million teenage men and women became parents in 1988 (not

*An additional 10,588 babies were born to women younger than 15, who were not included in the survey. Of these mothers, 2,351 reported the father was younger than 20; 915 said he was older; and 7,322 did not report his age on the birth certificate.

Table 1. Number of infants born to women aged 15–49 and percentage distribution, by age of father, according to age of mother, 1988

Father's age	All births		Mother's age						
	No.	%	15–17	18–19	20–24	25–29	30–34	35–39	≥40
All births									
No.	3,898,922	na	181,300	296,828	1,067,696	1,237,613	801,800	269,118	44,567
%	na	100.0	4.7	7.6	27.4	31.7	20.6	6.9	1.1
Father's age									
<18	50,937	1.3	19.7	4.1	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
18–19	144,029	3.7	29.8	21.9	2.0	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
20–24	795,010	20.4	42.4	56.7	42.3	6.5	1.6	1.3	2.3
25–29	1,257,221	32.2	6.8	14.8	40.1	51.3	14.9	6.2	3.0
30–34	993,918	25.5	1.0	1.6	11.5	32.5	51.3	18.2	5.7
35–39	429,832	11.0	0.1	0.7	2.3	6.7	23.5	44.7	23.4
≥40	227,975	5.8	0.2	0.2	1.5	2.7	8.7	29.6	65.6
Total	3,898,922	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: na=not applicable.

shown): 194,966 men, 86% of whom had female partners who were aged 15–19; and 478,128 women aged 15–19, 65% of whom had male partners who were 20 or older.* Of all babies born in 1988, 13% had at least one teenage parent; however, only 1% had parents who were both under age 18, and 4% had parents who were both under 20.

In general, fathers tend to be somewhat older than mothers, a relationship in line with the typical two-year age gap between grooms and brides.⁷ For example, 40% of mothers in 1988 were under age 25, compared with 25% of fathers.

The fathers of babies born to adolescent mothers are especially likely to be older than the women: Half of the fathers of babies born to women aged 15–17 were 20 years of age or older. Only 35% of the fathers of babies born to women aged 15–19 were also under age 20 (not shown). In comparison, 42% of mothers aged 20–24 had male partners in the same five-year age-group, as did 51% of mothers aged 25–29 and aged 30–34, and 45% of mothers aged 35–39. Some 66% of the partners of mothers aged 40 or older were also aged 40 or more.

Table 2 shows a more detailed view of the distribution of the age difference between mothers and fathers. In half of all cases, the parents' ages were within two years of each other. The youngest and oldest mothers were least likely to have had a partner within two years of their age (40% of 15–17-year-old mothers and 42% of those aged 40 and over).

The older the mother, the more likely it is that her partner is younger than she. Three in 10 mothers aged 40 or older had a partner who was three or more years younger than they. Conversely, the younger a mother, the more likely it is that her partner is at least three years older than she. Some 60% of 15–17-year-old mothers had a partner three or more years older than they, as did half of 18–19-year-

olds; about one in five of all teenage mothers had a partner six or more years older.

Among older women, age differences averaged out so that the mean difference in age was less than a year for mothers 35 and older. However, age differences are substantial for younger mothers: On average, 15–17-year-old mothers were four years younger than their baby's father. The mean age difference shows generally that the younger the mother is, the greater the age difference between her and her partner.

Comparisons of the age distributions of fathers and mothers are shown in Table 3 by selected characteristics. The number of fathers who had not completed high school (678,000) is only slightly lower than the number of mothers who had not graduated (744,000). However, among those with less than a high school education, mothers are markedly younger than fathers; 64% of mothers versus 38% of fathers with less than a high school education were younger than 25. Among those who are high school graduates or who have some college education, the age distribution of mothers is only slightly younger than that of fathers.

Married parents, both fathers and mothers, are typically older than those who are not married at the time of the birth. Only 2% of married fathers and 6% of married mothers were teenagers, while 49% and 34%, respectively, were 30 or older. Among unmarried couples who became parents in 1988, 15% of fathers and 31% of mothers were teenagers, and only 24% and 14%, respectively, were aged 30 and above. Of the fathers of babies born to unmarried women aged 15–19, 40% were teenagers, and only 2% were 30 or older (not shown). Among 15–17-year-olds, only 10% of fathers were married, compared with 21% of mothers; in contrast, among 30–34-year-olds, more than 85% of both fathers and mothers were married (calculated from Table 3).

Parents with higher incomes tend to be

Table 2. Percentage distribution of births to women aged 15–49 by age difference of father, and mean age difference, all according to age of mother

Age of mother	Age difference of father					Total	Mean age difference
	≥ 6 yrs. younger	3–5 yrs. younger	0–2 yrs. older or younger	3–5 yrs. older	≥6 yrs. older		
All births	2.2	4.4	49.6	25.3	18.5	100.0	2.6
15–17	0.0	0.0	40.3	40.8	18.9	100.0	3.6
18–19	0.0	0.7	48.2	32.0	19.2	100.0	3.2
20–24	0.1	1.3	46.3	28.6	23.8	100.0	3.6
25–29	1.2	4.4	52.9	24.1	17.4	100.0	2.6
30–34	4.4	8.4	52.8	19.2	15.2	100.0	1.7
35–39	11.1	9.7	47.8	19.1	12.4	100.0	0.6
≥40	13.1	17.2	41.8	17.0	11.0	100.0	0.3

older than those who are poorer. Among couples in which the mother's reported total family income in the year before the baby's birth was less than the poverty level,* 11% of fathers and 26% of mothers were teenagers. Only 27% of the fathers of babies born to women in poverty were aged 30 or older. In contrast, 52% of the fathers of babies whose mothers reported family income that was at least twice the poverty level were 30 or older, while only 2% of fathers and 5% of mothers in such families were teenagers.

White fathers and mothers are generally the oldest: Fewer than 4% of white fathers were under age 20, and 47% were 30 or older. In contrast, 11% of black fathers were adolescents, but only 31% were aged 30 or above.

Discussion

These data help to establish one of the many missing layers of information about male involvement in pregnancy and birth. Nevertheless, the data are neither as exact nor as detailed as the available data about women. More work is needed to improve our knowledge and understanding of male involvement in reproduction, both for men alone and in comparison with their partners. For example, although men generally report that they are sexually experienced at an age approximately one year earlier than women,⁸ these corrected data show that a much larger proportion of teenage females than teenage males are involved in a birth.

Age information for men makes clear that some of the assumptions underlying many of the programs and policies aimed at reducing teenage pregnancy and childbearing are not correct. Policies that equate teenage pregnancy with males under 20 miss many of the partners of adolescent

*In 1987, the federal poverty level for a single person was \$5,778. For a two-person family, it was \$7,397; for a family of four, it was \$11,611. For a family of four, 100–199% of poverty was \$11,611–23,221, and 200% or more of poverty was \$23,222 or more.

women. Almost two-thirds of mothers aged 15–19 have partners who are 20 or older.

Programs seeking to increase male involvement in prevention of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases need therefore to pay more attention not only to serving preadolescent and adolescent males, but also to reaching older males who are partners of teenage girls. Since these men are typically out of the public school system, programs may need to include more intensive outreach to locate and attract them.

While a certain degree of age disparity between mothers and fathers is common in the United States, wide age gaps between young teenage mothers and older fathers merits some concern. One in five mothers aged 15–17 have a partner six or more years older. This type of age difference suggests, at the least, very different levels of life experience and power, and brings into question issues of pressure and abuse. Data from the National Survey of Children indicate that about 18% of women 17 and younger who have had intercourse were forced at least once to do so.⁹

Relationships between young adolescents and adults should alert providers not only to concerns about the social skills and capabilities of both partners, but also to potential pressure or abuse in the relationship. In some cases, age of consent laws require notification of juvenile authorities. In others, even when the relationship is consensual, providers may need to move beyond empowering young women to protect themselves against unintended pregnancy and sexually trans-

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Table 3. Percentage distribution of infants born to women aged 15–49 by age of mother and by age of father, according to background characteristics

