

# Birthrate among teenagers drops to record low

By Rita Rubin  
USA TODAY

The birthrate among U.S. teens, which has been falling since its peak in 1991, dropped to an all-time low in 2005, according to preliminary data released Tuesday by the National Center for Health Statistics, part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Among Hispanic teens, though, the birthrate is twice as high as the overall teen birthrate.

Overall, the preliminary 2005 rate for females ages 15-19 was 40.4 births per 1,000, down from 41.1 in 2004 and 61.8 in 1991. The Hispanic rate for teens 15-19 was

81.5, down from 82.6 in 2004 and 104.6 in 1991.

Abstinence and contraceptive use "are still driving factors" behind the declining teen birthrate, says demographer Stephanie Ventura, co-author of the report.

Fear of contracting a sexually transmitted disease has helped spur teens to use condoms or delay having sex, says Bill Albert, deputy director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, a non-profit group based in Washington.

"AIDS has a way of getting a guy's attention in a way pregnancy did not," Albert says.

Some highly effective contraceptives weren't available in 1991, Al-

bert notes. One, Depo-Provera, requires one shot every three months, he says.

Still, Albert says, citing the Hispanic teen birthrate, "there are some hints here that the impressive progress that the nation has made may be slowing down."

Language and cultural differences may partly explain why the gap between the Hispanic teen birthrate and the overall teen birthrate is as wide as ever, he says.

To help narrow the gap in Washington, Mary's Center for Maternal and Child Care runs programs for teens and preteens, says Vanessa DeCarbo, director of advocacy and communication.

Program goals include motivating young people to consider the impact a baby would have on their families and on their economic futures, DeCarbo says.

Other record findings in the preliminary 2005 births data:

- ▶ The proportion of births to unmarried women rose to 36.8% — or more than 1.5 million babies — in 2005, up from 35.8% in 2004. "It's not a teenage issue," Ventura notes, "which was the case 20, 30, 40 years ago." About 40% of unmarried women who had their first baby in 2005 lived with the father. "It's not the same as marriage, but at least it suggests some stability," Ventura says.

- ▶ The proportion of preterm babies — those born at less than 37 weeks of gestation — rose to 12.7%, up from 12.5% in 2004. The preterm birthrate has increased 20% since 1990. In addition, the percentage of low-birth-weight babies rose 8.2% — the highest level since 1968 — up from 8.1% in 2005. That rate has increased more than 20% since the mid-1980s.

- ▶ The U.S. C-section rate — up 46% since 1996 — hit an all-time high of 30.2%, an increase of 4% over 2004. "It's really going through the roof," Ventura says. Rates were up for all age groups and all race and Hispanic-origin subgroups.