

## Preventing Teen Pregnancy with Facts, Not Fear

**T**een birth rates in the United States went up in 2007 for the second year in a row, according to statistics recently released by the Centers for Disease Control. Prior to 2006, the rate had been declining for 14 years. John Santelli, chairman of the Department of Population and Family Health at Columbia University, said in response to the news, “It’s a huge disappointment and a huge failure in public policy to see this reverse itself.”

### The United States is Off-Base

The United States has the highest teen birth rate in the industrialized world, at 42.5 births per 1,000 women. The figure in Switzerland and the Netherlands is five per 1,000 women; the rate in Italy is seven; in France it’s eight. The United Kingdom has the highest rate in Western Europe, at 27 per 1,000 women—still less than two-thirds the rate of the U.S.

American teens receive many mixed messages about sexual activity from their friends, religious leaders, teachers, parents, and the media. Comprehensive, medically accurate sex education programs lend an objective and informative voice to these often contradictory messages.

### Europe’s Approach to Teen Sexuality

One likely explanation for the discrepancy in teen birth rates between the U.S. and Europe is that the aura around the topic of sexuality is more tolerant and straightforward in many European societies. Most parents and policymakers in Western Europe consider teen sexuality a natural, healthy, normal development process and believe that confidential sexual health services are a fundamental right. For example, in Sweden, teens can receive free medical care, free condoms, and oral contraceptive prescriptions without parental consent. Emergency contra-



Teen Mother. Photo: Vladimir Godnik/bilderlounge/Corbis

ception is available over the counter. Teens in the U.S. need a prescription for emergency contraception, even though the Food and Drug Administration has conceded that there is no medical justification for such a policy. A federal judge ordered in March that emergency contraception be available to 17-year-olds over the counter. Teens under 17 will still need a prescription.

Cecilia Ekéus, a nurse midwife in Stockholm with a PhD in public international health, says Swedish society teaches that sex should occur in a committed relationship “and also that teenagers should use contraceptives, be informed and take responsibility. But in general we are open and positive and think that it’s okay.”

### Abstinence-Only vs. Comprehensive Programs

According to the national *Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, the percentage of sexually active high school students increased from 33.4% to 35% between 2001 and 2007. This is more evidence that the \$1.5

billion spent in the past decade on abstinence-only programs isn’t being put to good use. While our tax dollars are wasted on scare tactics, there is currently no dedicated federal funding stream for comprehensive sex education programs.

One unsurprising result of abstinence-only programs did, unfortunately, occur: the percentage of teens using condoms decreased from 63% to 61.5% between 2003 and 2007. John Santelli reasoned, “Abstinence education spends a good amount of time bashing condoms. So it’s not surprising, if that’s the message young people are getting, that we’re seeing condom use start to decrease.”

Bolstering evidence against abstinence-only programs, a report in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* found that comprehensive sex education is more effective at preventing pregnancy. While abstinence-only programs did not show any clear signs of preventing pregnancy or delaying sexual intercourse, teens were 60% less likely to get pregnant or get somebody pregnant if they receive comprehensive sex education. The research also debunked the myth that comprehensive sex education encourages teens to

engage in earlier sexual intercourse and raises rates of STDs. Pamela K. Kohler, the lead researcher of the report from the Center for AIDS and STD at the University of Washington in Seattle, said that this research shows that the comprehensive approach cuts the odds of teen pregnancy without increasing the likelihood of teens having sex.

### Consequences of Teen Pregnancy

Teen mothers face many educational and employment obstacles. According to Advocates for Youth, "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." They are also more likely to have preterm and underweight babies, and less likely to receive prenatal care.

The Guttmacher Institute found that, "Teen mothers are now more likely than in the past to complete high school or obtain a GED, but they are still less likely than women who delay childbearing to go on to college." According to Population Action International, "A child whose mother has no education is, on average, twice as likely to be out of school as one with an educated mother." So the cycle of poor education and early motherhood perpetuates itself. Infants born to mothers aged 15 to 19 are also 30% more likely to experience death or injuries than infants born to mothers aged 20 to 29.

John Guillebaud, Emeritus Professor of Family Planning and Reproductive Health at University College London, said at a conference in Australia that teens engaging in unprotected sex are driving up unsustainable population growth. "The inconvenient truth is the world is already overpopulated and soon we may experience shortages of food and water."

Demographically, the problem with teen pregnancy is one of simple mathematics. When women give birth as teens, there are three generations instead of two in the space of 60 years. Even if the birthrate is stable, there are still a third more people than if there were only two generations in that same space.

### Facts and Figures

- A sexually active teen who does not use contraceptives has a 90% chance of becoming pregnant within a year.
- One in five teens whose parents do not know they obtain contraceptive services would continue to have sex but would either rely on withdrawal or not use any contraceptives if the law required that their parents be notified of their visit.
- Only 1% of all minor adolescents who use sexual health services indicate that their only reaction to a law requiring their parents' involvement for prescription contraception would be to stop having sex.
- Eighty-two percent of teen pregnancies are unplanned; they account for about one in five of all unintended pregnancies annually.
- Eleven percent of all U.S. births are to teens.

### What to Do?

President Obama approved a cut of \$14 million for abstinence-only programs in the 2009 Omnibus appropriations bill. Still, \$94 million will flow to these ineffective and dangerous programs this year. Only 28 states remain in the federal program for Community Based Abstinence Education—participation dropped by 40% over the last two years. William Smith, of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), said "If Congress isn't getting that message, it's difficult to figure out what will convince them."

Comprehensive sex education is honest with teens about contraception, pregnancy, and sexuality. Tax-payers' money would be better spent on such programs and teens would be better prepared when they do become sexually active.

Become an advocate for ending wasteful spending on failed abstinence-only programs by visiting our website at [www.populationconnection.org](http://www.populationconnection.org).

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*Population Connection is America's largest grassroots group advocating for progressive action to stabilize world population at a level that can be sustained by the Earth's resources.*