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# Texas teens lead nation in birth rate

## Experts questioning abstinence-only education approach

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While the national teen birth rate has slowed, Texas has made far less headway, alarming public health officials and child advocates.

Texas teens lead the nation in having babies. Last month, the nonprofit group Child Trends conferred another No. 1 ranking on Texas. In the latest statistics available, 24 percent of the state's teen births in 2004 were not the girl's first delivery.

"That astounded me," said Kathryn Allen, senior vice president for community relations at Planned Parenthood of North Texas. "I mean, what are we doing wrong?"

Texas' policy is to deny contraceptives without parental consent wherever possible and to push an abstinence-only sex education program in public schools.

Experts, though, are questioning that approach. They note that from 1991 to 2004, the state's teen birth rate dropped by 19 percent, while the U.S. rate dipped by one-third.

By contrast, California, which has seen its teen birth rate drop by 47 percent in the same period, teaches abstinence but also explains contraception at school and has gone to dispensing birth control to teenage boys and girls – for free, no parental consent required – in community clinics and doctors' offices.

While the political cultures and religious traditions of Texas and California differ, the two huge states share fast-growing immigrant populations who are especially at risk of teen childbearing.

Erandy Gonzalez, 17, of Oak Cliff, could almost be the poster girl for Texas' challenges. She is Hispanic, and Hispanics by far have the highest teen birth rates of any ethnic group. She is the mother of a 15-month-old girl and is pregnant again.

In 2004, Hispanic girls ages 15 to 19 accounted for 61 percent of teen births even though only 39 percent of Texas adolescents were Hispanic, according to the federal National Center for Health Statistics.

Though low-income teens have a federally protected right to get birth control without parents' consent under Medicaid and family planning grants, many teenage girls in Texas don't learn that until it's too late.

"I had heard parents had to go" with their daughters, Erandy said, referring to the deHaro-Saldivar Health Center on Westmoreland Avenue, run by the Parkland Health and Hospital System.

That's not true. YWCA young parent educator Tracie Brewer, who is trying to rescue Oak Cliff girls one by one with mentoring and assistance, said she tells them that they can get birth control on their own at the clinic and hands out flyers explaining how to get there by bus.

Ms. Brewer has worked with Erandy, a straight-A student, since March.

"She's sharp," Ms. Brewer said. "I don't know when that fails them. They're intelligent, but they don't make some good decisions."

Making possibly fateful decisions in the mid-1990s were two Republican governors with their eyes on the White House – California's Pete Wilson and Texas' George W. Bush.

Mr. Bush endorsed a law that requires schools to teach abstinence as the "preferred choice" for unmarried young people and affirms parents' rights to take their youngsters out of sex-education instruction. Mr. Wilson won passage of a far-ranging program of "abstinence-plus" education, media campaigns and state-provided birth control.

"It's unsurpassed in the country," said Kathy Kneer, president of the Planned Parenthood Affiliates of California.

Bill Albert, deputy director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, said the California effort hasn't wavered.

"Through Republican and Democratic administrations, they have put an awful lot into preventing teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease," Mr. Albert said.

California pours resources into cities or regions where teen pregnancy spikes and also funds youth development programs that stress skills development or the value of going to college, said Claire Brindis and Douglas Kirby, California research scientists who have evaluated sex-education programs for the government and other groups.

A Wilson-backed program called Family PACT "made contraception substantially more available to teens," Dr. Kirby said. "The number of providers increased. And by making income eligibility apply to the teen herself, not the family, most teens qualify. In most other states, if a teenager comes to a clinic they ask about family income."

Dr. Brindis of the University of California at San Francisco, though, isn't satisfied.

"There are still a lot of teenagers who do not come in for services," she said. "I do not want to paint a panacea."

In Texas, social conservatives such as Cathie Adams of Eagle Forum suggest that liberal abortion policies and not the Wilson program may account for California's teen birth rate dip – from 74 births per 1,000 girls aged 15 to 19 in 1991 to 39 in 2004. In Texas, the 1991 mark was 78 births per 1,000; and the latest, 63.

"I certainly wouldn't believe anything coming out of California," Ms. Adams said. "I don't know where abortion comes in under their laws. ... Most anything that plays in California is out of step with the rest of America."

However, citing recent national studies, Dr. Janet Realini, a onetime medical school professor now with the Bexar County health department, said teen birth rates are declining because fewer young people are having sex and more are using birth control, "not because of more abortions."

Dr. Realini, who has spent the past decade trying to reduce San Antonio's teen pregnancy rate, said Texas' policy assumes that teaching teens about contraception encourages them to have sex. But she said research shows no link between more information and more sex, and that promoting abstinence, while valuable, has its limits.

"In real life, abstinence fails sometimes," Dr. Realini said. "I know lots of young people who said they were not going to have sex and yet they did."

Still, Texas public health leaders and advocates of women's reproductive rights aren't pushing huge course corrections, such as dispensing birth control at school sites – a practice approved last month by a school board in Portland, Maine.

Some advocates, though, are pushing for a bill in the 2009 legislative session that would clarify how school districts opting to teach about contraceptives should discuss different methods' failure rates. Teachers would use failure rates published by the federal Food and Drug Administration.

The bill also would require school districts to give parents a more detailed explanation of their choices of sex education for their children.

Last spring, despite opposition from some social conservatives, an identical measure cleared a House panel with some Republicans' support. It died, however, in the end-of-session crush – amid signals that some key Senate GOP leaders weren't enthusiastic about it.

Meanwhile, state leaders stoutly defend teaching abstinence – and without parents' permission, only abstinence – in the schools and wherever possible requiring parents to sign off on youngsters' obtaining contraceptives.

A spokeswoman said Gov. Rick Perry sees no need for new legislation.

