

16 and Pregnant: Tuned-In Teens Are Turned Off by Teen Pregnancy

By Bonnie Rochman

The U.S. teen birth rate dropped a smidgen between 2007 and 2008, but still, on average, three of every 10 girls gets pregnant at least once by the time she turns 20. It's long been a public health crisis, with experts scratching their heads over how to preach safe sex so teens will listen.

The most recent figures, released this week, show that the 2008 teen birth rate decreased to 41.5 births per 1,000 15-to-19-year-old women. The rates fluctuate wildly by region, from a low of 19.8 per 1,000 in New Hampshire to 65.7 per 1,000 in Mississippi. Although the numbers have declined significantly from the early 1990s, when they hovered at 62 per 1,000 teens, they're still far higher than other developed nations.

Nudging the numbers down more is an even greater challenge in an era when Bristol Palin dances with the stars, and Jamie Lynn Spears regularly lands in the pages of glossy magazines, two examples of teenagers raising babies without seeming to skip a beat.

Exactly what degree media portrayal of teen pregnancy influences teens' behavior is a question the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy has wrestled with for years. The non-profit regularly fields calls from reporters asking if television shows like "16 and Pregnant" — and its counterpart, "Teen Mom," both produced by MTV — glamorize teen pregnancy. "According to their website: "Although research has documented an association between exposure to sexual content on television and teen pregnancy, little research has been conducted to better understand how media might also have positive effects. Can the media, for example, decrease risky sexual behavior and promote healthier decisions among teens?" They decided to commission a study to find out.

What they concluded, says chief program officer Bill Albert, is that "while MTV is not in the teen pregnancy prevention business, we firmly believe they have developed two shows that are probably among the most powerful interventions you're likely to see."

Say what?

"We really need new and innovative ways to reach teens," says Albert. "This might be the best teen pregnancy public service announcement ever made."

Far from sensationalizing being a teen and a mom at the same time, "16 and Pregnant" tends to drive home to viewers just how difficult it is to raise a child.

Researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) and Durham, N.C., research firm iRT divided 162 teens in Boys and Girls Clubs in North Carolina into groups that watched three episodes of "16 and Pregnant" and groups that didn't. Separately, 1,008 teens answered a national public opinion poll. Both groups indicated that watching the show made the idea of pregnancy and parenting more real to them. Among the group of teens who watched the show, 82% said the program helped them better understand the challenges of teen pregnancy and early parenthood and how to avoid getting into such a situation; 15% said they thought the show glamorized teen parenthood.

What impressed Jane Brown, a UNC journalism professor involved in the research, was that teen viewers were more likely to talk to parents and friends and even their girlfriends' boyfriends about teen pregnancy than teens who hadn't seen the show. "At least it provides an opportunity for parents — if parents seize the opportunity — to talk with their children about what would happen if their child got pregnant," says Brown.

Although researchers did not know what exactly was discussed in these conversations, they do know that those teens who talked about what they'd seen were more likely to say they didn't want to get pregnant and that they thought pregnancy would be harder than they had before they'd seen the show.

Of the teens who watched the show, 63% said they'd talked to a friend; 40% said they'd talked to a parent. But even 40% is impressive. "The notion that you can get 40% of teens to talk to their parents about any topic other than when do I get my allowance is really quite extraordinary," says Albert.