

# Mercyhurst College Civic Institute



## **BIRTHS TO TEENS**

An Overview of Trend Data for Erie County

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George Fickenworth  
John Matia

[www.civicinstitute.org](http://www.civicinstitute.org)

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## Overview

Since 1990 the rates of births to teens in both the City of Erie and Erie County have been monitored in response to what was seen as an alarming increase in teen pregnancies and births during the late 1980's and early 1990's. When adolescents are thrust into the role of parents, they and their children are subject to a number of negative influences such as increased maternal health problems, lower infant birth weights, higher rates of birth defects, limited educational opportunities for parents, and reduced earning potential. Over the past two decades, numerous local and national programs have been instituted to provide both services and education to teens in an effort to reverse these trends. At the national and state levels, the data reflect some degree of success in reducing the teen birth rates. However, data at the level of the local environments of the City of Erie and Erie County while generally in decline have not achieved the same degree of consistency or fallen below the national or state levels.

The Mercyhurst College Civic Institute has been involved in the collection and dissemination of this data in the form of an annual report, demonstrating local trends as well as comparisons between counties and cities similar in population size to that of the City of Erie and Erie County. As done previously, this report will provide comparisons of birth rates for the City of Erie and Erie County to these corresponding locals.

## Births

During the past fourteen years both the state and national teen birth rates have been declining at very predictable rates since reaching highs in the early 1990's (Figure 1). Erie County has also experienced an overall decline in the birth rate of females aged 15-19 during this same time period; however, it has not been a continuous decline. Though lower than it has been for most of the past ten years, the City of Erie birth rate is still significantly higher than the other measured populations. Additionally, most of the other comparisons have recognized a steady decrease, while the City of Erie's has fluctuated over this time period.

