

# Second or subsequent births to teenagers

by Michelle Rotermann

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Compared with women in their twenties and thirties, teenagers are much less likely to give birth. For example, in 2003, there were 14.5 live births per 1,000 girls aged 15 to 19, compared with 96.1 per 1,000 women aged 25 to 34—the age group with the highest fertility rate.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the fertility rate among teenagers has fallen almost steadily since the mid-1970s.<sup>2,3</sup> Even so, a substantial number of teen girls give birth each year, and some bear more than one baby before turning 20.

Early childbearing can have serious consequences for both the babies and their mothers. Infants born to teenagers are more apt to experience adverse birth outcomes and die during their first year of life than are infants born to older women.<sup>4,9</sup> As well, the education and employment opportunities of the teens who have babies are often curtailed. Consequently, young mothers and their children are likely to be economically disadvantaged.<sup>10-15</sup> And those girls who have more than one baby while still in their teens may face even greater challenges.

This article describes 1993-to-2003 trends in second or subsequent births to girls aged 15 to 19. Provincial/Territorial and neighbourhood income differences are presented, and the prevalence of low birthweight is examined. The figures are based on the most recently available data from the Canadian Vital Statistics Database, which includes information from birth registrations (see *The data*).

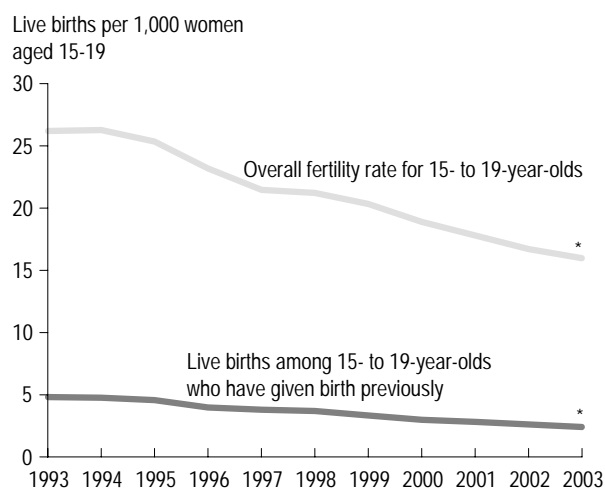
## Teen births declining

Registration of birth is required by law in all provinces and territories. However, in 1996, Ontario introduced birth registration fees,<sup>16</sup> and as of 2000, up to 4,000 (3%) births in that province

may not have been registered.<sup>1,17</sup> This is particularly likely for children born to teenage mothers and babies who died within days of birth (one-quarter of Ontario infant deaths do not have a matching birth registration).<sup>1,18,19</sup> Because births to teenagers are the focus of this article, Ontario data have been excluded from the analysis.

From 1993 through 2003, the rate of *second or subsequent* births to Canadian teenagers (excluding Ontario residents) declined from 4.8 to 2.4 births per 1,000 15- to 19-year-old girls. This drop partly reflects a downturn in the overall teen fertility rate (Chart 1). As a proportion of all teen births, those that were second or subsequent fell from 18.5% in 1993 to 15.2% in 2003 (data not shown). Nonetheless, during that period, nearly 25,000 Canadian teenagers gave birth to their second or subsequent child (data not shown).

**Chart 1**  
Fertility rates, women aged 15 to 19, Canada excluding Ontario, 1993 to 2003



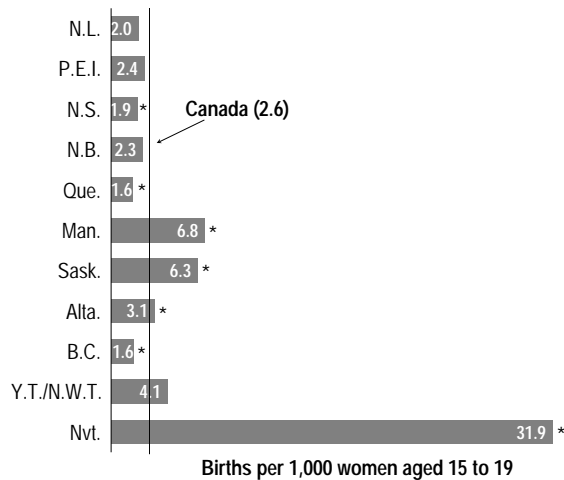
\* Test for trend is statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).  
Source: Canadian Vital Statistics Database, 1993 to 2003

## Provincial/Territorial variations

The rate of second or subsequent births among teens varied across the country. For the 2001-to-2003 period, the average annual rate was strikingly high in Nunavut (31.9 per 1,000 girls aged 15 to 19), and was also above the national average (2.6) in Manitoba (6.8), Saskatchewan (6.3) and Alberta (3.1) (Chart 2). Rates were below the national level in Nova Scotia, Quebec and British Columbia.

Provinces and territories with high rates of second or subsequent births to teens tended to have relatively large numbers of Aboriginal residents.<sup>20,21</sup> Unlike the Canadian population overall, Aboriginal peoples have not experienced the trend toward delayed first births.<sup>22</sup> For example, in 1999, more than 1 in 5 First Nations babies were born to mothers aged 15 to 19,<sup>23</sup> whereas the comparable figure for Canada as a whole was 1 in 20 (data not shown).

