

## As Teen Pregnancy Dropped, So Did Child Poverty

Study Looks At Decline Over 10-Year Period

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A decade of declining teenage birth rates has led to a notable reduction in the number of U.S. children living in poverty, according to a new analysis.

Building on research by two congressional committees, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy released a state-by-state report this week identifying how many more children would be living in poverty or growing up in a household with one parent in 2002 if the teenage pregnancy rate had remained at 1991 levels.

Nationally, the teenage birth rate fell 30 percent from 1991 to 2002, the most recent year for which such statistics are available.

If the rate had not dropped during the decade, 1.2 million more children would have been born to teenage mothers in the United States. Of those, 460,000 would have been living in poverty and 700,000 would have grown up in a single-parent household, according to the analysis. The federal poverty level in 2002 was a \$14,494 gross annual income for a parent and two children.

"The data show the power of prevention and how prevention can make a measurable contribution to reducing poverty in children," said Sarah S. Brown, director of the campaign, a nonpartisan, nonprofit research organization.

But at least one advocacy group cautioned that it may be an oversimplification to credit the decline in teenage pregnancy for improvements in poverty levels.

"During the economic boom of the 1990s, there was more opportunity for teens and others to improve their economic situation through employment," said Deborah Cutler-Ortiz, director of the family income division at the Children's Defense Fund. Additionally, government initiatives such as job training, tax credits and health care helped lift some families out of poverty during the period, she said.

Researchers at the teenage pregnancy group agreed that many factors contribute to poverty rates, saying their study was intended only to compute the numbers of poor youngsters who would have been born if pregnancy rates had not decreased.

"People love to argue about how to prevent teen pregnancy, but sometimes we fail to shine enough light on the basic problem," Brown said. "Teen pregnancy is a major

contributor to poverty, single parenthood, and limited futures for adolescents and their children."

Not every teenage mother is poor, "but bearing a child as a teenager increases the chances of a mother and child living in poverty," she said.

Adolescents who become pregnant are more likely to drop out of school, which in turn leads to lower-paying jobs. And often young mothers are less likely to marry, which means their children are raised in a home with one income. All those factors mean teenage mothers and their infants are "not finding a way out from what is often a low-income community to begin with," she said.

Locally, the positive impact was seen most dramatically in the District. Were it not for the 10-year reduction in teenage birth rates, the number of children living in poverty in the city would have been 21 percent higher than it was in 2002. In Maryland, the poverty rate for children would have been nearly 13 percent higher, and in Virginia it would have been about 8 percent higher.

Despite the encouraging developments, Brown and Cutler-Ortiz warned that the nation still faces enormous challenges. "Even with all these declines -- in every single state -- the U.S. still has the highest teen pregnancy rates in the fully developed world," Brown said. One in three American women conceives by the time she is 20.

And although pregnancy data were available only through 2002, Cutler-Ortiz noted that poverty rates have been increasing since 2000, raising concern the improvements may be short-lived.