

Births To Young Teens

For the most recent three year period, an average of nearly eight thousand (7,981) babies were born to Oklahoma females under the age of twenty. Each year about five thousand (5,086) of those babies were born to teen mothers ages 18 and 19. Nearly three thousand (2,895) Oklahoma school-age girls (age 17 and under) had babies. One hundred thirty-five of those school age girls were between ten and fourteen years of age.

On the average, every three hours an Oklahoma child (age 17 or younger) becomes a mother.

The rate of births to Oklahoma young teens continued its modest decline (from 37.0 to 35.9 births per 1,000 girls ages 15 through 17) during the most recent three years (1996-1998) when compared to the three-year period just one year earlier (1995-1997). Birth rates for that age group showed some improvement in most Oklahoma counties (43 of 77) during the same period.

The progress made in decreasing the high Oklahoma birth rate to young teens of the mid-1980's (from 43.9 to 35.9 births per 1,000 girls ages 15 through 17) has been evident at the county level where such rates also improved in nearly every (69 of 77) Oklahoma county during the same period of time.

The rates of births to young teens in the majority of Oklahoma counties (42 of 77) were worse than

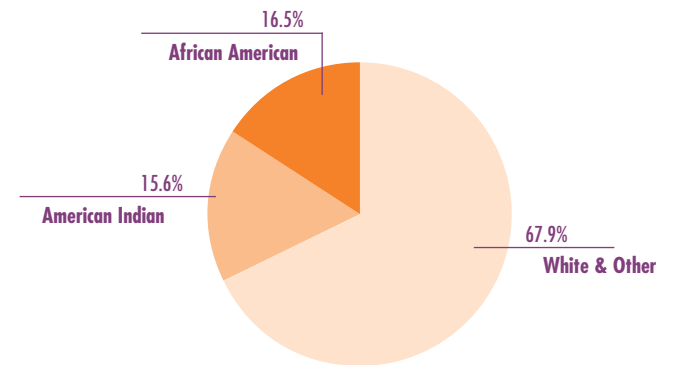
the average county rate (34.9 births per 1,000 girls ages 15 through 17). During this most recent period, the highest and worst rate (79.6 births per 1,000 girls ages 15 through 17) is found in Harmon County; the lowest and best (8.3 births per 1,000 girls ages 15 through 17) is in Dewey County.

The large majority (67.9%, including Other) of Oklahoma's young teen mothers are White. However, while non-White teenage girls comprise only about one-fifth (21.6%) of the teenage girl population, they account for almost one-third (32.1%) of the teenage girls giving birth in Oklahoma.

Oklahoma's teen childbearing rate was substantially above other states in 1980, but by 1997, the gap had narrowed. Even so, Oklahoma's young teen childbearing ranking relative to other states is poor, with more than two-thirds (37 states) having a teen (age 15 through 17) birth rate lower than Oklahoma during the most recent year (1997) compared.

Impact on early childhood and Oklahoma's future

- » *Improving early childhood requires Oklahoma to reduce teen pregnancy.* The cycles of generational poverty prevent too many children from receiving the physical, emotional, and mental nurturing necessary during their early developmental years. Children born to teen mothers are more likely to repeat the cycle of teen childbearing, to be born too small, to have lifelong developmental and health problems, to have lower cognitive functioning, to do poorly in school, and to exhibit problem behavior.
- » *Young mothers are the most at-risk for being poor parents and face bleak futures along with their children.* Each young mother is more likely to be poor, to be a victim of physical violence, to



Births to Mothers Ages 15-17

Oklahoma, By Race 1996-98

have another child before reaching adulthood, to drop out of school, to have unsteady employment, to be on public assistance at some point in her life, to be less skilled, and to experience marital instability compared to peers who delay childbearing until age twenty or later.

» *Education and reading is one key to reducing teen births and improving the lives of young children.* Poor literacy skills, poor progress in school and academic failure are good predictors of early childbearing. Children who don't read well

are at risk for early pregnancy and early parenting. There is a relationship between how much a child has been read to and how well they learn to read. Only half of infants and toddlers are routinely read to by their parents.

» *Communities and families can work together to reduce teen births.* Being connected with community, school and family decreases the risk of teen pregnancy and birth. School success, involvement in activities during non-school hours and opportunities to develop decision-making and

problem-solving skills join to prevent premature pregnancy and birth. Having positive options, aspirations for the future and goals for education and training beyond high school help young men and women make good choices and avoid becoming teen parents. Having healthy family communication and positive peer and adult role models decrease the likelihood that children will have children.

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Three-Year Rate of Births per 1000 Female Teens Age 15 through 17; Oklahoma: 1996-98, State Rate: 35.9 per 1000 girls, Average of County Rates: 34.9 per 1000 girls

Well over one-third (1,007 per year or 36.5%) of the births to mothers age 15 through 17 occurred to mothers living in one of the state's two large metropolitan counties (Oklahoma or Tulsa County) which together are populated with just under one-third (32.7%) of the girls age 15 through 17.

