
Out of the Wedlock Childbearing in Puerto Rico

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ABSTRACT. In 1978, the proportion of out of the wedlock childbearing amounted to 18 percent, the lowest figure ever recorded in Puerto Rico. Since then, a consistent upward trend has been observed and in 1994 almost 42 percent of all live births was attributed to non-legally married mothers; 32 percent to mothers in consensual unions and ten percent to unwed mothers (not cohabiting with her child's father). Out of the wedlock childbearing is higher among adolescents and mothers of the lowest socioeconomic status as well as,

among mothers out of the labor force. As compared with the legally married out of the wedlock mothers received a poorer prenatal care; those not cohabiting with their child's father receiving the poorest. Among out of the wedlock mothers the proportions of low birthweight newborns, preterm and depressed are higher than among the legally married, as well as their infant mortality rates. *Key words:* Out of the wedlock childbearing, Illegitimate births, Consensual marriages, Unwed mothers, Prenatal care.

In the United States and in other countries all mothers who procreate out of a legal marriage are considered as unwed. In Puerto Rico, in many other Latin American countries and among the negro population of the United States consensual unions, or common law marriages, are so frequent that mothers childbearing in this type of relationship should be considered differently from those not cohabiting with their child's father. In Puerto Rico, for example, a large proportion of these unions are fairly stable and many are later legalized (1).

In 1960, the item about the marital status of the newborn's parents was reformulated in the Puerto Rico's live birth certificate to distinguish parents in consensual unions from those not cohabiting. Those mothers not cohabiting with their child's fathers will be nominated as "unwed" in this study. In the "unwed" group many are never married, specially among the younger ones, but others are widows, divorced and separated. This information, however, can not be obtained from the live birth certificate. Data from the demographic registry

indicate that by the beginning of the 1940 decade out of the wedlock childbearing was considerably, amounting to 35 percent during the period of 1941-45 (2). Since then, it declined consistently reaching its lowest point by 1976. In that year, 18 percent of all live births were attributed to not-legally married mothers; 14 percent to mothers in consensual unions and four percent to "unwed" (not cohabiting with their child's father) (Table 1). Beginning in 1978, a clear and consistent upward trend has been observed and by 1991 over 38 percent of all live births corresponded to out of the wedlock mothers (3).

The main objective of this study is to determine the level and trend of out of the wedlock childbearing in Puerto Rico. It also aims to compare some of the characteristics of out of the wedlock mothers with those of the legally married to determine if the legally married represents a less risk group from a health standpoint. Among the out of the wedlock group, those in consensual unions will be contrasted with those not cohabiting with their child's father (unwed).

Method

The data to be analyzed in this study were derived from computerized files of live births obtained from the Office of Health Statistics of the Department of Health of Puerto Rico. To avoid counting mothers more than once, in the

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cases of multiple births, only the data pertaining to first order births will be considered in the detailed analysis of the information. For those purposes the last year for which these data is available will be utilized (1994).

This is a descriptive correlational study in which the proportion out of wedlock mothers will be the basic measure utilized in a contingency analysis (between groups comparisons). Percent distributions and measures of central tendency will also be utilized. In the comparison of infant mortality the conventional rates will be used.

Table 1. Percent of All Live Births Attributed to Out of the Wedlock Mothers, Puerto Rico; Selected Years: 1976-1994

Years	Out of the Wedlock (All)	In Consensual Unions	Unwed Mothers	Number of Live Births
1976	18.3	14.0	4.3	72,883
1980	20.9	15.9	5.0	73,060
1985	27.7	20.9	6.8	63,629
1990	36.8	28.1	8.7	66,555
1991	38.2	28.9	9.3	64,516
1992	39.3	29.9	9.4	64,481
1993	40.4	30.7	9.7	65,242
1994	41.9	31.7	10.2	64,330
Percent Increase				
1976-94	129.0	126.4	137.2	---

Source: José L. Vázquez-Calzada, *La Población de Puerto Rico y su Trayectoria Histórica*, pag. 148: Author's tabulations.

