

# Economic Correlates of Nonmarital Childbearing Among Adult Women

By Saul D. Hoffman and E. Michael Foster

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*The growth of nonmarital childbearing among women who are beyond their teenage years is well documented. Very little is known, however, about the economic status of these women. Data for 1991 from the nationally representative Panel Study of Income Dynamics indicate that the socioeconomic status of women who have had a nonmarital birth as an adult is similar to that of women who had a birth as an adolescent: They have similar median income-to-needs ratios (2.29 vs. 2.17), and similar rates of poverty (20% vs. 23%) and welfare receipt (22% vs. 19%). Women who have had both teenage and postteenage nonmarital births fare particularly poorly: Their median family income is \$11,280; nearly half receive welfare; and 55% are officially poor. However, women who first gave birth as adolescents but have not had subsequent nonmarital births do reasonably well: Fewer than 10% receive welfare, and their median income-to-needs ratio is 2.6.*

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Most research about and public attention on nonmarital childbearing is focused on teenagers. However, recent reports from the National Center for Health Statistics have noted the growing importance of nonmarital childbearing among women who are beyond their teenage years. Women aged 20 and older now account for a greater percentage of nonmarital births than do women younger than age 20. The nonmarital-birth rate is more than 50% higher among women aged 20–24 than among teenagers, and is approximately 30% higher among women aged 25–29 than among teenagers. Even women aged 30–34 have a nonmarital-birth rate that is only 15% lower than the rate among adolescents.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the nonmarital-birth rate during the 1980s and early 1990s increased more rapidly among women aged 20 or older than it did among teenagers: Since

1980, the rate increased by 61% among adolescents, by 69% among women aged 20–24, by 67% among 25–29 year-olds and by 82% among women aged 30–34.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the rates for these latter groups have continued to rise since 1991, even as the birthrate among adolescents has stabilized and turned slightly downward. As a result of these trends, nonmarital births now account for more than 40% of all births to women aged 20–24, 21% of births to those aged 25–29, and nearly 15% of births among women in their early 30s.<sup>3</sup>

There is a vast literature on the socioeconomic consequences of teenage childbearing,<sup>4</sup> more than 70% of which is nonmarital.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, there is virtually no information about the socioeconomic status of women who have nonmarital births after their teenage years. Thus, it is unknown whether their socioeconomic status is similar to that of women who had teenage births or whether nonmarital births to older women represent a fundamentally different demographic phenomenon than do nonmarital births to adolescents.

In this research note, we examine the socioeconomic correlates of nonmarital childbearing among women aged 20 or older. We present an assessment of how

these women are faring along a number of important socioeconomic dimensions compared with women with different marital and fertility histories. Our goal is to provide preliminary evidence as to the potential economic implications of this growing demographic phenomenon.

## Data

We use data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), a nationally representative survey of approximately 7,000 U.S. households. The PSID collects data annually about all individuals in a household, and has done so since 1968. All family members in the original sample are followed as they form independent households; as of 1991, the year from which our data are drawn, the sample included nearly 30,000 individuals.

The PSID not only provides extensive socioeconomic information, but also full marriage and birth history data. Thus, we are able to link teenage fertility with fertility among women aged 20 or older—something that cannot be done with vital statistics—and to link socioeconomic data with a woman's entire fertility history. While the marriage and fertility history information in the PSID is arguably not as good as that in other data sets, which may provide more demographic detail or a larger sample, its data on economic conditions, especially family income and receipt of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), are superior.

Our data come from the main PSID family-individual file and from two recently released PSID data sets: the 1985–1990 Childbirth and Adoption History file and the 1985–1990 Marriage History file. These two files include complete marriage and fertility data through 1991 for women of any age who were heads of households, wives or cohabitants in any year between 1985 and 1991 and also for women who were aged 12–44 in those

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Saul D. Hoffman is professor of economics in the Department of Economics, University of Delaware, Newark, Del. E. Michael Foster is assistant professor of public policy and economics, Vanderbilt Institute for Public Policy Studies, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tenn. The authors are grateful to the Smith-Richardson Foundation for their financial support of this research, and would like to thank Damon Jones for his outstanding research assistance and Tecla Loup and Jean Yeung of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics for their help with the data files.

