



An Update on State Policy Initiatives to Reduce Teen and Adult Nonmarital Childbearing

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36 states reported school-based abstinence education in 2001, up from 26 in 1999—not surprising, given the government’s focus on promoting abstinence among teens.

Despite a sharp and continuing decline in the rate of teen childbearing and a leveling off in the rate of nonmarital childbearing, the U.S. teen childbearing rate remains high compared with other industrialized nations, while nonmarital childbearing rates are in the mid-range of industrialized countries (Doyle 2002). Both teen and nonmarital childbearing are associated with negative outcomes for mother and child (Maynard 1996; DHHS 1995; Seltzer 2000). These forms of childbearing also bring with them substantial costs to society; the cost of the welfare system is a source of particular concern (Maynard 1996; Moore and Wertheimer 1984). Childbearing by young and unmarried women continues to concern health practitioners, educators, the media, and the public. Indeed, the federal welfare law includes provisions to offer states incentives to discourage teen and nonmarital childbearing.

While the period of decline in teen childbearing and the leveling off in nonmarital childbearing rates has coincided with the implementation of welfare waivers and a reformed welfare system, many other factors beside welfare rules may have played a role. They include the following:

- The vigorous economic expansion, which drew to a close in 2000;
- The expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit;

- An emerging consensus that mothers with nonmarital births should work to help support their child;
- Increased use of new methods of contraception, especially Depo-Provera and Norplant®;
- Increased education about HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases;
- A focus on males as well as females for policies affecting reproductive behavior;
- Increased focus on child support enforcement; and
- A rise in conservative attitudes toward premarital sex.

Child Trends conducted a survey in 2001 of all 50 states to learn how specific state policies and programs to discourage teen and nonmarital childbearing have changed since the 1999 and 1997 surveys. We summarize our findings below after we review the trends in teen and nonmarital childbearing.

Teen Childbearing Rates

Teen childbearing has declined dramatically since 1991. Declines have occurred in all age groups, all racial and ethnic groups, every state, and the District of Columbia. The birth rate among females age 15–19 declined 27 percent between 1991 and 2001, resulting in a record low rate of 45.3 births per thousand females. The rate for females age 15–17 declined by 36 percent over the

same period, while the rate for females age 18–19 declined 19 percent (figure 1).

Although these declines are noteworthy, they should be examined within a historical context. Before the recent declines, teen birth rates *increased* dramatically between 1986 and 1991. Consequently, the 2001 rate of 76.1 births per thousand females age 18–19 is only 4 percent lower than the 1986 rate of 79.6, while the 2001 rate among 15- to 17-year-olds is 19 percent lower than the 1986 rate. So some of the decline in teen childbearing during the 1990s was making up for ground lost in the late 1980s.

In recent years, teen birth rates have been falling for both unmarried and married teens. The birth rate for unmarried females age 15–19 dropped by 20 percent, from 46 births per thousand in 1994 to 37 per thousand in 2001. The birth rate for married females age 15–19 began its decrease earlier and has declined by 32 percent, from 420 births per thousand in 1990 to 286 per thousand in 2001. Because only a small percentage of teens are married, 79 percent of teen births occur outside marriage.

As shown in figure 2, teen birth rates across the country varied substantially in 2001. The southernmost tier of states (excluding Florida) has the highest rates, while six states in the Northeast and four in

the upper Midwest have the lowest. The 2001 rates (the most recent year available) ranged from 21 births per thousand teen females in New Hampshire to 67 per thousand in both Mississippi and Texas. State variations partly reflect the racial and ethnic composition of teens in each state.

