

22. Abstinence Promotion

FOR several decades, widespread teenage sexual activity has led to a host of major societal problems, including an increasing incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, emotional and psychological injuries, and high rates of out-of-wedlock childbearing among America's youth. Abstinence education programs, endorsed by President George W. Bush and many in Congress, have long been advocated as effective in reducing sexual activity and out-of-wedlock childbearing rates among teens, as well as in providing an important foundation for personal responsibility and enduring marital commitment. However, abstinence education programs continue to be attacked by those who promote "safe sex" and contraception programs for youth while seeking to eliminate or reduce funding for abstinence programs.

by *Robert Rector*

Notes

Recommendations

1. Close the enormous funding gap between abstinence education and "comprehensive, safe-sex" education. A recent Zogby poll found that 85 percent of parents believe that teaching about abstinence should be emphasized as much as, or more than, teaching about contraception. Only 8 percent believe that promoting contraception is more important. Many evaluations show that abstinence education programs can substantially reduce teen sexual activity, yet there is relatively little government funding for abstinence education. In 2002, federal and state governments spent \$12 on family planning, "safe sex," and contraception promotion programs for every \$1 they spent on abstinence programs. Specifically among teens, government spent \$4.50 on contraceptive services and promotion for every \$1 spent to encourage teen abstinence. Current federal abstinence programs should be reauthorized without any changes that would weaken or dilute them.

2. Eliminate abstinence funding for "abstinence plus" programs. Given the popularity of abstinence education among parents, safe sex and comprehensive sex education programs are often misleadingly labeled "abstinence plus" or "abstinence first." Advocates disingenu-

ously assert that these curricula are pro-abstinence because they contain a few perfunctory references to abstinence among their materials, but “abstinence plus” programs are overwhelmingly devoted to encouraging contraceptive use and contain material that would be deeply alarming to most parents. Congress should not agree to demands by some members of the Senate that new funding be established for “abstinence plus” programs in addition to, or in place of, authentic abstinence programs.

3. Encourage a delay in the onset of sexual activity among young people. The number one risk factor for acquiring a sexually transmitted disease is the number of sexual partners an individual has had, and the number one factor for increasing the number of sexual partners is initiating sexual activity at an early age. In addition, teens who abstain from sex while in high school are roughly twice as likely to attend college as are sexually active teens from the same socioeconomic background. The Administration and Congress should ensure that all government-supported sex education and contraception programs place a heavy emphasis on delaying the onset of sexual activity and reducing the number of sexual partners.

Facts and Figures

■ The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy reports that 20 percent of adolescents have had sexual intercourse before their 15th birthday and that one in seven sexually active girls became pregnant.

■ Every day, according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, 8,000 teenagers in the United States become infected by a sexually transmitted disease. This year, nearly 3 million teens will become infected. Overall, roughly one-quarter of the nation’s sexually active teens have been infected by a sexually transmitted disease.

■ Some 67 percent of teens who have had sexual intercourse regret it and say they wish that they had waited until they were older, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. The figure for teen girls is 77 percent.

■ Sexually active girls are more than three times more likely to be depressed than are girls who are not sexually active. Compared with peers who are not sexually active, boys who are sexually active are more than twice as likely to be depressed.

