

# Declining Marriage, Not Teen Births, Explains America's Falling Fertility: What the Latest Data Show

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

The principal driver of declining birth rates is the fact that fewer Americans are marrying and forming families.

The sharp decline in births among women in their 20s today is not being offset by an increase in births among women in their 30s and 40s.

Restoring marriage to its proper place will require both cultural change and policy action that is informed by that change.

Birth rates in the U.S. continue to fall according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released in April 2026.<sup>1</sup> The country's birth rates have been declining steadily for more than a decade, and the total fertility rate (the number of births a woman is projected to have over her lifetime) continues to hit new lows. Births in the U.S. are well below the replacement rate—the number of children born per woman that is necessary to replace the current population.<sup>2</sup>

The data released by the CDC show that the downward trend in fertility continued in 2025. The birth rate dropped from 53.8 births per 1,000 women in 2024 to 53.1 in 2025, and the total number of births declined by 22,534.<sup>3</sup> In addition:

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- Teen births fell, particularly among older teens (ages 18–19);
- Among all age groups of women younger than 30, births and birth rates (the number of births per 1,000 women in each age group) fell; and
- Among women 30 and older, the birth rate increased or remained steady (in the case of women ages 45–54).<sup>4</sup>

Some media outlets and scholars say the drop in birth rates represents positive trends. They argue that the decline is driven by falling teen births and by women in their 20s delaying relationships and motherhood to secure more stable lives for themselves and their future families. Proponents of this argument assume that births are being delayed until later in life rather than forgone altogether.<sup>5</sup>

The reality, however, is more concerning. Although teen births did decline somewhat in 2025, the principal driver of declining birth rates is the fact that fewer Americans are marrying and forming families. The sharp decline in births among women in their 20s today is not being offset by an increase in births among women in their 30s and 40s. Births delayed by women in their 20s today will likely mean overall lower births by the time these women reach the end of their childbearing years.

## Teen Births

Teen births dropped by nearly 12,000 between 2024 and 2025. The teen birth rate—the number of births per 1,000 teenage women—dropped by 0.1 among the youngest group of teens (ages 10–14), by 0.6 for young women ages 15–17, and by 1.7 for young women ages 18–19.<sup>6</sup>

While declines in unwed teen birth rates are good news, particularly in the case of minor-age young women, teen birth rates do not have much effect on the overall U.S. birth rate because they are only a small share of births today.<sup>7</sup> Declining teen births reinforce overall lower birth rates, but they are not driving the overall decrease in birth rates. To illustrate, even if teen births had decreased to zero in 2025 while all other births had remained steady (no declines among women in their 20s and no increases among women in their 30s and 40s), the overall birth rate would have remained nearly unchanged.

## Declining and Rising Births Among Women in Their 20s and 30s

The largest driver of declining birth rates is the large drop in births among women in their 20s. Declining birth rates among women in their 20s have a significant effect on the overall birth rate because this age group typically bears the largest number of children. Women in their 20s are old enough to have found a partner and married or at least to be at a socially acceptable age to have children. Biological fertility is also at peak or near peak for women in their 20s.<sup>8</sup>

Births among women in their 20s fell by more than 30,000 between 2024 and 2025. The largest declines in birth rates also occurred among women in their 20s: 3.9 for women ages 25–29 and 3.6 for women ages 20–24.<sup>9</sup> These drops are larger than the drop in teen birth rates and greater than the increases in birth rates among women in their 30s and 40s.

Some of the decline in births among women in their 20s, particularly women in their early 20s, is likely due to fewer births to unwed mothers. Declining unwed births is a positive trend. Children born outside of marriage are at higher risk for many negative outcomes.<sup>10</sup> But unwed births are not declining because of higher marriage rates among these women. Rather, more people are failing to marry and to have children at all.

## Increased Births Among Women in Their 30s and 40s

Some of the decline in births among women in their 20s is offset by an increase in births among women in their 30s and 40s. This lends support to the theory that births are just being delayed rather than forgone. However, the increase in births by older women has not fully offset declining births among women in their 20s.

Between 2024 and 2025, the birth rate increased by 2.5 for women ages 30–34, 0.8 for women ages 35–39, and 0.1 for women ages 45–54.<sup>11</sup> Overall, their total number of births increased by 19,572, but roughly 30,000 fewer births occurred to women in their 20s in 2025, so the additional 19,572 births among older women still led to a large net decline.

It is not yet possible to know how many births delayed by women who are currently in their 20s will be births that are permanently forgone. However, completed fertility among recent cohorts remains well below replacement, and unless there is a major reversal of that trend, birth rates will continue to fall.

