



Strategic Research La recherche stratégique

Early Parenting in First Nations

IS THERE A LINK TO COMMUNITY WELL-BEING?

Key Findings:

- The fertility of First Nations teenage girls in Canada is very high, about 100 births per 1000 women.
- The highest fertility rates for First Nations teens are found in the Prairies.
- The relationship between First Nation community well-being (CWB) and early parenting is strong, reflecting international findings.

Introduction

The decision to have a child is a personal, familial, cultural and social one. When a teenage girl becomes a mother, it concerns more than mother and child. Early childbearing also involves families, communities and, ultimately, society at large. Internationally, women's reproductive health is regarded as a key aspect of gender equality. This includes women's ability to decide whether, when and how often they will bear children. Attention to reproductive health is recognized by agencies like the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) as a means of reducing poverty and enhancing sustainable development.

In Canada, little research has been undertaken on the reproductive health of First Nations teenage girls and less research on early parenting in these contexts. This research brief reports on the relationship between teen fertility and the well-being of First Nations communities.

To ensure privacy, the fertility rates for First Nations teenage girls were calculated using anonymized data from the Indian Register at Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada. As such, the fertility rate calculations used here are only applicable to those registered as Indians under the Indian Act.

Main Findings

Teen fertility

The total fertility of Registered Indian women (all age groups) has decreased since the 1960s. Nation-wide, the fertility rate among First Nations women fell from 6.1 to 2.7 children per woman. By contrast, the fertility of Registered Indian teenage girls aged 15 to 19 has remained very high.¹ With about 100 births per 1,000 women, their fertility rate remains five to seven times higher than that of other Canadian teens (Figure 1).

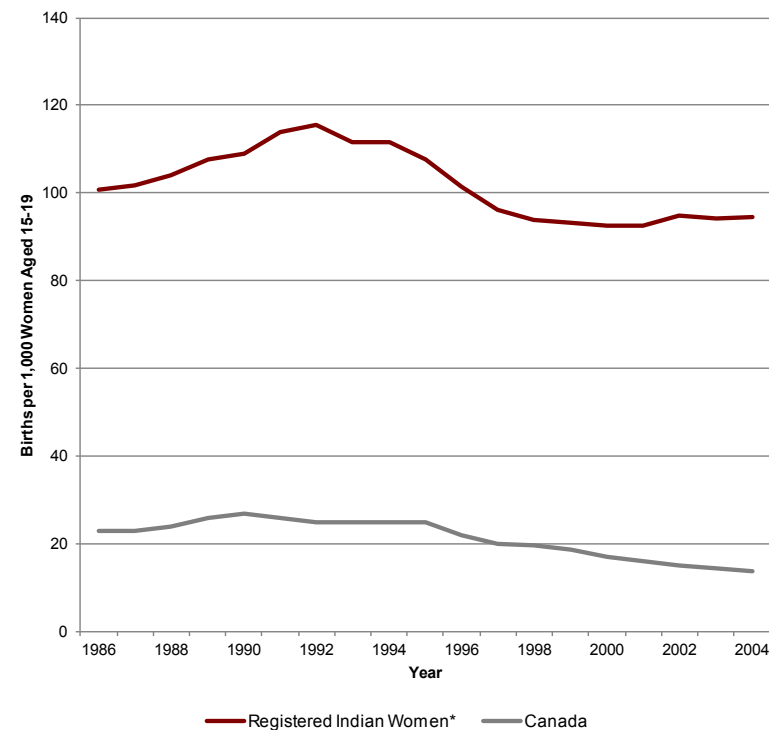
There are notable differences in Registered Indian teen fertility rates across regions in Canada, ranging from about 90 to over 120 births per 1,000 women (Figure 2). The highest fertility rates for Registered Indian teenage girls are in the Prairies, which range from 103 to 123 per 1000. In Manitoba, for instance, about one in eight Registered Indian teenage girls gave birth in 2001 (Guimond and Robitaille 2008).

