

# Teenage Fertility in New Zealand<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The rate of teenage childbearing in New Zealand is high by OECD standards. This has generated considerable interest and discussion among social researchers and policy makers.

Teenage childbearing is generally considered a poor life choice. It is widely acknowledged that the responsibilities of early parenthood have long-lasting effects on the socio-economic wellbeing of the women and children involved. This results in part from interrupted education; failure to attain educational potential; reduced earning potential; reduced career prospects; and, more generally, simply being emotionally and socially unprepared for childrearing.

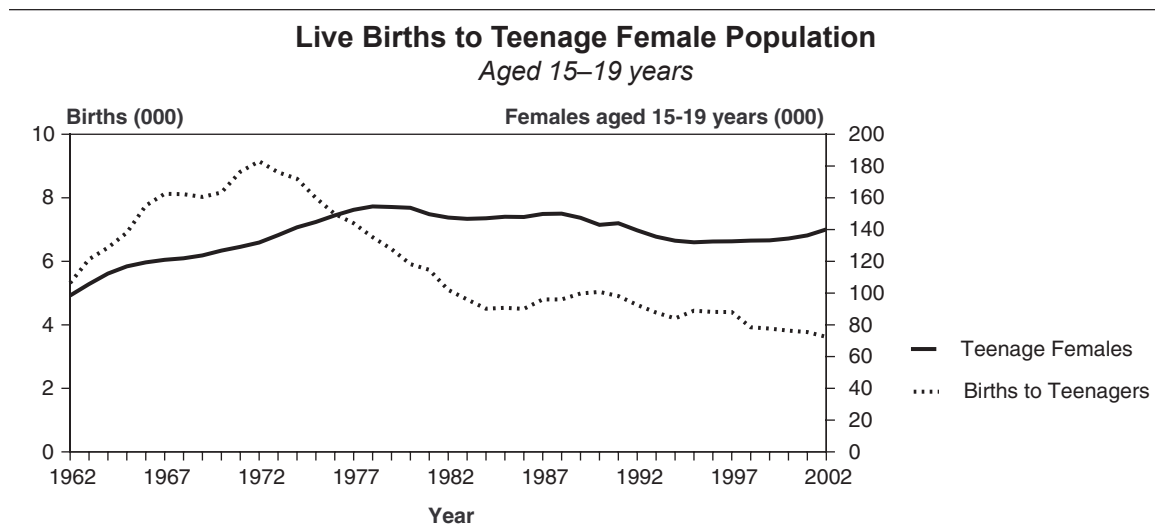
This article presents a brief demographic analysis of recent trends and patterns in teenage fertility in New Zealand. The analysis covers both nuptiality and ethnicity aspects, and also looks at abortion rates, as abortion has a direct impact on contemporary changes in the fertility level. The article draws on official statistics on births and abortions published by Statistics New Zealand. The cohort fertility indices are taken from *Demographic Trends 2002*, which is published annually by Statistics New Zealand.

## Numbers of births and teenagers

The post World War II years witnessed a dramatic trend shift towards early and almost universal marriage, and early childbearing. In 1971, teenage brides made up, roughly, one-third of all brides. Official statistics indicate that births to teenagers climbed from 5,315 in 1962 to a high of 9,150 in 1972, an increase of 72 percent (see Figure 1). In that year, births to teenagers made up 14.5 percent (or one in seven) of all births in New Zealand, up from just 8.2 percent in 1962.

The proportion of teenage females of marriageable age who were married peaked at 11 percent (11,700) at the 1971 Census. This might appear to support the conclusion that many of this generation chose to marry and start families as teenagers. However, of the 9,150 births to teenage women in 1972, 4,050 were ex-nuptial confinements (ie the child's parents were not married at the time of the birth); 3,180 confinements were nuptial first births to women married seven months or less; 920 were first births to women married eight months or more, and 940 were nuptial births to women who had previously given birth.

Figure 1



<sup>1</sup> This article was prepared by Bill Boddington, Mansoor Khawaja and Robert Didham of the Demographic Division.

There were over 3,600 adoptions in 1972. While details of the birth mothers' age are not readily available, 83 percent of adopted children were born out of wedlock. Since more than 40 percent of ex-nuptial births were to teenage mothers, this would suggest that many teenage pregnancies probably resulted in an adoption or a hastily arranged wedding.

Looking at more recent changes in teenage birth numbers, the peak in 1972 was followed by a sharp drop over the next decade – by 1982, births to teenagers had more than halved to less than 4,500. There was a partial recovery in births during the period 1983 to 1990, which coincided with a baby 'blip' in New Zealand. However, the general trend since then has been downward.

