

WHAT'S NEW WITH KIDS?

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Reality Show's Influence on Adolescent Attitudes and Outcomes

The teen birth rate for the United States fell from 40 births per 1,000 teenagers ages 15 to 19 in 2005 to 29 births per 1,000 teenagers in 2012—a decline of about 28 percent (AECF, 2014). Nevada also saw a decline in its teen birth rate. It fell from 50 births per 1,000 teenagers in 2005 to 33 births per 1,000 teenagers in 2012—a 34 percent decrease (AECF, 2014). State and national teen births rates are at historic lows.

One factor attributed to the decline in the teen birth rate is the television reality show, *16 and Pregnant*.¹ Kearney and Levine (2014), of the National Bureau of Economic Research, found that the reality show influenced teens' interest in contraceptives and abortion and contributed to the decline in the teen birth rate. The authors used data from Twitter and Google Trends to search teens' tweets and searches related to the show, contraceptive use, and abortions. They found that following the airing of new episodes of the show, there were spikes in Google search activity and tweets related to the topics. Examples of tweets included "Seriously, watching # 16 and Pregnant is birth control itself" and "Watching 16 and Pregnant is a great refresher on why NOT to get pregnant. Perfect birth control."

Using Vital Statistics Natality microdata and regression analysis, the researchers estimated that between June 2009, the date of the initial airing of the show, and the end of 2010, *16 and Pregnant* generated a 5.7 percent reduction in the teen birth rate. For that period, the show accounted for one-third of the decline in the teen birth rate.²

Kearney's and Levine's findings may help alleviate the concern that some people have about the reality show, namely, that the show glamorizes teen pregnancy and teen motherhood.

¹Various factors have been attributed to the decline in teen childbearing. Hamilton and Ventura (2012), of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suggest the following factors: "strong pregnancy prevention messages directed to teenagers" and "increased use of contraception at first initiation of sex and use of dual methods of contraception (that is, condoms and hormonal methods) among sexually active female and male teenagers" (p. 5). Based on research by Martinez, Gladys, Casey E. Copen, and Joyce C. Abma, 2011. *Teenagers in the United States: Sexual Activity, Contraceptive Use, and Childbearing, 2006-2010 National Survey of Family Growth, National Center for Health Statistics. Vital Health Stat 23(31)* http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/series/sr_23/sr23_031.pdf; and Oringanje, C., M. M. Meremikwu, H. Eko, E. Seu, A. Meremikwu, and, J.E. Ehiri, 2009, "Interventions for Preventing Unintended Pregnancies among Adolescents (Review)," *The Cochrane Library*, Issue 4, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/14651858.CD005215.pub2/pdf>.

²Kearney and Levine attribute the weak labor market (measured by the unemployment rate), resulting from the Great Recession, as having had the biggest role, 57 percent, in the decline of the teen birth rate during that time.

References

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Hamilton, Brady E. and Stephanie J. Ventura, April 2012, "Birth Rates for U.S. Teenagers Reach Historic Lows for All Age and Ethnic Groups," *NCHS Data Brief*, No. 89, <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db89.pdf>, accessed 8/1/14.

Kearney, Melissa S. and Phillip B. Levine, January 2014, *Media Influences on Social Outcomes: The Impact of MTV's 16 and Pregnant on Teen Childbearing*, National Bureau of Economic Research, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w19795>, accessed 8/1/14.

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