



Fact Sheet

Recent Trends in Teen Pregnancy, Sexual Activity, and Contraceptive Use

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- ◆ **How big is the problem?** Teen pregnancy and births rates declined steadily during the 1990s. However, despite these declines, *34% of girls in this country still get pregnant at least once before age 20.*¹ There are 820,000 teen pregnancies each year and about half as many teen births.²
- ◆ **Why should we care about teen pregnancy and childbearing?** Compared to women who delay childbearing, teen mothers are less likely to complete high school and more likely to end up on welfare. The children of teen mothers are at significantly increased risk of low birthweight and prematurity, mental retardation, poverty, growing up without a father, welfare dependency, poor school performance, insufficient health care, inadequate parenting, and abuse and neglect. U.S. taxpayers shoulder at least \$7 billion annually in direct costs and lost tax revenues associated with teen pregnancy and childbearing.³
- ◆ **What are the current trends in the teen pregnancy and birth rates?** After increasing 23 percent between 1972 and 1990 to an all-time high, the teen pregnancy rate for girls aged 15-19 decreased 27 percent to 86 pregnancies per 1,000 girls aged 15-19 in 1999 (the most recent year that national data are available).² The teen birth rate increased 23 percent between 1986 and 1991. Since then, the rate has fallen 30 percent to 43 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19 in 2002.⁷
- ◆ **How does the United States compare with other countries?** The United States has the highest rates of teen pregnancy and birth — by far — of any comparable country.⁴
- ◆ **Why has the teen pregnancy rate declined?** Both less sex and more contraceptive use are making important contributions to the decline in the teen pregnancy rate. That is, teen pregnancy rates have been declining because a smaller proportion of teens were having sex and the pregnancy rate among sexually active teens decreased due to better contraceptive use (and also, perhaps, to less sexual activity among those with some sexual experience).⁵
- ◆ **How many teen pregnancies are intentional?** The vast majority (78 percent) of pregnancies among teens are not fully planned or intended.⁶
- ◆ **How many teen mothers are married?** At present, 80 percent of births to teen mothers are out-of-wedlock — a dramatically different picture from 30 years ago when the vast majority of births to teen mothers were within marriage. In fact, nearly half of all non-marital *first births* in the United States occur to teens.⁷
- ◆ **Is teen sexual activity declining?** Between 1970 and 1990, the proportion of teen girls aged 15-19 who were sexually experienced increased from 29 to 55 percent before declining to 52 percent in 1995.⁵ The proportion of never-married teens males aged 15-19 who were sexually

experienced decreased from 60 percent in 1988 to 55 percent in 1995.⁸ The proportion of high school students who were sexually experienced decreased from 54 percent in 1991 to 46 percent in 2001.⁹

- ◆ **Are teens having sex earlier?** While the proportion of teen boys who first had sex at age 14 or younger remained constant, the proportion of teen girls who first had sex at age 14 or younger *nearly doubled* between 1988 and 1995.⁸
- ◆ **What about teen contraceptive use?** Contraceptive use among teens is a very mixed bag. While the percentage of teens using contraception the *first time* they have sex has been steadily increasing since 1982, the percent of teens using contraception the *last time* they had sex is declining. Between 30 and 38 percent of teen girls who use contraception use it inconsistently.⁸
- ◆ **How does the American public view teen pregnancy?** The overwhelming majority of adults *and* teens believe that teens should not be sexually active but those who are should have access to contraception, according to a 2003 National Campaign survey. However, a clear national consensus exists that school-age teens should not have sex — more than nine of ten adults (94 percent) *and* teens (91 percent) said it is important that teens be given a strong abstinence message from society. Advocating abstinence while also providing teens with information about contraception is not a “mixed message,” according to large majorities of adults (68 percent) and teens (77 percent).¹⁰

ENDNOTES

1. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. (2004). *Fact Sheet: How is the 34% statistic calculated?* Washington: Author.
2. Henshaw, S.K. (2004). *U.S. teenage pregnancy statistics with comparative statistics for women aged 20-24*. New York: The Alan Guttmacher Institute. Hamilton, B.E., & Martin, J.A., & Sutton, P.D. (2003). Births: Preliminary data for 2002. *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 51(11).
3. R.A. Maynard, Ed. (1997). *Kids having kids: Economic costs and social consequences of teen pregnancy*. Washington: The Urban Institute Press.
4. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. (2001). *Halfway there: A prescription for continued progress in preventing teen pregnancy*. Washington: Author.
5. Flanigan, C. (2001). *What's behind the good news: The decline in teen pregnancy rates in the 1990s*. Washington: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.
6. Henshaw, S.K. (1998). Unintended pregnancy in the United States. *Family Planning Perspectives*, 30(1):24-29, 46.
7. Martin, J.A., Hamilton, B.E., Sutton, P.D., Ventura, S.J., Menacker, F., & Munson, M.L. (2003). Births: Final data for 2002. *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 52(10). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2002). 2000 natality data set [CD-ROM]. CD-ROM Series, 21(14).
8. Terry, E., & Manlove, J. (2000). *Trends in sexual activity and contraceptive use among teens*. Washington: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.
9. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2002). Trends in sexual risk behaviors among high school students – United States, 1991-2001. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 51(38), 856-859.
10. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. (2003). *With one voice 2003: America's adults and teens sound off about teen pregnancy*. Washington: Author.