

Explaining Trends and Cross-National Differences in Teen Birth Rates in Developed Countries

Teen birth rates in the U.S. declined steadily (by almost 50%) from 1960 to the mid 1980s, they increased by 20% between 1985 and 1992, and, with the exception of 2006, they have been declining since (by 30% in the last 15 years). Even at their lowest point, teen birth rates in the U.S. remained substantially higher than in other developed countries.

The decline since the early 1990s has been heralded by family planning advocates as proof that expanded access to contraception is effective (they point to increased rates of contraceptive use) and by the right as proof that abstinence prevention programs are effective, and arguments abound about why rates of teen fertility in the U.S. are so much higher than in most other industrialized countries. However, none of the theories or explanations has been substantiated with rigorous empirical studies. Most research has focused on the role of proximal causes (timing of sexual initiation, contraceptive use, and abortion) on teen fertility, but proximal cause explanations do not address the causal mechanisms driving cross-country differences in teen fertility or trends over time.

In this paper, I use data from natality data from European countries and the U.S., over a 45 year period, to investigate (1) the effect of sex education on teen birth rates and (2) the effect of adult fertility patterns on teen birth rates. To answer the first question, I employ difference-in-differences methods and assess whether teen birth rates have been responsive to changes in the provision of sex education to youth. To answer the second

question, I regress country-year teen fertility rates on various indicators of the maternal age distribution of births among adult women.

Preliminary findings suggest that the provision of sex education has little effect on teen birth rates and that much but not all of the between-country differences in teen birth rates and the within-country time trends in teen birth rates can be explained by changes in adult age norms associated with parenthood. Based on these findings, I develop a simple structural explanation of teen fertility.