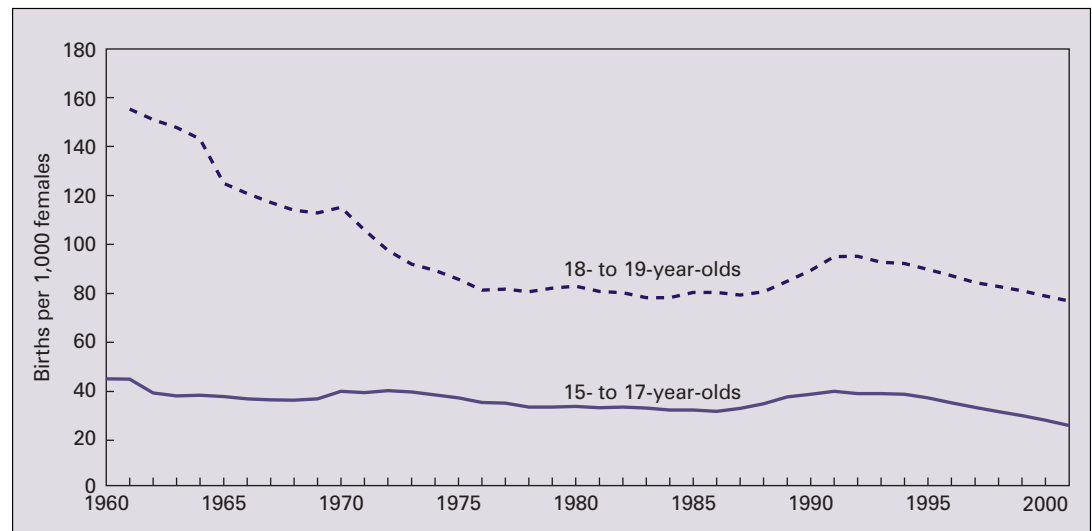
Adult Nonmarital Childbearing

Nonmarital childbearing is not restricted to teenagers. In fact, the nonmarital birth rate for women age 20–24 was 71.2 births per thousand unmarried women in 2001, compared with 60.6 for women age 18–19 and 22.0 for women age 15–17 (Hamilton, Sutton, and Ventura 2003). Further, 28 percent of all births to women age 20–44 in 2001 occurred outside marriage. In contrast with the decrease in teen nonmarital childbearing, the rate of nonmarital childbearing to adult women age 20–44 was slightly higher in 2001 (46.5 births per thousand unmarried women) than in 1991 (44.6 births per thousand), although the rate has been stable in recent years.

As shown in figure 3, the state-by-state percentage of births to unmarried women 20–44 varies widely, but there is no obvious regional pattern. In 2001, the percentage varied from 13 percent in Utah to nearly

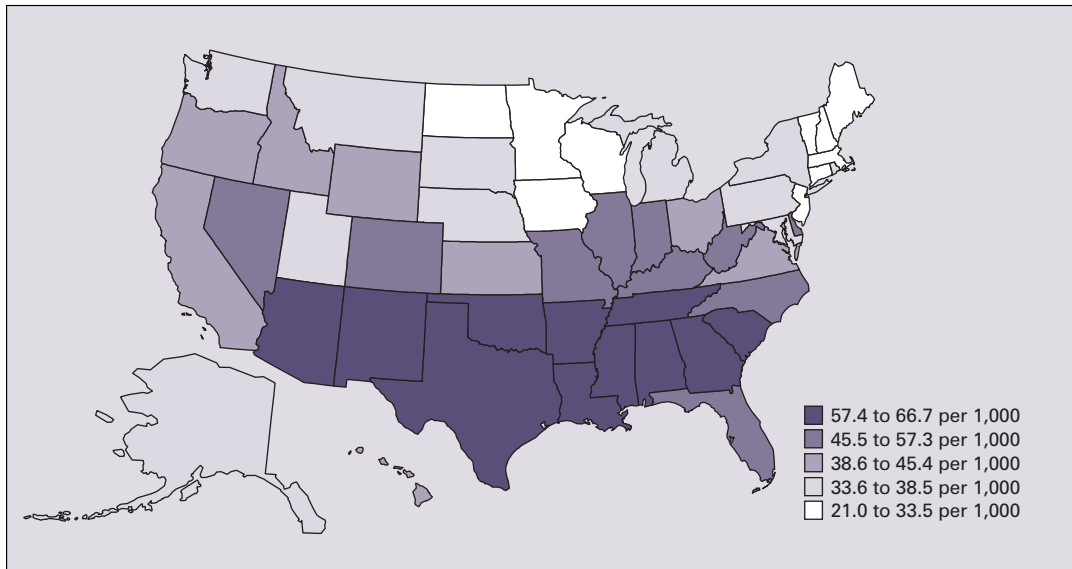
In recent years, teen birth rates have been falling for both unmarried and married teens.

