Record Birth Rate Set in 2007: 69.5/1,000

BY MICHELE G. SULLIVAN

The United States recorded its highest-ever birth rate in 2007, with increases in births across every age and race group, according to preliminary data released by the National Center for Health Statistics.

More than 4.3 million babies were born in 2007, the report said, corresponding to a general fertility rate of 69.5 births per 1,000 women—the highest fertility level since 1990.

The 2007 birth rate surpassed the previous record holder, set during the post–World War II baby boom," said Stephanie Ventura, chief of the center's department of reproductive statistics. "Previously, the country's highest-ever birth rate occurred in 1957, but of course, there are a lot more women of childbearing years in the United States now. The actual fertility rate of 2.1 children per woman [over a lifetime] is just about half of what it was in the baby boom years."

Teens, unmarried women, and older women all had more babies in 2007 than they did in previous years, Ms. Ventura said in an interview.

"The teen birth rate went up for the second year in a row. We have had an overall increase of 5% since 2005," although it's too soon to say if this trend represents a reversal of the 34% decline in births to teens aged 15-19 reported between 1991 and 2005.

Births to unmarried women made up 40% of the total births during 2007, Ms. Ventura said, a historic level. "This really is a trend and has been increasing since 2002 at a pretty good clip." The year 2007 also boasted the highest number of births ever in this group (1.7 million), and the highest birth rate ever in this group (53/1,000 women).

The increase among unmarried women occurred in all age groups, not just among teenagers. "Unmarried mothers used to be synonymous with teen mothers, but not any more," Ms. Ventura said. "Sixty percent of births to women in their early 20s were to unmarried mothers, as were almost one-third of births to women in their later 20s." In fact, the largest increase in nonmarital births occurred among women aged 25-39 years. "I think the social stigma of being an unwed mother has pretty much disappeared," she said. However, about 40% of these births were to women in cohabitation relationships.

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About a third of births in the United States in 2007 were by C-section, said Joyce Martin, an epidemiologist with the center. "This is the 11th straight year that we have had an increase in the cesarean section rate," she said in an interview. "Our data show an increase in the rate of primary C-sections and a decline in the rate of vaginal birth following C-section."

The increase follows a trend of decreasing C-sections in the early to mid-1990s. Since 1996, the rate has risen 50%. The increase has been spread over all age and race groups, she added.

Preterm births declined 1% in 2007, to a rate of 13%. "Historically, we have seen small declines in the preterm rate followed by large increases, so it's too early to predict whether this heralds the beginning of a trend," she commented. "We are certainly hopeful, particularly because we saw large, but not significant, declines in both preterm and low-birth weight babies."

Another positive sign was that the declines in preterm and low-birth-weight babies were spread across the country, not driven by a few states. "The decline was also concentrated among late preterm births, a group that had risen quite dramatically in recent years. … Again, it's too soon to say what might be causing this change," Dr. Martin said. ■

The full report is available at www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr57/nvsr57_12.pdf.