



## State's teen pregnancy rate declining, but still high

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OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) -- Oklahoma's teen pregnancy rate has declined in recent years, but the state still has the nation's eighth-highest teen pregnancy rate, health officials said.

"We still have a long, long way to go, but we're making progress," said James Allen, state adolescent health director. "It's not a problem that's getting any worse.

A national report shows that 8,000 babies were born in 1991 to Oklahoma females between 15 and 20. That number now is down to less than 7,000 a year.

More Oklahoma teens apparently "are delaying their first sexual intercourse to a later age, and more sexually active teens are using a reliable method of contraception," said Terry Dennison, educational services director for Planned Parenthood of Central Oklahoma.

"Teen-birth rates still are too high. But an emphasis on science-based, comprehensive sexuality education and increased access to family-planning services are important," Dennison said.

Patty Leach, director of the Bartlesville-based Teen Pregnancy Prevention Coalition, said Oklahoma adolescents "are getting good, accurate information about the harmful effects of recreational sex."

Allen, who works for the state Health Department, said greater numbers of teenagers "are beginning to recognize with greater frequency that sexual abstinence ... is a viable option for them."

Abstinence "is becoming socially acceptable," Allen said, because "it's less of a stigma to be a virgin. There's nothing wrong with not having sex in high school."

But sobering views are offered by Kay Holladay, head of an Oklahoma City-based group that coordinates efforts to curb adolescent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

Holladay said 50 percent of Oklahoma teens are sexually active, and that "should scare every parent."

"We're not doing enough in Oklahoma to have consistent, comprehensive education programs that help our teens make healthy choices when it comes to sex and sexuality," Holladay said. The Legislature needs to mandate and fund programs for schools to fully address the problem, she said.

Fears of HIV and AIDS, Holladay said, don't have a significant impact these days because "kids don't see people dying from AIDS. ... It's not that much of a reality to them."

Sharon Rodine, director of Youth Initiatives at the Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy, said most Oklahoma programs aimed at preventing teen pregnancies fail to reach 18- and 19-year-olds.

Another problem is high rates of repeat births to teens.

"High rates of teen births ... result in fewer young people graduating from high school, fewer young people being ready for the work force, and more young people becoming parents before they've finished growing up themselves," Rodine said.

"We need to send a strong and coordinated message to the young people in our state, that adolescence is a time for education and growing up, not pregnancy and parenting," she said.