FIGURE 1. Teen Birth Rate by Age, 1960–2001



Source: Joyce A. Martin, Brady E. Hamilton, Paul D. Sutton, Stephanie J. Ventura, Fay Menacker, and Martha Munson, *Births: Final Data for 2002*, National Vital Statistics Reports Vol. 52, No. 10 (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 2003).

FIGURE 2. Birth Rates for Teens Age 15–19 by State, 2001



Sources: Estimates of births from 2001 Natality Data Set, Series 21, Number 15, National Center for Health Statistics. Population estimates from *State Characteristics Population Estimates File for Internet Display*, Population Estimates Branch, U.S. Bureau of the Census (http://eire.census.gov/popest/estimates_dataset.php).

40 percent in Louisiana, Mississippi, and New Mexico.

Increases in the number of cohabiting couples having children account for some of the increase in nonmarital childbearing. Indeed, nearly half of all nonmarital births occur to cohabiting couples (Bumpass and Lu 2000). Women who have nonmarital births tend to have lower educational levels, lower incomes, and are more likely to receive public assistance than women who have births within marriage (Bennett, Bloom, and Miller 1995; Driscoll et al. 1999; Moore, Jekielek, and Emig 2002).

State Policy Options for Discouraging Teen and Adult Nonmarital Childbearing

In 1996, Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Among PRWORA's goals were reducing teen and nonmarital childbearing (with an emphasis on abstinence) and promoting marriage. This legislation included restrictions on benefits to unmarried teen parents; bonuses to states most successful at reducing nonmarital births while simultaneously decreasing abortions; federally funded teen abstinence programs; and a requirement

that states establish goals to reduce teen and nonmarital birth rates.

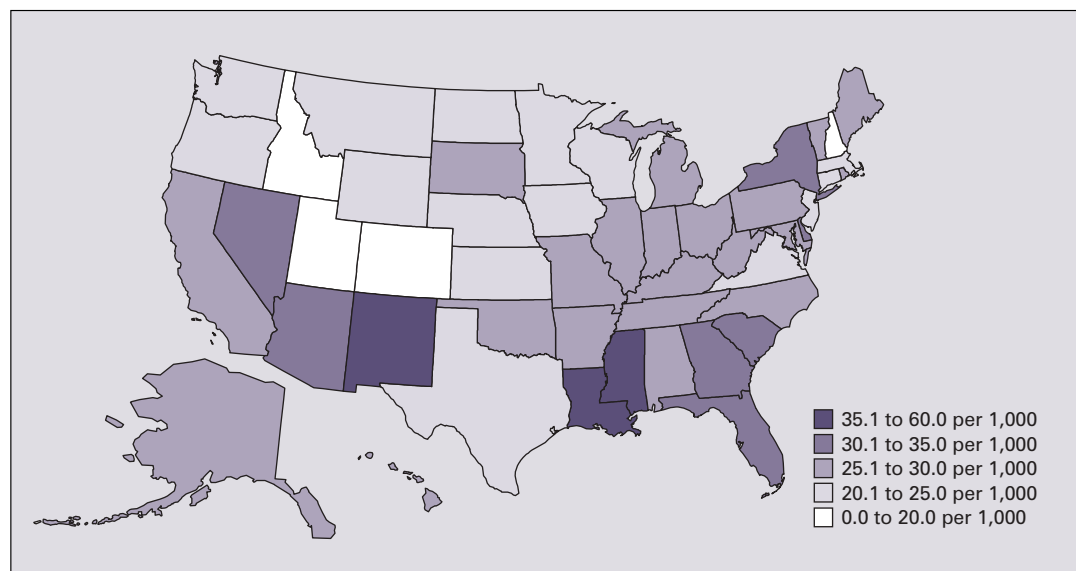
Several programs have successfully reduced teen pregnancy (Kirby 2001). They include some sex education and HIV education programs, some service learning programs,¹ and programs focused on both sexuality and youth development.

