

Fertility among very young adolescents

1. Childbearing among adolescent girls aged 10 to 14 years remains a challenge in selected settings

To address issues related to adolescent fertility in a comprehensive manner, the international community has recognized the importance of monitoring fertility levels among girls aged 10 to 14 years, in addition to ongoing surveillance of birth rates at ages 15-19 years. The two measures are included as part of indicator 3.7.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals, which records the birth rate per 1,000 women in both age groups.

Early adolescence is a transitional period in which young people develop health behaviours that may last a lifetime. Also, at these ages, people often experience their sexual debut and establish their gender role and sexual identity. Yet, this period of early adolescence is often overlooked by researchers and policy makers, making it one of the least well understood stages of human development.

2. Data on childbearing among girls at ages 10-14 years are not routinely collected

Data on fertility among girls under age 15 are deficient and often unreliable. In many settings, data are particularly scarce where birth registration is deficient. Recent estimates indicate that, globally, roughly three quarters of children under age 5 in 2017 had their births registered with a civil authority. In the least developed countries, the rate was only 40 per cent.

To fill this data gap, the Demographic and Health Surveys and other survey programmes have been collecting retrospective birth-history data among young women aged 15-19. By gathering information about any births that may have occurred in a window of 3 or 5 years before

the survey, it is possible to derive fertility and related reproductive health indicators for 10- to 14-year-old girls.^{8,9} Building on this work, the Population Division has analysed birth history data and available administrative records from more than 200 locations in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Northern America, as available in December 2018 and covering years 1940 through 2017.

3. Early childbearing is more common in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean than in other parts of the world

The most recent values available for 190 countries (referring to the year 2000 or earlier) show elevated levels of early adolescent fertility for a small number of countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean. Elevated levels of childbearing at ages 10-14 years are not common in other regions, with the notable exception of Bangladesh in Asia (figure 1).

In sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Western and Central Africa, early childbearing is generally more frequent and its levels span a wider range than elsewhere in the world. Three of the four countries in the world with more than 10 births per 1,000 girls aged 10 to 14 years are in sub-Saharan Africa, namely Angola, Mozambique and Nigeria. They are followed by Guinea and Sierra Leone with an estimated nine, and Madagascar and Mauritania with eight births per 1,000 girls aged 10-14. Gabon reports a value of seven, followed closely by Cameroon, Chad, the Congo, Mali, Niger and South Sudan with six, and Cote d'Ivoire and Liberia with five births per 1,000 girls in this age group. Outside Africa, Bangladesh reports an estimated 10 birth per 1,000 girls at ages 10-14 years.

Fertility rates among young adolescents in Latin America and the Caribbean are considerably lower than in sub-Saharan Africa and Bangladesh (figure 1). The highest rate was recorded for Venezuela, with five births per 1,000 girls aged 10-14 years, followed by two per 1,000 for the Dominican Republic.

