

# The Washington Post

## How MTV's '16 and Pregnant' Led to Declining Teen Birth Rates

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Since they premiered, MTV reality shows “16 and Pregnant” and “Teen Mom” have raised whoa-so-many eyebrows. A very vocal contingent of dismayed adults feared the shows glamorized teen pregnancy. That the young moms on the show often graced the covers of magazines such as *Us Weekly* only further proved that point: teenagers watching the show, the thinking went, would be jealous of the teen moms’ lives and celebrity. Bring on the pregnancy pacts! Unprotected sex for everyone, everywhere!

As it turns out, though, “16 and Pregnant” didn’t inspire viewers to have kids; it inspired viewers to use contraception. “Media Influences on Social Outcomes: The Impact of MTV’s 16 and Pregnant on Teen Childbearing,” a study conducted by Professors Melissa Kearney of the University of Maryland and Phillip Levine of Wellesley College released early this year, finds that the MTV “Teen Mom” franchise did far more good than harm. Using data from Google Trends, Twitter, Nielsen ratings and Vital Statistics birth data, Professors Kearney and Levine found that teens who watch “16 and Pregnant” immediately go online to search for (and tweet about) birth control and abortion. Through some very impressive and fascinating dot-connecting, Kearney and Levine found that “16 and Pregnant” led to a 5.7% reduction in teen births — a percentage that accounts for one-third of the total decline in teen births: 20,000 fewer teen births a year.

Some background from the study: In 2012, 29.4 out of every 1,000 girls between the ages of 15 and 19 gave birth in the U.S. It’s a good number and a bad one, depending on how you look at it: that’s a much higher rate than in any other developed nation (typical rates in the rest of the first world: 5-10 births per 1,000 girls) but it’s much lower than rates were in the U.S. 20 years ago, when there were a whopping 61.8 births per 1,000 teen girls. (Imagine the Facebook feeds, everyone.)

As Kearney and Levine, who have been working on teen birth rates for more than 20 years, write in the study: “[T]he realities of the lives of teen mothers are presented in ways that may have been unknown or difficult to imagine for other teens viewing the show.” By shattering whatever cutesy, tiny-sock-wearing fantasy would-be mothers may have had before watching the show, “16 and Pregnant” revealed teen parenting as it actually is: grueling, expensive, exhausting, and, without an incredibly support system, often lonely.

For a more detailed analysis of the study — how it was constructed, why most conventional wisdom about changing teen birth rates is wrong, and what these findings really mean, I reached out to Professor Phillip Levine. Below is a condensed and edited version of our conversation.

### How did you decide to look into the impact of “16 and Pregnant” in the first place?

Teen childbearing has been mostly declining at a relatively slow pace for the past couple of decades. In 2008, it started falling a lot more quickly... [Professor Kearney] and I were very interested in thinking about what was happening. We read all the press accounts about the decline, and we knew the literature well enough to know that most of the conventional wisdom answers aren’t right.

### What are some of those conventional wisdom answers?

Like, “We finally learned how to do sex education better,” or “abstinence-only programs are finally starting to work,” or “we have better ways to distribute contraception.” Sort of all the standard answers. Regardless of their effectiveness, they aren’t going to be able to explain a huge decline over the course of a year. And we read a press report through The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy [that] said [the decline] was partly about labor market predictions, where there are cyclical patterns, and partly about “16 and Pregnant.” That was novel and it was a plausible explanation. So we decided to investigate it.

### How familiar were you with “16 and Pregnant” and “Teen Mom” before you began your study?

At that point, I knew absolutely nothing about the show. I kind of knew that it existed, I think I spent 10 minutes watching one in a hotel room that time. But I knew next to nothing about it. Of course the first thing [Professor Kearney and I] did, was, we Googled it. And it took about five minutes to realize that there was a controversy about the show, that a bunch of people thought it glamorized teen birth... And as the show progressed a little bit, and the teen birthrate dropped at the same time, people offered this conjecture that it was depressing teen birth as well.

