

Teen Pregnancy Success Story

One of the nation's great national success stories of the past two decades has been the truly stunning declines in teen pregnancy and childbearing. Nationally, rates are down around 50 percent and the progress in Massachusetts has been even more impressive. Since the early 1990s — wait for it — teen pregnancy is down 57 percent and teen births have plummeted 62 percent. Not a typo and not too shabby an achievement on an issue many once considered intractable.

Surprised? You're not alone. In a recent national survey, fully half of adults in this country incorrectly believe the nation's teen pregnancy rate has increased over the past two decades and just 18 percent understand that rates of early pregnancy and parenthood have declined.

Make no mistake. The credit for this great good news goes to teens themselves. More are delaying sex, they are reporting fewer sexual partners, and they are using contraception more consistently and carefully. In short, the magic formula of less sex and more contraception is behind the historic declines in teen pregnancy.

The question of why teens have become more careful about pregnancy does not fit into such a neat and tidy portfolio. Consider the following plausible explanations:

The fertility rate for women of all ages has declined in recent years, not just among teens. The steady decrease in teen births over many years now has probably created a cycle of positive peer influence of sorts. Thanks in part to a robust federal investment in proven approaches, more communities are using effective, research-based programs that actually move the behavior needle. There is now credible evidence that MTV's wildly popular shows *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* have played a role in the nation's progress in preventing teen pregnancy — teens view these shows as more sobering than salacious. There has also been a substantial amount of time, attention, and action on this issue at the state level, including the very effective leadership of the Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy. And the list goes on.

Despite all this happy news, things are not all rainbows, lollipops, and unicorns. There are plenty of reasons why Massachusetts and the nation need to continue to invest in prevention. Despite the stunning progress noted above, it is still the case that nearly three in 10 girls in the U.S. get pregnant by age 20. Somewhere in the neighborhood of 85 percent of these pregnancies are unplanned. That is, teens themselves say they did not want to get pregnant.

Moreover, although the progress the nation has made has been both wide and deep — there have been substantial declines in teen pregnancy in all 50 states and among all racial/ethnic groups — great disparities remain. For example, the teen pregnancy rate among Latina teens has declined dramatically. Even so, it is still more than twice as high as the rate for non-Hispanic white teens.

Another reason to stay the prevention course is the high taxpayer costs associated with teen childbearing. New data from The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy show that in Massachusetts, teen childbearing cost taxpayers at least \$154 million in 2010 alone. For the nation overall, the costs were \$9.4 billion. Between 1991 and 2010, there have been 108,212 teen births in the Bay State, costing taxpayers a total of \$4.8 billion over that period.

It is critically important to note, however, that the off-the-charts progress Massachusetts has made in preventing teen pregnancy and childbearing have also resulted in real cost savings. The teen birth rate in Massachusetts declined more than 50 percent between 1992 and 2010. This success in reducing teen childbearing saved taxpayers an estimated \$268 million in 2010 alone compared to the costs they would have incurred had the rates not fallen.

One very important note: Whenever we celebrate the declines in teen pregnancy or shine a light on reasons why it remains important to help young people avoid early pregnancy and parenthood, it is also important to recognize the countless teen mothers — past and present — who have built strong families and who are heroically and successfully raising amazing, happy, healthy children. They need and deserve our admiration and support, not our judgment or second guessing.

May is Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month. Let's agree to thank the teens in our lives for one positively remarkable national success story. Let us also agree to recommit ourselves to helping teens navigate adolescence and improving child and family well-being.