

US Teen Births Fall to Historic Low: What Has Been Helping

Births to teenagers in the United States have reached a historic new low, with the rate cut by more than half since 1991, according to a report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued Friday.

Even just in the last few years, the numbers have dropped sharply: From 2011 to 2012, the rate declined 6 percent, from 31.3 births per 1,000 down to 29.4. That followed an 8 percent decline between 2010 and 2011, and a 9 percent decline the year before. The rates are down in all 50 states, and among all racial and ethnic groups.

The high-water mark for births to young women aged 15 to 19 came in 1991, with 61.8 births per 1,000. The CDC's National Center for Health Statistics has been tracking the numbers since 1940. But since just 2007, the rate has declined by one-third.

"It's off-the-charts extraordinary progress," says Bill Albert, chief program officer of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. "And the pace of progress is accelerating."

Why is this happening? Abortion is not the answer. The rates of both teen pregnancy and abortion are also going down.

Mr. Albert suggests two primary factors:

- The availability of more methods of contraception, especially more effective methods. Intrauterine devices (IUDs) are being prescribed more frequently, and while they don't protect against sexually transmitted diseases the way condoms do, they are nearly foolproof in blocking conception.

"Young people sometimes use condoms incorrectly, and sometimes they forget to use condoms," pediatrician John Santelli, professor of family health at Columbia University, tells NBC News. "There is almost zero user error with the IUD. Once it is in place, it works every time."

- The economy. At first blush, the nation's economic struggles since 2008 may not seem all that relevant to a teenager. But in fact, the economic downturn tracks well with overall declines of fertility among women of all ages. And certainly, poor economic prospects would logically discourage some teens from getting pregnant intentionally.

"Teens track what their older peers are doing, and they are keen observers of the culture around them," says Albert. "Imagine you're growing up in a family that's had to cut back, or your best friend's father is unemployed. It's reasonable to say that in the abstract, that has had a sobering effect."

In fact, Albert says, there are many likely factors that could be feeding into the lower teen birth rate. One is MTV's two shows focused on teen parenthood – "16 and Pregnant" and "Teen Mom," on which the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy played an advisory role.

In a survey last year, the National Campaign found that most teens took a sobering message from those shows – to a degree greater than adults expected. Among young people age 12 to 19, 77 percent said the shows help teens better understand the challenges of pregnancy and parenting. Only 53 percent of adults felt that way about teens' perceptions.

The National Campaign also found that majorities of both adults and teens believe increased media attention has been one reason for the big declines in teen pregnancy.

Sex education is another element, whether it be comprehensive – promoting both delayed sexual activity and the use of contraception – or "abstinence only."

"Communities have a larger smorgasbord from which to choose, based on community values," says Albert.

As public funding for reproductive health services has come under attack – particularly via legislative efforts to defund Planned Parenthood and other clinics, which have succeeded in some states – advocates added a note of caution to the new CDC data.

"While the continuing decline in teen birth rates is welcome news, it is important to note that the US still has the highest teen birth rate of any developed country and there are significant disparities among racial and ethnic groups," Leslie Kantor, vice president of education for Planned Parenthood Federation of America, said in a statement.

"We need to continue working to ensure that all young people get the information and access to services they need to prevent both pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases."