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Report shows bounce in bouncing babies

Two-thirds of U.S. pregnancies now end with the birth of a baby, a significantly higher rate than in 1990, when abortions were one-third more common than now, says a federal report on pregnancy rates and outcomes.

In 2008 — the latest year for these data — more than 6.5 million pregnancies were reported. Of these, 4.2 million, or 65 percent, resulted in live births, the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) said in its report released Wednesday.

The remaining third of pregnancies were almost evenly split between abortion and fetal loss, with 1.2 million pregnancies, or about 18 percent, ending intentionally and an additional 1.1 million, or 17 percent, ending in miscarriage or stillbirth.

The 2008 figures are quite different from 1990, when 61 percent of pregnancies went to term, 15 percent were lost and 24 percent ended in abortion.

Besides showing that abortion is continuing to wane as an outcome of pregnancy, the 2008 figures point to a gradual increase in fetal loss — “which is one of those tricky areas” to assess, said Stephanie J. Ventura, lead author of the NCHS report.

One explanation for increases in fetal loss could be that more pregnancies are identified earlier, which would allow for more early-term miscarriages to be identified as well, said Ms. Ventura. Also, since the risks for miscarriage and stillbirth rise with a woman’s age. The overall trend toward later-in-life pregnancies may be playing a role, too.

Pregnancy rates for women in their early 20s “declined to the lowest level in more than three decades,” the report said. Also, women in their early 30s continued to have higher pregnancy rates than women age 18 or 19, a dramatic reversal that started around 2002.

A major highlight of the report is the record-low pregnancy rate for teens.

The 2008 rate of 69.8 pregnancies per 1,000 15- to 19-year-olds is the lowest since 1976. Teen pregnancy rates have trended down for all ages and for all racial and ethnic groups.

This decline is “one of the nation’s great success stories of the past two decades,” said Bill Albert, chief program officer of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

Moreover, teen pregnancy rates should continue to fall because teen birthrates between 2008 and 2010 have continued to drop, he said. Teen abortion rates have not gone up, which means teens are doing “what everyone had hoped for,” Mr. Albert said — actively preventing pregnancy.

Other highlights of the NCHS report, “Estimated Pregnancy Rates and Rates of Pregnancy Outcomes for the United States, 1990-2008”:

- The 2008 U.S. pregnancy rate was 105.5 pregnancies per 1,000 women ages 15 to 44.
- Among teens, 754,000 pregnancies were reported in 2008. About 58 percent of these pregnancies ended in live births, while 26 percent ended in abortions and the rest in fetal loss.
- The pregnancy rate for young teens reached a record low in 2008, with 1.4 pregnancies per 1,000 girls 15 and younger. Of the estimated 14,000 pregnancies in 2008 in this group, 6,000 ended in live births, 6,000 were aborted and 2,000 ended in fetal loss.
- Pregnancy rates for both married women and unmarried women were fairly stable, with 116.2 pregnancies per 1,000 married women, and 96.2 pregnancies per 1,000 unmarried women. However, 84 percent of abortions in 2008 were to unmarried women.