**Table 1. Percentage distribution of women aged 25–40 who had a nonmarital postadolescent birth, by number of nonmarital and marital births, and age at birth, Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), 1991 (N=467)**

Marital and birth status	%*
<b>NONMARITAL BIRTHS</b>	
<b>All ages</b>	
1	49.1
2	25.7
3	17.3
≥4	7.9
<b>Age ≥20</b>	
1	67.6
2	20.3
≥3	12.1
<b>Age &lt;20</b>	
0	67.6
≥1	32.4
<b>MARITAL BIRTHS†</b>	
<b>All ages</b>	
0	64.1
1	22.2
≥2	13.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>

\*In this and subsequent tables, percentages are weighted based on PSID sample weights. †A total of 61.3% of respondents were ever married.

years and were classified as “other family members.”\*

Information in the marriage and fertility files includes the dates of all births, marriages and changes in marital status, as well as whether a marriage ended in divorce, in separation or with the death of a spouse. Using the birth and marriage history data, we were able to construct information on the marital status of the mother at the time of a birth.†

The marriage data do not include information on cohabitation, and cohabiting is not coded as a possible marital status at birth.‡ Thus, births to cohabiting women are classified as nonmarital. However, our assessments of the economic status of women in the sample always incorporate

\*Other family members are typically either adult daughters who are still living in a PSID household or other relatives. No marriage or fertility data were obtained from other family members who were women older than 44.

†For some cases with missing data on marital status at birth, we were able to attribute marital status where there was sufficient information in the marriage history to make an unambiguous assignment.

‡On the main PSID file, for data collected subsequent to 1976, cohabiting couples can be identified using the pair-indicator variable. However, this information is not part of the marriage-history data upon which we rely here.

§Family income is the entire income of a woman’s household. Income-to-needs ratio is a family’s total monetary income divided by the income level, adjusted for family size, designated by the U.S. government as the official poverty line. Families that received welfare payments of at least \$100 annually were considered AFDC recipients.

the financial resources of any cohabitants.

To ensure that members of the sample had sufficient exposure to the risk of nonmarital childbearing, we limit our inquiry to women who were aged 25–40 in 1991. Because the PSID initially oversampled minorities and low-income families, all data presented here are based on sample weights that adjust for both initial differences in selection probabilities and subsequent differences in attrition. The weights are designed to yield unbiased estimates of population means.<sup>6</sup>

### Findings

The sample included 1,836 women, of whom 467 had a nonmarital birth and 872 a marital birth at age 20 or older. Table 1 presents data on marital status and birth status for women with nonmarital births at age 20 or older. Among all such women, about half had more than one nonmarital birth, and one-quarter had three or more. One in three women with nonmarital births after adolescence had two or more such births. Overall, the women in the sample averaged 1.9 nonmarital births per woman and 1.5 per woman at age 20 or older (not shown).

Nearly one-third of women with postadolescent nonmarital births also had a nonmarital birth during their adolescent years. Thus, the population of teenage mothers and the population of women with postadolescent nonmarital births overlap. Thirty-six percent of women with postadolescent nonmarital births also had a marital birth, and 14% had two or more. More than 60% of women in the sample were ever-married; thus, nearly 40% of ever-married women did not have a marital birth.

In Table 2, we examine the association between marital and childbearing experiences, by whether they occurred before or after age 20 and by various demographic characteristics: number of children, educational attainment and economic status (including family income, family income-to-needs ratio, AFDC receipt and whether a family is officially poor<sup>§</sup>). The classifications according to marriage and fertility status in Table 2 are not mutually exclusive; women can be represented in more than one category (for example, having both a teen-

age birth and a nonmarital birth at age 20 or older). Any other presentation would obscure the general comparisons that we want to draw. Furthermore, the resulting subgroup of women over age 20 having nonmarital births corresponds exactly to the population that would be identified by vital statistics.

Mean age differences among the groups are minimal. Three of the four groups differ by no more than 0.6 years (33.1–33.7); the mean age of women without postadolescent births is 30.9. Thus, differences in socioeconomic variables are not likely to be due to age effects.

Overall, women who had nonmarital births as adults fared worse than other women. Sixty-five percent of such women are high school graduates, compared with 86–87% of women who had no nonmarital births as adults and those who had marital births as adults. Not surprisingly, the high school graduation rate is lower (55%) among women who had adolescent births. Moreover, 28% of women with nonmarital births as adults had some college experience, compared with 45% of women with marital postadolescent births and 60% of those with no postadolescent births. Eighteen percent of women with adolescent births had attended some college.

A similar pattern was observed for the proportion of high school graduates who accumulated additional education (not shown). Among women with nonmarital births as adults, 43% of high school graduates accrued some postsecondary education, compared with 52% of women with marital births at age 20 or older and 69% of women with no postadolescent births.

Surprisingly, we did not find that differences in economic status across groups reflected the pattern of educational at-

**Table 2. Selected demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of women aged 25–40, by marital and fertility status**

Characteristic	Post-adolescent nonmarital birth (N=467)	Post-adolescent marital birth (N=872)	No post-adolescent birth (N=610)	Adolescent birth (N=519)
Mean age	33.1	33.7	30.9	33.1
Mean no. of children	2.5	2.1	0.2	2.5
% high school graduates	65	86	87	55
% with some college	28	45	60	18
Income-to-needs ratio				
Median	1.71	3.53	4.70	2.17
Mean	2.07	4.32	5.53	2.62
Family income				
Median	\$18,600	\$40,200	\$39,500	\$27,300
Mean	\$23,825	\$50,255	\$47,824	\$32,557
% receiving AFDC	31	4	2	19
Poverty rate*	32	5	4	23

\*In this and subsequent tables, poverty rate is defined as the proportion with an annual income below that, adjusted for family size, designated by the U.S. government as the official poverty line. Note: Sample sizes for marital and fertility status are not mutually exclusive.

