

# Teen Births in the United States

**T**he teen birth rate in the United States is currently at the lowest level ever recorded — 20.3 births for every 1,000 girls aged 15–19. This is a 67-percent decrease from the peak (61.8 births per 1,000 teens) in 1991. Although there is evidence that teen sexual activity has declined since the 1990s, current analysis indicates that the recent decline in pregnancy rates (28 percent between 2007 and 2012 alone) is almost entirely due to improved use of effective contraception.

## The United States vs. Europe

Despite these improvements, however, the U.S. continues to have higher teen pregnancy and birth rates than most other developed countries, including the United Kingdom and Canada. A teenage girl who grows up in the U.S. is more than six times more likely to give birth than one who grows up in Switzerland, which has one of the lowest rates of teen birth in the world.

One likely explanation for the discrepancy in teen birth rates between the U.S. and Europe is the more open and straightforward climate around teen sexuality in European societies. “In many European countries — Switzerland in particular — sexual intercourse, at least from the age of 15 or 16 years, is considered acceptable and even part of normative adolescent behavior,” says Pierre-Andre Michaud, chief of the Multidisciplinary Unit for Adolescent Health at the University of Lausanne Hospital in Switzerland. Most parents and policymakers in Europe believe that confidential sexual health services are a fundamental right.

In Sweden, teens can access free medical care, free condoms, and oral contraceptive prescriptions without parental consent. Emergency contraception is available over the counter. Cecilia Ekéus, a nurse midwife in Stockholm with a PhD in international public health, says Swedish society teaches that sex should occur in a committed relationship “and also that teen-

agers should use contraceptives, be informed, and take responsibility. But in general we are open and positive and think that it’s okay.”

In contrast, in the United States, only 21 states and the District of Columbia explicitly allow all minors to consent to contraceptive services on their own authority. Twenty-five others allow teens to access birth control only under certain circumstances. As a result, American teens have less consistent access to contraception, especially to highly effective methods, than their peers in many other countries. From 2006–2010, 82 percent of adolescents at risk of an unintended pregnancy were using contraception, but only 59 percent were using a highly effective form. Only 5.8 percent of adolescents aged 15–19 had ever used a LARC (long-acting reversible contraceptive), the most effective forms of birth control available.

## Uneven Access to Sex Education

Access to contraception and information on how to use it is the most effective way to prevent pregnancy among teens who are already sexually active. But there is no national curriculum for sex education in American schools. Instead, decisions about how teens are taught about sex — or whether they are taught anything at all — are made at the state and local administrative levels.

As a result, while some adolescents learn how to access and correctly use effective forms of contraception, many others are given only minimal information. Many states and local school districts require that abstinence from sexual activity is heavily emphasized in any sexuality education program. While such programs were largely defunded under the Obama administration, the Trump administration has reversed course, once again taking funding away from comprehensive efforts and redirecting it toward abstinence-focused initiatives.