

# The Washington Post

## Can Faith Prevent Teen Pregnancy?

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When it comes to discussions of teen culture, teen sexual culture in particular, many adults shake their heads in resignation and wonder where things went off the rails. Sexualized media, parents who are not parental, and a general coarsening of the culture overall are usually fingered as the culprits for a generation gone wrong. Simply put, for many adults, teen culture is little more than a blur or bare midriff — a riot of raunch.

That is why it may surprise many parents and other adults to learn they are wrong—really wrong—about teens. For some time now, teen sexual culture can be fairly characterized by two words: increasingly responsible. In fact, one of the nation's great success stories of the past two decades has been the truly extraordinary declines in teen pregnancy (down 42 percent) and teen childbearing (down 49 percent). The good news is found in all 50 states and every racial/ethnic group—all have made significant progress.

This profound change in the culture remains the greatest story never told. In a recent national survey commissioned by my group, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, just 18 percent of adults in the U.S. believed that the teen pregnancy rate had declined over the past two decades and fully 50 percent incorrectly assumed that the rates had increased.

It may be even more surprising for adults to ponder the role that faith and individual morals and values have played. Among those teens who haven't had sex, the primary reason they give for...well...not doing it is that having sex at this point in their lives is against their religion or morals, according to the most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Research makes clear that religion, faith, and a strong moral sense play vital roles in protecting teens from too-early sexual activity and teen pregnancy. In particular, being connected to a religious community has been linked with a decreased risk for teen pregnancy. Moreover, a survey we released this week suggests that the majority of Americans

want more from religious groups rather than less. Some 52 percent of adults and 57 percent of teens think religious leaders and groups should be doing more to help prevent teen pregnancy.

Esperanza, one of the largest Latino faith-based evangelical networks in the U.S., is answering the call. The group is releasing a rich set of materials at its annual National Hispanic Prayer Breakfast and Conference this week. Included are data and research on teen pregnancy and related issues, relevant Bible studies and suggested activities and ideas on how faith leaders can openly discuss topics such as sex, dating, and relationships with teens and their parents as well.

The new resource was developed by Esperanza (with our help) and will be given to all 600 attendees of the conference. Twenty faith leaders will be trained to use the new resource; in turn, they will train more than 200 additional faith leaders in major metropolitan areas nationwide.

The efforts of Esperanza and other faith leaders are critically important for another reason. Despite the remarkable progress the nation has made in preventing too-early pregnancy and parenthood, it remains the case that nearly three in ten girls in this country get pregnant by age 20. It is also true that great disparities remain: rates of teen pregnancy and childbearing among African-American and Latino teens remains far above the nation average despite the impressive strides made by both groups of young people.

What's faith got to do with teens, love, sex and pregnancy? Quite a lot as it turns out.