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# Isles' teen pregnancy rate drops

## The lower rate means fewer children are living in poverty, a national analysis finds

By Helen Altonn  
[haltonn@starbulletin.com](mailto:haltonn@starbulletin.com)

Hawaii's teen birth rate fell 35.5 percent between 1991 and 2002, according to a state-by-state analysis released today.

Fewer children live in poverty and in single-mother households as a result of the lower birth rate, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy reported.

All states saw a decline and Hawaii's improvement topped the national average of 30 percent during the same period, according to the report. Hawaii had the 10th highest rate of decline in the nation; California had the highest at 44.3 percent, while Nebraska had the lowest at 12.7 percent.

Officials say national and state programs to discourage teen pregnancies appear to be paying off.

Although the trend has been for pregnancy rates to go down, the improvement doesn't show up in all geographic areas and ethnic groups across the state, said Momi Kamau, director of the state Health Department's Maternal and Child Health Branch.

### Child welfare

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy says that if the teen birth rate had not declined in Hawaii between 1991 and 2002:

- » Nearly 5,800 more children would have been born to teen mothers in that period.
- » Nearly 1,200 more children under age 6 would have been living in poverty in 2002.
- » An additional 900 children under age 6 would have been living in single-mother households in 2002.

"We still have reason to be concerned. We still have areas we're concerned about," she said.

The report said reduced teen births have significantly improved overall child well-being in Hawaii and across the country. "Specifically, declines in the teen birth rate have played a major role in improving child poverty in Hawaii," the report said.

The lower teen birth rate resulted in a 6 percent improvement in Hawaii's poverty rate for children under age 6 in 2002, according to the report.

A 6 percent improvement also was noted in the number of children under age 6 living in a single-mother household in 2002.

"National and state investments in teen pregnancy prevention pay huge dividends," said Sarah Brown, director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. "As this analysis clearly shows, preventing teen pregnancy is one of the most direct and effective ways states can reduce poverty and improve overall child well-being."

Despite major progress in reducing the teen birth rate, the United States still has the highest teen pregnancy rate among comparable countries, the campaign said.

One in three girls in the United States becomes pregnant by age 20, the report said.

"If all states can continue to bring down teen pregnancy and birth rates, the prospects of this generation of children and the next will greatly improve," Brown said.

Kamau said: "I'm sure that not having an unwanted or unexpected pregnancy in the home does improve the family's outcome.

"Our goal is always that every child is wanted, and we are concerned about every child and every pregnancy that arrives under circumstances where they're not planned, so we continue our family planning efforts, our outreach efforts."

The Department of Health has contracts with primary care centers and family-planning providers that do outreach for teens and young adults to prevent pregnancy or second pregnancies, she said.

Emphasis isn't just on family planning and prevention of pregnancy, Kamau said, but to strengthen young women and build their self-esteem, which "in the long run ... have a better chance of preventing pregnancy."

"It looks like things are paying off, but you want to continue to be vigilant," Kamau added. "We still have a large number of unintended pregnancies in this state."