Results

Out of the wedlock continued to increase in Puerto Rico. In 1994, 42 percent of all live births corresponds to non-legally married mothers; 32 percent to mothers in consensual unions and ten percent to unwed (Table 1). During the 18 years period of 1976 to 1994, this proportion more than doubled; an increase of 129 percent. This represents a tremendous increment over the 1976 proportion and the 1994 figure is the highest ever recorded in the Island.

The proportion of out of the wedlock mothers varies considerably throughout the Island. In 1994, the highest figure corresponded to mothers residing in the municipality of Santa Isabel in the Southern Coast, with 62 percent. The lowest figure was recorded among mothers of municipality of Moca with only 18 percent. In general, municipalities with the lowest percentages were clustered in the northwestern extreme of the Island whereas those with the highest figures were located in the southern coast to the east of Ponce. And noteworthy, this geographical

pattern has remained fairly stable for the last decade.

Out wedlock differentials. Mother's age is clearly associated with out of the wedlock childbearing. As it has been in the past, in 1994, the highest proportions of mothers in consensual unions and of unwed mothers corresponded to adolescents (Table 2). Among this group, 64 percent were non-legally married mothers and for those under 18 years of age the figure amounted to 71 percent. The proportions of mothers in consensual unions and of unwed declined as age increases but there is upward turn among those 35 years of age and over. A comparison with 1976 data, the year with the lowest recorded proportions of out of the wedlock childbearing, demonstrates that the enormous increment occurred was observed in all age groups, although the greatest increase was registered among mothers 25-29 years.

As in the past, out of the wedlock childbearing is more frequent among mothers of the lower socioeconomic strata as evidenced by her schooling and her partner's occupation. Table 2 demonstrates that the proportions of mothers in consensual unions and of unwed tend to decline as years of school completed increased. For those mothers with less than 12 years of school completed more than two thirds were out of the wedlock as compared with only thirteen percent among those with 16 years of schooling or more (Table 2). A similar association is observed between the proportion of mothers in consensual unions and her husband occupation (Table 2). No such relationship, however, is observed in relation to the percentage of unwed mothers. One of the most striking feature in this respect, is the considerable proportion of non-legally married mothers among those whose child's father has an unknown occupation. In 1994, this group amounted to 76 percent; 46 were unwed mothers and 30 percent were in consensual unions.

Mother's participation in the labor force is negatively associated with out of the wedlock childbearing. For mothers in the labor force the proportions in consensual unions and of unwed are considerably lower than for those mothers out of the labor force (Table 2). In spite of the fact that childbearing in consensual unions is still concentrated among mothers of the lowest socioeconomic strata, the data obtained since 1980 clearly demonstrate that the greatest relative increases occurred among mothers of the higher groups. This is true with respect to mother's schooling, as well as with her husband occupation, the two socioeconomic indicators utilized in this study. No such trend has been observed with respect to the proportion of unwed mothers.

Health Services. As expected, out of the wedlock mothers received a poorer prenatal care than those legally married; the unwed group receiving the poorest (Table 3). This

Table 2. Percent of Out of the Wedlock Mothers by Selected Characteristics, Puerto Rico: 1994

Selected Characteristic	Out of Wedlock (All)	In Consensual Unions	Unwed Mothers	Number of Mothers
Mother's age (years)				
Under 20	63.9	47.6	16.3	12,704
Under 18	71.4	52.9	18.5	5,902
18-19	57.5	43.0	14.5	6,802
20-24	43.7	33.4	10.3	20,290
25-29	32.2	24.6	7.6	16,622
30-34	28.9	21.9	7.0	9,602
35 and over	35.1	26.1	9.0	4,503
Mother's years of school completed				
0-6	66.9	53.2	13.7	2,502
7-11	66.9	51.4	15.5	17,982
12	41.9	31.8	10.1	17,252
13-15	28.4	20.5	7.9	14,622
16 and over	13.6	9.8	3.8	11,243
Father's occupation				
White collar	24.7	18.8	5.9	17,470
Services	41.5	33.1	8.4	9,789
Manual workers	45.7	37.7	8.0	29,759
Agriculture	58.1	51.4	6.8	2,074
Unknown occupation	75.8	30.1	45.7	4,629
Mother's labor force				
In labor force	21.8	15.8	6.0	18,167
Out of labor force	49.9	38.1	11.8	45,554