**Table 3. Selected demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of women aged 25–40 who had a postadolescent nonmarital birth, by race and age at first birth**

Characteristic	Race		Age at first birth	
	White (N=95)	Nonwhite (N=372)	<20 (N=198)	≥20 (N=269)
Mean age	33.2	33.0	32.9	33.2
Mean no. of children	2.5	2.5	3.3	2.0
% high school graduates	62	68	40	79
% with some college	26	29	13	36
Income-to-needs ratio				
Median	1.85	1.14	0.90	2.29
Mean	2.40	1.72	1.36	2.45
Family income				
Median	\$23,470	\$11,861	\$11,280	\$22,000
Mean	\$28,060	\$19,270	\$17,850	\$27,013
% receiving AFDC	23	39	47	22
Poverty rate	22	43	55	20

tainment. Women who have had adolescent births are typically a group with low economic status, and in our sample they are, in fact doing poorly, both in an absolute sense and relative to women with no nonmarital births as adults and those with a marital birth at age 20 or older.

However, Table 2 indicates that even with considerably less education, women who had adolescent births appear to be better off than women who had nonmarital births after their adolescent years. The median income-to-needs ratio for women with postadolescent nonmarital births was 1.71 and the mean was 2.07; both are more than 25% lower than the corresponding measures for women with teenage births. A similar pattern is apparent for poverty rate (32% vs. 23%) and welfare receipt (31% vs. 19%). Women with postadolescent marital births and those with no postadolescent births have income-to-needs ratios at least twice those of women with nonmarital births as adults, and their poverty rates and rates of AFDC receipt are a fraction of the rates of other women in the sample.

Table 3 focuses on differences by race and age at first birth\* among women with postadolescent nonmarital births. White women and women of other races were similar in terms of age, number of children and educational attainment, but differed considerably on economic indicators. White women had higher income-to-need ratios, higher mean and median family incomes and lower rates of poverty and AFDC receipt. However, the sample size for white women was relatively small, reflecting both their lower nonmarital-birth rate at these ages and their lower sampling rate in the PSID.

Differences between women who had a first birth as teenagers and those who did not were more dramatic than were differences by race. Women who had an ado-

lescent birth as well as a later nonmarital birth had low socioeconomic status across all variables. Only 40% of these women completed high school, their median income-to-needs ratio was 0.90 and their median family income was \$11,280. Nearly half received AFDC, and 55% were officially poor.

Women with postadolescent nonmarital births who did not have teenage births were substantially better off than those who did: Their median income was \$22,000 and their median income-to-needs ratio was 2.29; their rates of poverty and AFDC receipt were less than half those of their counterparts with adolescent births.

These differences notwithstanding, women with nonmarital births who had their first child at age 20 or older still fared poorly. Their socioeconomic status parallels quite closely that of the full sample of women reporting adolescent births, although education is a notable exception: Women with a nonmarital birth at age 20 or older who had delayed their first birth until after their teenage years were more likely than those with an adolescent birth to complete high school and also more likely to have had some postsecondary education. However, their mean income was still relatively modest, given their educational attainment, which is similar to that among women with postadolescent marital births.

These findings suggest that a woman's entire fertility history, not just her age at first birth, have important implications for her economic well-being. Overall, the socioeconomic effects of teenage childbearing are negative; however, there is substantial variation, and a sizable minority of teenage mothers fare quite well. The population of women with postadolescent nonmarital births is composed of women who did and did not have adolescent births, just as the population of women with adolescent births is composed of women who do and do not have postadolescent nonmarital births. A comparison of the means in Table 2 for all adolescent mothers with those in Table 3 for adolescent mothers who also had postadolescent nonmarital births implies that teenage mothers who do not have subsequent nonmarital births must be faring reasonable well.

Indeed, teenage mothers who do not have a nonmarital birth after their adoles-

cent years fare better than women who have additional nonmarital postadolescent births or only have later nonmarital births. These women have mean and median income-to-needs ratios of 3.1 and 2.6, respectively. Fewer than 10% are receiving AFDC (not shown).

Women who gave birth during their adolescent years were more likely to have had later nonmarital births than were women who did not have teenage births. Overall, 25% of the women in our sample who gave birth as teenagers also had a nonmarital birth at age 20 or older, compared with 12% of the women who did not have teenage births. Although the women in our sample have not yet completed their childbearing (their mean age is 33), we suspect that the ratios between these groups will remain substantially unchanged.

