

# THE★STAR. KansasCity★com

## Teen births and abortions are down, but no one is certain why

---

Blame reality TV. Blame films about sexually active youths. Blame, as always, the Internet.

Or credit them all.

The cultural forces that cause parents to worry sick about teens getting pregnant may actually be doing more good than harm.

Pick a reason, as many researchers are attempting, to explain why rates of both teen birth and abortion have fallen to historic lows.

Some cite more effective contraceptives and straight talk in schools. Some point to the stigma of abortion and even the long economic slowdown.

For Jasmin Robinson, a Lee's Summit West High School senior, it was a health course that gave some classmates artificial infants to carry around. They wailed and needed changing at the worst times.

"It's this huge hassle that's so annoying. You just knew, I'm not ready to have kids," Robinson said.

For Trevor Wright, a 2014 graduate of the Barstow School, MTV's "16 and Pregnant" and other reality shows presented such gritty portraits of kids raising kids that he joined a national group of teens that met with Washington lawmakers to push pregnancy prevention.

Whatever is driving down teen pregnancy numbers, "we call it the greatest story never told," said Bill Albert of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

"From extraordinary to almost unbelievable," campaign CEO Sarah Brown said of the latest preliminary data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The report by the CDC's health statistics center found that the 2013 birth rate for females ages 15 to 19 had dropped to 26.6 births per thousand — down 10 percent from just the year before. It's down 36 percent since 2007 and is less than half the teen birth rate of 1991.

And back in 1991, childbearing youths were twice as likely as now to have abortions.

All news to you?

Perhaps so. An opinion poll that the campaign released in December found that 49 percent of American adults incorrectly believed that teen pregnancy rates had climbed over the last two decades.

One-quarter believed the rates had stayed the same. Only 18 percent correctly said they had dropped.

Pondering what it termed "the mystery" of falling rates of teen pregnancy and abortion, the news website Vox.com this summer floated a variety of possible causes, most backed by scholarly research:

- "16 and Pregnant" and its hit spinoff "Teen Mom" could have accounted for one-third of the overall drop in teen births in the year and a half following 2009, when the series debuted, according to a study published in January by the National Bureau of Economic Research.
- In a rough economy, birth rates tend to decline for women of all ages, a large body of research shows. Couples are more apt to grow families when the financial outlook appears safe.

What's less convincing, experts say, are theories that the economy affects teen behavior in the same way — unless youths are extra cautious knowing their struggling parents can't afford to feed an extra mouth.

- Among the wilder theories floated by Vox.com is research pointing to the nation's drastically lower exposure to lead, particularly in gasoline and paint.

In an August working paper also published by NBER, economist Jessica Wolpaw Reyes wrote that a reduction in environmental toxins known to affect child development may help explain two parallel trends, both about taking fewer risks: lower juvenile crime rates and less teen pregnancy.

▪ A report last week by the Guttmacher Institute, a reproductive health advocate, credited better contraception. Options such as long-acting intrauterine devices and over-the-counter emergency contraceptives (so-called morning-after pills or Plan B) were not as widely available for teens a decade ago.

Groups with an advocacy stake in fights over teen pregnancy may insist they know what works and what doesn't. But the biggest factor behind the drop in numbers, many experts acknowledge, is unknown.

They say the most credible answer probably is "all of the above," though at least one factor is undeniable, concluded the Guttmacher report:

"At the end of the day, the credit for the declines in teen pregnancy goes to adolescents themselves."

### Less sex?

Nobody contends the problem is going away.

U.S. teen birth rates remain among the highest of any developed country. Ethnic and class disparities persist. African-American and Latina girls are far more likely to become young mothers than non-Hispanic whites.

However, beginning in the early 1990s, those higher U.S. birth rates for non-white groups in all 50 states have been plunging along with rates for the overall teen population, the CDC reports.

And despite what parents might fear, high school students in that span report having less sexual intercourse and with fewer partners.

The federal Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance survey published in June tracked a "significant" decrease in the percentage of students saying they had ever engaged in intercourse, with just under 47 percent reporting it last year, compared with 54 percent in 1991.

Experts attribute much of that decline to youth concerns about the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

Even among young adults who are sexually active, 62 percent this year told pollsters that they could be happy in a serious but "sexless relationship."

In the same survey, sponsored by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unwanted Pregnancy, three-quarters of all respondents, sexually active or not, said they wished Hollywood "did a better job" addressing virginity. (The survey of 1,001 high school graduates ages 18 to 24 had a margin of error of 4.4 percent.)

Popular entertainment is responding.

