

Researchers document changes in teenage parenthood

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The US birth rate hasn't changed for two generations of teenage girls, but other aspects of young parenthood are shifting, especially regarding young fathers, according to new Indiana University research.

The researchers analyzed parenthood, education and income statistics over a long time span from two groups of about 10,000 people—those born in 1962-64 and those born in 1980-82. These are the key findings:

- Teen fathers and mothers came increasingly from single-mother families with disadvantaged backgrounds.
- The proportion of teen mothers or fathers living with their partners didn't change, but far fewer were married.
- The birth rates to [teenage girls](#) across the two groups didn't change, but the reported rate of teenage fatherhood increased, a seemingly contradictory conclusion. For example, 1.7 percent of the men in the older group were fathers by the time they were 17, while in the younger group, nearly double that number were dads. About 8 percent of the 17-year-old females in both groups were mothers.

The researchers offer several theories for the reported growth in the number of [teenage fathers](#).

"In what might be called the 'cougar effect,' we may be seeing more young males partnering with older females," said researcher Maureen Pirog of IU's School of Public and Environmental Affairs. This

phenomenon has been popularized in the media by television shows such as "Cougar Town" and "Extreme Cougar Wives" and on dating websites like CougarLife.com.

Pirog said that other factors could explain the reported increase in teenage paternity. State child support enforcement offices are aggressively working to establish paternity, made easier by the simplicity and lower cost of genetic paternity tests and the now-commonplace practice of establishing paternity in the hospital.

It is also possible that teenage girls are selecting male partners who are closer to their own age. Reporting for teenage males may have improved because the stigma associated with nonmarital parenting decreased between the two generations.

Whatever the reason, it is a worrisome trend because teen [fathers](#) are less likely than older men to provide financial support and a stable home environment to their children. But there are encouraging data points in the findings, the researchers said. Teen parents are staying in school longer, and there has been an uptick in their income level.

"What hasn't changed over time is the need for well-funded Head Start programs and pre-K programs so that [teen mothers](#) can continue their work or study," Pirog said. "High schools need to foster programs targeted at those at the greatest risk of unintended pregnancy and unprepared parenting."

Pirog's co-researchers included Haeil Jung of Korea University and Daewoo Lee of Columbus State University in Georgia. Their article, "The Changing Face of Teenage Parenthood in the United States: Evidence from NLSY79 and NLSY97," was published in the peer-reviewed journal *Child Youth Care Forum*.

More information: *Child Youth Care Forum*, [DOI: 10.1007/s1056](https://doi.org/10.1007/s1056)

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