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EYE ON THE NEWS

The Great Teen Sex Decline?

Not exactly

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Last week, the Centers for Disease Control released a [report](#) touting a “significant” decline in teen sex—14 percent for females and 22 percent for males—over the last 25 years. The topic is what Internet media types call “clickbait.” Sure enough, within hours, headlines like [TODAY’S TEENS ARE](#)

[HAVING A LOT LESS SEX THAN PAST GENERATIONS](#) and [TEEN SEX RATE LOWEST SINCE THE 1980S](#) appeared like so many paparazzi at a Kim Kardashian shopping spree. Read the whole report, however, and you may be disappointed—or not, depending on your view of these matters and the age of your children. What the numbers really say is that with the exception of using more emergency contraception—a.k.a. “the morning-after pill”—teens haven’t changed their sexual habits much since the agency’s last survey in 2002.



PHOTO BY MICHAELJUNG/THINKSTOCK

Here are the facts. Sexual activity among 15- to 19-year-olds peaked by the early 1990s. The CDC's 1988 survey reported 51 percent of females and 60 percent of males between the ages of 15 and 19 had experienced sexual intercourse at least once. That number fell by the beginning of the new century. By 2002, 47 percent of female teens and 46 percent of male teens reported being sexually experienced. As of 2006, the percentage among females fell another 2 percentage points. That's where it remained until 2013, the date covered in last week's report. Boys' sexual activity, the report concedes, saw only "an insignificant change" since 2002. In other words, the "significant" drop in teen sex cited by an apparently publicity-hungry CDC occurred in the 1990s. Since 2002, early sexual activity among girls has declined only slightly, and since 2006, it hasn't declined at all among girls or boys.

As teens delayed sex, they began using more contraception. That's not surprising; your average 18-year-old is more mindful than your average 15-year-old. In 1988, 67 percent of girls and 71 percent of boys used contraception their first time, [according to the research group Child Trends](#). Just seven years later, that number had soared eight percentage points—to 75 percent—for girls. Boys took a little longer to get with the program, but by 2002, 81 percent of them reported using contraception when they lost their virginity. By 2006, those numbers had increased to 78 percent for females and an impressive 85 percent for males, almost the same percentages the CDC now reports for 2013. Once again, by far the biggest change came about in the 1990s, with only slight movement since 2002.

Journalists should have been able to figure this out regardless of the CDC's attempt at hype. After reaching crisis levels in the late 1980s, particularly among poor minority kids, [teen pregnancy](#) has been in a more or less steady decline, with the largest drop occurring—you guessed it—in the 1990s. (Interestingly enough, a similarly steep fall has occurred since the beginning of the Great Recession.) The 51 percent decline in teen birth rates

has been the subject of numerous official reports and media articles. There were only two ways the decline could have happened: either teens were having less sex or they were using contraception more reliably (or both). As the numbers fell, culture warriors battled over how to interpret them. “Sexual health” activists like those at the Guttmacher Institute insisted that contraception deserved the credit; abstinence-education believers trumpeted the success of their programs. But by 2002, more than a decade ago, the answer was clear: both things were happening.

Despite the non-news, stories about the Great Teen Sex Decline proliferated for much of last week, and along with them, the familiar partisan “expert” speculation. In a *Washington Post* article, [WHY AMERICAN TEENAGERS ARE HAVING MUCH LESS SEX](#), Brooke Bokor, identified as “an adolescent medicine specialist at the [Children’s National Health System](#),” suggested that teens were being so much more responsible because of . . . cellphones. “They’re looking for guidance [on the web] from parents, guardians and physicians. . . . We really need to be prepared to treat our youth and young adults as educated consumers.” That teens started having “much less sex” long before cellphones could have made them “educated consumers” passed right by both the adolescent medicine specialist and the *Washington Post* reporters.

In the early 1990s, teen pregnancy seemed like an intractable problem. No one knows what turned it around, but it has declined in every state and among every racial and ethnic group. It has gone down in states that swear by abstinence education and in states where 11-year-olds are taught how to put condoms on bananas. It has gone down in good economic times and gone down further in bad times. It’s worth speculating why kids are having less sex than they did 25 years ago. But first—please—let’s get the facts straight.

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