

U.S. Teen Birth Rate Hits Record Low

But American young people are still having babies at rates higher than other rich nations, CDC says

By Steven Reinberg, HealthDay Reporter

Over the last two decades teen births have dropped 37 percent in the United States and are now at a record low, government health officials report.

While this is good news, the U.S. teen birth rate is still up to nine times that of other affluent nations, and more than 410,000 teen births were recorded in the United States in 2009 alone, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

“While we are making significant progress in bringing down the teen birth rate, we have much more work to do in order to bring those rates in line with other developed countries,” Ursula Bauer, director of CDC’s National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, said during a noon press conference Tuesday.

Another expert agreed.

“The report makes clear that the United States is a real outlier in teen pregnancy,” said Bill Albert, Chief Program Office at the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. “Even with these extraordinary declines it is still the case that 3 in 10 girls get pregnant in their teenage years and our rates remain far higher than other comparable countries,” he said.

Speaking at the press conference, Dr. Wanda Barfield, director of the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion’s division of reproductive health, said that teens may still not be getting the sex education they need to protect themselves.

“Teens are not receiving abstinence education, as well as sexual education,” she said. “Only 50 percent of high school students are getting comprehensive sexual education including abstinence and contraception,” Barfield added.

The new CDC report is based on 2009 data on those aged 15 to 19. It finds that about 46 percent of teens say they’ve

had sexual intercourse and about 14 percent of girls and 10 percent of boys say they do not use any type of birth control.

The report emphasizes the need for sex education as well as talking with parents about pregnancy. In addition, teens who are sexually active need access to contraception that is both affordable and effective, the report’s authors say.

In terms of contraception, condoms are recommended for boys, and birth control pills, hormone shots, or an IUD, are the most effective methods for girls, the team said.

According to the report, teen births also vary among racial and ethnic groups.

Hispanics have the lowest use of contraceptives and also the highest teen birth rates. In addition, black and Hispanic teens are about 2.3 times more likely to have a baby than white teens. Among black teen girls, 58 percent said they have had sex, compared to 45 percent of Hispanic girls and 45 percent of white girls, the researchers found.

Among boys, 72 percent of black boys say they have had sex, compared with 53 percent of Hispanic boys and 40 percent of white boys.

Teen pregnancy also has emotional, physical and economic costs, the CDC noted. For example:

- half of teen mothers don’t graduate high school before 22.
- Girls of teen mothers are one-third more likely to become teen mothers.
- Children of teen parents are more apt to drop out of school and become teen parents themselves.
- Teen moms are more likely to deliver a premature or low birthweight baby.
- Babies born to teen moms are more likely to die in infancy.

According to the CDC, teen pregnancy and births cost taxpayers about \$3 billion each year, some \$6 billion in lost taxes, and almost \$3 billion in other public costs.

Still, the number of very young parents continues to decline. Not only have teen birth rates been going down, but there have also been declines in the rates of abortions for all age groups including teens, Barfield said.

“We are also seeing declined in the rate of high school students who are sexually active,” she said, “and we are seeing increases in contraception among high school students who are sexually active.”

Commenting on the report, Albert said that it “underscores something that is counterintuitive to many adults: that the progress the nation had made in preventing teen pregnancy has been nothing short of extraordinary.”

“When it comes to teens and sex, adults usually think the news is bad and probably getting worse,” he added. “The bad news is our rates are still too high,” Albert said.

To get teen pregnancy rates further down, parents need to get more involved, Albert said. “In surveys, teens say it is parents, not peers, not popular culture, that most influence their decisions about sex,” he said. “Parents have a role in talking early and often with their kids about relationships, sex and contraception,” he added.

“What’s driven the teen pregnancy rate down is a combination of less sex and more contraception,” Albert added. “So we need to encourage more of both.”

Albert advises teens delaying sex is the first and “best option. But that has to be coupled with a message for kids who are having sex, that it is critical that they use contraception each time they have sex.”