

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Editorial: Education, Contraception, and Less Sex Brings Down Teen Birth Rate

September 16, 2013

Sex education, less sexual activity among teens and more use of contraception are being credited for the lowest teen birth rate in the United States since 1940.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued a report Sept. 6 showing a 6 percent drop from 2011 to 2012 in the birth rate for mothers ages 15 through 19. The report noted that the rate has declined across nearly all ethnic and racial groups.

The rate is the lowest since data on teen births have been collected, according to the study, and is about half what it was in 1991. In that year, the rate was 61.8 births per 1,000 teens. Last year's rate was 29.4 births per 1,000 teens in the 15 to 19 age group.

"The remarkable decline in the nation's teen birth rate is certainly one of this country's crowning achievements in the past two decades," Bill Albert, chief program officer for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, said last week.

Mr. Albert said teens themselves deserve credit for the "remarkable" turnaround, which he said in the early 1990s was a problem thought to be "intractable and inevitable."

Among the reasons Mr. Albert cited for the decline is that teens are delaying sex, having fewer sexual partners and using contraception more frequently. He added that there are more methods of contraception available to teens today than there were decades ago, and that some of the methods, such as IUDs, are highly effective.

Another reason: The larger menu of effective sex education programs being offered in communities. Mr. Albert noted that the programs are no longer based on ideological perspectives but on outcomes, and that they offer complementary, not contradictory, strategies to teens. He said the Obama administration has invested millions of dollars in making better sex-ed programs available to communities throughout the country.

Another influence, according to Mr. Albert — "MTV." The youth-oriented television network broadcasts two reality shows that depict the day-to-day struggle of teens raising babies. He said his organization's surveys on the effect of the programs "Teen Mom" and "16 and Pregnant" show that they discourage teens from wanting to have children.

To me that is sex education for the 21st century," Mr. Albert said.

Despite the turnaround, he cautioned that rates of teen childbearing in the United States remain far higher than in other countries and that the nation should not be "lulled into complacency" by the good news.

The CDC report also found a drop in the birth rate for women in their early 20s, from 85.3 births per 1,000 women to 83.1, another record low. The birth rate for women ages 30 to 34 increased slightly, as did the birth rates for women ages 35 to 39.

Paula Gianino, president of Planned Parenthood in St. Louis, agreed with Mr. Albert.

"The U.S. still has the highest teen birth rate of any developed country, with Missouri and Illinois at the national average of around 25 percent," she said. "We must continue to answer the call to provide young people with information and access to services they need to prevent both pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, no matter what."

A social problem that has been corralled in 20 years is something to be proud of, but we must be mindful that there still are teens having unwanted and unintended pregnancies. Solutions are out there: more education, more readily available contraception and guidance on the value of delaying sexual activity. They should be made universal.