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ROOM FOR DEBATE

A Running Commentary on the News

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A New Trend in Motherhood

By [The Editors](#)



(Credit: Pennsylvania Hospital via Associated Press) Pennsylvania Hospital nursery, 1930.

A [report](#) released last week by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that the percentage of children born to unmarried women is rising sharply. In 2007, [nearly 40 percent of births](#) in the U.S. were to unmarried women, up from 34 percent in 2002.

More women in their 20s and 30s are opting to have children outside of marriage. Teenage birthrates, however, are declining, making up only 23 percent of nonmarital births in 2007, down from 50 percent in 1970.

Of the 14 developed countries surveyed, the highest unwed birth rates were among the Scandinavian nations (66 percent in Iceland, 55 percent in Sweden, 54 percent in Norway and 46 percent in Denmark). The report didn't look at cohabitation rates.

We asked a number of experts what these new numbers mean and what they thought was the most striking trend in this data.

- [Silvia Henriquez](#), National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health
- [Stephanie Coontz](#), Council on Contemporary Families
- [Corinne Maier](#), author
- [Mark Regnerus](#), sociology professor
- [Libertad González Luna](#), economics professor

The Numbers Are Deceptive



Silvia Henriquez is the executive director of the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health.

The recently released study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention points out that the birthrate for unmarried women has risen to 40 percent and is highest among Hispanic women — climbing 20 percent between 2002 and 2006. While this data is worth noting and signals a need for policymakers and advocates to reexamine our family-centered policies, we shouldn't present single motherhood as a problem in itself.

Hispanic women who have immigrated to the U.S. may be living with a partner but may not be legally married by American law and are therefore listed in the study as “unmarried.”

Instead we need to take this opportunity to call for greater economic support, health care access and education for all women, so that those wishing to be mothers can raise healthy and happy children, with or without the support of a spouse. Specifically we must remember that women still get paid less than men do for the same work and that women who are insured pay higher insurance premiums for health care coverage than men do. Both of these issues put single working mothers at a lower socio-economic status than women in two income households.

But this data must also be carefully scrutinized. Recent migration patterns show that women from Latin America are coming to the United States and assuming head of household responsibilities. These women may be living with a partner but may not be legally married by U.S. law and are therefore listed in the study as “unmarried.”

Moreover, for many Latino families, a household may not look like a traditional husband and wife scenario. Indeed, in many Latino households, grandmothers, aunts and uncles play a significant role in raising children and contributing to the household income. Finally, the data that links single-motherhood to lower achievement for their children is weak and dubious. And frankly, it's always dangerous to assume women would be better off with their husbands.

We have to contextualize the data and not jump to policy conclusions that can further penalize unwed mothers. This data should be used to look at policy recommendations that will support healthy families and support a woman's decision to raise her children as she sees fit.