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U.S. Fertility Plummets to Record Low

American fertility has reached a record low, driven by falling birthrates among teens and women in their early 20s, the federal government says in a new report being released Thursday.

The number of teen births in 2013 — 274,641 — was the lowest number ever reported for the United States, researchers said in their report on preliminary birth data for 2013.

Overall, America's total fertility rate fell to just 1.86 births per woman, the lowest since 1986 and a 1 percent decrease from 2012. That figure puts the U.S. on the same course with many Western European nations and Japan, where the birth rate has fallen below what demographers call the "replacement rate," usually around 2.1 births per woman, needed to keep a country's population from falling. The U.S. last had a total fertility rate of 2.1 births in 2007.

With its new figure of 1.86, the United States looks like it will lag behind Australia (1.92), France (2.01), Sweden (1.91) and the United Kingdom (1.90) but have higher fertility than Brazil (1.81), China (1.66), Japan (1.41) and Russia (1.59), according to 2012 data from the World Bank.

In many of those countries, the governments have adopted public policies deliberately designed to encourage women to have more children.

Researchers say the striking drop in teen birth rates is a main driver in the shifting population numbers.

"The fact that it's another historical low just cannot be underscored enough it really has dropped precipitously," said Brady E. Hamilton, a report author and researcher at the National Center for Health Statistics.

Taken as a whole, the number of births in the United States in 2013 ticked up slightly to 3,957,577, about 5,000 more births than in 2012.

The changes in the overall fertility rate reflect a profound shift in U.S. family patterns, due in part to the trend of more women choosing to have their first baby later in life.

That trend — which has been going on for "quite some time" — affects childbearing because if a woman postpones her first baby, it can diminish the chance that she will have a second, said Mr. Hamilton.

The new record-low teen birthrate — 26.6 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19 — represented a 10 percent decline from 2012 and a 57 percent drop since 1991, the most recent peak for teen births, the report said.

Reasons for this historical decline include more teens abstaining from sexual intercourse until they are older, better contraceptive use and fewer sexual partners, said The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy and Unplanned Pregnancy.

Even MTV's popular reality shows "16 and Pregnant" and "Teen Moms" have had an impact: In the 18 months after the first episodes aired in June 2009, the shows have had a measurable effect in pushing down teen pregnancies and births, economists Melissa Kearney and Phillip Levine said in a January study published by National Bureau of Economic Research.

"This new research shows that, rather than glamorizing teen pregnancy and pregnancy as some have suggested, '16 and Pregnant' and 'Teen Mom' are more sobering than salacious," wrote Bill Albert, chief program officer at the national campaign.

Abortions among teens are also down — the 2010 rate of 14.7 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15-19 is “the lowest since abortion was legalized,” Guttmacher Institute indicated in a major report released earlier in May.

Even women in their young 20s are having babies in fewer numbers.

According to the report, roughly half of all births in 2013 were to women in their 20s. However, the birthrate for younger adult women fell to a record low of 81.2 births per 1,000 women aged 20-24, and both the birthrate and number of births to women in their late 20s fell slightly from the previous year.

Meanwhile, birthrates rose modestly for women in their 30s and 40s — about 1.5 million births were to women in their 30s and 120,000 were to women in their 40s.

A final key indicator — the birthrate for unmarried women — fell 1 percent in 2013 to 44.8 births per 1,000 unmarried women aged 15-44. This rate was 14 percent lower than the peak seen in 2007-2008.

The number of births to unmarried women (1,605,643) was also lower, as was the percentage of all births to unwed mothers (40.6 percent) from the previous year.

Other findings from the new report, “Births: Preliminary Data for 2013”:

- The general fertility rate slipped to a record low of 62.9 births per 1,000 women aged 15-44.
- Births to the youngest girls, 14 and under, also fell, to 3,108 births, the lowest number of births to this group ever reported.
- The Cesarean delivery rate and preterm birthrate both fell in 2013, while the low birth weight rate was unchanged.
- Birthrates were stable or slightly up for most ethnic and racial groups; Asian and Pacific Islander women saw a 2 percent decline in their birthrate.