Have Teen Pregnancy Rates in Canada Been Going Up, Down, or Holding Steady?

The teen pregnancy rate is one of the key statistical measures that governments and researchers use to assess the overall health and well-being of young people. While some young women choose to become pregnant in their late teens, most teen pregnancies are "unplanned" or "unintended", that is, they did not happen on purpose. So a declining rate is considered "good news" and that is what has been happening yearly in Canada for some time. In 2005, the most recent year for which we have national data, the teen pregnancy rate was the lowest ever!

How Canadian teens got there is an interesting story. Math skills are not needed to understand the story but knowing how teen pregnancy rates are calculated will make it easier to follow (check out the box below).

What Does The Research Say About Teen Sexual Activity?

How are Teen Pregnancy Rates Calculated?

The teen pregnancy rate is the number pregnancies per 1,000 females aged 15 to 19 in the population. Statistic Canada determines this number for each year by first adding together the number of recorded live births, abortions, and fetal losses (miscarriages) among all females aged 15 to 19 and then calculating what the number would be per 1,000 females in this age group. For example, the teen pregnancy rate in 1994 was 49.2 per 1,000. This means that for every 1,000 females aged 15 to 19 in the Canadian population in 1994, 49.2 of them became pregnant in that year.

Canadian Teen Pregnancy Rates for 15- to- 19 year olds from 1995 to 2005

The teen pregnancy rate in Canada fell from 47.6 per 1,000 in 1995 to 29.2 per 1,000 in 2005 (Table 1). In other words, in 1995 for every 100 females aged 15-19 in Canada, 4.76 had a pregnancy compared to 2.92 in 2005 (a decline of 63%). Table 1 also shows changes in the outcomes of teen pregnancies over this period. For example, in 1996, the live birth rate was 22.1 and the abortion rate was 22.1 and in 2005 the live birth rate was 13.2 and the abortion rate was 15.3 (the miscarriage rate can be calculated by subtracting the birth and abortion rates from the total pregnancy rate).

Table 1: Rates of pregnancy, live birth, and abortion for teens aged 15-19 in Canada from 1995 to 2005

Rates*	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Pregnancy	47.6	45.6	42.8	42.4	40.1	38.0	36.1	33.9	32.1	30.5	29.2
Live Births	24.3	22.1	20.0	19.8	18.6	17.0	16.0	14.9	14.4	13.6	13.3
Abortions	21.5	22.1	21.6	21.6	20.5	20.1	19.4	18.4	17.1	16.3	15.3

*Rates are per 1,000 females.
Source: Adapted from Statistics Canada CANSIM database http://cansim2.statcan.gc.ca/cgi-win/cnsmcgi.pgm, Table 106-9002. Retrieved 14/12/2009

Pregnancy rates for teens aged 15-17 and 18-19 in Canada from 1995-2005

The pregnancy rates for both younger (15-17) and older (18-19) teens declined from 1995 to 2005. Since pregnancies among younger teens are more likely to be unintended, the decline in the pregnancy rate for 15 to 17 year-olds from 28.5 per 1,000 to 15.8 per 1,000 indicates a significant shift in this age group's behaviour in relation to their sexual and reproductive health.

Table 2: Pregnancy rates for teen aged 15-17 and 18-19 in Canada, from 1995-2005

Rates*	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
15-17	28.5	27.3	25.4	24.8	22.6	21.4	20.1	18.1	16.8	16.9	15.8
18-19	76.1	73.5	69.3	68.5	65.9	62.5	59.8	57.1	54.1	50.2	49.0

*Rates are per 1,000 females.
Source: Adapted from Statistics Canada CANSIM database http://cansim2.statcan.gc.ca/cgi-win/cnsmcgi.pgm, Table 106-9002. Retrieved 14/12/2009.

Provincial/Territorial Variations in Teen Pregnancy Rates

Canada is a diverse country geographically, economically, and culturally. There is considerable variation in teen pregnancy rates between different parts of the country. As shown in Table 3, Newfoundland and Labrador, PEI, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Ontario had teen pregnancy rates below the Canadian average of 29.2 per 1,000 while Quebec, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut had teen pregnancy rates above the national average.

Table 3: Pregnancy rates per 1,000 for females aged 15-19 by Province/Territory in Canada: 2005

CAN	NFLD	PEI	NS	NB	QUE	ON	MB	SK	AB	BC	YK	NWT	NUN
29.2	23.3	19.3	24.0	23.0	32.7	23.3	42.8	43.6	34.4	29.8	31.4	72.0	145.6

Source: Adapted from Statistics Canada CANSIM database http://cansim2.statcan.gc.ca/cgi-win/cnsmcgi.pgm, Table 106-9002. Retrieved 14/12/2009.

Long-Term Trends and International Comparisons

Is the recent decline in teen pregnancy rates in Canada part of a long term trend? Yes and no. Looking back to 1974, the teen pregnancy rate was 53.9. Then the rate declined steadily to 41.8 in 1988 and then over the next six years it increased to 49.2 in 1994 and then it declined consistently until 2005.

It is also interesting to note that Canada has lower teen birth and abortion rates than the United States and England/Wales. Although birth/abortion rates have fallen in all three countries since the early to mid-1990s, Canada's birth/abortion rates began at lower levels and are still lower than in the United States or England/Wales.

For more information see Trends in Teen Pregnancy in Canada with Comparisons to U.S.A. and England/Wales from The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality.

What's the take home message?

Because most teen pregnancies are unintended, teenage pregnancy rates have often been used to assess how well young people are doing in the area of sexual and reproductive health. There are a number of social and economic factors that can influence teen pregnancy rates. For example, sexually active teens with less access to good health care, social supports, sexual health education, and affordable contraception, may be at greater risk for unintended pregnancy. In contrast, efforts to support contraceptive use by sexually active teens can help to reduce the likelihood of unintended teen pregnancy.

It is interesting to think about what may have caused teen pregnancy rates to decline in Canada over the years. One possible reason is that more and more teenage women have decided to continue their education and pursue a career before having children. It may also be that more young people have access to reliable contraceptive education and services. It may also be that Canadian teens have become progressively more knowledgeable about sexuality and sexual health which has led to fewer unintended pregnancies. At a very basic level, declining teen pregnancy rates are good news because they can be seen as a direct indicator that more and more young women have access to the information, support, and health services they need to control their sexual and reproductive health.

Links

McKay, A. (2006). Trends in teen pregnancy in Canada with comparisons to U.S.A. and England/Wales. The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality, 15, 157-161.
http://www.sieccan.org/pdf/mckay_cjhs2006_trends%20in%20teen%20pregnancy.pdf