"The governor is satisfied with current law, in that abstinence is the only 100 percent [effective] way to prevent pregnancy," said spokeswoman Allison Castle.

Ms. Castle added, "It's important to make a distinction between pregnancy rate and birth rate. Texas does not have the highest teen pregnancy rate."

The last time teen pregnancy rates were reported, for 2000, Texas was fifth highest, with 101 pregnancies per 1,000 girls aged 15 to 19. The U.S. average was 84.

Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, while "deeply concerned" about teen pregnancy in the state, said parents have the most responsibility. Still, he said, "our public health facilities and public schools can help reduce teenage pregnancies by educating young people about the consequences of premarital sex and promoting abstinence."

House Public Education Committee Chairman Rob Eissler, R-The Woodlands, opposes more instruction on contraceptives.

"The problem with moving away from the abstinence curriculum ... is the notion that premarital sex is state condoned," he said.

Back in Dallas, Erandy Gonzalez had the abstinence instruction at Sunset High but in January, before she's 18, is due to give birth for a second time.

The fact she's still in school is little short of miraculous. Last winter, she missed more than 60 days of instruction after her toddler, Emily, then 7 months old, had to be hospitalized for two weeks with a serious respiratory ailment. Then Carolina Gonzalez, her Spanish-speaking mother, needed her to translate for her during a job search. The mother now works nights as a temporary worker, mostly in factories.

Ms. Brewer helped Erandy appear before a judge for truancy last spring and get her child care and education back on track. Days later, Ms. Brewer got distressing news.

"Erandy called and said, 'Tracie, let's go to lunch,' " Ms. Brewer recalled. "I said, 'Are you pregnant?' ... When my girls call and ask me to lunch, I know they're either pregnant or homeless."

Once again, Erandy told her, the father was Vicente Rivera, 20, her housepainter boyfriend. He lives with the Gonzalez family in a small apartment in the Wynnewood area and helps pay the bills and care for Emily.

After the unmarried couple's daughter was born in July 2006, Erandy had a DepoProvera injection, a long-lasting contraceptive.

"I didn't want to have any more" babies, she said. "I was OK until I had a well-paying job and Emily was at least 5."

But the shot caused irregular bleeding, she said. Then clinic nurses gave her low-dose estrogen pills. They were for anemia, but Erandy thought they were birth control pills – and soon was pregnant again.

Last summer, at Ms. Brewer's urging, Erandy switched from Sunset to the CAN Academy, an alternative public school. She has doubled up on course work, in hopes of getting her diploma in June, a year early. Someday, she said, she'd like to go to college and become a kindergarten teacher.

Ms. Brewer, herself a product of Mexican-American teen parents in Odessa, said Erandy "has come a long way" and is resilient, but her desire to achieve might not survive another misstep.

"No one wants to talk about teens having sex," Ms. Brewer said. "That's why we're No. 1 in the nation. We're not No. 1 for nothing."

## TWO STATES, TWO APPROACHES

Texas has the nation's highest teen birth rate – 63 births per 1,000 girls ages 15 to 19 in 2004, the most recent year for which state comparisons are available. In 1991, when teen births peaked nationally, it had the fifth highest rate.

Over the same period, California's rate went in the opposite direction – from 11th highest to 24th highest.

Though a tangle of social, cultural and economic factors are at work and are still not well understood, experts say government policies have some effect on teen birth trends. A look at key policies in Texas and California:

## SEX EDUCATION

**In Texas**, public schools don't have to offer sex education. If local school boards choose to offer it, state law says teachers must:

• Present abstinence as the "preferred choice ... for unmarried persons of school age."

• Devote more attention to abstinence than to "any other behavior."

• Emphasize that abstinence is the only 100 percent effective method of preventing pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, HIV/AIDS and "the emotional trauma associated with adolescent sexual activity."

If a school district decides to teach about contraception, it must:

• Allow parents to pull their children from such classes.

• Teach "human use reality rates" of failure for various birth control methods, not "theoretical laboratory rates."

The state distributes about $5 million a year of abstinence education grants to contractors who work with schools. Ninety percent is federal money.

**In California**, if local school districts offer sex education, instruction must comply with a state law requiring that both abstinence and other birth control methods be taught.

• Information must be "evidence-based, scientifically driven and demonstrated to have a positive impact." Abstinence-only instruction fails to meet that standard, according to many social scientists.

The state, which rejects federal abstinence money, spends about $100 million a year on sex education.

AVAILABILITY OF BIRTH CONTROL

**In Texas**, state law doesn't specifically give minors the ability to give consent for themselves to get birth control. For 10 years, the Legislature has passed budget provisions that try to prevent that from happening if a teen on Medicaid sees a doctor or a low-income teen goes to a clinic that receives federal family planning grants.

While federal rules override the state's effort, and low-income teens can and do receive birth control without parental consent under those programs, teens are not taught about that at public schools.

The state spends about $9 million a year on family planning services for teens and has a $1.1 million pregnancy prevention effort under way in six high-need counties.

**In California**, state law gives teens the right to obtain birth control without parents' permission. Teens of all economic backgrounds can receive free contraceptives at community clinics or private doctors' offices.

The state spends nearly $100 million a year providing family planning services to teens, about 60 percent of it federal funds from a Medicaid experiment approved during the Clinton administration.

**NOTE:** California's population last year was estimated by the Census Bureau to be 36.5 million, while Texas' was 23.5 million. So California has to spend just over 1.5 times as much as Texas to have the same per capita spending on a program.

SOURCES: Office of Gov. Rick Perry; Texas Department of State Health Services; Texas Education Agency; California Department of Health Services; Bixby Center for Reproductive Health Research & Policy, University of California at San Francisco; *Dallas Morning News* research