International comparisons

The magnitude of early motherhood among First Nations teens in Canada becomes clear when compared to other countries. For instance, the fertility of Registered Indian teenage girls in 2006 was more than twice that of American teenagers, whose rates are among the highest of all industrialized nations (Figure 3). The same is true for Native American teenage girls, whose 2010 fertility rates of 47 per 1000 persons is around one-half of the Canadian First Nation rate. Interestingly, the highest teen fertility rates among Native Americans tend to be in the northern mid-western states along the Canadian border.²

As one of its indicators of maternal and newborn health, the United Nations tracks teen fertility worldwide. A 2011 report of the UNFPA lists countries according to the number of births per thousand women aged 15 to 19. This list shows that the closest international comparisons are not industrialized countries.³ It also shows that the First Nations teen fertility rates exceed those in the USA, as noted above. Figure 4 displays the teen fertility rates of First Nations compared to other countries.

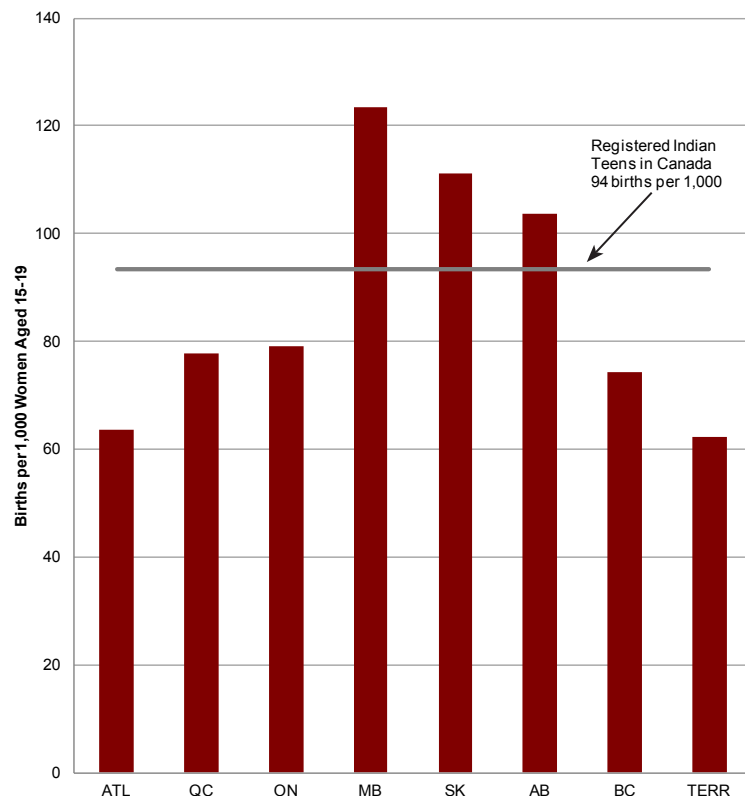
Figure 1: Teen Fertility Rate, Canada, 1986–2004



* Under Section 6(1) of the Indian Act.

Source: Guimond and Robitaille (2008).

Figure 2: Teen Fertility Rate by Region, Registered Indians, 2001*



* Average annual fertility rate from 1999 to 2003.

Source: Guimond and Robitaille (2008).

Teen fertility and individual well-being

What are the outcomes of early parenting on individual well-being? Internationally, it is recognized that teenage mothers are often challenged in providing a healthy environment to support their children's physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual development. International research has demonstrated several risk factors connected to early parenting in general: these include health challenges facing both young mothers and their children such as heightened risk of exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, insufficient prenatal care leading to lower birth weights and higher risk of complications, as well as developmental difficulties for the children such as inattention and conduct problems.

Research in Canada has also made some observations specific to First Nations teen mothers. For instance, there is a noticeable gap between teenage mothers and older mothers in educational attainment. First Nations women aged 25-29, who became pregnant in their teens, were found to be significantly less likely to graduate from high school than First Nations women who delayed childbearing into their twenties.

Because their mothers are less likely to attain the education required for employment, the children of teenage mothers are also more likely to grow up in low income households. However, there are numerous indications that First Nations adults who dropped out of high school as youth often return to obtain their high school diploma or equivalent at a later stage in life.

