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Plunging birthrate of U.S. teens 'amazing'

In 16 states, teen birthrates tumbled by at least 20 percent in recent years, the federal government said in a report. Large declines such as these helped push the nation's teen birthrate to a new low in 2010.

It's a "pretty amazing" set of trends, said Brady E. Hamilton, senior researcher and co-author of the Tuesday report from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), which provided state data and other details about the 2010 teen birthrates.

These data show "a truly extraordinary American success story," said Bill Albert, chief program officer for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

"You couple these impressive declines with the better than 40 percent decline in teen pregnancy ... and it really is quite remarkable progress," he said.

Mr. Albert, whose group was not involved with the report, attributes the decline to a shift in teen behavior.

"More teens are delaying sexual activity, which is a good and responsible thing to do. And those teenagers who are having sex are using contraception better."

The NCHS report shows that in 16 states - including Maryland and Virginia - teen births fell between 20 percent and 29 percent between 2007 and 2010.

Thirty-one states and the District reported rate decreases by at least 8 percent during that three-year period.

Three states - West Virginia, Montana and North Dakota - showed no significant differences.

Birthrates also fell for each race and ethnic group. In three groups of teens - blacks, American Indians, and Alaska Natives and Asian and Pacific Islanders - the 2010 rates were more than 50 percent lower than the 1991 peak.

Teen birthrates also have fallen in every age group. The 2010 rate for the vulnerable 10-to-14 age group reached a record low of 0.4 births per 1,000.

The depth and breadth of these declines show that the teen birth issue is not the problem of "a particular group of teens, a particular region of the country or a particular socioeconomic class," Mr. Albert said.

Instead, the data show "that progress can and has been made" in different areas and different circumstances, he said. When states such as Mississippi, as well as those as diverse as California and Maryland, show 20-plus percent declines, "it is quite encouraging," he added.

The NCHS report also calculates the number of births to teen mothers "that were averted, if you will," as a result of the teen birthrate declines, Mr. Hamilton said.

The teen birthrate peaked in 1991 and has fallen almost without interruption since. As a result, an estimated 3.4 million babies were not born to teen mothers since 1991, the report said.

Preliminary birth data for 2011 for all ages should be out this summer, Mr. Hamilton said. Early indications seem to show "a leveling off" in all birthrates.

The national campaign, however, would not like government agencies to conclude that the teen-pregnancy problem is "solved," Mr. Albert said. "What goes down can go back up again," he said. Children are constantly entering their teenage years, and the messages and policies aimed at them need to stay fresh and innovative.

"We can't continue to rest on [the idea that] what worked in the past will work in the future," Mr. Albert said.