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Teen birth rate at record low in California

By Molly Hennessy-Fiske

The birth rate among teens in California has reached a record low, according to a new state report, and experts attribute the reduction to sex education, the poor economy and possibly even reality-television programs that show the strain on young parents.

The teen birth rate decreased to about 32 births per 1,000 female teens age 15 to 19, according to a report released Tuesday by the California Department of Public Health. The figures are based on data for 2009, the most recent year available.

The 2009 rate was less than half the rate in 1991, the most recent peak, when the state had about 71 births per 1,000 female teens.

The number of babies born to teen mothers in 2009 -- 47,811 -- was an 8% decrease from the previous year.

Since 1998, births to teens have declined about 18%, even as the number of teen girls grew by about 30% statewide.

Teens ages 18 and 19 saw a more marked decline in birth rates than younger teens, the report showed.

Latinas have seen the steepest decline in teen births since 2007, although their birth rate remained the highest among all ethnicities. About 71% of the Latina teen mothers in California were born in the U.S., while 29% were foreign-born, according to the report.

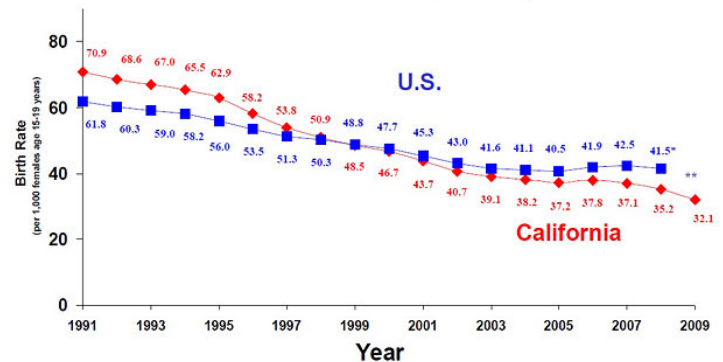
The birth rates reflect the increased use of contraception among teens, who are also delaying the first time they have sex, said Dr. Jonathan E. Fielding, Los Angeles County's director of public health.

Latinas, particularly recent immigrants, may have higher birth rates because studies suggest they have less access to contraception and are less inclined to have abortions, Fielding said.

Although Latinas may be more likely to be married in their late teens than other ethnic groups, that did not account for their higher rate of teen births, state officials said.

Federal officials are expected to release a report Wednesday showing that teen birth rates have continued to decline nationally following a slight increase from 2005 to 2007.

California and U.S. Teen Birth Rates, 1991-2009



State public health officials credit sex education programs with lowering teen birth rates at a time when some critics worry that teen pregnancy is being glamorized by reality shows such as “Teen Mom” and “16 and Pregnant.”

“California does remain in the forefront in being the only state that is adamant about having a comprehensive approach,” to sex education, said Catherine Camacho, deputy director of the state public health department’s Center for Family Health.

Camacho noted that California has been the only state to refuse federal funding that limits outreach to abstinence-only sex education.

National teen health experts agreed that California’s sex education programs have helped lower teen birth rates.

“It appears that the programs have had a big impact,” said Stephanie Ventura, chief of the reproductive statistics branch at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and co-author of the upcoming national teen birth rate report.

Ventura and others said California educators appear to have successfully retooled teen outreach efforts after the slight increase in birth rates six years ago.

“The consistent investment California has made over a number of years has made an extraordinary difference,” said Bill Albert, a spokesman for the Washington-based National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

Albert said the recent pop culture fixation with teen mothers from Jamie Lynn Spears to Bristol Palin and the stars of MTV's "16 and Pregnant" may actually have a deterrent effect.

"As far as we're concerned, that's a good thing," Albert said. "It gets people thinking about the importance of avoiding too-early pregnancy."

Albert's group surveyed about 1,000 teens who had seen "16 and pregnant" in August and September of last year and 82% said it "helped them understand the challenges of teen pregnancy and parenting and how to avoid them."

"I think this adult concern that these shows might be glamorizing teen pregnancy is not a view shared by teens," Albert said.

He and other experts said the economic recession has also likely played a role in discouraging teens from becoming pregnant.

"Teens aren't thinking about their 401(k) when they hop into the sack. However, they are growing up in communities where their parents are struggling, maybe their parent is out of a job or their neighbor's house has been foreclosed," he said. "Maybe that leads them to think 'Maybe this is not the right time to not be cautious about the possibility of pregnancy.'"

Comparable data were not released concerning teen pregnancy rates, which include pregnancies that end in miscarriages and abortions.

The teen pregnancy rate was 71.5 per 1,000 women ages 15 to 19 in 2006, the most recent year available, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a nonprofit pro-choice research group. That was a 3% increase from the year before, which was the lowest in 30 years. The group also found that the abortion rate among those teens increased slightly. California's pregnancy rate was 75 per 1,000 women ages 15 to 19 in 2005, the most recent year available, a decline of 52% from the peak in 1992, the group found.

Albert and state public health officials said they hope to push teen birth rates even lower in coming years. They noted that birth rates for girls age 15 to 19 were in the single digits in France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Sweden and Switzerland in 2008, the most recent year available.

"The wrong message to take from this is that our job is now done," Albert said.