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Politics & People / By Albert R. Hunt

Beware the Moral Cops

There is some important good news for which Republicans and Democrats alike can share credit: The teen birth and pregnancy rate in America has plummeted over the past decade.

Last year there were 41.7 births per 1,000 kids between the ages of 15 and 19, down dramatically from 61.8 in 1991, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports. The progress is across the board, among younger teens too and especially pronounced among African-Americans.

The best evidence suggests this decline is attributable to comprehensive approaches to the teen-pregnancy problem. These include more and earlier safe-sex education and better distribution of contraceptives, positions advocated by many Democrats and the Clinton administration. It also probably includes sexual-abstinence programs and welfare reforms championed by conservatives and the Bush administration.

There is only one group that seems unhappy: the moral right. With an obsession about anything sexual, these forces—like Lou Sheldon and his Traditional Values Coalition and the demagogic televangelist Jerry Falwell—would undo important research and programs affecting teenage sex as well as sexually transmitted diseases.

These morality cops, boosted by last month's election, argue the traditional values they champion provided the margin of victory for President Bush and Republicans around the country. That is a gross exaggeration but a perception shared by more than a few grateful politicians.

There will, and should be, big fights over abortion and judicial appointments.

Both sides are ready. These debates will be passionate and open.

More worrisome, however, may be the numerous fights that these forces will wage, as my friend Ralph Reed once put it, "below the radar screen." (This was in Ralph's Christian right days before he found the real manna from heaven by shaking down Indian tribes on gaming issues; that's for another day.)

On teenage pregnancy, the big push from the right has been for abstinence-only programs. Federal support for these efforts, advocated by many conservatives, including President Bush, has soared the past few years. This may be having some limited success; in evaluating the encouraging news about declines in teen pregnancy, a separate CDC study shows a little over half is attributable to decreased sexual experience and almost half due to improved contraceptive use.

But only a portion—some experts say a small portion—of the reduction in sexual activity can be attributed to abstinence-only initiatives. The Bush administration has postponed for two years a national evaluation of these programs amid reports there is scant empirical data that they really work.

The Lou Sheldons want to fund more abstinence-only programs by de-funding other sex-education and contraception-distribution efforts.

That would be catastrophic, says Sarah Brown, national director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. No one has played a more important role than this bipartisan private organization started less than a decade ago. (My wife is on the board.)

Sarah Brown and her colleagues—the chair is Tom Kean, who made time for meetings even while he was chairing the 9/11 Commission—have encouraged myriad approaches, including abstinence-only, improved contraceptive information, more and earlier sex education in schools, and working with, sometimes pressuring, the entertainment industry not to glorify sex. "Nobody is sure why kids are having less sex and using more contraception," she says, "but a very rich brew of activities is working."

Almost everyone agrees teens should

The Right Direction

Birth Rate Among U.S. Teens (aged 15-19)

1991	6.18%
2003	4.17

Leading factors in teen pregnancy rate decline

Decreased sexual experience	53%
Improved contraceptive use	47

Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control

be encouraged to delay sex, but it's not the real world to make this the only message. The public gets this; polls soon to be released by the teen-pregnancy campaign show that adults and teens overwhelmingly believe that youngsters should be given both a strong abstinence message and more information about contraception. The CDC research, Sarah Brown argues, should "lessen some of the counterproductive arguments in this country that pit abstinence against contraception."

There is much work left to do. Even with recent progress, America still has the highest teenage-pregnancy rate

among major industrialized countries in the world; one in three teenage girls in America still gets pregnant.

But the right-wing Traditional Values Coalition crowd has a penchant for going after those programs that work. Another target is the National Institutes of Health—widely considered one of the most efficient federal agencies. Some of the more important research NIH does is on sexually transmitted diseases. But the critics have tried to kill studies of psychological factors in sexual risk-taking, drug-use behavior of Asian prostitutes in San Francisco and sexual activity at truck stops:

They revel in claiming a waste of taxpayer monies. But all these programs have important potential benefits, particularly in combating the spread of AIDS. Emotional factors help explain irrational promiscuity; the spread of AIDS in parts of Africa is directly related to truckers; and some suspect truckers are contributing to the alarming recent increases of AIDS infection in rural America; and an important factor in spreading the disease to the heterosexual community is drug use.

Unfortunately, this is more than just the fringe effort it should be. This Congress came within two votes in the House of eliminating five specific NIH grants. Dr. Chris Beyrer, a professor of epidemiology at Johns Hopkins and one of the House targets, recalls a meeting in which an NIH program director warned scientists that any NIH grant proposal that includes words like "sex" or "gay" or "prostitute" would be rejected.

Voters may have sent a message about values on Nov. 2. This wasn't it.