

# Chicago Tribune

## Editorial: Good News--the Teen Birthrate Keeps Falling

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Teen culture often looks like a riot of raunch. Modern kids can watch TV dramas featuring high schoolers coupling. They have easy access to pornography. They even engage in “sexting” — sending explicit photos of themselves to others in text messages. Never have youngsters been so exposed to carnal fare or so pressured to join the fun.

But familiarity doesn’t always attract. In spite of the climate in which they live, today’s American teenagers are notable less for their wild abandon than for their self-restraint. A new report from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention finds that teen birthrates declined by a gaudy 10 percent from 2009 to 2010 — “reaching the lowest level reported in the United States in seven decades.” This is the acceleration of a long-standing trend. Since 1991, the birthrate among those ages 15-19 has plunged by 45 percent.

What’s more, the progress extends across all racial categories. Among African-Americans, the rate is down by 56 percent in the past two decades. Hispanics saw a decline of 46 percent. Things have improved in states with relatively high rates (which are mostly in the South and Southwest) and in states with low rates (which includes all of New England). The rate in Illinois is just below the national average.

Nor is this a consequence of higher abortion rates. Quite the contrary: From 1988 to 2008, notes the Guttmacher Institute, the abortion rate among 15-to-19-year-olds fell by 59 percent.

So what’s going on? Believe it or not, one reason for the decline in pregnancies is that adolescents are doing it less. From 1991 to 2011, the percentage of high school students who had ever had sex fell from 54 percent to 47 percent.

Those who do engage in intercourse are being smarter about it. Some 80 percent of teens who have had sex say they used contraception the first time they did so. Most girls now use what the CDC calls a “highly effective” means — such as intrauterine devices and birth control pills and implants. Compared with the past, more of them insist on double protection — a highly effective method and a condom.

Education about contraception and the consequences of unwanted pregnancies have clearly had an effect. The Department of Health and Human Services has found 31 different sex education programs that produce positive results, and it has promoted them.

Modern teens may be more willing to discuss these matters with their parents, whose advice can be critical. “When we ask teenagers directly: Who influences your decisions about sex? Surprise. Year after year after year they say parents,” Bill Albert, the chief program officer of The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, told Time magazine.

More youngsters go on to college than in the past, and more face a forbidding job market. Both facts are bound to induce caution. It’s hard to afford a higher education if you’ve got a child to support, and it’s hard to afford a child if you don’t have a job.

But the biggest single factor is that today’s adolescents are smart about sex and pregnancy. That may not make good TV. But it makes good reality.