**Figure 1: Birth Rates for All Females, Ages 15-19**

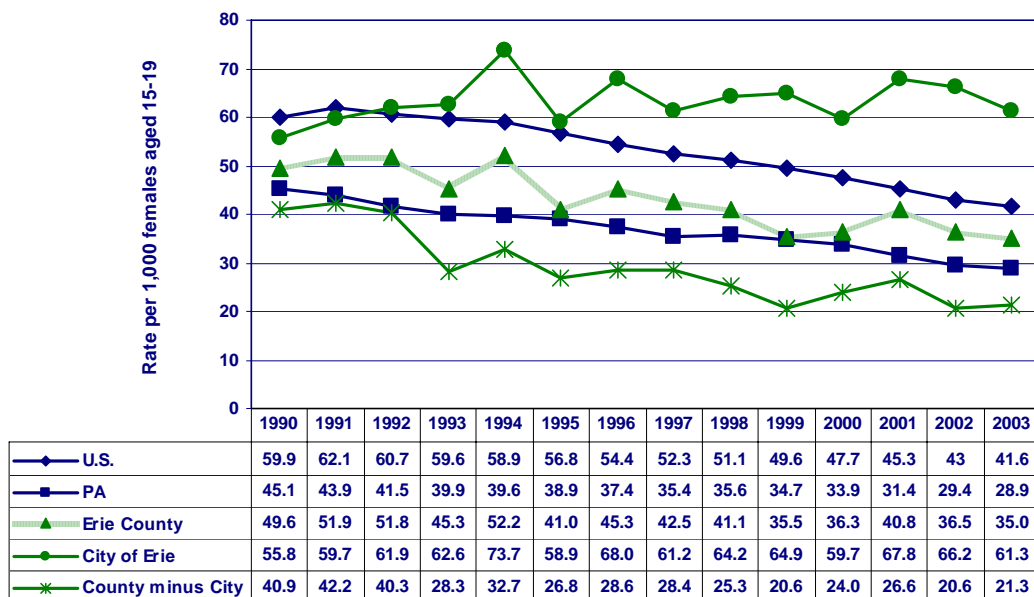
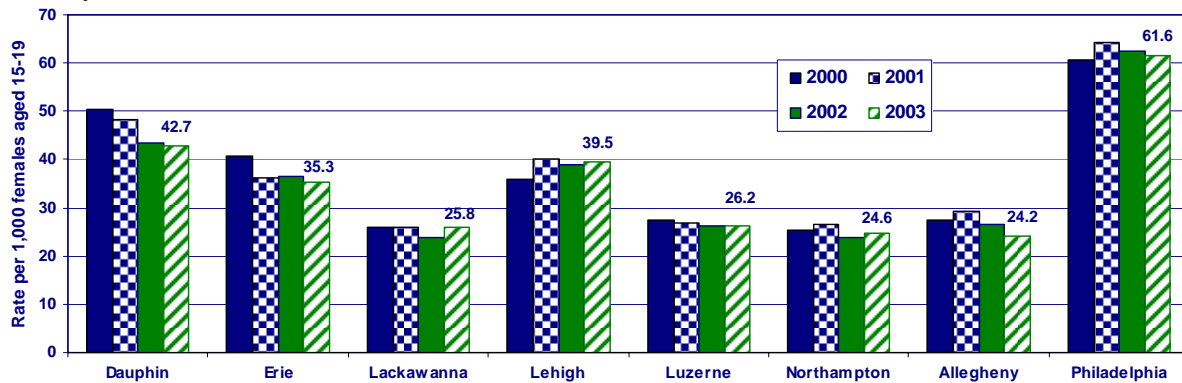
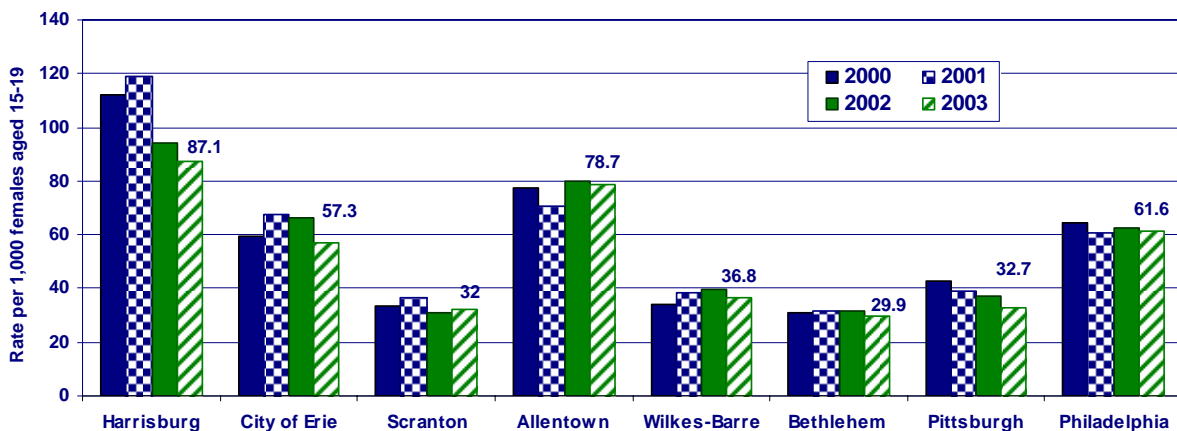


Figure 2 demonstrates a comparison of the teen birth rate of Erie County to similar sized third-tier counties and the larger counties of Allegheny and Philadelphia over the past four years. Erie County is positioned in the middle showing a slight decrease in birth rates. A comparison of birth rates of similar sized cities and the cities of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia to the City of Erie finds the City of Erie ranked in the middle, and again documents a slight decrease since 2002, as shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 2: Birth Rates for Females Ages 15-19; PA Third-Class Counties, Allegheny and Philadelphia**