As stated in a previous policy brief (Wertheimer, Jager, and Moore 2000), findings on the relationship between welfare provisions and nonmarital childbearing have been mixed. Only some studies find significant associations between nonmarital fertility and either welfare waivers or family caps.

The Bush administration is currently focusing efforts on initiatives that reduce nonmarital births by promoting healthy marriages. Current legislation provides funding to states for demonstration programs and matching grants to develop approaches for promoting healthy marriages (Horn 2002).

Some studies have found that improvements in communication and conflict resolution skills are necessary to build strong, long-lasting marriages. Approaches include programs providing couple-to-couple mentoring, prevention of

FIGURE 3. Birth Rates for Unmarried Mothers Age 20–44, 2001



Sources: Estimates of births from 2001 Natality Data Set, Series 21, Number 15, National Center for Health Statistics. Population estimates from *State Characteristics Population Estimates File for Internet Display*, Population Estimates Branch, U.S. Bureau of the Census (http://eire.census.gov/popest/estimates_dataset.php).

domestic violence, and interventions for couples in crises. Successful programs could become available to a broader array of couples under the administration's proposal to promote healthy marriages (Horn 2002).

Approach

As in 1999 and in 1997, we attempted to reach officials in all 50 states to learn about the programs and policies in place to reduce teen and nonmarital childbearing. The starting point was officials that had responded to the previous surveys. Whenever possible, we began with officials that coordinated the various state efforts to discourage teen or nonmarital fertility programs. In most states, we also contacted officials from certain state agencies to address agency-specific questions. For example, we frequently asked officials from the state departments of education about educational programs and policies.

Survey responses were obtained by a formal questionnaire in which most questions were yes/no or multiple choice. Child Trends staff administered surveys over the telephone or via e-mail.

The survey was designed to obtain information about a wide variety of pro-

grams and policies in two broad areas—teen fertility and nonmarital fertility.

We received responses from 49 states to the teen pregnancy prevention portion of the questionnaire, although several states did not respond to all questions. Unfortunately, we received responses on nonmarital childbearing policies and practices from just 40 states, and three of those answered only a few questions. Given the lower response rate in 2001 compared with 1999, apparent changes across all 50 states must be interpreted with caution.

What States Are Doing about Teen Childbearing

Since virtually all teens are currently or recently in school, programs to discourage teen pregnancy are frequently administered there. Examples include state-level policies encouraging (or, in one state, discouraging) teen pregnancy prevention programs in the public schools, HIV and STD education, contraceptive education in public schools, contraceptive clinics in public schools, and school-based abstinence programs.

School-based services are often supplemented by statewide media campaigns and programs to provide family planning ser-

vices for teens. In addition, many states have formed multiagency task forces or coalitions run by nonprofit institutions for teen pregnancy reduction.

States varied widely in their programs and policies designed to discourage teen pregnancy. Disseminating information about these differences may encourage states to rethink their own policies and programs. The differences also constitute a sort of unplanned experiment, allowing researchers to look for associations between state-level teen sexual activity, pregnancy, and fertility rates and the policies and programs in place in each state.

The three Child Trends surveys (1997, 1999, 2001) collected information from each state on teen pregnancy prevention policies and programs. Although nearly half the states (23) reported an “official” policy regarding pregnancy prevention education in public schools in 2001, more than half (37) reported official policies regarding HIV education. Twenty-six states reported policies regarding STD education in the public schools.²

Nearly all states (44) reported state-wide family planning initiatives to prevent teen pregnancy in 2001, and 25 provided contraceptive education in the schools. Not surprisingly, given the government’s focus on promoting abstinence among teens, school-based abstinence education has also increased. In 2001, 36 states reported providing school-based abstinence education, an increase from 26 states in 1999.

In 2001, four of 42 states reported multiagency plans for pregnancy prevention, a decline from 21 states in 1999. Eleven states reported a multiagency task force for teen pregnancy prevention, and 17 states reported media campaigns to prevent teen pregnancy. Finally, 18 states had state coalitions to prevent teen pregnancy prevention. These coalitions are run by nonprofit organizations.

