

Pragmatic Problem-Solving Reduces Teen Birth Rate

The most recent statistics on births to teenage moms in America provide continuing good news.

The birth rate among teens has been declining for a long time, and that trend is holding. There's also good news in the apparent reasons for the decline.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention just released stats for 2015. They show the birth rate for U.S. teenagers dropped to 22 per 1,000 individuals from 24 per 1,000 the previous year. That's an 8 percent drop in just one year.

In 1970, U.S. teens gave birth to almost 645,000 children; in 2015, the figure was about 230,000.

On its website, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy provides a snapshot that shows Florida is part of the national trend, which is down 64 percent since 1991. Florida's teen birth rate for 2014 was 22.5 per 1,000 girls, which translates to 12,816 births or a decline of 67 percent since 1991.

The snapshot also shows a decline in Florida's teen pregnancy rate. The pregnancy rate, which also has decreased dramatically nationwide, is different from the birth rate, which only includes live births. The organization says Florida's teen pregnancy rate, measured in 2011, fell 58 percent since the peak year of 1988, to 56 pregnancies per 1,000 teen girls.

What's causing the decline in teens having babies? Experts think fewer teens are having sex and that those who do are more likely to use birth control. That's borne out by a report this year from the Pew Research Center. In 2013, it says, 44 percent of teens who never have been married reported that they have had sex. That's a decrease from 51 percent in 1988.

Further, a big majority of never-married teens who have had sex used birth control the first time they had sex. And they are using more effective forms of birth control.

In 2015, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 40.3 percent of Florida high school students said they'd had sex and 86.1 percent said they'd used some form of contraception the last time they had sex.

There has been a lot of discussion and disagreement about the best way to reduce teen pregnancies. Those preaching abstinence are accused of being naïve. Those calling for education about birth control and access to contraception are accused of giving teens the OK to have sex.

It turns out that both abstinence and contraception are contributing to the decline in teen pregnancies. There is an important lesson here. When polarized camps agree on the overriding goal and accept pragmatic solutions, they can make progress.

Imagine, for example, if the current shouting contest about guns and terrorism could be steered by a similar process.

Different groups can have different primary reasons for seeking a reduction in the number of teen pregnancies. Some are most concerned about reducing the number of abortions. Some are most concerned about reducing the number of children born into poverty. Some are most concerned about the health risks to teen mothers or the fact that teen moms are much more likely to leave school.

The key is that they are united by a common goal and, truly, many share multiple motivations as well. Anti-abortion groups are not callous about childhood poverty; family planning advocates would be thrilled if no teen ever had to choose to have an abortion.

For all the good news about the trend in teen births and pregnancies, there are some disturbing statistics as well. Although births among non-white teens have been declining rapidly, it's still not enough. The CDC reports that teen birth rates for non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics still were more than two times higher than the rates for non-Hispanic white teens.

So there's another hallmark of a successful change in societal behavior — despite all the progress, everyone agrees that the goal still is ... more progress.