## Fertility rates

Fertility rates are calculated by relating births to teenagers during a given year to the estimated number of teenagers in that year. As few births occur below age 15 years, the denominator was restricted to those aged 15 to 19 years.

In the early 1970s, 70 out of every 1,000 teenagers had a child in any year. By the mid-1980s the figure had fallen to 30 per 1,000. Subsequently, it varied between 30 and 35 per 1,000 until 1997. There has been a general downward trend in the last five years, and in 2002 the fertility rate for teenagers was at a historical low of 25.6 per 1,000.

Our fertility experience does not compare favourably with OECD countries. The New Zealand teenage fertility rate in 2001 (27.7 per 1,000) was the third highest, behind the United States (45.9) and England and Wales (29.2). It

was almost four times the latest rate recorded in France, Japan, the Netherlands and Sweden.

## Cumulative cohort fertility

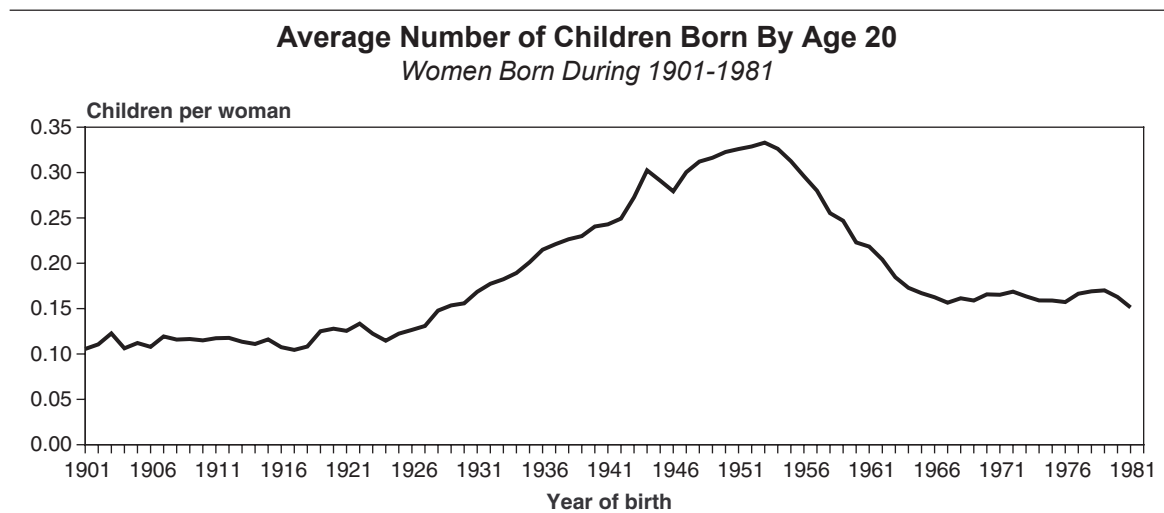
Figure 2 summarises the reproductive experience during teenage years, of New Zealand women born since 1912. Looking from a historical perspective, women born in the first quarter of the 20th century had similar fertility experiences, just one in nine women having had a child in their teens.

Cohorts born over the following three decades, from 1925–1952 were clearly transitional, coinciding with a remarkable trend toward early childbearing. Each successive cohort undertook more childbearing during their teenage years than their predecessors. Among the 1953 cohort, which reached age 19 in 1972, almost one-third of women had had a child during their teenage years. Women born after 1952 reversed the pattern and teenage fertility fell rapidly to a new threshold, albeit a threshold not as low as the pre-1925 level. Among women born after 1965 one in six have had a child during their teenage years.

## Age pattern of fertility

Overall, fertility among teenagers increases with increasing age (see Figure 3). While the boom in teenage childbearing for 1925–1952 birth cohorts was felt strongly at all ages, the pace and amount of the increase varied significantly by individual ages. The fertility rate of 18 year olds more than doubled from the pre-1929 level of around 40 births per 1,000 women to a peak of 105 in 1953, before halving to 50 per 1,000

Figure 2



women post-1964. The fertility rate of 19 year olds also doubled from the levels of the pre-1926 birth cohorts of around 60 births per 1,000 women to a peak of 143 for the 1944 birth cohort, before returning to its previous level for post-1963 birth cohorts.

The onset of change in teenage fertility in New Zealand suggests World War II as a catalyst. The first indications of change occurred amongst the 1925 birth cohort at age 19 (ie 19 year olds in 1944). Data also suggested that teenagers followed the reproductive norms of their older siblings and each birth cohort passed it on to its successor. However, there is a slight lag in the timing of the rise, the peak, and then the timing of the subsequent decline in fertility for each successively younger age group.

