

Spending cuts may have contributed to falling teen pregnancy rates, study finds

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Teenage pregnancy rates have dropped in areas of the country most affected by government cuts to spending on sex education, according to a new study.

In recent years [local authorities](#) in England have been forced to make significant cuts to public expenditure, with one particular health target affected: reducing rates of teen [pregnancy](#).

In a new study published in the [Journal of Health Economics](#), Professor David Paton from Nottingham University Business School and Liam Wright, a research Assistant at the University of Sheffield, looked at whether a decrease in [sex education](#) had led to an increase in [teen pregnancy](#).

Between 2007 and 2015, the under-18 conception rate in England almost

halved, with some stating that this was due to the 1999 Teenage Pregnancy Strategy. Running until 2010, the strategy saw hundreds of millions of pounds distributed to local authorities with the aim of expanding access to birth control and sex and relationships education.

These services were subject to significant [government cuts](#), with spending falling by over 70 per cent since 2008.

Writing about the study for [The Conversation](#), Professor Paton said:

"Contrary to expectations, we found that if anything, cuts have led to fewer teen pregnancies.

"Our analysis compares changes in [teenage pregnancy](#) rates with changes in annual expenditure on teenage pregnancy services for 149 English local authorities between 2008 and 2014. The extent and timing of cuts varied significantly across areas. This meant we were able to test whether areas that reduced spending the most experienced smaller declines in pregnancy.

Approach with caution

"To our surprise, we found the opposite. Authorities making bigger cuts saw relatively larger decreases in both birth and abortion rates among teenagers. The effect was not huge – a 10 per cent reduction in expenditure was associated with a decrease of just 0.25 per cent in the under-18 conception rate – but it was strongly significant."

Professor Paton concludes: "Policymakers need to use some caution when interpreting our results. We find that cuts to teenage pregnancy services, to date, have not increased conceptions. If the least effective projects have been cut first, it may be that further cuts to services would have different effects. Perhaps there will also be long-term

consequences that we have not yet been able to observe. Though [economic theory and evidence](#) suggest reduced access to contraceptives will have worse effects in the short term.

"Most importantly, it may not be possible to generalise the finding that cuts in public expenditure can be achieved without negative consequences. For example, Oxford University's Rachel Loopstra and colleagues recently concluded that cuts to local authority spending on housing services and social care have contributed to increases in homelessness and in old-age mortality rates.

"This begs the question: why have teenage mothers been disappearing so quickly? One factor brought up in our research, and in [previous research](#), is improvements in educational attainment – something which tends to increase aspiration and make early pregnancy less attractive.

"Another, more speculative, explanation is the rise of "generation sensible" (possibly abetted by the growth of social media and lower childhood exposure to [lead in petrol](#)). Many countries, including the US, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand, have seen decreases in teenage pregnancy similar to the UK. Teenagers in these countries now smoke and drink less, take fewer drugs, and are less likely to commit crimes. Sex may be another risky activity they are turning away from.

Provided by University of Nottingham

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