## Declining Family Formation

What best explains the continual decline in births is the fact that fewer adults are marrying and forming families. Marriage and childbearing are strongly connected. Although the U.S. has an exceedingly high nonmarital birth rate, most births still take place within marriage. Births to married couples have declined far less than have marriage rates themselves. Married women have a much higher average number of children compared to their unmarried peers. The average number of children born to married couples has remained roughly steady for the past three decades with modest declines in recent years. Taken together, these trends suggest that declining marriages are the primary driver of declining births.<sup>12</sup>

The consequences of declining marriage and family formation go beyond shrinking birth rates. Smaller families and fewer people with families of their own mean fewer family members for people to rely on for support over the course of life. More older adults will reach old age without spouses or adult children to care for them, and this will likely entail negative consequences for the well-being of the elderly as well as greater reliance on government health care and social services.<sup>13</sup>

Declining family formation is also linked to broader social consequences. Americans report rising loneliness, but married adults with children tend to be happier, have greater well-being, are less lonely, and are more engaged in their communities.<sup>14</sup>

## Reasons for Declining Marriage and Family Formation

Americans have not rejected the idea of marriage altogether. Most unmarried Americans say they would like to marry someday, but fewer are reaching that goal.<sup>15</sup>

Society encourages young people to delay marriage, often to pursue personal and professional goals. For some, this means never marrying or having children.<sup>16</sup> Educational and career achievement are emphasized, along with personal autonomy and relationship experimentation. For those who do wed, marriage is often viewed as the capstone of adult life rather than as the cornerstone of a life that couples build together.

Economic factors also play a role in declining marriage, but these factors have more to do with increased opportunity cost and rising material expectations for marriage than they do with declining economic well-being.<sup>17</sup>

## Policy Recommendations

Restoring a culture of marriage is needed to create thriving families, communities, and societies. But birth rates will likely continue to fall if marriage continues to decline. Therefore:

- Parents, schools, churches, and media should educate young people about the importance and benefits of marriage and help young adults prepare to build and maintain healthy marriages.
- Reducing marriage penalties in the welfare system is also crucial to strengthening marriages in low-income communities. Marrying can often mean a substantial reduction in welfare benefits, creating a significant barrier to marital formation among lower-income Americans.
- The Heritage Foundation's *Special Report* on the family provides dozens of pro-marriage policy recommendations, including tax credits for married-parent families and investment accounts redeemable upon marriage.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

Marriage is the institution that is most likely to produce children and the environment that fosters the healthiest setting for their development. It is therefore, by definition, crucial to the current and future well-being of the country, and restoring it to its proper place will require both cultural change and policy action that is informed by that change.

