

# Adolescent Pregnancy and Childbearing in the United States

Since 1991, U.S. teenage pregnancy, abortion, and birth rates have declined steadily in every age and racial/ethnic group.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Teenage birth rates declined in every state as well as in the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands.<sup>4</sup> Research indicates that sexually active teens are becoming more effective users of contraception and that more teens are choosing to remain abstinent during early and middle adolescence.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the United States continues to have higher rates of teen pregnancy, birth, and abortion than other industrialized nations.<sup>6,7</sup> Teens ages 18 and 19 account for as much as 66 percent of U.S. teen births.<sup>8</sup> Most teenage mothers come from socially and/or economically disadvantaged backgrounds; adolescent motherhood often compounds this disadvantage.<sup>9,10</sup>

## Teen Pregnancy Rates Decreased among Sexually Active Teens.

- Each year, approximately 750,000 to 850,000 teenage women in the United States experience pregnancy.<sup>10,11</sup> Seventy-four to 95 percent of teen pregnancies are unintended.<sup>12,13</sup>
- In 1999, the estimated U.S. teen pregnancy rate was 87 pregnancies per 1,000 females ages 15 to 19—a drop of 25 percent from the 1990 rate of 116.<sup>14,15</sup> [Note: 1999 is the most recent year for which published pregnancy data is available.]
- Some researchers attribute 75 percent of the decline in U.S. teen pregnancy rates to better contraceptive use among sexually experienced teens and 25 percent of the decrease to increased abstinence; others credit the two factors about equally.<sup>5,15</sup>

## Teen Birth Rates Fell among Teens in All Age Groups.

- Among all teens ages 15 to 19, the U.S. birth rate declined by 30 percent between 1991 and 2002, from 62 per 1,000 women in 1991 to a record low of 43 in 2002.<sup>16</sup>
- By comparison, the birth rate in France was 10 per 1,000 women ages 15 to 19; in Canada, it was 25; and in Britain, 28.<sup>6</sup> [Data are the most recent available.]
- Among youth under age 15, the U.S. birth rate declined by 50 percent, from 1.4 per 1,000 women in 1991 to 0.7 in 2002.<sup>2,16</sup>
- Among teens ages 15 to 17, the U.S. birth rate declined 40 percent from 39 per 1,000 in 1991 to 23 in 2002.<sup>16</sup>
- Among teens ages 18 to 19, the U.S. birth rate declined 23 percent from 94 per 1,000 in 1991 to 73 in 2002.<sup>16</sup>
- The number of children born to U.S. teens also decreased between 1991 and 2002. Women under age 20 had 532,000 births in 1991<sup>2</sup> compared to 432,000 births in 2002,<sup>16</sup> a 19 percent decline.

## Teen Birth Rates Fell among Teens in All Racial/Ethnic Groups.

- Between 1991 and 2002, U.S. birth rates among 15- to 19-year-old women declined in all racial/ethnic groups, although rates for African American and Hispanic teens continued to be higher than the rates for other groups.<sup>2,16</sup>
- African Americans ages 15 to 19 experienced the steepest decline in birth rates—42 percent—from 118 per 1,000 women in 1991 to 68 in 2002. Among African Americans ages 15 to 17, birth rates dropped by 52 percent between 1991 and 2002.<sup>16</sup>
- The birth rate for native American teens ages 15 to 19 dropped 36 percent from 84 per 1,000 women in 1991 to 54 in 2002.<sup>16</sup>
- Among non-Hispanic white women ages 15 to 19, the birth rate declined 34 percent from 43 per 1,000 women in 1991 to 29 in 2002.<sup>16</sup>

- The birth rate for Asian or Pacific Islander teens ages 15 to 19 dropped 33 percent from 27 per 1,000 women in 1991 to 18 in 2002.<sup>16</sup>
- The birth rate for Hispanic teens ages 15 to 19 declined 20 percent from 105 per 1,000 women in 1991 to 83 in 2002.<sup>16</sup>

## The Teen Abortion Rate also Fell.

- Each year since 1992, teens accounted for 20 percent or less of all abortions in the United States.<sup>3,16</sup>
- Since the late 1980s, the proportion of teen pregnancies ending in abortion has steadily declined. In 1999, 28 percent of pregnancies among 15- to 19-year-olds ended in abortion, down from 40 percent in 1990.<sup>9,14</sup>
- Among 15- to 19-year-old females, the abortion rate declined by 39 percent between 1990 and 1999, from 38 per 1,000 women to 25.<sup>14</sup>
- The decline in U.S. teenage abortion rates partly reflects declining pregnancy rates. It may also reflect restrictive abortion laws, limited availability and accessibility of abortion providers, and decreased public funding.<sup>17</sup>
- Between 1989 and 1995, less than one percent of babies born to never-married U.S. women were relinquished for adoption.<sup>18</sup>

## Many Births Occurred to Teens Living in Poverty and to Unmarried Teens.

- Compared to teens from higher income families, poor and low-income teens are somewhat more likely to be sexually active and somewhat less likely to use contraceptives or to use contraception successfully. Poor and low-income adolescents make up 38 percent of all women ages 15 to 19; yet, they account for 73 percent of all pregnancies in that age group.<sup>19</sup>
- Nearly 60 percent of teens who become mothers are living in poverty at the time of the birth.<sup>9</sup>
- Teenage mothers are much less likely than older women to receive timely prenatal care and are more likely to smoke during pregnancy. As a result of these and other factors, babies born to teenagers are more likely to be preterm and of low birth weight and are at greater risk of serious and long-term illness, of developmental delays, and of dying in the first year of life compared to infants of older mothers.<sup>2</sup>
- Adolescent mothers are less likely to complete their education and are more likely to face limited career and economic opportunities compared to women whose first children are born after age 20.<sup>13</sup>
- Both adult and teen women today are less likely to marry in response to a pregnancy than were earlier generations and are also less likely to choose abortion.<sup>2</sup> In 2002, about one-fourth of all non-marital births occurred among teenagers.<sup>16</sup> Non-marital birth rates were highest among women ages 20 to 24 and 25 to 29, followed by 18- to 19-year-old and 30- to 34-year-old women (71, 62, 59, and 41 per 1,000 women in the given age group, respectively). Teens ages 15 to 19 and 15 to 17 had lower non-marital birth rates (35 and 21, respectively).<sup>16</sup>

## References

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