Educational attainment in this context is an important consideration for several reasons. For example, maternal education levels are an important predictor of children's long term health, development and academic achievement. Maternal education also ensures greater equity for mothers. Education increases the likelihood of higher income levels, better health outcomes, resulting in healthier communities.

Teen fertility and collective well-being

What is the relationship between early parenting and collective well-being? For First Nations in Canada, we can address this question by comparing registered Indian teen fertility rates to the Community Well-Being Index (CWB).

The Strategic Research Directorate developed the CWB to measure the social and economic well-being of individual First Nations communities. This well-being index is based on the Canadian Census of Population. It is composed of data measuring

education, income, employment and housing. CWB scores run from 0 to 100, where 0 is the lowest score and 100 the highest.

Analysis of the teen fertility rates of First Nations communities and their related CWB scores reveals a strong negative relationship (Figure 4). In other words, the greater a community's teen fertility, the lower is its CWB score.

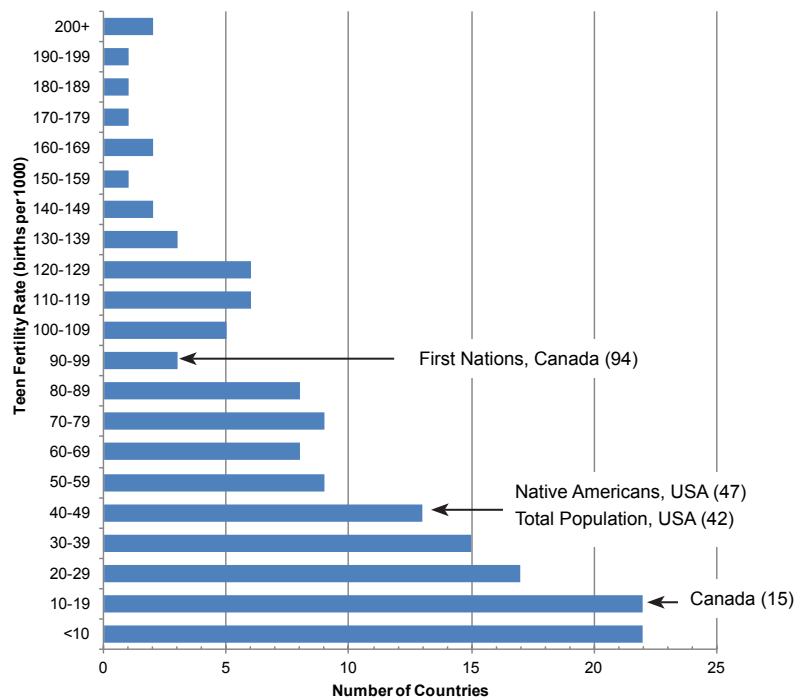
The ten highest scoring First Nations communities on the CWB have a combined teen fertility rate of 59 births per 1,000 women. By contrast, the ten lowest scoring First Nations communities have a combined fertility rate of 116 births per 1,000. Evidence of the link between teen fertility and the well-being of First Nations communities is consistent with the international data from development research.

Conclusions

While fertility has declined among First Nations women since the 1960s, the First Nations teen fertility rate remains very high relative to other Canadian teens. In 2006 it was around three times greater than that of the American teen fertility rate, which is among the highest in of all industrialized world. In addition, it was observed that there are regional variations among First Nations with the highest rates being found in the Prairie region. The fact that First Nations teens have high fertility rates is of potential concern, given international findings on the risk factors and impacts to well-being associated with teenage pregnancy and motherhood. In addition, it should be noted that the relationship between teen parenting and well-being are complex. For discussions on mitigating factors, see the *International Indigenous Policy Journal's* special issue on Indigenous Early Parenting (2013).

