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Teen births down; unwed moms up

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The U.S. teen birthrate fell again in 2005 to a new historical low, however, almost all of these births were to unwed mothers, which helped push the percent of unwed births to a record high.

The teen birthrate of 40.4 births per 1,000 women ages 15 to 19 was a modest 2 percent decline from 2004, according to preliminary data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

It is the lowest teen birthrate recorded in 65 years of federal record-keeping and marks a 35 percent drop since 1991, when there were 61.8 births per 1,000 teens.

However, more than four out of five of teen births are to unmarried women. When these unwed births are added to the more than half of births to women 20 to 24 that are also out of wedlock, they help push the unwed birthrate to a record 36.8 percent.

The rise in unwed births is "disastrous, about as big a leap as we've ever had," said Robert Rector, welfare analyst at the Heritage Foundation.

When welfare reform passed in 1996, the unwed birth figures leveled off and seemed to stabilize for a while, Mr. Rector said. But recent increases in these numbers "clearly show that the impact of welfare reform is now virtually zero, and we are going back to the way things were before welfare reform."

Focus on the Family sexual health policy analyst Linda Klepacki applauded the "great news" about sinking teen birthrates but said the rise in unwed childbearing is a sign that "our culture and policies are not supporting marriage."

"We know that more than anything stable marriages help to bring children and mothers out of poverty. So when we link this to economics, it's very sad news," she said.


Referring to the teen birthrate, the "most impressive" decline was seen among black teens, said Brady Hamilton, a researcher at the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics and lead author of the report.

The birthrate for black teens of high-school age fell 6 percent from 2004 to 2005, more than any other age or race group.

"In the last few years, the most dramatic declines happened among black girls," said Brenda Rhodes-Miller, executive director of the D.C. Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, who noted with pleasure that latest data show the District's teen-pregnancy rate has also fallen, to 79.4 pregnancies per 1,000 teens.

Still, "we haven't seen the same kind of declines in Latinas, so we've got to redouble our efforts to make sure we reach all these boys and girls with the message that there's

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something better for you to do in your teen-age years than become a parent," she said.

Sarah S. Brown, director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, said the new declines in the teen birthrate "give this nation something else to be grateful for this Thanksgiving week."

But the nation should "resist the inclination to consider this problem solved and move onto something new," she said.

"Teen childbearing in the United States remains far higher than in other countries, and despite the impressive strides the nation has made on this issue, adolescent childbearing still costs taxpayers at least \$9.1 billion annually," said Mrs. Brown, citing a recent campaign report on public costs of teen childbearing.

Other highlights of the CDC's preliminary birth report:

- The total number of births in 2005 rose 1 percent to 4,140,419. Of these, 1,525,345 were to unwed mothers. The number of births to teen mothers was 421,123.

- The decline in teen births was due almost entirely to declines among girls 15 to 17; birthrates among those 18 to 19 and 14 and younger were essentially unchanged.

- The birthrate for women 20 to 24 increased by less than 1 percent, while the birthrate for women 25 to 29 -- the most common age for motherhood -- remained unchanged.

- Birthrates among women in their 30s and 40s continued to rise, reaching rates not seen since the 1960s.

- The rate of Caesarean sections rose 4 percent, to 30.2 percent of all births.

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