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Teens and Risky Behavior: Is it Getting Better or Worse?

By Beth Teitell JUN. 23, 2016

Parental alert: just in time for summer break, there's some good news from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention about teens and risky behavior.

Smoking rates have dropped to their lowest levels ever, the CDC's 2015 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance study found, and drinking, drug use, and sexual activity have also declined.

On a less encouraging note, the study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found the use of electronic vapor products, including e-cigarettes, pose "new challenges"; condom use has fallen; and despite a decrease from 2009 to 2015, nearly 17 percent of high school students say they've taken potentially addictive prescription drugs — such as OxyContin, Percocet, Adderall, Xanax, or others — without a doctor's prescription. In 2009, 20.2 percent had taken such drugs without a prescription.

So why has the prevalence of many risky behaviors fallen among teens?

Bill Albert, spokesman for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, says perhaps it's as simple as this: "There's a hell of a lot more entertainment available to young people than ever."

And this: "Maybe the rendezvous at the park has been replaced by texting in your bedroom."

The percentage of high school students who are currently sexually active (who have had sexual intercourse during the past three months) has been decreasing since 1991, according to the CDC, dropping from 38 percent in 1991 to 30 percent in 2015.

At the same time, however, among high school students who are currently sexually active, condom use decreased from 63 percent in 2003 to 57 percent in 2015, following more than a decade of increases that peaked in the early 2000s.

Sharon Levy, director of Boston Children's Hospital's Adolescent Substance Abuse Program, attributes declines in drinking and smoking traditional tobacco products to "consistent" public health messages.

"But unfortunately," she added, "there are always new products on the market, like e-cigarettes."

Cigarette use among teens has decreased significantly, from 28 percent in 1991 to 11 percent in 2015, according to the CDC. But the 2015 survey found that 24 percent of high school students reported using e-cigarettes during the past 30 days.

Stephanice Zaza, the director of the agency's Division of Adolescent and School Health, says gathering data on this young population is crucial.

"We know that adolescence is a time when healthy or risky behaviors are established, and these behaviors can last a lifetime," she said.

Among the study's other findings:

- Just under a third of respondents had at least one alcoholic drink in the 30 days before the survey, down from 45 percent in 2007. About 63 percent have ever had a drink, down from 75 percent in 2007.
- Teens continue to be at risk by using wireless devices while driving. Nationwide, 42 percent of students who had driven a car or other vehicle during the past 30 days reported texting or e-mailing while driving. This percentage did not change from 2013.
- Among students who are currently sexually active, 21 percent have drunk alcohol or used drugs before the last sexual intercourse.
- HIV testing has also decreased from 13 percent in 2011 and 2013 to 10 percent in 2015.
- The percentage of high school students nationwide who had been in a physical fight in the last year has decreased dramatically from 42 percent in 1991 to 23 percent in 2015. But bullying, both in-person and electronic, has remained at a troubling 20 percent and 16 percent, respectively.

Looking at the study as a whole, Albert, of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies, says today's teens are "more cautious," than those of previous generations.

"A lot of those things parents tend to fret about — guess what? — teens are doing better," he said.