

# TEEN SEX

July 14, 2014

## Is sex education working to prevent teen pregnancy?

*The latest drop in teenage pregnancy is “pretty astounding,” according to demographer Carl Haub of the Population Reference Bureau. Teen birth rates dropped 10 percent from 2012 to 2013 and have plunged in the last 20 years, largely attributed to greater availability of sex education and a wide variety of contraceptives. But the U.S. teen birth rate is still one of the highest in the developed world. American teens get sex education too late, experts say, and less than 1 percent use long-acting reversible contraception, such as an intrauterine device, which is most effective. In addition, a quarter of teen mothers are young — ages 15 to 17 — and nearly 1,700 teens in that age group give birth every week. Another worrisome statistic, experts say, is that 88.7 percent of the 15- to 19-year-olds who gave birth in 2012 were unwed, although the rate among younger girls (ages 15-17) dropped by 8 percent from the previous year.*

The decline in teenage birth rates “has gone from extraordinary to almost unbelievable,” according to Bill Albert, chief program officer at the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.<sup>1</sup> Teen pregnancy reached a historic low in 2013, with 274,641 babies born to teenagers 15 to 19 years old. The 26.6-per-1,000 birth rate represents a 10 percent drop from 2012, according to the CDC and a 52 percent drop since 1991, according to the Brookings Institution.<sup>2</sup>

“A 10 percent drop in teen birth rates in one year is frankly astonishing,” said Leslie Kantor, vice president of Education at Planned Parenthood. “When young people have accurate information and resources, they make healthy decisions.”<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the abortion rate among 15- to 19-year-olds also fell dramatically between 1998 and 2009 (the most recent period for which data are available) from 43.5 per 1,000 teens in 1998 to 16.3 in 2009.<sup>4</sup>

Racial and ethnic disparities in teen birth rates have remained the same over time, however, with the highest rates in 2012 among Hispanic girls ages 15-17, at 25.5 births per 1,000, compared to 21.9 for non-Hispanic blacks, 17 for American Indians or Alaska Natives, 8.4 for non-Hispanic whites and 4.1 for Asian or Pacific Islanders.<sup>5</sup> Among older teens, ages 15 to 19, birth rates declined among nearly all race and ethnic groups in 2012.

Disparities in teen birth rates nationwide reflect many different factors, including race, poverty, sex education, availability of contraceptive methods, access to abortion and attitudes toward giving birth at a young age, said Kathryn Kost, a demographer for the Guttmacher Institute, which works on sexual and reproductive health issues.<sup>6</sup>

The highest teen birth rates are geographically concentrated in the South. The “teen birth belt,” as some call it, runs from New Mexico through Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Mississippi, which have more than 50 births per 1,000 teen girls.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the lowest birth rates are in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Vermont and Connecticut, which have fewer than 20 births per 1,000 teen girls, according to the Martin Prosperity Institute, which studies urbanism.<sup>8</sup> Teen birth rates tend to be higher in more religious states because other options, such as abortion, may be more restricted.<sup>9</sup> Teen girls of lower socioeconomic status also are more likely to become pregnant and keep their babies.<sup>10</sup>

### Reason for Concern

“Although we have made significant progress in reducing teen pregnancy, far too many teens are still having babies,” said Dr. Tom Frieden, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).<sup>11</sup> One out of four teen moms in 2012 was younger — ages 15 to 17 — and girls from this age group accounted for 1,700 births each week. Giving birth at such a young age can have negative medical, social, financial and emotional consequences, such as causing a teen mom to drop out of high school.<sup>12</sup>

More than 80 percent of teens in that younger age group had no formal sex education before they had sex, according to a 2014 CDC report. And nearly one-quarter of the teens in this age group never spoke with a parent or guardian about sex.<sup>13</sup> “We are missing



“Teen Mom 2” cast members Kailyn Lowry (right) and Javi Marroquin appear on the red carpet for an event for Star Magazine’s Hollywood Rocks party in Los Angeles on April 23. According to researchers from Wellesley College and the University of Maryland, programs such as MTV’s “Teen Mom” and “16 and Pregnant” decreased teen pregnancy rates by nearly 6 percent. (Getty Images/FilmMagic/Tibrina Hobson)

opportunities to deliver prevention messages before younger teens begin having sex” — both how to say “no” to sex and the proper use of contraception, said Ileana Arias, the CDC’s principal deputy director.<sup>14</sup>

Teens also are using the least effective contraceptives. Less than 1 percent used an intrauterine device (IUD) or hormonal implant, which are considered the most effective in preventing pregnancy.<sup>15</sup> More than 90 percent of sexually active teens used birth control the last time they had sex, but they relied on the least effective methods, such as condoms.<sup>16</sup>



Ninety percent of teens ages 15 to 17 used birth control the last time they had sex. Statistics show the most common contraceptive methods used by teens are condoms and birth control pills, such as these fourth-generation Convuline birth control pills. (Getty Images/Universal Images Group/BSIP)

Although teenage pregnancy is on the decline overall, the United States still has dramatically higher rates than other developed countries.<sup>17</sup> American girls are more than twice as likely as their Canadian peers to have a child and nearly six times as likely as Swedish teens.<sup>18</sup> Sarah Brown, chief executive of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, said birth control is less expensive and easier for teens to access in many other developed countries compared with the United States. Teachers, parents and physicians in those countries also tend to be more accepting of teenage sexuality and are more likely to encourage the use of contraceptives, she added.<sup>19</sup>

“We certainly can pause for a moment to celebrate the progress that we’ve made, but by no means should we wash our hands of this issue and think we have it solved,” said Forrest Alton, chief executive officer of the South Carolina Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.<sup>20</sup>

