

THE 5% SOLUTION

Reversing the Rise in the Teen Birth Rate



Why is the Teen Birth Rate Increasing?

The United States has made extraordinary progress in reducing rates of teen pregnancy and birth. Since the early 1990s, the teen pregnancy rate has declined 38 percent and the teen birth rate has declined by one-third. In fact, few social problems have improved quite as dramatically over the past decade plus.

The most recent news on this front, however, has not been positive. After 14 straight years of overall decline in the teen birth rate, and declines in all 50 states and among all racial/ethnic groups, the teen birth rate increased five percent between 2005 and 2007. The key question is, of course, what is causing this recent increase? Based on the limited data that are available, the observations of those who work directly with teens nationwide, and researchers who study the issue, there are several clues that help explain the recent increase. Here are several:

More sex, less contraception. Declines in sexual activity and increases in contraceptive use among teens—the two factors that drove the steep decreases in the teen pregnancy and birth rates beginning in the early 1990s—have apparently stalled out. In fact, although the changes have been small and not statistically significant, sexual activity increased and contraceptive use by sexually active teens decreased among high school students between 2005 and 2007.

Less concern about HIV/AIDS. Observers have long believed that concern about HIV/AIDS has helped make young people—in particular, young men—more cautious about sexual activity and more vigilant about contraceptive use,

and that these concerns helped to drive the decline in teen pregnancies and births over many years. Now, however, there is evidence to suggest that concern among young people about HIV/AIDS is not as pronounced as it once was. For example, a recent survey of those ages 18-29 who say they are personally very concerned about becoming infected with HIV declined from 30 percent in 1997 to 17 percent now and those citing HIV/AIDS as the most urgent health problem facing the nation dropped from 44 percent in 1995 to 6 percent at present. And according to the CDC, the proportion of high school students who say they have ever been taught about HIV/AIDS has decreased from a high of 92 percent in 1997 to 83 percent in 2007.

Reaching older teens. Recent National Campaign analyses suggest that nearly three-quarters of the increase in overall teen birth rates can be attributed to older teens (age 18 to 19) rather than younger teens (age 15 to 17). Efforts to prevent teen pregnancy have largely ignored older teens and recent increases in the teen birth rate underscore the need for additional, more creative interventions that reach older teens. In short, high school sex education may not “carry forward” into non-high school years.

Changes in the makeup of the teen population. The overall increase in the national teen birth rate is due, in large part, to increases in the birth rate among teens of all racial/ethnic groups. Even so, a National Campaign analysis suggests that 24 percent of the three percent increase in the teen birth rate between 2005 and 2006 alone may be due to underlying changes in the racial/ethnic makeup of the teen population

Limited information about contraception. Abstinence should be stressed as the first and best option for teens. It is developmentally appropriate, widely supported by parents and teens, and the only certain way to prevent too-early pregnancy and parenthood. But the reality is that it is those teens who are having sex and not using contraception who get pregnant. The nation's emphasis on abstinence-only education in recent years may not have provided young people with adequate information about contraception or enough encouragement for sexually active teens to use contraception consistently and carefully.

Complacency, fewer resources, and prevention fatigue. Until quite recently, the news about teen pregnancy and childbearing in the United States had been almost universally positive. The uninterrupted good news may have led to complacency on the part of practitioners and parents and may have served as a green light for policymakers and funders to divert attention and resources for effective interventions away from preventing teen pregnancy to other initiatives.

An informal survey The National Campaign conducted in December 2008 found that in half of the 20 states that responded, teen pregnancy prevention programs received cuts in funding from public and/or private sources. Others reported flat funding. This situation may worsen as the full effects of the current economic downturn become apparent.

An "anything goes" culture. What about the role of prevailing social norms and popular culture? At present four in ten births to U.S. women are non-marital (and the rate is far higher among teens and 20-somethings); one in five teens say they have electronically sent or posted a nude or semi-nude image of themselves; and the high-profile teen pregnancies of Bristol Palin and Jamie Lynn Spears were largely greeted as the latest in a long line of celebrity baby bumps. Perhaps such trends and factors help shape the social script for teens, suggesting that getting pregnant and starting a family in the teen years as a single teen who may not have even finished high school is simply not that big a deal.