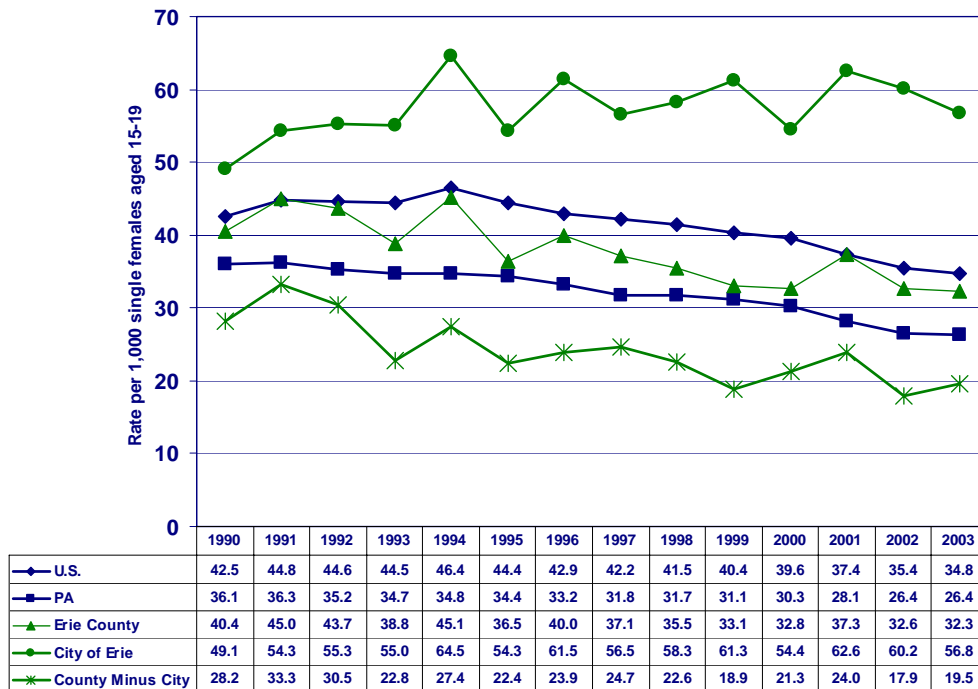
**Figure 3: Birth Rates, Females Aged 15-19; PA Urban Third-Class Cities, Pittsburgh & Philadelphia**



### ***Births by Marital Status***

Data pertaining to birth rates of unmarried teens has been collected by the Civic Institute since 1990. During this time period, the birth rate for Erie County has been consistently lower than the national teen birth rate but higher than that of the state. Although both the City of Erie and Erie County have been experiencing declines in their respective birth rates during the past three years, the birth rate for the City of Erie continues to exceed the national birth rate for unmarried teens by 64% as of 2003. It should also be noted that though the City of Erie birth rate for unmarried teens has been declining over the past few years, it is the only of the measures that recognizes a higher rate than in 1990. See Figure 4 for this data.

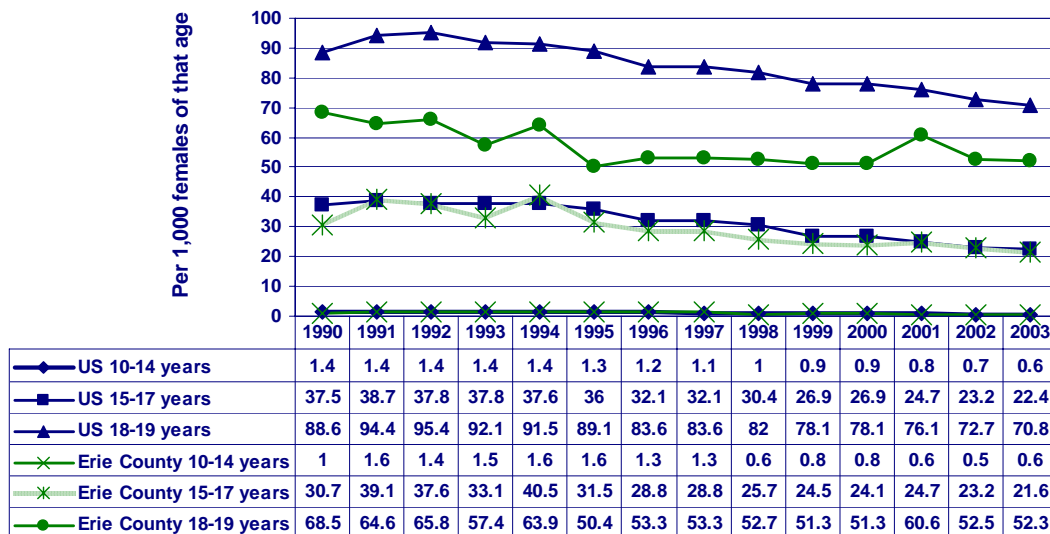
**Figure 4: Birth Rates for Unmarried Females Aged 15-19**