relationship holds true for all the three indicators of the adequacy of the prenatal care that can be obtained from the live birth certificate. The proportion of mothers making less than four prenatal visits amounted to nine percent among the unwed in contrast with less than two percent for those legally married. Mothers in consensual unions had an intermediate value (6.1 percent). Similar results were obtained with respect to the trimester of pregnancy when the care began, as well as with the Kessner Index of adequate care (4). Non-legally married mothers depended heavily on public institutions for their delivery. In 1994, over 80 percent had their deliveries in public hospitals compared with 42 percent for legally married mothers (Table 3).

The Physical Condition of the Newborn and His Survival Probability. Partly as a result of the inadequate prenatal care received by their mothers, the physical condition of out of the wedlock newborns is poorer than those of the legally married (Table 4). The proportions

of low birthweight, preterm and depressed newborns of non-legally married mothers are greater than of those of

Table 3. Indicators of Health Services by Mother's Type of Marital Arrangement, Puerto Rico: 1994

Prenatal Care	Legally Married	In Consensual Unions	Unwed Mothers
Percent with less than 4 prenatal visits	1.8	6.1	9.4
Median number of prenatal visits	11.5	9.8	9.6
Percent began 1 st trimester of pregnancy	81.6	71.0	64.5
Percent adequate care (Kessner index)	69.4	49.0	46.0
Percent delivered in public hospitals	43.6	82.9	81.2
Number of mothers	37,018	20,185	6,473

Table 4. Indicators of the New Born Physical Condition and Infant Mortality by Mother's Marital Arrangement, Puerto Rico:1994

Indicators of Newborn Conditions	Legally Married	In Consensual Union	Unwed Mother's
Percent low birth weight*	8.2	11.0	11.2
Mean birth weight (grams)	3,195	3,126	3,119
Percent preterm*	10.7	12.7	12.6
Percent depressed*	1.2	1.6	1.7
INFANT MORTALITY			
Total	8.9	15.3	12.7
Neonatal	6.7	11.4	9.8
Late	2.2	3.9	2.9
Number of newborns	37,382	20,375	6,549

* Low birth weight, 2,500 grams or less; preterm, 36 weeks of gestation or less; depressed, 5-minutes APGAR of 6 or less.

the legally married. In general, the conditions of the newborns of the unwed is the poorest.

Since 1979, the first year for which studies linking infant deaths with its corresponding live birth data have been undertaken in Puerto Rico, a clear-cut relationship have been observed between infant mortality and out of the wedlock childbearing. The data for 1994 show that neonatal mortality of infants of non-legally married mothers was 64 percent higher than that of the legally married (Table 4). The children of consensually married mothers having the highest neonatal mortality rate. Similar results were obtained for late infant mortality (post-neonatal).

Resumen

En 1976, la proporción de nacimientos ocurridos fuera de un matrimonio legal fue de 18 por ciento, la cifra más baja registrada en Puerto Rico. Desde ese año se ha observado una tendencia ascendente y en 1994 casi un 42 por ciento de todos los nacidos vivos fueron procreados fuera de un matrimonio legal; 32 por ciento atribuidos a madres en una unión consensual y diez por ciento a madres solteras (no convivían con el padre de sus hijos). La procreación fuera de un matrimonio legal es muy frecuente entre adolescentes y entre madres de un nivel socioeconómico bajo, así como entre aquellas que no están en la fuerza laboral. A compararse con aquellas legalmente casadas, las que procrearon fuera de un matrimonio legal recibieron un cuidado prenatal pobre; correspondiendo al más inadecuado a aquellas que no convivían con el padre de sus hijos. Tal vez como consecuencia, las proporciones de bajo peso, pretérminos y deprimidos son más altas entre recién nacidos de madres que procrearon fuera de un matrimonio legal así como las tasas de mortalidad infantil.

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