

Are conservative states creating more teen moms? The role of religion and policy

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Background

The United States has the highest teen pregnancy and teen birth rate among all developed nations. From the peak in 1991, teen birth rates declined nearly 30% nationally, tapering off between 2002 and 2005, and *increasing 3%* in 2006 and another 1% in 2007.

In recent years, one central issue of debate is whether the expansion of conservative health policies at the state level (driven by increased religiosity) has caused the increase in teen birth rate.

We consider the role of key state women’s health policies, as well as measures of state religiosity and conservatism in predicting teen birth rates.

Methodology

We utilized publicly-available data sources to construct a dataset of the 50 states comprising variables to measure state conservatism ⁺, state religiosity (% residents

stating religion is very important in their lives), per capita income, unemployment rates, % teens in the state population and dichotomous measures of whether the states maintain key women’s health legislation on abortion parental consent laws, Medicaid family planning waivers, and provider conscience clauses (allowing a provider to refuse provision of contraception). A logistic regression was run with teen birth rates per 1,000 as the dependent variable.

Results

Predictors of Teen Birth Rates at the State Level					
Variable	Coefficient	SE	P Value	95% CI	
				lower	upper
State Religiosity	45.807**	17.31	0.011	10.84	80.77
State Conservatism	0.042**	0.018	0.026	0.01	0.08
Abortion Parental Consent	-2.641	2.92	0.37	-8.54	3.26
Medicaid FP Waiver	3.968	0.14	0.14	-1.33	9.27
Conscience Clause	3.756	0.29	0.287	-3.28	10.79
% Teens	-108.662	227.21	0.635	-567.53	350.21
Unemployment	177.997	130.41	0.180	-85.37	441.36
Income	-0.001*	0.0003	0.051	-.001	2.23 e-06

**Indicates significance at 5% level; * indicates significance at 10% level

Our results indicate that both the religiosity of those living in the state and the conservatism of the elected officials are highly significant and positive predictors of teen birth rates in the U.S. Notably, the magnitude of the religiosity variable is extremely high, suggesting a considerable impact on birth rates.

Per capita income is also significant and negatively correlated as would be expected, suggesting that states with higher per capita incomes have lower teen birth rates.

Conclusions

This analysis examines teen birth rates; it is expected that birth rates would be more severely impacted by religion and conservative views than pregnancy rates, as policies surrounding abortion are increasingly likely to be subject to religious views, compared to educational, family planning and support programs. However, similar findings are expected for teen pregnancy rates as well.

These findings, while preliminary, suggest that policymakers and health professionals need to understand the religious and cultural/value environments of states and locales when considering policies or interventions to address teen pregnancy.

⁺Quantitative measurement of conservatism of the elected officials in a state by the American Conservative Union, often used in political science research.