

# **Teenage Promiscuity in the United States**

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Age 17

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## Teenage Promiscuity

The moral decay in America manifests itself in many ways, including the increasing rates of teenage promiscuity. While diverse groups strive to reduce teenage pregnancy in America, it must be understood that this merely springs from this much larger problem. The media and popular culture accept lascivious behavior and influence teenagers' views of immorality. From society, they learn to eschew self-control and pursue self gratification. Furthermore, sex education frequently reinforces or confuses these ideas without accomplishing solid results.

Neither left-wing nor right-wing interest groups deny the prevalence of teenage promiscuity and pregnancy in the United States, demonstrated by the following statistics. In 1999, more than half of teens aged 15 to 19 reported that they had sexual intercourse. From 1988 to 1995, the percentage of teen girls who participated in sexual intercourse increased from 11% to 19%. Each year, three million American teens become infected with a sexually transmitted disease (STD) and researchers estimate that a quarter of those newly infected with HIV are younger than 22 years old (Figure 1) (NARAL). As shown in Figure 2, of the more than ten million teenage girls that the U.S. Census Bureau recorded as living in America, one million become pregnant every year (Garth, NARAL). Greater than three quarters of these pregnancies were "accidental" (NARAL). About 40% of these will benefit from federal aid. Fifty-two percent of these one

Figure 1: New Cases of HIV in the US (by age)

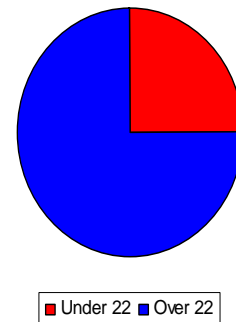
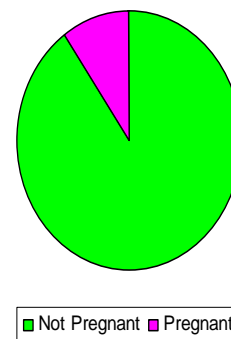
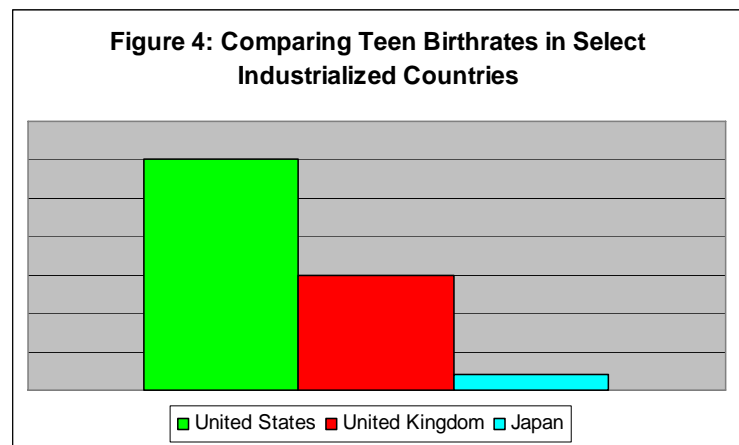
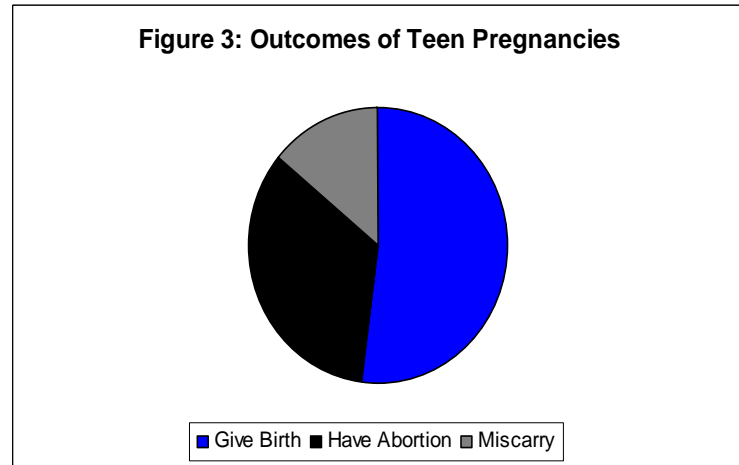


Figure 2: Pregnancy Among Teenage Girls



million will give birth, one third (33.3%) will get abortions, and 14% will miscarry (Figure 3) (Garth).

When compared with international figures, the statistics on teenage promiscuity in the United States become even bleaker. U.S. teens begin having sex younger than teens in Germany, France, and the Netherlands. American adolescents also demonstrate higher rates of birth and abortion (NARAL). Of the industrializations, the United States possesses the largest teen birthrate which doubles the United Kingdom's and is approximately 15 times greater than Japan's (Figure 4) (Garth).