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are also of concern among teens. The CDC estimates that 15- to 24-year-olds account for nearly half of the new STDs

diagnosed in the United States each year, which cost the U.S. healthcare system nearly \$16 billion to treat.<sup>21</sup> In addition, youths and young adults, ages 13 to 24, represented a disproportionate share of HIV infections in 2010: About one-quarter of all new HIV infections were among that age group, which represents only 17 percent of the population. And nearly 60 percent of those individuals do not know they are infected, which increases the risk they will infect someone else, according to the CDC.<sup>22</sup>

### “Less Sex, More Contraception”

As to why teen pregnancy rates are down, “The short answer is that it is a combination of less sex and more contraception,” said the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy’s Albert. “Teenagers have a greater number of methods of contraceptives to choose from.”<sup>23</sup>

Experts say sex education and access to a wider variety of contraceptives seem to be helping to prevent teen pregnancy. There’s also more talking going on, according to CDC researcher Lee Warner. “Research shows that teens who talk with their parents about sex, relationships, birth control and pregnancy begin to have sex at a later age, and use condoms and birth control more often when they do have sex,” he said.<sup>24</sup>

More teens also appear to be waiting until they are married to have sex. The number of unmarried females ages 15 to 19 who have had sex has dropped from 51 percent in 1988 to 43 percent in 2006-10.<sup>25</sup> And teens are more open to using contraceptives.<sup>26</sup> Ninety percent of teens ages 15 to 17 used birth control — usually condoms or birth control pills — the last time they had sex.<sup>27</sup>

"We call it a public health success story because the efforts to reduce teen pregnancy have really worked," says Stephanie Ventura, chief of the CDC's reproductive statistics branch.

Sometimes prevention motivation comes from unlikely sources. A study conducted by professors Melissa Kearney of the University of Maryland and Phillip Levine of Wellesley College looked at the impact of TV series dealing with teen pregnancy, such as MTV's "16 and Pregnant" and "Teen Mom." Using data from Google Trends, Twitter, Nielsen ratings and Vital Statistics birth data, the researchers said the shows were responsible for a nearly 6 percent drop in teen births. <sup>28</sup>

## Sex Education

Debate continues over what type of sex education is most effective. In some school districts, especially in religiously conservative areas, school officials insist that the best sex education is an abstinence-only curriculum. Students are told to abstain from sex until marriage and are not taught about different contraceptive methods. Others, however, such as the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, recommend comprehensive programs that recommend that students delay the initiation of sex but also provide information on the various contraceptive methods. <sup>29</sup>

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends 31 evidence-based programs that have been proven to help prevent teen pregnancy, ranging from abstinence-only and comprehensive sex education to mentoring and confidence-building activities.

<sup>30</sup> "When we look at the menu of proven programs, programs that have been shown to actually move the needle, that number has grown over the last years, and to the credit of the federal government, they have invested in it," said Albert. <sup>31</sup>

Local governments and school districts are also investing in such programs. Denmark, S.C., used to have one of the nation's highest teen pregnancy rates. The town has drastically reduced that rate in recent years, using comprehensive sex education programs starting in middle school. Michelle Nimmons, the director of the Bamberg County School/Community Sexual Risk Reduction Project for Teens, said the biggest challenge in reducing teen pregnancies has been getting people in a religious state like South Carolina to acknowledge there's a problem. <sup>32</sup> The program has joint sessions with both sexes to help them understand the emotional and financial consequences of having unprotected sex. South Carolina schools are prohibited from distributing condoms, so the program relies on local businesses to make condoms available to students. <sup>33</sup>

## Chronology

**2012**

**October**

An American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists committee endorses use of long-acting reversible birth control methods, such as intrauterine devices and implants, for teenage girls. The panel says its decision is based on adolescents' high risk for unintended pregnancy and typically high "failure rate" of other contraception methods such as condoms, withdrawal or oral contraceptives.

**November**

American Academy of Pediatrics endorses making birth control pills available without a prescription to anyone because easier access to the pill will lower the rate of unintended pregnancies and the \$11.1 billion those pregnancies cost taxpayers. Group also calls on doctors to talk to teenage patients about the "morning-after pill" and to give young female patients prescriptions for emergency contraception for use "just in case" they have unprotected sex.

**2013**

**February**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issues two new studies on sexually transmitted infections, one of which says the country has "an ongoing, severe ... epidemic," and that young people (ages 15-24) are most at risk and account for half of the new infections.

**April**

A federal judge in New York orders that emergency contraception be made available over the counter to women of any age (instead of requiring a prescription for girls 16 and under). In June, the Obama administration drops its appeal of the ruling.

**May**

*Obstetrics & Gynecology Journal* publishes study showing that intrauterine devices (IUDs) are safe for teenage girls, ages 15-19.

## 2014

### January

A study examining the impact on teen pregnancy of MTV's shows "Teen Mom" and "16 and Pregnant" finds that such programs decreased teen pregnancy rates by almost 6 percent.

### February

Child Trends, a research center focused on youth well-being finds that anti-pregnancy programs for Hispanics must be culturally relevant and that comprehensive sex and contraceptive education needs to be more widely available in Latino communities, particularly information about long-acting reversible contraception, such as intrauterine devices.

### April

A CDC report says more than 80 percent of teens ages 15-17 had no formal sex education before they had sex for the first time.

### May

A report by the Guttmacher Institute, a reproductive health research and policy advocacy group, finds historically low trends in teen pregnancy nationwide....A CDC report on preliminary 2013 data shows that teen birth rates have dropped 10 percent from 2012 to 2013.

## Footnotes

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