Looking over time, the findings indicate that, with one exception, state efforts to prevent teen pregnancy and early childbearing have changed little between 1999 and 2001. The important exception is the increase in states reporting school-based abstinence education. Between 1990 and

1999, state activity to discourage teen childbearing increased substantially.

What States Are Doing about Adult Nonmarital Childbearing

Since adults are generally not still in secondary school, our focus on policies and programs to discourage adult nonmarital childbearing is quite different from our focus on policies and programs to discourage teen childbearing. The federal government recently attempted to influence nonmarital childbearing through PRWORA, which included specific policies designed to reduce nonmarital childbearing and promote marriage among women on welfare or at risk of going on welfare. States also have much more control over their own welfare policies since PRWORA was enacted in 1996. Consequently, we focus first on welfare provisions intended to discourage nonmarital fertility. One such provision is a family cap on welfare payments, under which recipients do not receive additional welfare payments when they bear additional children. We also asked about the presence of other rules designed to reduce nonmarital childbearing (without specifying what the rules might be).

States can reach a broad population of women through media campaigns and programs that improve access to contraceptive services, encourage abstinence before marriage, and encourage couples experiencing pregnancy to marry. Programs primarily designed for other purposes may also reduce nonmarital fertility. These include paternity establishment programs, child support programs (Garfinkel et al. 2003), and youth development (Maynard and Johnson 2001) or young adult education and employment programs. As with teenagers, some states have also developed state coalitions run by nonprofit institutions to reduce nonmarital fertility.

Although states are still not attempting to prevent nonmarital childbearing as proactively among unmarried adults as among teens, the 2001 survey suggests that such efforts are increasing. Twenty-one of

37 reporting states have policies that cap welfare payments to women who have children outside marriage, a slight increase from 1999 when 19 of 49 states reported such policies. Ten of 39 states also report other welfare rules associated with reducing nonmarital childbearing.³

In 2001, 22 of 36 reporting states had policies to improve access to contraceptive services and 15 of 37 states reported media campaigns to discourage nonmarital pregnancy. There was a substantial increase in the number of states reporting programs teaching abstinence before marriage—21 of 37 states reported such programs in 2001 compared with 14 of 50 states in 1999.

Although the number of states reporting programs encouraging unmarried pregnant couples to marry increased, very few states have such programs. In 2001, only five of 37 states reported these programs—still an increase from three of 48 in 1999.

It was not possible to determine if there was a national trend in paternity establishment because of the substantial increase in nonreporting between 1999 and 2001. Thirty-two of 33 states reporting on paternity establishment programs had such programs in 2001 compared with 43 of 50 states reporting on paternity establishment in 1999. However, five states that reported *not having* a program in 1999 reporting *having* one in 2001, and no state that reported *having* a program in 1999 reported *not having* one in 2001. This suggests an upward trend in paternity establishment.

Paternity establishment programs may indirectly affect nonmarital childbearing by establishing financial responsibility for children. Thus, they may provide a financial incentive for fathers to reduce nonmarital pregnancies.

Child support enforcement is also designed to establish financial responsibility for children (Garfinkel et al. 2003). Of the 36 states reporting in 2001, all reported child support enforcement policies compared with 42 of 50 reporting states in 1999.

Finally, youth development or young adult education employment programs may indirectly affect nonmarital childbearing (Maynard and Johnson 2001). In 2001, 32 of 37 states reported such programs—an increase from 26 of 43 states in 1999.

In short, although states focused less effort on nonmarital pregnancy prevention than on teen pregnancy prevention, there is evidence that states are emphasizing such efforts as welfare caps, improved access to contraceptive services, programs encouraging unmarried pregnant couples to marry, and youth development or young adult education programs. If new initiatives to promote marriage and reduce nonmarital childbearing are enacted and additional funding is provided, states will likely increase their efforts in this area.

Conclusion

The first two years of the 21st century have seen a continuation of the steady decline in the teen childbearing rate that began in the early 1990s. Each of the last three years (1999, 2000, and 2001) has been successively the lowest on record. Our earlier brief (Wertheimer et al. 2000) documented a dramatic expansion during the 1990s of programs at the state level to prevent teen pregnancy. This brief suggests that this level of effort has been maintained, although not expanded, during the past two years, with the striking exception of an increase in the number of states promoting abstinence for teens. However, the connection between the downward trend in the teen birth rate and federal and state policy remains unclear, since many other factors also changed over the same period.

