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Birthrates among teens decrease across nation

Statistics show big drop in births to black girls

By TAMAR LEWIN
The New York Times

In a trend that some credit mostly to abstinence education and others to better use of contraception, teen-age birthrates nationwide declined substantially from 1991 to 1996.

According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the sharpest declines were among black teen-agers — until recently the group with the highest level of births.

While black teen-agers still have babies at almost twice the rate of whites, the rate declined 21 percent from 1991 to 1996, and is now at the lowest level ever reported.

There were 91.7 births for every 1,000 black women aged 15 to 19 in 1996, while whites had 48.4 per 1,000, and Hispanic teen-agers had 101.6.

“What’s significant is that these declines are in every state,” said Donna Shalala, secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. “I give a lot of credit to the African-American community, which has put out a clear, consistent message from the churches, the schools and all sorts of civic organizations, a drumbeat to young women and young men that they should not become parents until they are truly ready to support a child, that having children too early will limit their options.”

Overall, in 1996, the teen-age birthrate was 54.7 for every 1,000 women aged 15 to 19, down 11.9 percent from the 1991 rate of 62.1. Although the 1996 numbers were previously reported as part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s vital statistics report last fall, the special five-year report Shalala issued yesterday stressed the decline in teen-age births.

John Webb, teen intervention coordinator for the Kentucky Department of Health, said yesterday it would take a special computer run to calculate the birthrates for black teens in Kentucky. He said that one

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TEEN BIRTHS

A breakdown by race of teen birthrates and percentage change, 1991 and 1996.*

Birthrates per 1,000 women age 15-19

	Total	Percent change
1996	55	
1991	62	-11.9%
*White		
	39	
	43	-9.4%
Black		
	92	
	116	-20.6%
American Indian		
	75	
	85	-11.6%
Asian or Pacific Islander		
	25	
	27	-7.3%
Hispanic		
	102	
	107	-4.8%

*Data unavailable for white, 1995 figure used.
Source: National Center for Health Statistics

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Birthrates among teen-agers fall across nation

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recent state survey showed teens reporting a decrease in sexual activity from 1993 to 1997.

"That may mean that they're getting smarter about it," Webb said.

Experts of every political stripe agreed that the last few years marked the end of an era in which teen-agers started sexual intercourse at ever-earlier ages — a trend extending from the 1950s, when 27 percent of women turning 18 had had sex, to the mid-1980s, when 56 percent had done so.

And the pregnancy and abortion rates among teen-agers are dropping too. But there is no consensus about what is behind those declines either.

Conservative groups, such as Focus on the Family, in Colorado, say it is abstinence education that turned the tide. Spokeswoman Amy Stephens said, "Privately funded abstinence programs started in the late 1980s and went on in the 1990s, and now there is federal funding for programs that give kids a direct message about what we want them to do. Kids

respond when they get a direct message instead of the mixed message that if you're going to have sex, you should use a condom, but oh, also, we don't think you should have sex."

But groups like the Alan Guttmacher Institute, a New York-based non-profit research and education group emphasize the effects of better contraception.

"The proportion of sexually active teen girls using contraception, even at first intercourse, is increasing," said Jacqueline Darroch, the institute's senior vice president for research. "My sense of why the black teens' birthrate is declining the fastest is that they are the most likely to use long-lasting contraceptives like Norplant and DepoProvera, which are very reliable."

Nearly a half million babies were born to women aged 15 to 19 in 1996 and 11,000 more to girls 14 and under.

Teen-age mothers are much less likely than older women to receive timely prenatal care or gain the recommended weight during their pregnancy and much more likely to

smoke and have a low-birthweight infant, according to the National Center for Health Statistics.

The level of teen births was far higher in the 1950s and 1960s: the historic high point for teen-age births was 1957, when there were 96 births per 1,000 women aged 15 to 19. But in those days, the vast majority of teen-age mothers were married, while today, most are unmarried.

Teen-age birthrates vary greatly from state to state, with many Northern states having fewer than 35 births per 1,000 teen-age women, less than half the rate of Southern states. The District of Columbia has the highest teen birthrate, 105.5 births for every 1,000 women aged 15 to 19, down from 114.4 in 1991.

The statistics released yesterday showed that from 1991 to 1995, the birthrate for teens 15 to 19 declined by 9.2 percent in Kentucky, from 68.9 births per 1,000 women to 62.6 births.

In Indiana, there was a 4.9 percent decrease over the same period, from 60.5 births per 1,000 women in 1991 to 57.5 in 1995.

Despite the declining rates, the United States still has by far the highest rate of teen-age births of any industrialized nation.

Yesterday the National Campaign

to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, a private non-partisan initiative, released research showing that parents have great influence on teen-agers' sexual decision-making. Young people who are close to their parents, and closely supervised, are more likely than others to postpone intercourse, have fewer sexual partners and use contraception consistently.

The group said parents can help

prevent teen-age pregnancy by talking candidly to their children about sex from an early age and being clear about their own values, supervising adolescents' after-school activities, discouraging one-on-one dating before age 16, and stopping teens from dating anyone who is not within two or three years of their own age.

Staff writer Dick Kaukas contributed to this story.