Women in the United States also had the highest levels of childbearing before age 18 at all three levels of educational attainment. Among women aged 20–24 with less than a high school education, 34% gave birth before they were 18, compared with 6–19% in the other countries (not shown). Nine percent of American women aged 20–24 with a middle level of educational attainment gave birth before they were 18, compared with 3% or fewer of these women in the other countries. Finally, 3% of 20–24-year-old women in the United States with the highest level of educational attainment gave birth before age 18, compared with 1% or fewer in the other countries.

In the United States and Great Britain, which have data on adolescent childbearing according to economic status and race and ethnicity, there is a strong negative association between economic status and having a child before age 20 (Figure 2). The difference in childbearing levels among women in the lowest and highest income groups is much wider in the United States than in Great Britain. However, at all three economic levels, U.S. teenagers have higher levels of childbearing than their peers in Great Britain. At the low economic level, U.S. teenagers are 79% more likely to have a child by age 18 (18% vs. 10%—not shown) and 58% more likely to have given birth by age 20 (40% vs. 25%).

The differential is smaller but continues among those in the high economic status group: U.S. teenagers in this group are 36% more likely to have had a child by age 18 (3.4% vs. 2.5%—not shown) and 14% more likely by age 20 (7.4% vs. 6.5%).

The proportion of black and Hispanic 20–24-year-old women in the United States who had a birth before age 20 is much larger than the proportion of nonwhites in Great Britain (33–37% vs. 13%, Figure 2). Among whites, the difference is smaller, but in the same direction (17% in the United States and 15% in Great Britain).*

Available data also show substantial differences in adolescent childbearing according to immigrant status. In the United States and Sweden, adolescents who are recent immigrants have higher levels of childbearing than their peers. However, in Canada and Great Britain, recent immigrants have lower levels of adolescent childbearing than women who were born there. These different patterns reflect differences in the cultural background of immigrants in each country. In Sweden, the birthrate among adolescents was seven per 1,000 for citizens, while it was 30 per 1,000 for women who were not citizens; the birthrate ranged from 18 per 1,000 among noncitizen adolescents from Finland to 34 per 1,000 among those of Turkish origin.23

In the United States, 29% of foreign-born women aged 20–24— a majority of whom are from Latin America and the Caribbean, where premarital and early childbearing occur at moderate to high levels—had a child before age 20, compared with 21% of those born in the United States. In Great Britain, 15% of native-born young women have a child during adolescence—twice the proportion among foreign-born women, a large fraction of whom are from South Asia. In these communities, premarital sex and childbearing are strongly censored. In Great Britain, the proportion of households with children in which the parents are cohabiting or in which only one parent is present is much smaller among households headed by persons of Asian origin than among households headed by whites or blacks.24

Within countries, certain geographic areas are likely to have greater than average concentrations of people who are disadvantaged, whether because of poor resources, lack of educational and employment opportunities, migration patterns or discrimination. Comparisons of regions within and across countries provide further illustration of differences by disadvantage and by country. We also found large regional differences in adolescent childbearing within countries. In Great Britain, the poorest districts— principally the inner-city areas of London and several large, old industrial cities of northern England—have teenage pregnancy rates and birthrates up to six times higher than the most affluent areas.25 In Sweden, there is relatively little difference by area in socioeconomic levels or in adolescent birthrates, except for somewhat higher teenage birthrates in remote northern areas with few inhabitants.25 In Canada, the teenage birthrate in the Northwest Territories (87 per 1,000 teenage women per year) is much higher than the national average (23 per 1,000 in 1996). This region has the highest concentration of aboriginal people, who are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Canada. The teenage birthrate also is quite high (34 per 1,000) in the Prairie Provinces (Alberta, Manitoba and Saskatchewan), which are predominantly rural and are the most conservative provinces.

In the United States, differences in adolescent pregnancy rates and birthrates across regions and across states are large, but rates in states with the lowest levels exceed rates in all the other study countries. For example, in 1996, the teenage birthrate ranged from roughly 30 per 1,000 in some states in the Northeast and Midwest to more than 70 per 1,000 in several states in the South, which generally have larger proportions of residents who are black or Hispanic and low-income. Teenage pregnancy rates ranged from about 50–60 per 1,000 in a handful of states to more than 90 per 1,000 in 24 states.27

*Adolescent birthrates for the United States show similarly large racial and ethnic differences. The rate is highest among Hispanic teenagers (102 per 1,000 in 1996), slightly lower among black non-Hispanic teenagers (91 per 1,000) and much lower among white non-Hispanic teenagers (38 per 1,000). (Source: reference 27.)