Meanwhile, the nonmarital birth rate remains at a stable, albeit near-record high, level. Some research indicates an association between welfare policies and nonmarital childbearing and marital stability by adults (Garfinkel et al. 2003). Our survey shows increasing state activity to discourage nonmarital childbearing over the past two years. Whether nonmarital child-

bearing will show the same trend reversal as teen childbearing remains unknown.

Notes

1. Service learning programs have two components: volunteer service by teens to the community and structured time for preparation and reflection before, during, and after service.
2. A table presenting information on teen pregnancy prevention programs in all 50 states is available at <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=311046>.
3. A table presenting information on state policies and programs to target nonmarital pregnancy prevention and nonmarital childbearing is available at <http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=311046>.

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TABLE 2. State Policies and Programs for Adult Nonmarital Pregnancy Prevention, 1999–2001

State	Family caps on welfare payments		Other welfare rules (not specified)		Improving access to contraceptive services		Media campaign		Abstinence before marriage programs		Programs encouraging unmarried pregnant couples to marry		Tax code changes to encourage marriage		Paternity establishment programs		Child support enforcement		Youth development or young adult education and employment programs	
	1999	2001	1999	2001	1999	2001	1999	2001	1999	2001	1999	2001	1999	2001	1999	2001	1999	2001	1999	2001
AL					X	X	X	X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X	X
AK					X	X	X	X							ns					X
AZ	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X	X
AR	X	ns		ns	X	X	X	X	X						ns					X
CA	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X						X	X	X	X	X	X
CO		X			X										X					
CT					X				X						X					
DE	X		X		X										X				X	
FL	X				X				X						X				X	
GA	X	X	X	X	X	ns			X			X			ns				X	X
HI					X	X									X	X	X	X	X	X
ID	X	ns		ns	X	X									X	X	X	X	X	X
IL		X		X	X	ns									X	X	X	X	X	X
IN	X	X		X	X	ns									X	X	X	X	X	X
IA				ns	X	X									X	X	X	X	X	X
KS					X	X									X	X	X	X	X	X
KY					X	X									X	X	X	X	X	X
LA					X	X									X	X	X	X	X	X
ME		ns		ns	X	X									X	X	X	X	X	X
MD	X				X	X									X	X	X	X	X	X
MA	X	X	X	ns	X	X		X	X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
MI					X	X									X	X	X	X	X	X
MN					X	X			X						X	X	X	X	X	X
MS	X	X			X	X									X	X	X	X	X	X
MO					X	X									X	X	X	X	X	X
MT					X	X			X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
NE		X		X	X	X			X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
NV					X	X			X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
NH				X	X	X			X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
NJ					X	X			X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
NM					X	X			X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
NY					X	X		X	X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
NC		X			X	X			X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
ND	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
OH	X	X		ns	X	X			X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
OK	X	X	X	X	X	ns			X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
OR		X			X	ns									X	X	X	X	X	X
PA	X	X			X	X			X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
RI					X	X									X	X	X	X	X	X
SC		X		X	X	ns			X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
SD					X	X									X	X	X	X	X	X
TN	X	X			X	X		X	X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
TX					X	X			X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
UT				X	X	X			X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
VT				X	X	X			X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
VA	X	X			X	X		X	X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
WA			X		X	X		X	X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
WV			X	X	X	X		X	X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
WI	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
WY	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X					X	X	X	X	X	X
Total	19	21	11	10	32	22	17	15	14	21	3	5	1	3	43	32	42	36	26	32

Sources: 1999 and 2001 rounds of the National Survey of America's Families.

ns = not sure

— = information not available

Note: Comparisons between 1999 and 2001 for the United States as a whole should be made with caution because of a low response rate in 2001.

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This series is dedicated to the memory of Steven D. Gold, who was codirector of *Assessing the New Federalism* until his death in August 1996.

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