

Nation

Pregnancy rate for teens reaches record low in 1997

Slide in abortions, birthrates began early in decade

By Cheryl Wetzstein
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The teen-pregnancy rate fell to a record low in 1997, reflecting a slide in pregnancy, abortion and birthrates that began earlier in the decade, the federal government said yesterday.

There were 872,000 teen pregnancies in 1997, said researchers with the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS).

The 1997 teen-pregnancy rate, which is the most recent figure available, was 94.3 pregnancies per 1,000 teens ages 15-19.

This is 19 percent lower than the teen-pregnancy rate in 1991, when the rate peaked at 116.5 pregnancies per 1,000 teens, said NCHS researchers. This is also the lowest rate since 1976, when consistent collection of national pregnancy rates began, they said.

The news is "greatly encouraging," especially since teen pregnancy rates fell for "all racial and ethnic groups," Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy G. Thompson said yesterday.

Mr. Thompson urged parents to talk to their teens about pregnancy issues, "as they can have the greatest influence on their children."

The White House is "dedicated to doing its part" as well, he said, listing budget requests of \$64 million to "strengthen the role of fathers" in families, \$33 million for teen maternity group homes, and equal funding for "abstinence education and programs that teach about contraception use."

Yet in a separate event yesterday, 35 national organizations denounced "abstinence-only education" as "government censorship."

A program that exclusively teaches young people to be sexually abstinent until marriage "silences speech about sexual orientation," undermines church-state separation and is "ineffective, unnecessary and dangerous," said leaders of the National

FEWER TEEN-AGERS PREGNANT

The pregnancy rate for teen-agers fell to a record low in 1997, the federal government reported yesterday. Here are figures relating to teen pregnancies for that year.

- Total number of teen pregnancies: 872,000
- Teen pregnancy rate: 94.3 pregnancies per 1,000 teens ages 15 to 19
- Peak teen-pregnancy rate: 116.5 pregnancies per 1,000 teens (1991)
- Total number of U.S. pregnancies: 6.1 million
- Overall pregnancy rate: 103.7 pregnancies per 1,000 women ages 15 to 44.
- Peak overall pregnancy rate: 115.6 pregnancies per 1,000 women (1990)

Source: "Trends in Pregnancy Rates for the United States, 1976-97: An Update," National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Department of Health and Human Services

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Coalition Against Censorship, which included the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States and Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Leaders of Project Reality, an abstinence program in Golf, Ill., countered that some of the coalition's members have "a vested interest" in ending federal funding for abstinence education because it competes with their safe-sex approach.

Dr. John Diggs, a member of the

Other factors are the introduction of long-lasting contraceptives, such as Norplant and Depo-Provera, and a good economy, which may have inspired more teens to avoid pregnancy so they could pursue educational and career goals, they said.

Jennifer Manlove, a researcher with Child Trends Inc., said teen-pregnancy rates may continue to fall since abortion rates have been declining and teen birthrates fell in both 1998 and 1999.

The 1997 teen-pregnancy rate was 94.3 pregnancies per 1,000 teens ages 15-19.

Physicians Consortium, also criticized the coalition, saying it was hypocritical to teach that condoms "make sex safe" when they don't protect against sexually transmitted diseases such as human papillomavirus, which can cause cervical cancer.

In the NCHS report, Stephanie J. Ventura and her colleagues credited sexual abstinence and increased contraception use as reasons for the recent declines in teen pregnancy, abortion and birthrates.

Pregnancy rates are based on the number of live births, induced abortions and fetal losses, such as miscarriage or stillbirth. In 1997, the teen-pregnancy rate included 52.3 live births, 27.5 abortions and 14.5 fetal losses per 1,000 teens.

The total pregnancy rate in 1997 was also a record low, with 103.7 pregnancies per 1,000 women ages 15-44. The 6.1 million pregnancies, included 3.88 million live births, 1.33 million abortions and 0.98 million fetal losses.