In the new TV comedy-drama "Jane the Virgin," Jane is grappling with pregnancy brought on, believe it or not, by accidental artificial insemination.

MTV has just rolled out "Virgin Territory," a docuseries profiling the relationships of 15 selected young adults.

Wright, the 17-year-old Barstow graduate now enrolled at Amherst College, said his peers make better decisions when all aspects of teen sexuality are given an honest airing.

"It helps to have a view of things we all can discuss," he said. Wright's advice to adults: "Don't be afraid of the topic."

The topic stirred a national debate in 2007 with the summer premiere of "Juno," a film about a bright and sharp-witted teen, played by Ellen Page, who carries an unwanted pregnancy to completion. A box office hit, it earned four Oscar nominations.

But some commentators predicted the film would inspire more teen births and worsen a national problem. The numbers had been edging up in the two years before the movie's release.

They feared a "Juno Effect."

Instead, pregnancies sharply decreased in 2008 and continued further south in later years.

Not that "Juno," "Knocked Up" or any other film factored into the decline, wrote Amy Benfer for Salon.com in 2010: "There may have been no such thing as a 'Juno Effect.' But if there had been? It would have caused teen pregnancy rates to go down."

### Sites and apps

The same is being theorized about telecommunications.

A 2010 report funded by the Ford Foundation, for example, found 89 percent of teens use the Internet to address delicate questions about sexuality and reproductive health, often before asking family members or medical professionals.

Websites such as Columbia University's "Go Ask Alice" and a growing marketplace of mobile apps can respond to queries about birth control, menstruation and STDs.

"Young people have increased access to comprehensive information on sexual health care that can be confidentially accessed through their smartphones," said Jamia Wilson, executive director of California-based YTH, which researches and develops youth-targeted software tools.

“The practical advantage of making this available on mobile devices is they can get information rapidly, when they need it and wherever they are,” she said.

With every attempt to explain the trends in teen pregnancies, skeptics serve up counterpoints.

The Internet and social media are notorious purveyors of wrong information. The CDC surveys that show abstinence holding its own are predicated on youths volunteering the truth. And the questionnaires don’t ask about sexual acts that can’t lead to pregnancy.

### **The economy?**

“To me, it might be an indirect influence — if teens are paying attention to what’s happening in their households or neighborhoods,” said Sam Sturgeon of Demographic Intelligence, which forecasts birth patterns for companies marketing to young families.

He added: “Knowing what affects teens is always a challenge, isn’t it?”

At the three area locations of Rachel House, a nonprofit that answers youths’ questions about contraceptives and alternatives to abortion, “it’s the same old story,” said executive director Kathy Edwards. “They think it (unplanned pregnancy) happens to other people. ...

“They’re still showing up. We see pregnant kids who have good relationships with their parents and kids without that support. We see kids who go to church and who don’t go to church.”

Active in the organization since 1993, Edwards said young people today do seem less apt than before to view abortion as a simple procedure without consequences.

“In those early years, a lot of young people talked about just getting rid of a blob of tissue. That’s what we heard all the time. ‘Blob of tissue,’” she said.

“There are not many people who believe that anymore.”

### **Rap session**

India Williams, outreach consultant for a local radio program called “Generation Rap,” expressed surprise at the reason The Star asked to interview her young charges: “I thought teen pregnancy was going up.”

On Saturday mornings, the KPRS station off Red Bridge Road turns the airwaves over to students from 10 area high schools to discuss issues important to youths. Robinson of Lee’s Summit West is a program co-host.

Some of the teens who gathered at the station earlier this month shared Williams’ assumption — that their peers were as sexually active as ever and incidents of pregnancy probably weren’t plummeting.

But when the newspaper shared the findings of the research papers and surveys, the “Gen Rap” kids began to nod.

Some had seen “16 and Pregnant” and “Teen Mom.” And yeah, the shows did spotlight heartache in real girls with whom they could relate, they said.

The programs also captured the indifference in young fathers who vanish from the family scene.

And while the Web may not always provide the most reliable information, said Grandview High School student Erica Spencer, “Google can be a comfortable place for some teens. You can ask whatever you want.”

Spencer and her fellow Gen Rappers, mostly girls, said a number of other theories about pregnancy rates made sense. They, like the academics, suspected no one factor drove the trends.

There is group dating, which limits one-on-one encounters. There are online relationships. Same-sex relationships.

And the group credited parents who discuss how their own decisions led to families formed too soon.

Albert of the national prevention campaign said it’s good they talk it out. With parents, especially.

“The role that parents play may be the most important factor of all.”