

## American Teens Are Waiting to Have Sex

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After years of steep declines, the rates of teens having sex has plateaued, according to a report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) out today.

About 44 percent of girls and 47 percent of boys ages 15 to 19 reported having had sexual intercourse in 2011–2013. Though the percentage has declined significantly over the past 25 years—by some 14 percent girls and 22 percent for boys—the figures haven't budged in a statistically significant way since 2002.

The report also states boys are more likely to lose their virginity at an earlier age than girls, but by age 17, the likelihood that both will have had sex evens out. Roughly 18 percent of boys have had sexual intercourse by age 15, 44 percent by age 17, and by age 19, 69 percent of boys had given away their V-card. For girls, only 13 percent had had sex by age 15, but by age 17 and 19, they reported about the same rate of virginity as boys.

Teens are putting off sex for several reasons, according to previous survey data. The most popular reason has always been because of religious beliefs or morals, but surveys have shown boys also delay sex out of fear of getting a girl pregnant and not having found the right person. While the data is heartening for teen health advocates, keeping in mind that the number one reason behind the delay is moralistic, it should be noted that these surveys are self reported via laptop. And although this is may be the best method available to researchers currently, it still can only report what teens say about having sex, not what they're actually doing behind closed doors.

Most of these teens are using contraceptives for their first time, a trend that's held steady since 1988. Around 79 percent of girls and 84 percent of boys report using some form of contraception the first time they had sex. The condom is still the most popular method, followed more troublingly by withdrawal, and then the pill.

The largest jump in contraceptive use for girls was emergency contraception. In 2002, only eight percent of teen girls had ever used the morning after pill, but from 2011–2013, that number jumped to around 22 percent. The newfound popularity is undoubtedly tied to the recent increase in accessibility. In 2013, the FDA approved the non-prescription use of Plan B One-Step for women over 15 years old.

Teens who choose to protect themselves the first time they have sex correlates to young people who continue to practice safe sex. "It sets you on a trajectory of being a contraception user," said Gladys Martinez, the report's lead author and a statistician with the National Center for Health Statistics. In fact, the report notes that teen girls who do not use some form of contraception the first time they have sex are twice as likely to become teen moms as those who do.

There's a lot missing from this report. It doesn't contain data on oral sex, or sexual acts other than intercourse. (Data shows one in seven teens who have not had intercourse have engaged in oral sex.) But the myopic focus of the report is understandable, as it is specifically meant to understand risk of teen pregnancy. And though teen sex may have stalled, teen pregnancies and birth continue to fall. In 2013,

the U.S. birth rate for teens ages 15 to 19 hit 26.5 births per 1,000 dropping 57 percent from its peak in 1991. Even that all-time low is one of the highest teen birth rates in the developed world, one that costs the public \$9.4 billion a year.

"Teens are doing a whole hell of a lot right," said Bill Albert, Chief Program Officer for The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. "There has been progress in all 50 states, and across all racial and ethnic groups. That progress has been very wide and deep."

The credit for such progress, Albert says belongs to "a common sense approach" to sex education—one that includes advice urging both abstinence and contraception—the kind that the US Department of Health and Human Services keeps in a database of successful evidence-based programs.

Still, Albert concedes there is more work to be done.

"The message here is that progress can and has been made on a very challenging social issue and the credit goes to teens themselves," he says. "But it is not time to hang a 'Mission Accomplished' banner or declare victory. It's not like a polio vaccine, where you get a shot and are immune. We need to continue to work."