The strength of the relationship between having an adolescent birth and a later, nonmarital birth varies by race, as the data below reveal:

Race	% with teenage birth	% with no teenage birth
White	17.0	7.7
Nonwhite	42.1	38.3

For nonwhite women, the effect of having had a teenage birth on the likelihood of having a nonmarital birth at age 20 or older is quite small; even among women who did not have a teenage birth, nearly 40% had a later nonmarital birth. In contrast, the probability of a later nonmarital birth among white women is more than twice as high among those who first gave birth as teenagers (17%) compared with those who did not (8%).

We have shown that, on average, women who have nonmarital births at age 20 or older attain relatively low socioeconomic status. However, there is substantial variation within this group. In Table 4 (p. 140), we examine socioeconomic variables and marital and fertility data among women with postadolescent nonmarital births according to their economic status, as measured by the income-to-needs ratio. These data underscore the importance of teenage fertility as a factor in women's economic success. Fifty-six percent of the women with income-to-need ratios in the

\*In regard to adolescent births, we do not distinguish between women with marital and nonmarital births. Less than 10% of the women with nonmarital births as adults had marital births as teenagers. Thus, they represent too small a sample to treat as a distinct subgroup. The comparisons in the table are virtually unchanged when the adolescent birth group is limited to those with nonmarital births.

**Table 4. Selected demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of women aged 25–40 who had a postadolescent nonmarital birth, by ranking of income-to-needs ratio**

Characteristic	Low ratio (N=206)	High ratio (N=114)
% with teenage birth	56	15
% with first nonmarital birth		
<20	53	13
20–25	33	53
>25	14	34
Mean no. of nonmarital births	2.41	1.34
% ever-married	45	70
% with marital birth	20	49
% nonwhite	64	38

Note: The low-ratio group includes all women with income-to-needs ratios in the lower third of the distribution ( $\leq 1.03$ ), while the high-ratio group includes all women with income-to-needs ratios in the upper third of the distribution ( $\geq 2.53$ ).

lower third of the income distribution (1.03 and below) report a nonmarital teenage birth, compared with only 15% of women with income-to-needs ratios in the upper third of the distribution (2.53 and above). Meanwhile, women who had their first nonmarital birth after age 25 account for 34% of those in the top third of the distribution, compared with 14% of those in the lower third. Finally, among women in the bottom third of the income distribution, 55% were never married, and 20% have had a marital birth; in contrast, among women in the top third of the distribution, 30% were never married, and 49% have had a marital birth.

## Conclusions

How are the families of women who have nonmarital births after age 20 faring? The simple answer is not very well. Neither their educational attainment (which exceeds that of teenage mothers) nor the contributions of a cohabiting partner serve, on average, to ameliorate the adverse economic circumstances these women face. Much to our surprise, we found that, as a group—and across all outcomes except

education—teenage mothers were better off than women with postadolescent nonmarital births, a finding that many demographers would not have predicted.

Teenage mothers who do not have subsequent nonmarital births do reasonably well; this may be an important factor in explaining the substantial variation in outcomes among teenage mothers that has been observed by other researchers. Second births, particularly to women who have had a teenage birth, may be an especially relevant target for interventions and may merit more attention than they have previously received.

Our analyses reveal that focusing on a woman's age at first birth may obscure the importance of marital status as a factor associated with economic well-being among women giving birth after their teenage years, and especially among women having a second birth. A clear example of this is the very low economic status of women with postadolescent nonmarital births who also had teenage births, a situation that describes nearly one-third of the women with postadolescent nonmarital births in our sample. More than half of these women have an income below the poverty line, and nearly half receive welfare.

In contrast, women who have had teenage births but do not have subsequent nonmarital births and women who have had nonmarital births at age 20 or older but have not had teenage births are both doing reasonably well. Indeed, when we examine our sample according to income level, we can identify a group of women with postadolescent nonmarital births who are well-educated, earn middle-class incomes, and are, in general, faring about as well as their counterparts who have had marital births as adults.

The simple, but, we think, unappreciated insight is that neither age at first birth nor even marital status at first birth are decisive in terms of a woman's economic

well-being; marital status at second birth may well be a more critical factor. Indeed, women who have had both teenage births and postadolescent nonmarital births are particularly likely to experience poor economic outcomes.

In this research note, we have not attempted to model the occurrence of postadolescent nonmarital childbearing. However, we do note that there is a strong general relationship between having a teenage birth (marital or nonmarital) and having a later nonmarital birth. (This relationship is considerably weaker among nonwhite women.) We believe there would be a substantial payoff to investigating the causes of postadolescent nonmarital childbearing, both among those giving birth for the first time and, especially, among women who first gave birth as teenagers.

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