

# San Jose Mercury News

## Mercury News Editorial: California's Teen Pregnancy Rate Success

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California's remarkable success in curtailing its out-of-control teen pregnancy rate illustrates what the state is capable of doing when it focuses its resources on measurable results.

In 1991, in the midst of the AIDS crisis, California had the worst teen pregnancy rate in the nation, with 160 out of every 1,000 girls ages 15-19 becoming pregnant, more than double the national average. Twenty-four years later, it has cut that rate by 60 percent, transforming what was perceived as an insurmountable problem into one of the state's most stunning social policy success stories. Abortion rates are down as well, even though the state has not compromised a woman's right to choose.

While California's progress has greatly contributed to the United States attaining its lowest teen pregnancy rate in nearly 40 years, it's no time for complacency: We still have the highest teen pregnancy rate of any developed country in the world.

To continue improving, California has to raise its Medi-Cal reimbursement rates to make sure teens get the health care they need, and the federal government has to fund preventive teen pregnancy programs.

"It's absolutely without question that preventing teen pregnancy is infinitely less costly in terms of money and misery than having to deal with the alternative," says Linda Williams, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood Mar Monte, the organization's largest affiliate in the nation spreading over 42 California and Nevada counties. "So many things would be so much better handled if we as a society were a little more into prevention and less into intervention."

Williams says teen moms are less likely to graduate from high school and more likely to live in poverty, forcing them to rely on welfare to make ends meet. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy estimated in 2011 that the annual cost to society of teen pregnancy is nearly \$11 billion. Reducing teen pregnancies has also led to welcome progress in reducing the number of abortions in the state.

The idea for solving the problem was remarkably simple: Provide teens with quality sex education and access to contraceptives. California leads the nation in strategies to help teenagers, male and female, make more responsible choices. No other state comes close.

But implementing those solutions was anything but simple. The Legislature and governors -- including Republicans Pete Wilson and Arnold Schwarzenegger -- showed courage by rejecting abstinence-only programs favored in other states. They instituted comprehensive sex education programs that taught abstinence but also an objective, medically accurate, age appropriate sex education curriculum.

This is how California reduced its teen pregnancy rate to 59 per 1,000 teens age 15-19. But other countries do much better, including Switzerland (8 per 1,000 teens), Netherlands (14 per 1,000 teens), Sweden (20 per 1,000) and England (21 per 1,000). So the bar remains high.