



Teen birth rates fall markedly, group says

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WASHINGTON - Fewer children in Missouri and Illinois are living in poverty thanks to a dramatic decline in teenage birth rates, according to a national survey released Wednesday.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy did its first analysis of state-by-state data and found that from 1991 to 2002, Missouri had a 32 percent decline in teen birth rates while Illinois saw the rate drop by 35 percent. Nationally, the decrease was 30 percent.

The decrease - which experts attribute largely to an increase in the availability of contraception - meant significantly fewer children were living in poverty and with single mothers in 2002, the last year surveyed, than would have been the case had teen birth rates continued unchanged.

The "what if" study took the teen birth rate in 1991 and kept it constant until 2002. Had the birth rate to teens leveled off instead, the report found, 26,000 more children would have been born in Missouri and 55,000 more in Illinois.

Using 2002 poverty rates, the study said that had those children been born, the number of children living in poverty would have increased by 10 percent in Missouri and by 9 percent in Illinois.

A continuation of teen births at the 1991 rate would have meant a 17 percent increase in the number of Missouri children under 6 living with single mothers - a bigger jump than for any other state - and a 14 percent increase in the number of Illinois children with single mothers.

The increase in the availability of and information about contraception is a big factor in the decreasing rate, said Bill Albert, spokesman for the National Campaign.

"Abstinence is best, but at the same time, many young people do have sex and for those young people, information about contraception is critically important, as is access to contraception," Albert said. "We view them as complementary."

Dr. Katie Plax, interim director of the Adolescent Medical Center at St. Louis Children's Hospital, said the variety of contraception available - patches and injections instead of daily pills and condoms - has helped teens who are sexually active avoid pregnancy. Most of Plax's patients, who range in age from 11 to 21, see her for advice on managing contraception.

"There's a lot more energy and focus about getting medically sound information to teens for them to make choices about their health," she said.

Pregnancies decline

St. Louis Public Schools officials report a dramatic decline over the past decade in the number of students who become pregnant. From the 1992-93 school

to last year, the number of student pregnancies dropped 42 percent, far outpacing the decline in the district's enrollment, which saw a decrease of about 15 percent over the same time period.

Although the district's sex education programs focus exclusively on abstinence, school nurses also counsel sexually active teens and refer them to clinics that offer both contraceptives and information about how to use them, said Richelle Clark, supervisor for the district's office of health services.

In many cases, Clark said, students have "not just an increased use of contraceptives but also a more informed use of contraceptives."

But LaMont McCurry, a student at Roosevelt High School, said while students are hearing the messages, not everyone is acting on the information. McCurry, 16, was hanging out at the St. Louis Galleria on Wednesday with Virgil Warren, 18.

Both of the teens have a child, each about a year old.

"We had to figure out the hard way," McCurry said.

They said they were surprised teen birth rates are down, though they do know a number of girls who get birth control injections.

"They're hearing about (birth control), but they aren't using it," Warren said. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy's data mirror other recent studies, including Duke University's Child Well-Being Index, which said the teen birth rate has dropped from 20 births per 1,000 girls in 1992 to about 10.9 births per 1,000 girls in 2004.

Albert, of the campaign, said abstinence is growing, too. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported 37.5 percent of high school students in 1991 reported having sex in the past three months, while 34.3 percent said that was the case in 2003.

To view the study, visit www.teenpregnancy.org/whycare/whatif.asp.

Percent change in teen birth rates
(1991-2002)

Missouri:
-32%

Illinois:
-35%

Nationwide:
-30%

The Associated Press and Tricia L. Howard and Greg Jonsson of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.
