



Teen Mothers Most Prevalent in the South Up to 1 in 17 Births to Teenage Moms, CDC Reports

By Courtney Hutchison, ABC News Medical Unit

As many as one in seventeen babies born in the South are born to teenage mothers, according to new statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The CDC's National Center for Health Statistics released a state-by-state comparison of teenage birth rates today that shows trends in teen moms up to 2008. While the teenage birth rate overall saw a 2.4 percent decline, large disparities in the prevalence of teen moms still exist from state to state, with the Southern states reporting the highest rates.

"Teenage birth rates are higher in the South, which we've seen in the past, though among non-Hispanic blacks, five of the ten states with the highest rates are actually in the upper Midwest, with Wisconsin having the highest rate," says T.J. Mathews, demographer and co-author on the report.

When comparing teen birth rates by state, the ten states with the highest number of teen moms were almost all southern states: Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky and Nevada.

"There is no single reason why rates of teen childbearing remain so stubbornly high in the South," says Bill Albert, chief program officer at The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. "It may have something to do with social norms---that societal disapproval of teen childbearing was slower to form in the south. It may be that southern states simply have traditionally not put as much attention and resources into preventing teen pregnancy as other states."

While rates remain highest in the South, these states did not see a significant increase from 2007 to 2008. Fourteen states overall saw a significant decrease in their teen birth rates, with only Montana and Kansas showing a significant increase, Mathews says.

Despite an overall decline in teenage births since 1991 (with one spike from 2005 to 2007), U.S. teen birth rates

still remain substantially higher than those in other Western countries, the authors say in the report.

"Variations in teenage birth rates reflect differences in many factors, including differences in socioeconomic factors such as education and income, risk behaviors such as sexual activity and contraceptive use, and attitudes among teenagers toward pregnancy and childbearing," authors write.

Continued Efforts to Prevent Unplanned Pregnancy

Dr. Ellen Rome, head of Adolescent Medicine at the Cleveland Clinic, says that access to affordable and confidential care for adolescents is a key factor in preventing unwanted pregnancies among teens.

"Family planning counseling needs to be widespread, accessible, and happening in multiple places, with consistent messages at home, in the school, and in the physicians' offices, promoting abstinence, but tempering with practicality," Rome adds.

Even with the 2.4 percent decline in teen births in 2008, the recent spike in this rate from 2005 to 2007 was sobering, experts say, and there is still much work to be done in preventing unwanted teen pregnancies.

"The report is yet another reminder that the problem of teen pregnancy and childbearing in the United States remains deep, wide, and urgent," Sarah Brown, CEO of The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy said in a statement on the report. "The national declines in too-early pregnancy and parenthood have stalled and racial/ethnic differences in teen pregnancy and childbearing remain profound."

Albert notes that progress in "convincing young people to avoid too-early pregnancy and parenthood has now stalled." He feels the report "is just the latest reminder of the profound challenges ahead to get things back on track again."