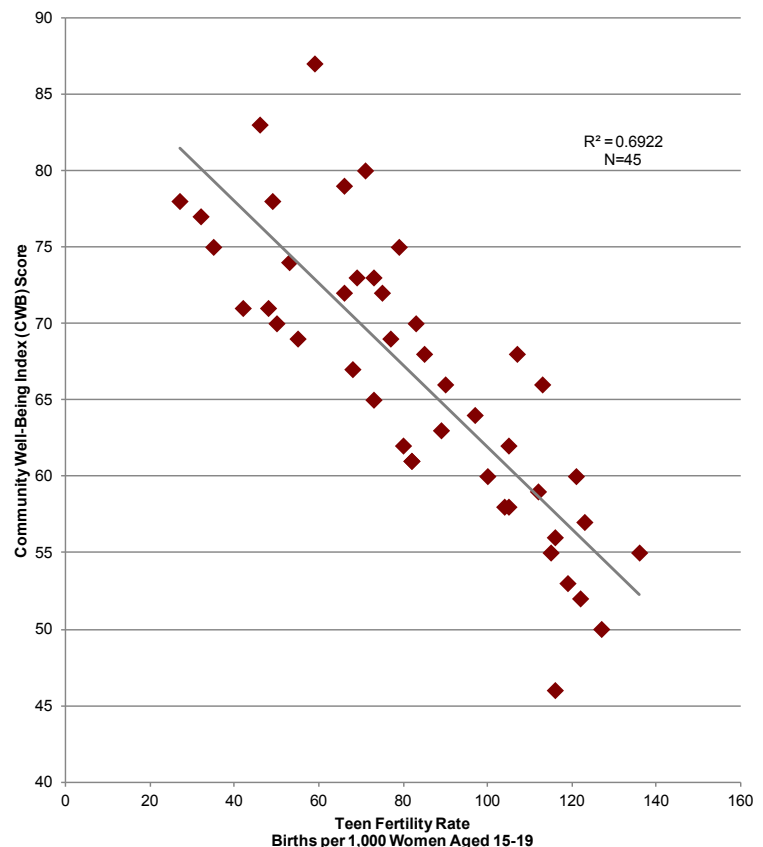
First Nations populations are growing rapidly at a time when the fertility of other Canadian families can no longer ensure replacement of the population. In the context of an aging population, it becomes ever more important to ensure children and youth have opportunities to succeed through education and community support. Research has shown that education is key to empowering young women, improving their prospects today and in the future and those of their children and their communities. A good education increases the prospects of better jobs and higher income levels, as well as better health outcomes all which are important elements to making healthier communities.

Figure 3: Distribution of Countries by Teen Fertility Rate, 2010



Sources: UNFPA (2008); Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2010).

Figure 4: Teen Fertility and Community Well-Being, First Nations Communities in 2001*



Source: Statistics Canada, 2001 Census of Population, AANDC tabulations.

About the Researchers and the Strategic Research Directorate

This research brief is based on reports co-authored by Eric Guimond of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada and Norbert Robitaille of the University of Montréal. Sacha Sénécal of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada also contributed to this analysis.

Notes on Methodology

The Community Well-Being Index (CWB) uses data from the Census of Population. CWB scores range from 0 (lowest) to 100 (highest). The CWB measures four dimensions of well-being:

- Education (percent of adults in community that completed high school; percent with a university degree);
- Labour force activity (percent of adults in the labour force; percent employed);
- Income (total income per person in the community); and,
- Housing (percent of community members living in non-crowded houses; percent living in houses that do not require major repairs).

References:

1. Guimond and Robitaille. 2008. "When teenage girls have children: Trends and consequences." Horizons 10:1, 49-51. http://www.horizons.gc.ca/doclib/HOR_v10n1_200803_e.pdf. Last accessed 16 March 2012.
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3. United Nations Population Fund. 2008. "State of Population 2008." URL: <http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2008/en/index.html>. Last accessed 16 March 2012.
4. United Nations Population Fund. 1999. "Population Issues: The New Generations, the Family and Society." URL: <http://www.unfpa.org/6billion/populationissues/generation.htm>. Last accessed 16 March 2012.

About us

The Strategic Research Directorate is mandated to support the Federal Government's policy making regarding First Nations, Métis, Inuit and northern peoples in Canada. It does this through a program of survey development, policy research and knowledge transfer.

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