### Nuptial and ex-nuptial fertility

The general shift away from early marriage has also meant fewer young New Zealand women marrying in their teen years, with a growing proportion of teenagers living in informal relationships.

Between 1986 and 2001 Censuses, the number of females aged 15–19 years dropped by 11 percent, from 147,000 to 130,000. However, the number living in a union (legal or informal) increased from 8,000 to 9,700. In 2001, they made up 7.4 percent of all teenagers, up from 5.4 percent in 1986. The growth was mainly due to the number cohabiting informally, up from 5,800 in 1986 to 8,900 in 2001. The number of married teenagers, which had fallen from a peak

of 11,700 in 1976 to 2,200 in 1986, fell further to just 700 in 2001. In that year, married teenagers made up less than 8 percent of all teenagers in a union.

Given these structural shifts, differences in the trends for nuptial and ex-nuptial births among teenagers are not surprising. In 1971, there were more births among married teenagers than those not married – 5,100 versus 3,700. Over the next three decades, the number of nuptial confinements among teenagers collapsed from 5,100 in 1971 to just under 200 in 2002, with most of the large fall taking place in the 1970s and early 1980s.

The changes in the ex-nuptial component were less spectacular. Between 1962 and 1977, the number more than doubled (from 1,700 to 4,500), but since then the trend has been irregular. In the last six years, the number has fallen by 18 percent, from 4,100 in 1977 to 3,400 in 2002.

### Fertility rates by ethnicity

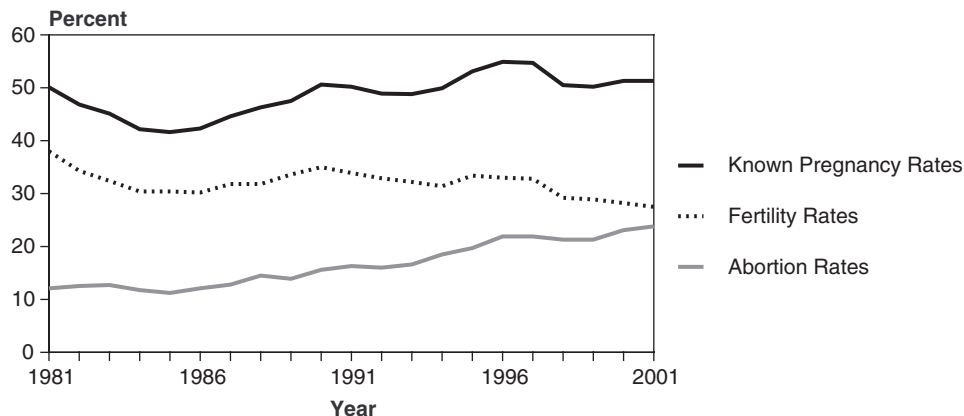
A significant feature of family formation norms in New Zealand is the ethnic diversity in reproductive behaviour. Both Maori and Pacific women have larger families than their European counterparts, and they also follow early childbearing norms.

This is partly reflected in higher fertility rates in teenage years. Māori teenagers have the highest fertility rate (70 per 1,000 in 2000–2002). Pacific teenagers' fertility rate (48 per 1,000), although lower than that for Māori, was 50 percent above

Figure 3

### Fertility, Abortion and Known Pregnancy Rates

Females aged 15–19 years, 1981–2001



the national level, and over twice the European rate in 2000–2002 (22 per 1,000). Both groups also have higher abortion rates, 30 and 26 per 1,000 for Māori and Pacific respectively. The corresponding rate for the European teenagers was 21 per 1,000. This suggests that fertility indices understate pregnancy levels among Māori and Pacific teenagers.

## Abortions

Accurate information on the levels of abortion in New Zealand only dates from the 1980s. There is some circumstantial evidence, such as that presented in the 1937 McMillian report to Parliament, which suggests that abortion has been available throughout New Zealand's history. However, there is no direct, reliable information on levels of teenage abortion pre-1980.

Interestingly, although the teenage abortion rate has almost doubled since 1980, it was accompanied by a decline in teenage fertility (see Figure 4). Thus, short-term variations aside, the known pregnancy rate (live births plus abortions) in 2001 (50 per 1,000) was almost the same as that 20 years earlier in 1981, in spite of a number of social changes, such as non-eligibility to welfare support and high levels of youth unemployment, which may have been expected to act as disincentives to teenage childbearing.

Since more teenage pregnancies are now ending in abortion, this suggests that fewer teenage women are choosing to become teenage mothers or, alternatively, fewer teenage women are completing an unplanned pregnancy.