**Chart 2**  
Average annual rate of second or subsequent births, women aged 15 to 19, by province and territory, Canada excluding Ontario, 2001 to 2003



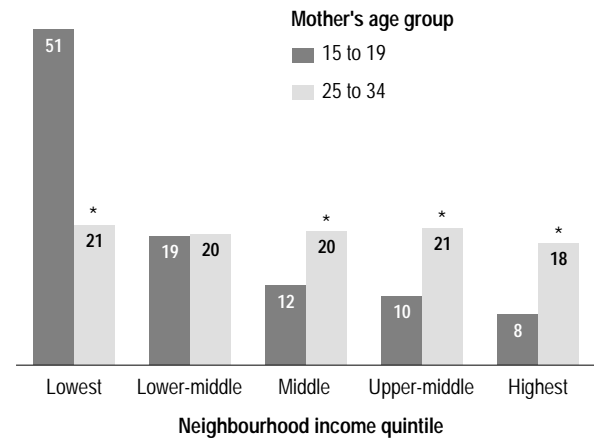
\* Significantly different from estimate for Canada excluding Ontario ( $p < 0.05$ )  
Source: Canadian Vital Statistics Database, 2001 to 2003

## Neighbourhood income

Canadian birth registrations do not contain information about socio-economic status. For this analysis, neighbourhood income data from the census, which were linked to the birth data by means of the mother's postal code, were used to approximate household income.

Teenagers delivering their second or subsequent child were highly concentrated in low-income neighbourhoods. Half the 15- to 19-year-olds who had a second or subsequent child in the 2001-to-2003 period resided in neighbourhoods that were in the lowest quintile of the neighbourhood income distribution (Chart 3). By contrast, 25- to 34-year-old women who had a second or subsequent child in that period were fairly evenly distributed across the income groups.

**Chart 3**  
Percentage distribution of women aged 15 to 19 and 25 to 34 who had a second or subsequent birth, by neighbourhood income quintile, Canada excluding Ontario, 2001 to 2003



\* Significantly different from corresponding estimate for ages 15 to 19 ( $p < 0.05$ )

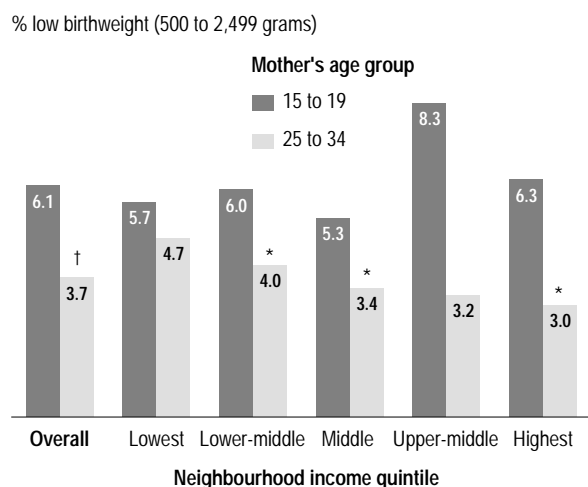
Source: Canadian Vital Statistics Database, 2001 to 2003

## Low birthweight

A newborn's chances of survival are closely associated with birthweight. Low-birthweight infants (less than 2,500 grams) have higher mortality and more physical health problems than do babies whose weight at birth was normal.<sup>4-6,9,24</sup>

In the 2001-to-2003 period, the proportion of second or subsequent births that were low-birthweight was significantly higher for teen mothers than for mothers aged 25 to 34: 6.1% versus 3.7% (Chart 4). Rates of low birthweight among second or subsequent births to teen mothers did not vary significantly by neighbourhood income quintile. By contrast, among women aged 25 to 34, these rates were higher in low-income neighbourhoods. This suggests that for teens who have a second or subsequent child, the risk of low birthweight is elevated, regardless of their household income.

**Chart 4**  
Percentage of second or subsequent births that were low birthweight, by neighbourhood income quintile and mother's age group, Canada excluding Ontario, 2001 to 2003



\* Significantly lower than estimate for previous neighbourhood income quintile ( $p < 0.05$ )

† Significantly lower than overall estimate for ages 15 to 19 ( $p < 0.05$ )

Source: Canadian Vital Statistics Database, 2001 to 2003

## The data

Data on live births are from the Vital Statistics Database, which contains information collected by the Vital Statistics Registry in each province and territory. The unit of analysis, unless otherwise specified, is the mother, not each birth. Therefore, mothers of twins and triplets were counted once. The vast majority (99%) of mothers aged 15 to 19 and 25 to 34 gave birth to a single baby.

Because birth registration practices differ across the country,<sup>25</sup> births under 500 grams were excluded. A small number of records had no information about birthweight, duration of pregnancy and/or the total number of live births to the mother, so they were also excluded.

The *teenage fertility rate* is the number of live births per 1,000 women aged 15 to 19.

*Low birthweight* is defined as less than 2,500 grams. Multiple births (twins, triplets) were considered to have been low birthweight if one infant weighed less than 2,500 grams.

Income data are not recorded on birth registrations. Associations between income and birth outcomes could be estimated only at the neighbourhood level and may mask individual variations within geographic areas.

To determine *neighbourhood income quintile*, the postal code for the mother's usual place of residence was linked to the appropriate 2001 dissemination area (formerly enumeration area), the smallest level of geography for which census data are compiled.<sup>26,27</sup> Neighbourhood income per person equivalent is a measure of household income adjusted for household size. All dissemination areas within a given region were ranked into quintiles by that indicator. Income quintiles could not be assigned to 7.5% (375) of 15- to 19-year-old and 4.1% (8,603) 25- to 34-year-old mothers of second or subsequent births. Rural postal codes accounted for the majority of records that could not be coded.

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