### Births by Age Groups

Due to developmental differences in reproductive maturation of teenage children, it is not surprising to see that teens of different ages differ in their likelihood of having children. Teens aged 10-14 continue to demonstrate the lowest birth rate for all levels. For Erie County, the 10-14 year-old birth rate continues to be comparable with the same aged national population. Similar rates are seen for the 15-17 year-old county and national populations, as well. During the past fourteen years, the county and national birth rate values have been almost identical to the rates for the past three years. The national birth rate for teens aged 18-19 has been declining during the past twelve years since a peak rate of 95.4 in 1992. In the same age group in Erie County, the birth rate has hovered around 52 for much of the past six years. See Figure 5 for a graphic representation of this data.

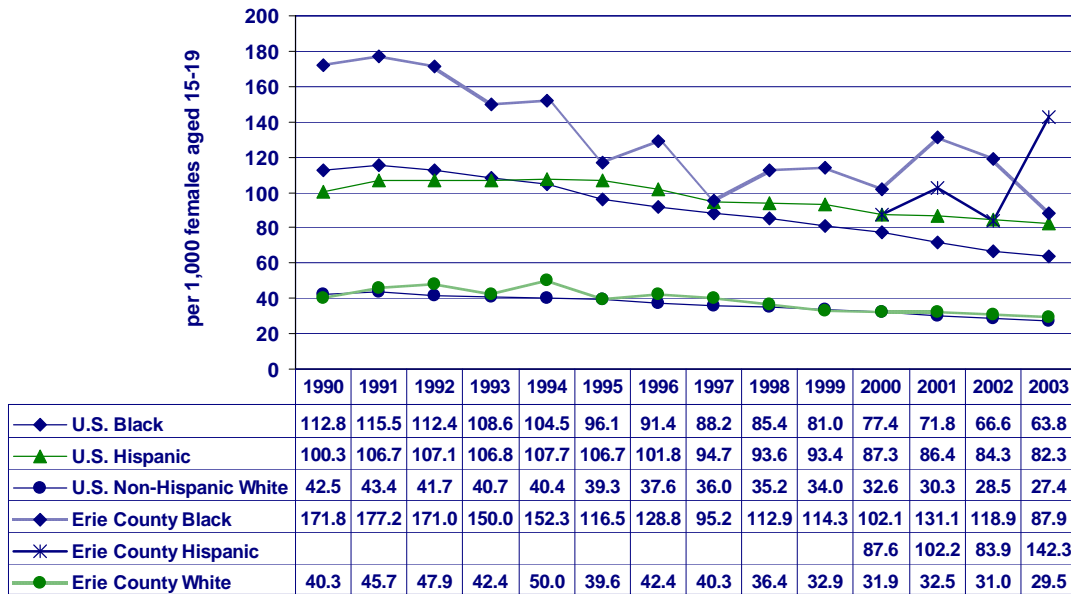
**Figure 5: Birth Rates for Females Aged 10-19 by Age Group**



## Births by Race and Ethnicity

When comparing different racial and ethnic groups at the local and national levels, the most pronounced change is seen in the birth rate for local black teens. The 2003 birth rate is at a fourteen year low and is less than ½ the birth rate that it was at the 1991 high (Figure 6.). Although significantly higher than the birth rate for black teens at the national level, it is showing a trend that has it approaching the national rate. Because of the small numbers of births to Hispanic teens locally and the small population of Hispanic 15-19 year olds, the Erie County Hispanic rates should be interpreted with caution. Also, data for this population has only been available since 2000; therefore no long term comparisons can be made.

