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## Data: U.S. teen birth rate on decline

By Rob Stein, Washington Post Staff Writer

The rate at which teenage girls in the United States are having babies has dropped, according to the latest government statistics released Tuesday, raising hopes that an alarming two-year increase in teen births was an aberration.

Births among U.S. girls ages 15 to 19 fell 2 percent from 2007 to 2008, according to the federal analysis of birth certificates nationwide, reversing two consecutive years of increases that had interrupted a 34 percent decline and caused alarm that one of the nation's most successful social and public health successes was faltering.

"This is good news," said Stephanie J. Ventura of the National Center for Health Statistics, which released the preliminary analysis. "It might come as a surprise because people were concerned the teen birth rate was on a different course."

Ventura and others said it was too early to know whether the trend would continue in 2009 figures. But she speculated that it might because it was part of a broader drop in the birth rate for women of all ages—except those 40 and older—and that appears to have continued at least another year.

The reason for the drop remained unclear, though experts offered several possible explanations, including the poor economy.

"The economy may have had some role," Ventura said. "The economic downturn has been so severe that many people may be rethinking a lot of things, including having children."

But others argued that it was unlikely the economy was to blame and said it was likely due to a combination of factors.

"It is not possible to fully explain what accounts for changes in the teen birth rate, especially in any given, single year," said Sarah S. Brown of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies. "It went up a bit between 2005 and 2007 and now is down a bit in 2008. In fact, one view is that the rate has sort of plateaued and is now varying -- bouncing around a flat line."

Whatever the cause, the trend was hailed by advocates across the ideological spectrum.

"We are very pleased with this good news," Brown said. "If there had been a third year of increase in the rate, the two-year 'uptick' in teen births would have become a troubling trend."

Others cautioned that the trend may instead represent a stalling in the decline in teen births.

"I think it is hard to make any pattern out of the last three years, other than to say that we are no longer making steady progress," said John Santelli of Columbia University. "The trend from 1991 to 2005 was steadily downward. We now seem to be stuck."

The rate dropped the most—4 percent—for the oldest teens: those 18 and 19. The rate had increased 6 percent between 2005 and 2007 for this group, halting a 26 percent decline between 1991 and 2005. The rate fell 2 percent -- for those 15 to 17. The rate for this age group had increased 4 percent between 2005 and 2007, interrupting a 45 percent decrease between 1991 and 2005. The rate among those 10 to 14 remained unchanged.

The rate fell among all races, but hit a historic low for Hispanics.

The report comes as President Obama is launching a \$110 million teen pregnancy prevention program that is being closely watched to see whether it includes funding for any controversial programs that focus on encouraging abstinence until marriage.

Advocates on both sides expect Obama's program to eliminate most funding for abstinence programs because \$75 million was targeted only at curricula that had produced convincing scientific evidence that they work. But \$25 million was set aside for more experimental approaches, which could potentially include some abstinence programs. And the new health-care legislation includes \$50 million a year for five years for abstinence programs.

"The downward trend is encouraging and gives us reason to believe that the 2006-07 slight uptick in teen births may have been a hiccup, rather than the start of a troubling new trend," said Valerie Huber of the National Abstinence Education Association.

"It is a shame that abstinence education opponents too early use any statistics to denigrate an approach that offers teens the best skills to avoid all the consequences of sex, including teen pregnancy," Huber said.

But opponents of abstinence funding urged caution.

"We don't yet know whether the new data for 2008 showing a decline constitutes a blip or a trend. What we do know is that the federal government is about to launch one of the largest teen pregnancy prevention efforts in decades and if we are to ensure that this decline continues, it is critical that federal funds go only to the programs that work. The fact that Democrats included nearly a quarter-billion of failed abstinence-only-until-marriage programs in health-care reform is alarming," said James Wagner of Advocates for Youth, a Washington advocacy group.

The report also had another piece of good news—a significant decline in babies born preterm, which fell 3 percent. That was the second consecutive year of decline, following a 20 percent increase between 1996 and 2006.

At the same time, the report also found the "total fertility rate" fell 2 percent, pushing it below 2.1 per woman, meaning the nation was no longer giving birth to enough children to keep the population from declining.