



Bristol Palin's Cameo Role in Teen Pregnancy Trend

New CDC Report Says Teen Births on the Rise; Alaska Showed Biggest Surge Among States

By JOSEPH BROWNSTEIN, ABC News Medical Unit

Although 18-year-old Bristol Palin has made headlines in recent months for her pregnancy and the birth of her son, Tripp, she has a lot of company -- in her state and in the rest of the nation.

According to the newest numbers from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, teen births increased by 3 percent nationally in 2006, reversing a 15-year decline of more than a third. And Palin's home state of Alaska -- one of 26 states to see a rise -- led the way, with a 19 percent increase in the teenage birthrate from the previous year.

"It's concerning because there was so much effort made to encourage teenagers to avoid pregnancy starting in the early 1990s," said Stephanie Ventura, an author of the study and director for natality statistics and the National Center for Health Statistics.

The numbers showed a 3 percent increase in births among women of all ages -- an increase in every age group -- as well as the first decline in the average age of mothers giving birth (from 25.2 to 25) for the first time since the CDC began tracking it.

The reversal of the trend in teen births is what most concerns experts.

"It may be that one of the nation's most extraordinary success stories of the past two decades is coming to a close," said Bill Albert, chief program officer for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. "What you have is a serious, profound change in an issue where we had nothing but good news to report for almost two decades."

While Albert did not equate every teenage pregnancy with failure, Albert said the issue is a major concern.

"There are, of course, many great success stories," he said. "But the fact of the matter is that many of them don't fare well. And importantly, their children don't tend to fare well."

Only three states -- North Dakota, Rhode Island and New York -- and the District of Columbia saw significant declines in their teen birth rates. Alaska, Mississippi, Montana, Hawaii, Kentucky, Nevada, Louisiana and Oklahoma each saw double-digit increases.

Mississippi led the nation in the teen birthrate, with 68.4 births per 1,000 women age 15 to 19, while New Hampshire had the lowest, with 18.7 births per 1,000 teenagers.

While the trends varied significantly between certain states, it remains unclear what has caused that.

"We've never known exactly why the rates have decreased so dramatically, and I don't think we'll ever fully know why they've gone up here," said Albert.



Although 18-year-old Bristol Palin drew headlines for her pregnancy and the birth of her son, Tripp, in recent months, she is far from alone, in her state or the nation. (ABC News Photo Illustration)

While the causes of the recent increase in teen births have yet to be found, Albert noted that the newest findings are of concern because they are not being driven by just a few states and the increases are found across almost all racial and ethnic groups.

But he noted that the numbers are not entirely unexpected, as recent surveys of high schoolers have revealed that efforts to curb teen sexuality and promote contraceptive use have stalled.

"It very well may be that this is driving pregnancy and birthrates," Albert said.

Though he said sexual education in schools might help, it would not reverse the recent teen birth rise on its own.

"I think the quantity and quality of sex education young people get should be of great concern, especially given the grim news offered by this report," said Albert. But, he said, "Sex education alone, no matter what type it is, is not the single answer to teen sexual behavior."

And while the recent economic downturn may curb pregnancy and births among other age groups, Albert doesn't expect it to affect teenagers.

"I don't think when teenagers hop into bed, they're sort of thinking of the national debt," he said. "Somehow, I don't think they're that cerebral about this."