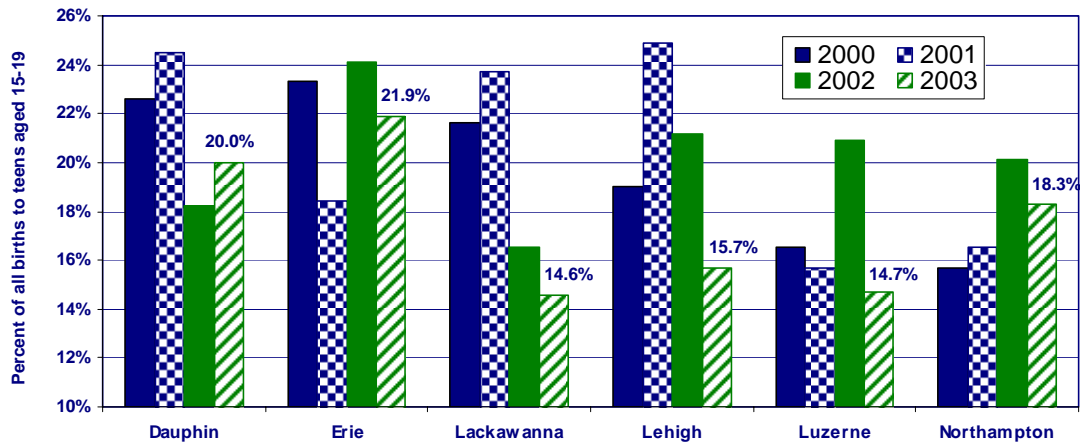
**Figure 6: Birth Rates for Females Aged 15-19, by Race and Ethnicity for Erie County and U.S.**



## Higher Order Births

The percentage of teens having a second or third child born during the 2000 to 2003 time period is depicted in Figure 7. In 2003, roughly one in five babies born to teen mothers in Erie County was not the teen mother's first child. This is a decrease from the one in four ratio seen in 2002. With a 2003 higher order birth rate of 21.9%, Erie County has the distinction of having the highest rate of higher order births to teens when compared to other third-tier Pennsylvania counties during this time period.

**Figure 7: Percent of Higher Order Births to Teens Aged 15-19**



### **Conclusions and Implications for Erie**

In response to the increased teen birth rates of the late 1980's and early 1990's, the Erie County Policy and Planning Council approved the formation of the Erie County Network for Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention (ECNAPP) in December of 1997. The primary goal was to recognize a 5% annual reduction in teen pregnancy rates reaching a pregnancy rate of 25.0 per 1,000 for all women aged 15-17 by the year 2000. A second goal included a reduction in the pregnancy rate among Black teens aged 15-17 to 100.0 per 1,000 females by the year 2000. The heart of this plan charged with reducing teenage pregnancies involved a community oriented approach and included educating parents to deal with the sexuality of their children, establishing community standards, increasing involvement with religious institutions, training youth activity workers to counsel youth on healthy sexuality, providing alternative activities, enhancing sexuality education in schools, encouraging teens who are sexually active to use contraceptives, and mounting media campaigns to address teenage pregnancy concerns. The end of 2003 marked five years since the formation of ECNAPP and success has been seen in the teen birth rates for Erie County which dropped to a level of 21.6 per 1,000 for teens aged 15-17, exceeding the goal of the committee. However, the birth rate for Black teens in Erie County still remained significantly higher than that of the national rate, and the rates for the entire City of Erie appeared to be slightly increasing on average over the past 10 years. Therefore, the Erie County Policy and Planning Council created a subcommittee to review the comprehensive plan of 1997 and determine if there needed to be a more holistic approach to the reduction of births to teens. The majority of teen mothers are not deliberately choosing to have children at this point in their lives and there are factors causing them to act out in behaviors leading to higher teen pregnancies. Alcohol use, lack of educational attainment, poor self-esteem, youth unemployment, and lack of a family system in place at home are some factors contributing to life altering behaviors. Addressing these issues and encouraging an open dialogue with teens may help to address this ongoing problem for our region. The subcommittee, now called the Healthy Youth Development Advisory Board, has revised the plan which was unanimously adopted by the Erie County Policy and Planning Council in 2003. Since that time, the Healthy Youth Development Committee has been working to develop community standards and increase collaboration among service providers.

Special thanks goes to Valerie Bukowski of the Erie County Department of Health for providing Erie County and City of Erie data. State data comes from the Pennsylvania Department of Health, Bureau of Health Statistics Research; national data is from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the National Center for Health Statistics reports. Each of these organizations specifically disclaims responsibility for any analyses, interpretations, or conclusions.

This annual report was prepared by the Mercyhurst Civic Institute and can be accessed at:  
[www.civicinstitute.org](http://www.civicinstitute.org) or by calling Shelley Thayer at (814) 824-2327.

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