

**HEALTH / MEDICINE**

# Nation's birthrate falls to its lowest point in modern history

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Associated Press

WASHINGTON — America's birthrate fell to a record low last year as both teenagers and women in their prime childbearing years had fewer babies, the government said yesterday.

But the percentages of premature and low-birth-weight babies climbed, continuing the rise of recent years.

The birthrate was 13.9 per 1,000 persons in 2002, the Health and Human Services Department announced. That compares with 14.1 a year ago. The most recent high was 16.7 in 1990.

The latest figure is the lowest in government records that go back to the turn of the 20th century, according to Brady Hamilton, a demographer at the National Center for Health Statistics.

A major factor in the decline has been the recent reduction in births to teenagers, Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson said.

He called that "a significant accomplishment."

Other factors also play a part, including the aging of the population, added Hamilton.

Hamilton noted that women in their prime childbearing years have been choosing to have fewer children and, as the population ages, there are fewer women in their 20s and 30s.

Overall, there were 4,019,280 births in the United States in 2002, down from 4,025,933 the year before.

Some 12 percent of last year's births were premature, compared with 11.9 percent in 2001. In addition, 7.8 percent were listed as low birth weight, which the center said was at the highest level in more than 30 years. Last year's rate was 7.7 percent.

Those increases came despite greater access to prenatal care. The center said 83.8 percent of women began receiving care in the first trimester of pregnancy last year, compared with 83.4 percent in 2001 and 75.8 percent in 1990.

The birthrate for unmarried wom-

en declined last year to 43.6 per 1,000 unmarried women, but this group still accounted for more than one-third of all births.

Other findings in the study of births in 2002 include:

■ Those 15 to 19 had a birthrate of 42.9 per 1,000, down from 45.3 in 2001 and 47.7 in 2000. The rate for girls 10 to 14 was 0.7 per 1,000, down from 0.8 in 2001.

■ For women 20 to 24, the rate was 103.5 per 1,000, down from 106.2 in 2001. For women 25 to 29, the rate was unchanged at 113.6.

■ The birthrate dropped between 2001 and 2002 from 91.9 to 91.6 per 1,000 for women 30 to 34.

■ For women 35 to 39 and 40 to 44 the birthrates edged up. It went from 40.6 to 41.4 for the former, and 8.1 to 8.3 for the latter. The rate for women aged 45 to 54 was unchanged at 0.5.

■ Last year, more than one-fourth of births, 26.1 percent, were by Caesarean section, compared with 24.4 percent in 2001.