


 The Economist

## Setting aside childish things

America's teenage-pregnancy rate has hit a 40-year low

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TEXAS has long been the centre of the abstinence-only movement. A 2009 report from the Texas Freedom Network (TFN), based on classroom materials from 990 school districts used during the 2006-2008 school years, found that only 4% of districts were even trying to teach students about any option other than abstinence. Many of the rest were relaying incorrect information about contraception, or turning to blatant shame and scare tactics. Nor is sex education the only factor; access to contraception is also a big concern. Texas has one of the highest teenage-pregnancy rates in the country.

But things are changing, in Texas and around the country. Between 1990 and 2008, according to a June 2012 report from the Centres for Disease Control (CDC), the teenage-pregnancy rate dropped by 40% nationally. In Texas, the fall was almost as large. It is now nationally at its lowest recorded level in more than 40 years. If the birth rate had stayed where it was in 1991, an additional 3.4m babies would have been born to teenagers between 1992 and 2010.

The progress has been national and thorough. Nearly every state has seen a decline, as has every ethnic group. The drop has been particularly precipitous among black teenagers, although black and Latina teenagers continue to have a much higher pregnancy rate than Anglos and Asians.

It is also that rare phenomenon, a public-health victory for which no one is claiming credit. Better information, inside and outside the classroom, must be a factor. Last year, for example, the Texas Freedom Network had an important update: during the 2010-11 school year, 25.4% of the state's school districts had moved to an "abstinence-plus" curriculum. It has also become easier to get information from elsewhere. A 2010 study from the Kaiser Family Foundation found that more than half of middle- and high-school students have looked up health information online. These sites, however, are not necessarily any more accurate than a health textbook in Texas.

MTV may have been a good influence. In 2010 the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, a non-partisan advocacy group, assigned dozens of teenagers to watch several episodes of "16 and Pregnant", a reality series that followed a handful of the girls in question. Almost all the young viewers agreed that teenage parenthood was harder than they had imagined. The show was also, the study's authors reported, a good conversation starter; fully 40% "talked to a parent afterward", which may be progress.

Teenagers themselves are being more cautious. True, between 1991 and 2011 the share of high-school students who reported that they had never had sex dropped from 54.1% to 47.4%. But those who are sexually active are behaving more responsibly: 60.2% said that they had used a condom during their most recent encounter, up from 46.2% in 1991. Just 12.9% admitted to using no contraception at all.

By other measures, curiously, teenagers are still feckless. In 2011 the CDC also reported that they are no more likely to eat a vegetable every day, or to drink milk, than they were in 1991. Some sexually transmitted infections, for that matter, are becoming slightly more prevalent.

But avoiding pregnancy requires motive as well as opportunity. So part of the explanation is simply that teenagers are trying harder not to become parents. That is despite the high rate of youth unemployment and the staggering costs of university, which might discourage young women from looking for a job or seeking higher education. There is still room for improvement; America's teenage-pregnancy rate remains the highest of any rich country. But if teenagers are planning a bit more carefully than they used to, that at least is a cheering sign.