

THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

A force behind the lower teen birthrate: MTV's '16 and Pregnant'

After rising between 2005 and 2007, the US teen birthrate fell dramatically in 2009. What happened? For one, MTV began airing a tough reality show called '16 and Pregnant.'

By Patrik Jonsson

Atlanta – For years, MTV has made a living, its detractors would say, peddling rock-star debauchery to wide-eyed teenagers.

But according to a new government study that shows the US teen birthrate falling dramatically in 2009 after a five percent increase from 2005 to 2007, experts say the network may have redeemed itself with its gritty "16 and Pregnant" documentary series, which many teens credit with opening their eyes to the consequences of unprotected sex and early parenthood.

A report released Tuesday by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy shows that parental influence is the most-cited factor by teens when it comes to avoiding teen pregnancy.

But the report also specifically cites the popular "16 and Pregnant" series, indicating that 82 percent of teens say the show helps them better understand the challenges of teen pregnancy and parenthood – and why they should avoid it.

"Entertainment media is one of the nation's favorite punching bags, but we have to acknowledge that when we're talking about teen pregnancies media can be and often is a force for good, and that is particularly true when it comes to shows like '16 and Pregnant,'" says Bill Albert, a spokesman for the National Campaign. "Some critics say these shows glamorize teen pregnancy, but our survey data shows that's not the case – that not only do they not glamorize it, but teens who have seen it suggest it makes the realities of teen parenthood more real to them."

"16 and Pregnant," which chronicles the real-life travails of teen moms and dads through rocky relationships and the complicated emotional roller-coaster ride of having a baby, first aired in June 2009, becoming a counterpoint to some of the network's provocative offerings. MTV also has a follow-up show, "Teen Mom."

After leveling off in 2008, teen pregnancies declined by 6 percent in 2009, to a record low, according to a Centers for



Maci Bookout (c.) and Farrah Abraham (r.) from MTV's '16 and Pregnant,' and Bristol Palin create awareness for the National Day to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, held at Lighthouse International Conference Center in New York City on May 5, 2010.

Disease Prevention and Control study released Tuesday. The reduction cut across all ethnic and racial lines, with Hispanic teen pregnancy rates going down by 10 percent, also to a record low.

To be sure, new census figures showed that overall birthrates also slowed as recession and unemployment gripped America in the last three years. What's more, after 15 years of declining teen birthrates, the uptick between 2005 and 2007 may have once again focused parents on the issue.

But while sex talks are almost always uncomfortable between parents and teenagers, shows like "16 and Pregnant" can serve as a neutral bouncing-board for families to talk about issues related to sex and early pregnancy, says Mr. Albert.

"What you see on TV, as a parent, isn't always exactly what you'd want your teen to know or say or see, but it does deflect the conversation from, 'What are you doing?' to more of an abstract, and that can be a good way to start conversations," he says. "The fact is, this is not your parents' sex talk, not a one-time white knuckle conversation, but this should be an 18-year conversation that you're having with your kids."