Characteristic	N	15–17*	18–19	20–24	25–29	30–34	35–39	≥40	Total
FATHERS									
Education									
<high school	677,518	4.2	7.8	26.2	34.3	15.8	5.7	6.0	100.0
High school	1,607,762	1.4	5.0	28.0	33.8	19.9	8.2	3.8	100.0
>high school	1,613,642	0.0	0.7	10.3	29.8	35.1	16.1	7.9	100.0
Marital status†									
Married	2,903,602	0.2	1.5	15.6	33.9	29.6	12.9	6.3	100.0
Unmarried	995,246	4.6	10.2	34.3	27.4	13.5	5.5	4.6	100.0
Mother's poverty status									
<100%	932,290	2.9	8.3	33.9	28.3	14.9	6.7	5.0	100.0
100–199%	750,982	1.5	5.2	25.9	34.1	20.2	9.0	4.1	100.0
≥200%	2,215,650	0.6	1.2	12.8	33.3	31.7	13.6	6.8	100.0
Race/ethnicity‡									
Hispanic	503,964	2.0	3.9	27.1	33.7	20.4	7.6	5.3	100.0
Black	651,766	3.4	7.3	29.8	28.6	16.9	8.3	5.7	100.0
White	2,743,192	0.7	2.8	16.9	32.8	28.5	12.3	6.0	100.0
MOTHERS									
Education									
<high school	743,724	17.4	15.3	31.0	20.2	11.5	3.7	0.9	100.0
High school	1,526,736	2.8	9.9	34.5	32.2	15.4	4.6	0.7	100.0
>high school	1,628,462	0.5	2.0	19.1	36.6	29.6	10.5	1.7	100.0
Marital status†									
Married	2,903,602	1.3	4.4	24.7	35.9	24.4	8.0	1.2	100.0
Unmarried	995,246	14.4	17.0	35.3	19.6	9.3	3.6	0.9	100.0
Mother's poverty status									
<100%	932,290	10.8	15.5	39.2	20.8	10.2	2.8	0.7	100.0
100–199%	750,982	5.3	11.2	32.6	29.4	15.5	4.8	1.2	100.0
≥200%	2,215,650	1.9	3.1	20.7	37.1	26.6	9.3	1.3	100.0
Race/ethnicity‡									
Hispanic	501,457	6.4	9.4	32.0	29.5	14.8	6.9	0.9	100.0
Black	614,272	10.1	12.7	33.7	24.7	13.5	4.5	0.8	100.0
White	2,783,193	3.1	6.2	25.2	33.7	23.1	7.4	1.3	100.0

*The age-group 15–17 excludes mothers who were under 15 at the birth, but includes any fathers who were under age 15 if the mother was 15 or older. †Category does not add to 3,898,922 because of missing data for less than 1% of births. ‡The three racial/ethnic groups considered in this article are Hispanics, non-Hispanic blacks, and non-Hispanic whites and others. For simplicity, however, we refer to these groups as Hispanic, black and white.

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mitted diseases, and into helping them assess the wisdom of the relationship.

For some pregnant women, the age and resources of their male partners undoubtedly play a role in their decision whether to have an abortion or birth, as well as in their decision and ability to marry or remain single. The majority of births to adolescent women occur out of wedlock; the proportion reached 70% in 1992.¹⁰ The men involved in these pregnancies are often young themselves—40% are also adolescents, compared with 27% of the partners of married mothers aged 15–19. The sparse data available on the ages of the male partners of women having abortions suggest that pregnant unmarried women under 18 are more likely to have an abortion if their partner is also under 18 than if he is 18–19 or older (61%, 57% and 33%, respectively, do so).¹¹

Yet, teenage mothers whose male partners are in their 20s or older are not necessarily better off economically than teen-

age mothers with partners of the same age. Some studies based on small numbers of couples suggest that older male partners of teenage mothers are more similar developmentally to teenage fathers than they are to their peers whose female partners are adults.¹² Many of these fathers also have low educational attainment and inconsistent work histories.¹³ Programs that help young women who are pregnant or mothers complete schooling and obtain vocational training should also address similar needs of the fathers, to enable them to be personally and economically involved in their child's life.

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