As the age at first birth has continued to rise (FP-17-22), childbearing among women at the end of their childbearing years occurs more frequently. This profile examines births to women aged 40 and older. First, using data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) Vital Statistics System, the profile documents trends from 1960-2016 in overall age-specific birth rates (all births to women in a specific age group per 1,000 women in the specified group) and first age-specific birth rates (first births to women in a specific age group per 1,000 women in the specified group). Second, the profile uses data from the CDC Wonder online database to examine the share of marital and nonmarital births to older mothers, looking at trends in overall births since 1995 and in first births since 2003 (the earliest year for which birth data is disaggregated by marital status and parity).

Birth Rates for Women 40 and Older

The overall birth rate for women 40-44 peaked during the Baby Boom and reached a lifetime high of 1.9 births per 1,000 women aged 40-44. Since then, the overall birth rate has increased steadily, reaching 1.4 in 2016.

- First birth rates for women 40-44 have consistently been much lower than overall rates and have risen more slowly.
- The first birth rate was quite low in 2016, despite an eightfold increase since the 1970s (from 0.3 births per 2.4 births per 1,000 women).
- The overall birth rate for women 45-49 has stayed very low since 1960, always below one birth per 1,000 women 45-49.
- First birth rates among this group have increased but were still near zero in 2016.

Share of All Births to Older Mothers by Marital Status

In 1995, there were nearly 70,000 births to mothers 40 and over. In 2016, the number had risen to nearly 122,000 births. More than 80% of births to women 40 and over occurred outside of marriage. Only 2.0% of all nonmarital births were to mothers aged 40 and over in 2016.

First births to mothers aged 40 and over accounted for an increasing share of all births over time, regardless of whether the births occurred within marriage, but the percentages remained quite low. In 1995, to mothers 40 and older accounted for 1.8% of all births, rising to 3.1% by 2016.

The share of all marital births to older mothers was 3.6% in 2016. Of all nonmarital births to mothers 40 and over in 2016.

Share of First Births to Older Mothers by Marital Status

In 2003, there were just under 24,000 first births to mothers 40 and older. This rose to nearly 27,000 in 2016.

- Among first births, the share attributable to mothers aged 40 and over increased slightly between 2003 and 2016, but remained very low.
- Less than 2% of all first births were to mothers aged 40 and over in 2016.
- There was very little change in the share of marital first births to older mothers, staying around 2%.
- Among first births, the largest increase in the share of first births to older mothers occurred for nonmarital births. While so, only 1.1% of all nonmarital first births were to mothers aged 40 and over.
- Of all births in 2016, less than 0.2% were first births to older unmarried mothers (not shown).

The Marital Context of Births to Women Aged 40 and Older

In this section, we shift the focus to specifically examine changes in the marital context of births to women aged 40 and older at both time points, just over a fifth (22%) of births to women aged 40 and over were first births.

- The proportion of births to mothers aged 40 and older that occurred outside of marriage increased between 2003 and 2016.
- Just over a quarter of all births and first births were to unmarried women in 2016.
- Despite these increases, the absolute number of older mothers having children outside of marriage remains extremely small, especially for first births.
- In 2016, there were only 1,711 first births to older mothers aged 40 and older in the entire United States.

Data Source:

References:

Family Profiles: Original reports summarizing and analyzing nationally representative data with the goal to provide the latest analysis of U.S. families. These profiles examine topics related to the NCFMR’s core research themes.