While the motives of New Zealand teenagers may be very different from teenagers in other countries, the similarity of teenage fertility and abortion rates in many other countries might suggest access to abortion has been an issue for New Zealand teenagers.

## Summary

The rapid changes in society that followed World War II caused a dramatic rise in teenage childbearing. While there was an accompanying rise in teenage marriage, it would appear that, in many cases, the pregnancies were unplanned. New norms in teenage pregnancy were reached in the 1980s. The stability of the teenage pregnancy rate since then provides no direct evidence that changes in the welfare assistance in the early 1990s affected teenage fertility, nor is there any obvious link with levels of youth unemployment, which rose steadily from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s.

Not all teenage pregnancies are necessarily unplanned. However, analysis of international teenage abortion rates suggests that planned pregnancies at these ages are perhaps not the norm. Among those countries listed in Table 1, teenage abortion rates are only low in countries that have low teenage fertility rates. Almost without exception, teenage abortion rates in these countries mirror teenage fertility rates.

Both historical levels and overseas experience suggest teenage childbearing and abortion rates have the potential to fall further.

Figure 4

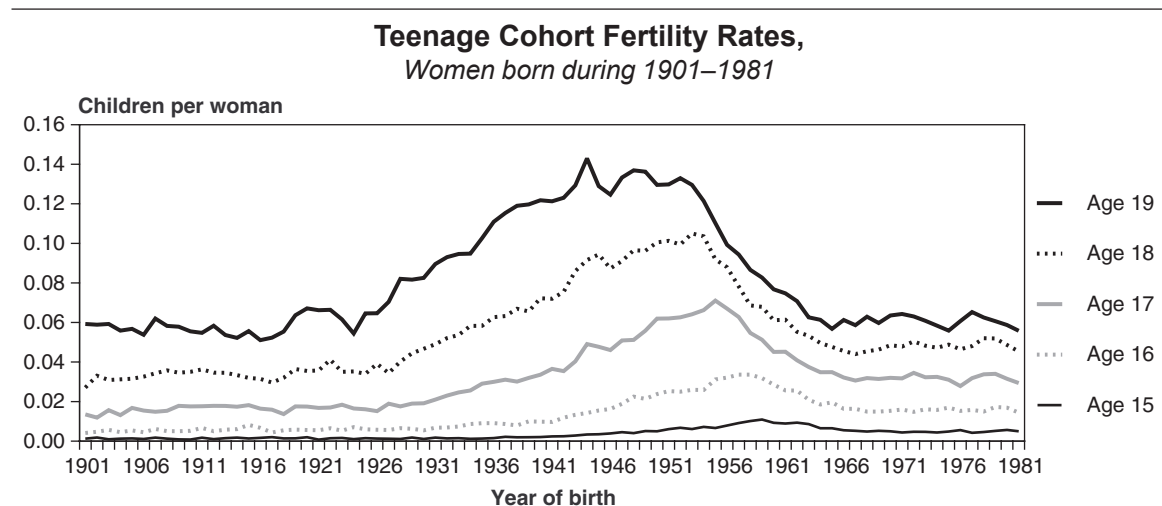


Table 1

**Teenage Fertility, Abortion and Pregnancy Rates**  
*New Zealand and selected countries*  
 Latest available year

Country	Teenage Fertility Rate <sup>(1)</sup>	Teenage Abortion Rate <sup>(1)</sup>	Known Pregnancy Rate <sup>(2)</sup>	Reference Year	
				Teenage Fertility Rate	Teenage Abortion Rate
Australia	17.6	23.9	41.5	2001	1995-96
Canada	20.2	20.9 <sup>(3)</sup>	41.1 <sup>(3)</sup>	1997	1998
Denmark	7.6	14.0	21.6	2001	1999
England and Wales	29.2	23.6	52.8	2000	2000
Finland	10.0	9.6	19.6	2000	1996
France	7.0	8.9 <sup>(4)</sup>	15.9 <sup>(4)</sup>	1998	1995
Japan	4.9	6.3 <sup>(4)</sup>	11.2 <sup>(4)</sup>	1999	1995
Netherlands	5.9	4.2	10.1	2001	1992
NEW ZEALAND	27.7	24.6	52.3	2001	2001
Norway	11.0	20.0	31.0	2001	2000
Scotland	29.1	18.2	47.3	2000	2000 P
Sweden	5.0	21.1	26.1	2000	2000
United States	45.9	32.1	78.0	2001	1995

(1) Number of live births/abortions per 1,000 estimated mean for females aged 15–19 years.

(2) Number of births plus abortions per 1,000 estimated mean for females aged 15–19 years.

(3) Excludes abortions to teenagers aged under 15 years.

(4) Based on incomplete national statistics.

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