These figures lead to both sides of the debate blaming the other for ineffective sex education policies. However, statistics do not show that any type of sexual education has generally proved to be very effective, perhaps as a result of mixed messages between curriculums or between curriculums and the media. The percentage of American teenagers who took advantage of contraceptives during their first sexual encounter has increased while the percentage of those who took advantage of such methods during their most recent sexual encounter has actually decreased (NARAL). This does not support the projected results of either abstinence-based or

contraception-centered curricula. Sex education has been found to increase rates of teen pregnancy and abortion (Collison) while abstinence-only education has not been found to consistently improve or worsen these problems (ACLU). One study found that the best (most effective) sexual education curricula presented a “clear, consistent message” and “consistently made a specific case.” Furthermore, they created a “message appropriate to the age and sexual experience of the participants” in the course (Finger).

Currently the United States possesses no coherent policy on sexual education. It does provide aid to programs that will meet the federal requirements which include abstinence-only curricula (no aid currently exists for programs addressing contraception as well as abstinence). Thirty-five of the fifty states require education which covers sex or STDs (most of these laws are broad rather than narrow) (Guttmacher).

The government must develop a more organized and effective approach to sexual education. However, if the federal government created a detailed curriculum and mandated that the states implement it, it would impede on the educational rights of the states and the people. Therefore, policy would be best transformed if Congress wrote a piece of broad legislation which applied to all the states. It could outline in a general sense the topics which should be covered in sex-ed courses (by target audience) and the best and most effective way to address these topics. Then, individual states could tailor the curriculum to their schools and provide for both implementation and assessment of these policies.

Sexual education in schools should objectively assess all aspects of the issue, including abstinence and contraception. However, rather than just confronting students with their choices (including abstinence and contraception), teachers should also address the varying consequences of these choices in a professional and unbiased manner. Students should learn, for example, not

only how to use various methods of contraception, but their rates of effectiveness and how they prevent birth. Effective education ought to clearly address all aspects of the issue and present them as they are in hope that adolescents will become be able to make more informed choices regarding their sexuality.

Authorities as well as those developing these curricula must understand that teenagers tend to mold what they hear into their preconceived notions of sexual activity, so broad education will not be able to change their minds and teach them healthy behavior. Furthermore, when listening to a biased message they do not completely support, teenagers find it easy to dismiss all issues addressed in the message rather than thinking about them and assessing their own views.

Besides incomplete policies on sexual education, the government's other grant policies addressing teenage promiscuity tend to be counter-productive. Government funding for abortion and birth control in an area actually increase the pregnancy rates in that area. For example, in 1978 when Georgia and Ohio ceased to receive Medicaid abortions, the pregnancy rate decreased among women who were eligible for Medicaid. Furthermore, when the states place restrictions on teenage abortions the teenage *pregnancy* rates as well as the abortion rates decrease. When Massachusetts enacted a law of parental notification of minor's abortions, the amount of pregnant girls under the age of 18 decreased by 15% in two years. In Minnesota after such a restriction the pregnancy rate among girls 15 to 17 years old decreased by 15% in five years (Kasun). Perhaps when the state facilitates abortion for minors, teens see it as a federal approval for promiscuity. Therefore, it must be understood that government aide often exacerbates the problems it seeks to solve.

The federal government can only play a limited role in the rescue of America's youth. Government programs and sexual education can only address the superficial aspects of problems

such as teenage pregnancy. However, the root problem, teenage promiscuity, emerges from the condition of the hearts and minds of adolescents. If the nation seeks to combat teenage pregnancy, teenage promiscuity must be addressed. If teenage promiscuity is reduced, the attitudes and opinions of teenagers must be changed. While the government can control general education, it cannot oversee the shaping of beliefs and morality.

Therefore, churches and families must take ultimate responsibility for their communities.

Parents, the greatest influence in their children's life, must strive to exemplify virtues and provide their families with a solid moral base. They must also demonstrate how to make decisions based on such a foundation. Then, when their kids become teenagers they will know how to discern and make responsible choices. Strong families are essential in preventing promiscuity.

However, in modern times the family has been eroded. When parents do not fulfill their roles, children often become raised by their friends and by the media. This environment fosters a subjective and arbitrary morality that does little to combat major problems such as promiscuity.

When the family collapses, one more institution still exists to guide children: the church. In church as well as at home, children can learn how to think through issues and make decisions using a moral base. In this way, the church can bolster the work of parents as well as taking responsibility for fractured families. By influencing kids and teens to make healthy decisions, the church can halt the influx of teenage promiscuity.

Ideally the church and the family should work together to teach and guide the children to make the best decisions. This involves active participation and perseverance on the part of both these institutions. Although apathy provides an easier course, it only facilitates the escalation of social and moral decay. Such dilemmas, including teenage promiscuity, will only intensify until

the church and the family choose to take responsibility for their youth and actively rebuild their broken communities.

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