How do you go about connecting those two things: the birth-rate and the TV show? Because it would be easy to point out that they aren't necessary affected by one another.

The easy criticism is that people learn somewhere along the line that correlation is not causation; just because teen births are falling when the show was starting doesn't mean one caused the other. We are very familiar with that point of view.

### **So what kind of data do you use?**

The simplest version is, we have Nielsen ratings about MTV shows, and we want to know, in the places where MTV shows are more popular, is it the case that at the moment when "16 and Pregnant" started, [the teen birth rate dropped]? You should expect to see a bigger reduction in teen birth in the places where more people are watching the show. And it's got to be about the changes in birth rate, because if it's always high or always low, we don't care. We want to know, did the birth rate drop. And we find that the timing of the decline is very tightly intertwined with the airing of the first show, and we see that it has an effect on the age group [that watches the show]. It gets a pretty big following up to about age 24, so you see an effect on birth through age 24 but not beyond.

### **How do you get from people watching the show to teen birth rates dropping in real life? Because even the best TV isn't actually birth control.**

We know where babies come from. So can we find something to show that that behavior is changing as well? It would be great to get data directly about contraceptive use and sexual behavior, but that's very difficult to do. So we decided to try out new data sources. In terms of social policy research, the use of Google Trends data and Twitter data is pretty novel... and it allows the researcher to actually get inside the heads of the viewer of the show to see what is changing about what they're thinking about immediately afterwards. And it's amazing.

### **What did you look for?**

Apparently, when kids are watching TV these days, they have their phone in their hand. And when they see things that are meaningful to them, they tweet about them, or they search for another idea. So we see these huge spikes in searches and tweets immediately following the airing of a new [episode]. The first thing they're searching on is the show itself and making some comment: "I just saw '16 and Pregnant,' blah blah." But you can also link that to searches for birth control and abortion.

### **What specific search terms did you use?**

In tweets, the search terms we used were "birth control" and "abortion." In Google, where you can be a little more specific, we used "how do you get birth control," "how do you get birth control pills," "how do you get an abortion."

### **What did you find?**

What we were able to find was a very large number of tweets that literally said "'16 and Pregnant' is the best form of birth control." Thousands of tweets say that, or some variant of that. "Just watched '16 and Pregnant,' remembered to go take my birth control." [We] also [saw] this apparently big movement of binge watching, mother-daughter "16 and Pregnant" marathons, which would never have occurred to me, except there's people tweeting about it. So it opens up the possibility of this dialogue between mothers and daughters.

### **In the grand scheme of factors that influence the decline in teen birth rates, how big a contributor are these TV shows?**

The economic conditions and the severity of the recession definitely contributed. During periods in which it's difficult for a teen to get a job, and it's difficult for the teen's boyfriend and the teen's parent to get a job, people are sitting there thinking, "It's not obvious whether there's going to be any support for this kid. It may not be a good time to get pregnant." That happens across the age distribution, [not just to teenagers]. That was actually the biggest factor. We calculate that over half the decline is contributable to [the economy]. "16 and Pregnant" accounts for about a third.

### **Now that you're a "16 and Pregnant" and "Teen Mom" expert, what do you think about the shows? Just as a viewer, are you hooked?**

I think it's incredibly compelling. I don't know how anyone could possibly watch an episode of "16 and Pregnant" and think that it glamorizes teen pregnancy. It's a very honest portrayal of the difficulties that these girls face. Anyone who thinks they're going into this with a high probability that their boyfriend is going to stick around, or that they'll continue their education, or maintain their friends, or continue going out and socializing, and maintain strong family relationships: there's conflicts everywhere in these girls lives.

I think what "16 and Pregnant" is so successful at doing is portraying images that seem very real. And that's why it works. It has exactly the right combination of, it's MTV and they know what kids like, and they can market the show in a way that draws in large numbers of viewers — because if nobody sees it, what difference does it make? — and including messages which are very honest and realistic.