

Politics & Policy

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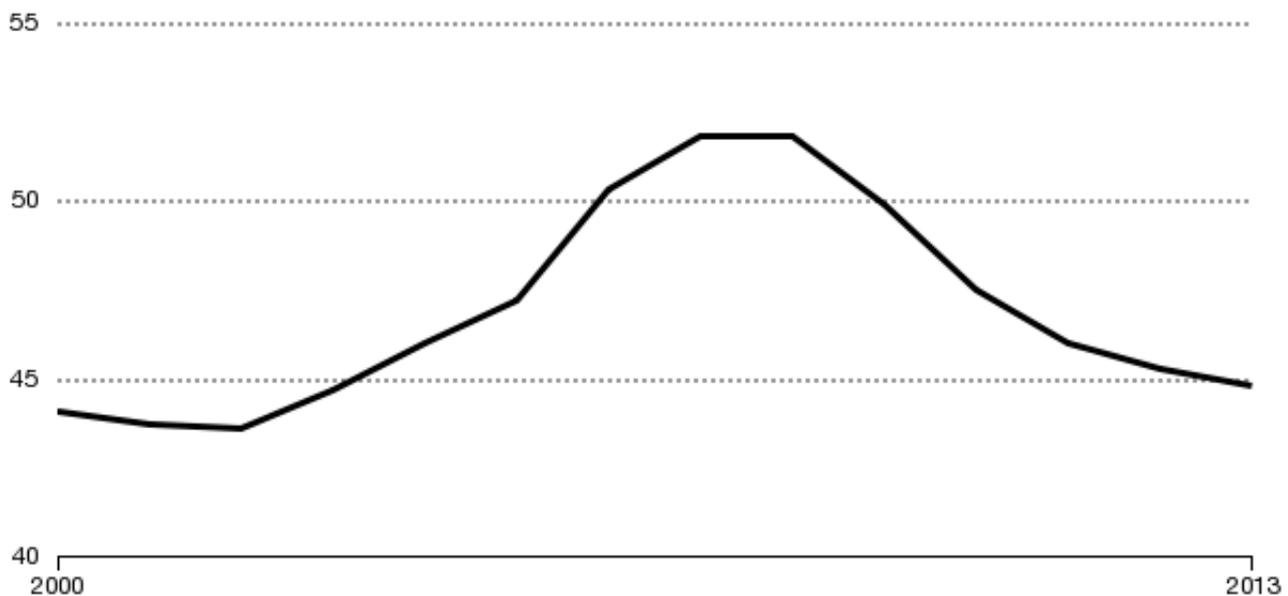
MTV Public Policy: How *16 and Pregnant* Reduced Teen Motherhood

By [John Tozzi](#) August 14, 2014

In 2008 there were 1.7 million children born to unmarried women in the U.S. The rate of unwed births, at 52 newborns per 1,000 unmarried women, had been climbing steadily since 2002 and was the highest ever recorded. Then the trend turned around. Births to unmarried women declined each year after 2008, and continued to drop last year, [according to new data](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Births to Unwed Mothers Peaked in 2008

U.S. births per 1,000 unmarried women (15-44)



Source: National Vital Statistics System

While fertility rates overall have declined during that period, the turnaround in unwed births is particularly dramatic. The steepest declines in childbearing have been recorded among unmarried black and Hispanic women, narrowing the gap with whites. And children born out of wedlock are increasingly born to partners who share a home, a signal to the authors of the CDC report that “the nature of nonmarital childbearing may be changing.”

What’s happening here? Fertility rates can be affected by lots of variables, including the effectiveness of contraception and women’s access to it, as well as the state of the economy and perceived opportunity. And there’s MTV.

Melissa Kearney, an economics professor at the University of Maryland who’s studied [teen birth rates](#)

(PDF), attributes most of the declines from 1990 to 2008 to better access to effective contraceptives. But teen birth rates dropped more sharply in the years after 2008, and Kearney's research credits MTV's reality show *16 and Pregnant* and its slew of *Teen Mom* spinoffs.

The first episode of *16 and Pregnant* aired in 2009. The narratives of hard lives of young mothers, conveyed to a mass TV audience, prompted Google searches and tweets about birth control or abortion, according to Kearney's [research](#) (PDF) with Phillip Levine of Wellesley College. Their analysis suggests the show accounted for as much as one-third of the overall drop in teen births in the year and a half after its debut. High unemployment also contributed to the decline.

Here's the shocking thing: If Kearney's research is correct, a hit TV show dwarfs the influence of pretty much all the public policy that could affect teen birth rates. Changes to welfare, Medicaid coverage for contraception, sex ed or abstinence curriculums, access to abortion—she says none of it really moves the needle. Those charged policy questions take up most of the oxygen in our public debate around family planning, and they're certainly important to the [individuals affected](#). But they play “a very, very small role in affecting aggregate rates” of unmarried births, Kearney says.

She was floored by how powerful the MTV shows were in changing social norms. Prior to her research on the show, Kearney says, she believed that reducing the teen birth rate depended on changing young women's perception of their opportunities. But on MTV, she says, “they just show young women's lives being really hard as young mothers.”

While Kearney's research focuses on teens, women in their 20s behave similarly. The CDC's data show decreases in unmarried births since 2007 for women of every age group younger than 35.

Since the 1990s, women have been delaying childbirth as they see greater economic opportunity—better access to education and higher-paying jobs, Kearney says. That trend isn't limited to the U.S. The pattern is evident in other developed nations as well.

Teens, in particular, are staying childless by using contraception and having less sex. “The reductions in teen birth rates in particular are not driven by an increased reliance on abortion,” Kearney says.

This is all, broadly speaking, good news. There's still plenty of room for unwed birth rates to decline, particularly among populations with the least economic opportunities. “The proportion of births to low-educated women that are outside of marriage remains staggeringly high,” Kearney says.



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