

Briefly...

Responding to the Increase in the Teen Birth Rate: Analysis From The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

How serious is the increase in the teen birth rate?

The teen birth rate in the United States declined 34% between 1991 and 2005, but...

- In December 2007, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) released preliminary teen birth data for 2006 noting that the national teen birth increased 3% between 2005 and 2006 (from 40.5 to 41.9 births per 1,000 teen girls age 15 to 19), the first increase after 14 years of steady decline. Final teen birth data released January 7, 2009 confirmed the 3% increase. The overall decrease in the teen birth rate between 1991 and 2006 now stands at 32%.
- NCHS data released in January 2009 also show that 26 states had a significant increase in their teen birth rate between 2005 and 2006 and only three states and the District of Columbia had significant decreases.
- The overall teen birth rate increased between 2005 and 2006 for teens of almost every age and racial/ethnic group. For example, the rate increased by 3% for non-Hispanic white teens, by 5% for non-Hispanic black teens, and by 2% for Hispanic teens. The only racial/ethnic group that did not experience an increase was Asian/Pacific Islanders.
- While the teen birth rate still remains well below its record high of 61.8 reached in 1991, this recent increase is a source of major concern because it signals a change in course from the progress the nation had been making—that is, while the teen birth rate had been declining for 14 years, those declines were slowing in recent years and teen birth rates actually increased between 2005 and 2006.

FIGURE 1. Teen Birth Rates by Age Group

	1991	2005	2006	Change '91-'05	Change '05-'06
Age 15 to 17	38.6	21.4	22.0	-45%	3%
Age 18 to 19	94.0	69.9	73.0	-26%	4%
Age 15 to 19	61.8	40.5	41.9	-34%	3%

- National Campaign analyses suggest that roughly two-thirds of the increase can be attributed to teens age 18 to 19 and one-third to teens age 15 to 17.
- The National Center for Health Statistics is expected to release preliminary 2007 national teen birth data in February 2009. Many observers believe that the teen birth rate will rise for a second year in a row.

Why Is the teen birth rate on the rise?

There is no single reason why the teen birth rate rose between 2005 and 2006 or why it increased in 26 states, just as there is no single factor influencing a teen's behavior at any given moment. The National Campaign has examined those factors that likely help explain the increase from 2005 to 2006. These factors are discussed in more detail below.

Is some of the increase in the teen birth rate simply because teens with higher fertility now make up a greater share of the teen population?

The overall teen birth rate can increase either because teen birth rates across racial/ethnic groups are increasing, or because those groups with higher fertility are becoming a growing share of the teen population, or a combination of the two. For the period of 2005 to 2006, both factors seem to have played a role in the teen birth rate increase, according to analysis done by the National Campaign. First, increases in the teen birth rate were noted for every racial/ethnic group (except Asians and Pacific Islanders), and Hispanic teens all posted increases in their birth rates. Second, it is also apparent that the overall teen population now includes a slightly larger representation of demographic groups with higher birth rates—Hispanic teens, in particular.

More specifically, analyses by the National Campaign suggest that roughly three-quarters of the overall increase in the teen birth rate is due to increases in the teen birth rates for each racial/ethnic group, and about one-quarter is due the fact that racial/ethnic groups with higher teen birth rates account for a growing share of the teen population.

National Campaign analysis of the 2005 to 2006 change also suggests that older teens (age 18 to 19) account for roughly two-thirds of the overall increase in the teen birth rate, while younger teens account for roughly one third.

Does the increase in the teen birth rate between 2005 and 2006 mean the teen pregnancy rate is also going up, or that more pregnant teens are giving birth rather than having abortions.

At present, it appears that the increase in the teen birth rate may have resulted from an increase in the overall teen pregnancy rate, rather than an increase in the proportion of pregnant teens who give birth. National data on teen pregnancy are available only through 2004; however, state teen pregnancy data are available through 2006 in 16 states. Fourteen of those 16 states reported an increase in the teen pregnancy rate between 2005 and 2006.

- A teen pregnancy can, of course, result in a birth, an abortion or a miscarriage. An increase in the rate of births among teenagers can, in theory, reflect an increase in the overall rate of pregnancies among teens or a decrease in the proportion of pregnant teens who have an abortion

(or even a miscarriage), or some combination of the two. Unfortunately, we do not have all the data we need to identify the precise role of these two factors; in particular, national data on abortion rates for 2005 and 2006 are not yet available.

- Because these 16 states account for only about one-third of the teen births across the country, and because we do not know if the changes in the teen pregnancy rate they report are statistically significant (that is, the change is larger the margin of error in measuring the rates), we cannot say with certainty that teen pregnancy rates have increased nationally.
- These state reports at least suggest that teen pregnancy rates have increased along with the teen birth rates.

What is known about changes in teen sexual activity and contraceptive use?

It is not clear to what extent changes in teen sexual activity and/or contraceptive use drove the increase in the teen birth rate (and likely teen pregnancy rate).

- The most up-to-date data on teen sexual activity and contraceptive use (the Youth Risk Behavior Survey or YRBS) are for the period 2005-2007. However, YRBS data do not include teens outside of school, and therefore reveal little about 18-19 year olds, who account for roughly two-thirds of overall increase in the teen birth rate between 2005 and 2006, based on National Campaign analyses.
- For teens in school, YRBS data for 2005 and 2007 reflected small increases in sexual activity and decreases in contraceptive use that were not statistically significant, but the changes are likely large enough to account for the 3% increase in the teen birth rate (and likely a similar increase in the teen pregnancy rate) between 2005 and 2006.

In general though, it seems that the country's earlier progress in reducing risky sexual behavior among teens has stagnated, perhaps even reversed—why?

There are likely many factors that, in combination, influence teens' decisions and behavior concerning sexual activity, contra-

ception and pregnancy. These include changing social norms, a series of recent high profile teen pregnancies and extensive publicity concerning teen pregnancy (or even nonmarital pregnancy among celebrities), the portrayal of sex without consequences in the media, dwindling economic or educational opportunities on the part of teens (either real or perceived), the influence of policies and availability of programs and services, and perhaps “prevention fatigue” among policymakers, funders and program providers.

Other factors might include concerns about infertility and changes in teen’s attitudes and values toward sex and contraception. In particular, there are anecdotal reports that teen’s concerns about HIV/AIDS have decreased since the mid-1990s, and some research suggests that teens might be becoming more conservative in their attitudes toward sex but still have trouble communicating with their partners about delaying sex or using an effective method of contraception.

In sum:

- *The good news:* the national teen birth rate decreased 32% between 1991 and 2006.
- *The bad news:* the national teen birth rate increased 3% between 2005 and 2006—the first increase in 15 years—and most observers expect another increase between 2006 and 2007.
- *Additional bad news:* 26 states reported a significant increase in their teen birth rate between 2005 and 2006 and only three states and the District of Columbia had significant decreases.
- *What’s driving the increase?* Decreases in teen sexual activity have come to a halt as have improvements in contraceptive use—at least among teens still in high school. However, the increases in the birth rate between 2005 and 2006 have been greatest among those aged 18-19, a group for which there are no recent data on sexual activity or contraceptive use at the national level.