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Unlike U.S., birth rate declines in Monroe County

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As the nation logged a record number of births in 2007, the number of babies born in Monroe County has dropped significantly since 1990.

According to a preliminary report from the National Center for Health Statistics released Wednesday, 4.31 million babies were born in the United States, surpassing the 1957 record of 4.3 million births. Statewide, the number of births rose from 249,182 in 2006 to 253,458 in 2007, according to state Health Department and federal data.

In Monroe County, however, the 8,685 babies born in 2007 showed a decline from 8,900 births in 2006 and a marked decrease from the 12,046 births in 1990. The number of births here reached a low in 2005, when about 8,500 babies were born, said Arthur Streeter, senior planner and director of review for the Finger Lakes Health Systems Agency.

"The Census Bureau has projected for a while that there will be a rebound (in the number of local births), but we haven't seen it by these numbers," he said.

The difference between the birth data locally and across the country matches other population trends in the area that buck national figures. The local numbers may partly reflect a drop in teen pregnancies in recent years, which comes as teen birth rates nationwide inched up for the second year, said Nancy Adams, executive director of the Monroe County Medical Society.

At the same time, many couples in their child-bearing years have left the area, looking for jobs in other parts of the country, she said.

"We are truly shifting to becoming an older population."

The aging demographics, though, do not fully explain the trend in the Rochester area, said county Health Department spokesman John Ricci, pointing to fertility rates that have also declined. The rates, which account for changes in population, have dropped from nearly 70 births per 1,000 Monroe County women of child-bearing age in 1990, to 57 per 1,000 in 2007.

Nationwide, fertility rates were the highest since 1990, with 69.5 births per 1,000 females 15 to 44 in 2007. Statewide, the 2007 rate was 62.1.

Stephanie Ventura, a demographer who worked on the government report, said birth numbers nationwide are higher due to more women overall giving birth rather than individual women having multiple children, as during the baby boom. Part of the climb reflected a rise in births to unwed mothers,

who accounted for 40 percent of all births, an all-time high. More than three-quarters of these women were 20 or older.

Monroe County's lower birth rates mean, in part, some relief for schools that must plan for any bubble of students coming through. The Greece school district, for example, has prepared for a slight increase in enrollment in the next several years, said spokeswoman Laurel Heiden. "Obviously we don't want to see a huge jump because space is limited ... but we would be able to accommodate more students."

But an aging population takes a heftier toll on the health care system, Adams said. In a community-rated insurer pool, healthy patients, such as youths and adults of child-bearing years, offset costs of health care for the elderly, who are more likely to need more expensive treatments.

As the number of births declines and the population ages, the area has also experienced a shortage of geriatricians while plenty of pediatricians are in town, Adams said.

"It's a dramatic difference," she said. "We have literally a handful of geriatrics, while we have hundreds of pediatrics."

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