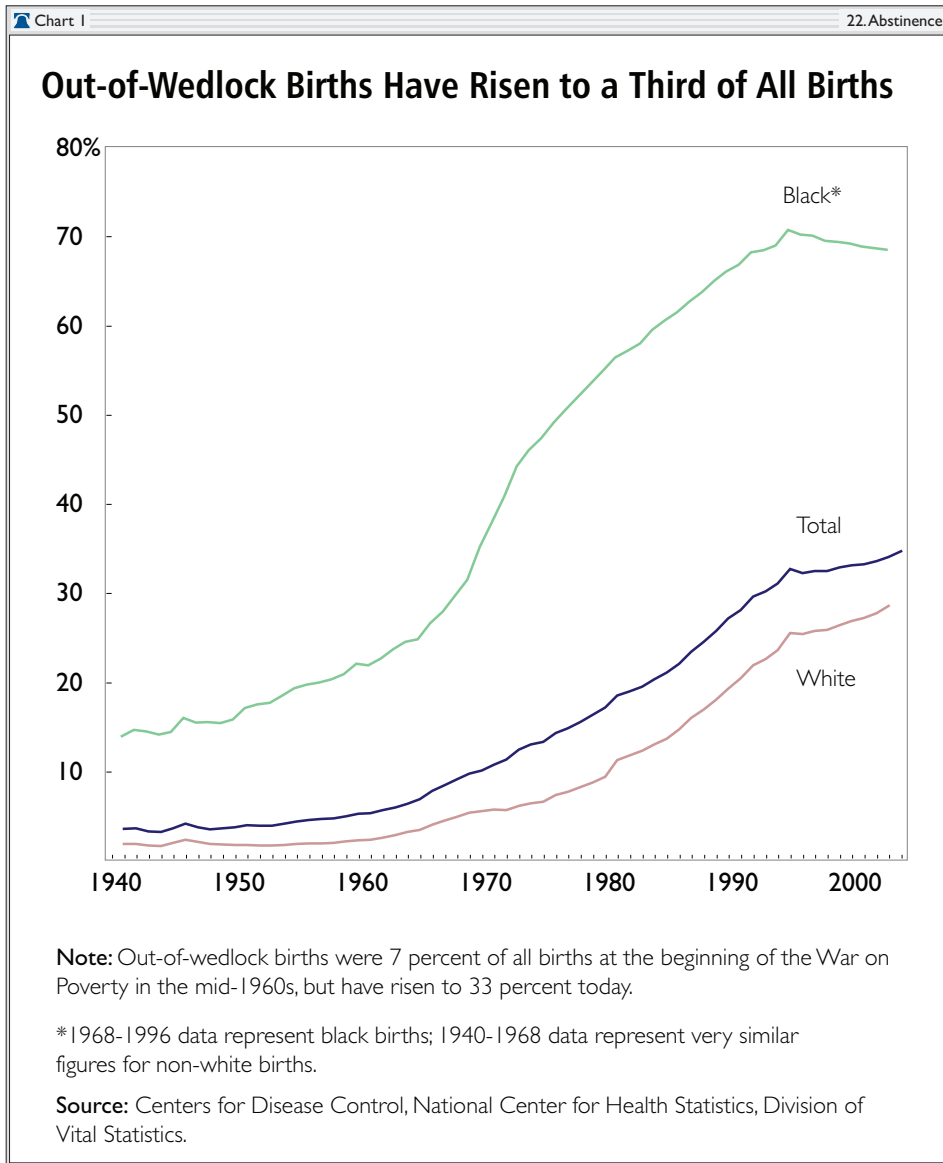
■ When compared with teens who are not sexually active, teenage boys and girls who are sexually active are significantly more likely

Notes

to attempt suicide. Sexually active girls are nearly three times more likely to attempt suicide than are girls who are not sexually active. Sexually active teenage boys are eight times more likely to attempt suicide than are boys who are not sexually active.

- Girls who begin sexual activity at age 13 are twice as likely to become infected with a sexually transmitted disease as girls who started sexual activity at 21.
- Nearly 30 percent of girls who started sexual activity at ages 13 or 14 have had an abortion. By contrast, some 12 percent of young women who became sexually active in their early twenties have had an abortion.
- Nearly 40 percent of girls who commence sexual activity at ages 13 or 14 will give birth outside of wedlock. By contrast, only 9 percent of women who delay becoming sexually active until they are 21 or 22 will give birth outside of marriage.
- Girls who begin voluntary sexual activity at ages 13 or 14 will have, on average, more than 13 voluntary non-marital sex partners during their lives. By contrast, women who do not become sexually active until they are in their early twenties will have, on average, 2.7 sexual partners during their lives.
- When compared with women who began sexual activity in their early twenties, girls who initiated sexual activity at ages 13 or 14 were less than half as likely to be in stable marriages when they are in their thirties. In addition, beginning sexual activity at an older age is linked to higher levels of personal happiness in adult years.
- In one study, among unmarried teens aged 15 to 19, increased abstinence accounted for 67 percent of the decrease in the pregnancy rate. Similarly, a 51 percent drop in the number of babies born to single teens aged 15 to 19 was attributed to abstinence.

Notes



This chapter can be read online at issues2006.org/abstinence.

Additional Reading

Robert E. Rector, Melissa G. Pardue, and Shannan Martin, “What Do Parents Want Taught in Sex Education Programs?” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1722, January 22, 2004, at www.heritage.org/Research/Welfare/bg1722.cfm.

Melissa G. Pardue, Robert E. Rector, and Shannan Martin, “Government Spends \$12 on Safe Sex and Contraceptives for Every \$1 Spent on Abstinence,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1718, January 14, 2004, at www.heritage.org/Research/Family/bg1718.cfm.

Melissa G. Pardue, “Increased Abstinence Causes a Large Drop in Teen Pregnancy,” Heritage Foundation *Executive Memorandum* No. 872, May 2, 2003, at www.heritage.org/Research/Family/em872.cfm.

Robert E. Rector, “The Effectiveness of Abstinence Education Programs in Reducing Sexual Activity Among Youth,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 1533, April 8, 2002, at www.heritage.org/Research/Family/bg1533.cfm.