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## Endnotes

1. See Table 1, "Births and Birth Rate, by Age of Mother: United States, Final 2024 and Provisional 2025," in Brady E. Hamilton, Michelle J.K. Osterman, and Elizabeth C.W. Gregory, "Births: Provisional Data for 2025," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, *Vital Statistics Rapid Release Report* No. 43, April 2026, p. 6, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr043.pdf> (accessed May 19, 2026).
2. Rachel Sheffield and Delano Squires, "Crossroads: American Family Life at the Intersection of Tradition and Modernity," Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 310, March 4, 2025, <https://www.heritage.org/marriage-and-family/report/crossroads-american-family-life-the-intersection-tradition-and-modernity>.
3. Hamilton et al., "Births: Provisional Data for 2025." Calculation of the total fertility rate was not released but will likely fall further from the previous year's historical low.
4. Among a couple of age groups of women over age 30 (specifically, women ages 30–34 and 45–54), the number of total births dropped even though their birth rate increased or stayed steady. Birth rates can increase or remain steady while the number of births declines when the number of women in that age group declines.
5. See Sabrina Tavernise and Jeff Adelson, "The Birthrate Is Plunging. Why Some Say That's a Good Thing," *The New York Times*, February 27, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/27/us/politics/us-birthrate-decline-women.html> (accessed May 19, 2026); Sabrina Tavernise, "U.S. Fertility Rates Drop to Another Record Low," *The New York Times*, April 9, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/09/us/fertility-rates-decline.html> (accessed May 19, 2026).
6. Table 1, "Births and Birth Rate, by Age of Mother: United States, Final 2024 and Provisional 2025," in Hamilton et al., "Births: Provisional Data for 2025."
7. During the past several decades, the decline in teen births has been accompanied by a decline in teen pregnancies and abortions; the drop in teen births is therefore not simply about more young women getting abortions. See Doris W. Chiu, Isaac Maddow-Zimet, and Kathryn Kost, *Pregnancies, Births and Abortions in the United States, 1973–2020: National and State Trends by Age* (New York: Guttmacher Institute, 2024), <https://www.guttmacher.org/report/pregnancies-births-abortions-in-united-states-1973-2020> (accessed May 20, 2026). Teen births used to be a much larger share of U.S. births. In the first half of the 20th century, teen births were common because people married at younger ages. It used to be that teen births were nearly always to married women. In recent decades, the vast majority of teen births have been to unwed mothers. Births to teenage women declined after the Baby Boom era as the age of first marriage began to increase in the U.S. Teen birth rates stayed flat during the 1970s and through much of the 1980s but began to rise rapidly in the late 1980s and into the early 1990s. The rise in unwed teen births was of great concern to policymakers and other leaders and a social trend that most of the public agreed was problematic. There was a concerted effort to reduce teen pregnancies and births. Teen pregnancies and births have been falling for about three decades and are now at historic lows. See Figure 1, "Teen Birth Rate, 1940–2023," in Alexandria K. Mickler and Jessica Tollestrup, "Teen Births in the United States: Overview and Recent Trends," Congressional Research Service *Report for Members and Committees of Congress* No. R45184, updated April 17, 2025, [https://www.congress.gov/crs\\_external\\_products/R/PDF/R45184/R45184.12.pdf](https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/R/PDF/R45184/R45184.12.pdf) (accessed May 19, 2026), and U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, "Statistical Briefing Book: Youth Population Characteristics: Percent of Births to Unmarried Teen Mothers, 1955–2023," released October 6, 2025, <https://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/population/qa01303.asp> (accessed May 20, 2026).
8. American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, "Frequently Asked Questions: Having a Baby After Age 35: How Aging Affects Fertility and Pregnancy," last updated February 2023, last reviewed April 2025, <https://www.acog.org/womens-health/faqs/having-a-baby-after-age-35-how-aging-affects-fertility-and-pregnancy> (accessed May 20, 2026).
9. Table 1, "Births and Birth Rate, by Age of Mother: United States, Final 2024 and Provisional 2025," in Hamilton et al., "Births: Provisional Data for 2025."
10. See Melissa S. Kearney, *The Two-Parent Privilege: How Americans Stopped Getting Married and Started Falling Behind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023).
11. Table 1, "Births and Birth Rate, by Age of Mother: United States, Final 2024 and Provisional 2025," in Hamilton et al., "Births: Provisional Data for 2025."
12. Sheffield and Squires, "Crossroads: American Family Life at the Intersection of Tradition and Modernity," and Roger Severino, Jay W. Richards, Emma Waters, Delano Squires, Rachel Sheffield, and Robert Rector, "Saving America by Saving the Family: A Foundation for the Next 250 Years," Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 323, January 8, 2026, <https://www.heritage.org/marriage-and-family/report/saving-america-saving-the-family-foundation-the-next-250-years>.
13. Rachel Sheffield, *The Consequences of Declining Fertility for Social Capital*, U.S. Congress, Joint Economic Committee Republicans, Social Capital Project, December 2022, [https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/\\_cache/files/635c69dc-6a5a-467b-b7b0-3ab906fb4a94/the-consequences-of-declining-fertility-for-social-capital.pdf](https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/635c69dc-6a5a-467b-b7b0-3ab906fb4a94/the-consequences-of-declining-fertility-for-social-capital.pdf) (accessed May 20, 2026).
14. Ibid.
15. Jeffrey M. Jones, "Is Marriage Becoming Irrelevant?" Gallup Poll Social Series, December 28, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/316223/fewer-say-important-parents-married.aspx> (accessed May 20, 2026).

16. Rachel Sheffield, “How Modern Approaches to Relationships Decrease the Likelihood of a Healthy Marriage,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 3843, November 8, 2024, <https://www.heritage.org/marriage-and-family/report/how-modern-approaches-relationships-decrease-the-likelihood-healthy>; Steven Ruggles, “Marriage, Family Systems, and Economic Opportunity in the United States Since 1850,” University of Minnesota, Minnesota Population Center *Working Paper* No. 2014-11, December 2014, [https://users.pop.umn.edu/~ruggl001/Articles/Ruggles\\_Marriage\\_2014.pdf](https://users.pop.umn.edu/~ruggl001/Articles/Ruggles_Marriage_2014.pdf) (accessed May 19, 2026).
17. Rachel Sheffield, “The Working-Class Marriage Decline: How Higher Expectations and Shifting Norms, Not Wages, Are the Main Cause,” Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 329, May 19, 2026, <https://www.heritage.org/marriage-and-family/report/the-working-class-marriage-decline-how-higher-expectations-and-shifting>; Scott Winship, *Bringing Home the Bacon: Have Trends in Men’s Pay Weakened the Traditional Family?* American Enterprise Institute, December 2022, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/bringing-home-the-bacon-have-trends-in-mens-pay-weakened-the-traditional-family/> (accessed May 19, 2026); Severino et al., “Saving America by Saving the Family: A Foundation for the Next 250 Years.”
18. Severino et al., “Saving America by Saving the Family: A Foundation for the Next 250 Years.”