

Teen Birth Rates Down in All States

Black teen rates reach record lows

By Jennifer Brooks

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Good news! For the first time in over a decade, the national teen birth rate has dropped significantly in all 50 states. African American teens experienced the sharpest decline in birth rates during the same period. Although rates for Hispanic teens fell, they are now higher than other groups, according to a 1998 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). The findings were discussed during HHS's Healthy People 2000 Progress Review for Women, held May 1998 at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland.

According to Clay E. Simpson, MSPH, Ph.D., Deputy Assistant Secretary for Minority Health, making life better for our youth was essential. "Many teenagers had nothing to do after school. Where we've put in playgrounds and organized the community to provide youth with something to do that is productive, that in itself helped reduce the rates," Dr. Simpson said during the Healthy People 2000 satellite conference.

The most recent data showed that between 1991 and 1996, teen birth rates declined 5 to 12 percent for White, American Indian, Asian, Pacific Islander and Hispanic girls ages 15 to 19. The preliminary U.S. teen birth rate in 1996 was 54.7 live births per 1,000, down 12 percent from 1991 when the rate was 62.1. But the largest decline by race since 1991 was for Black teens.

The overall rate for Black teenagers fell significantly between 1991 and 1996. Once the highest, the Black teen birth rate, age 15 to 19, dropped 23 percent—making the rate the lowest ever reported for that group. Hispanics now have the highest teen birth rates in the country.

According to NCHS, Black teens had the greatest reductions in birth rates—91.7 per 1,000 births—in both 15-to-17 and 18-to-19 years age groups. The rate for older black teens, 18 to 19 years, dropped 16 percent. Hispanic teenage birth rates had very little change during 1991 and 1995, before declining 5 percent between 1995 and 1996.

Teenage pregnancy rates have also declined in the U.S. from 1991 to 1994, and has continued to fall since then, according to NCHS. This figure is based on the continued decline in the teenage birth rate and preliminary data that show a drop in abortions among teenagers since 1994.

"The reasons are very complex," said Helen Rodriguez-Trias, Ph.D., co-director of the Pacific Institute for Women's Health. "We're not seeing only the impact of programs that make family planning more accessible to young people...or programs dealing with sex education alone. We're also looking at cultural changes as to what young

people see for themselves," said Dr. Rodriguez-Trias. "The way to sustain this positive trend is to improve young people's quality of lives by closing the gaps between rich and poor, young and old," she said.

Contributing to the decline in teen birth rates are indications that teenagers nowadays are less likely to be sexually active, and sexually active teens are more likely to use contraception, according to NCHS.

There has been success in lowering the birth rate for both young and older teens. "We must give teens hope. But its too early to celebrate. We still have among the highest rates of teen births for a developing nation in the world," said Thomas Kring, Ph.D., Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Population Affairs in HHS.

Findings from the report show that although teen birth rates declined in all states, many states still have high numbers of births by teenagers. For example, in 1995—the most recent year state-specific rates are available—Vermont had a 28.6 per 1,000 birth rate while the rate was 105.5 per 1,000 births in the District of Columbia. According to NCHS, given that birth rates for Hispanic and Black teenagers are more than double the rates for non-Hispanic White teens, states with relatively high proportions of Hispanic and/or Black teenagers have higher overall teenage birth rates.

The recent declines in U.S. birth rates reverse the 24 percent rise in births by all teenagers from 1986 to 1991. But birth rates today are still higher than they were just prior to that period when the rate was at its lowest point—50 to 53 births per 1000 teens age 15 to 19. In 1957, the U.S. experienced its highest teen birth rate at 96 births per 1,000 women ages 15 to 19. But most teens who gave birth during the 1950s, 60s and 70s were married, unlike the majority of teen mothers today who give birth out-of-wedlock.

There are some significant health consequences for teenage child-bearing. For example, teen mothers are much less likely than older women to receive prenatal care during their first trimester, or throughout their pregnancy. Also, teenage mothers are more likely to smoke and are less likely to gain adequate weight during pregnancy, thus putting their babies at increased risk of low birth rate, serious and long-term disability, and mortality during the first year of life.

The report on teenage birth rates is the first in a series of statistical summaries by NCHS designed as an easy-to-read presentation of the key data and facts on critical public health issues. The report can be downloaded from the NCHS home page at: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchswww>. Copies are also available at (301) 436-8500. A similar report on the 40-year low birth rate for single Black women was released by NCHS in June 1998. ❖

