

Federally funded sex education programs linked to decline in teen birth rates, new study shows

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The implementation of federally funded sex education programs over a decade ago was followed by a decline in teenage pregnancies in counties where these programs were implemented, finds a new study. The research, which encompasses a 20-year period, offers a long-term assessment of the impact of comprehensive sex education in reducing teen birth rates.

"Sex education in the United States has been hotly debated among researchers, policy makers, and the public," says Nicholas Mark, a doctoral candidate in New York University's Department of Sociology and the lead author of the paper, which appears in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*. "Our analysis provides evidence that funding for more comprehensive [sex education](#) led to an overall reduction in the teen birth rate at the county level of more than 3 percent."

"We've known for some time that abstinence-only programs are ineffective at reducing [teen birth rates](#)," adds Lawrence Wu, a professor in NYU's Department of Sociology and the paper's senior author. "This work shows that more wide-reaching sex education programs—those not limited to abstinence—are successful in lowering rates of [teenage pregnancy](#)."

To study the impact of sex education programs, the researchers focused on the federal Teen Pregnancy Prevention [program](#) (TPP), which was initiated in 2010 and awards funding at the county level. The vast

majority of these programs provide more comprehensive information on sex, contraception, and reproductive health than do abstinence-only programs. Local organizations receiving TPP funding for their programs targeted different groups of at-risk youth. For example, one delivered in San Diego centered on 9th and 10th grade students in schools identified as "teen pregnancy hotspots."

While previous studies have concluded that broadly based sex education programs are beneficial in reducing teenage pregnancy rates, many rely on *correlational* support. The PNAS research, by contrast, examined which counties received TPP funding and subsequent birth rates, which Mark and Wu studied by analyzing birth certificates, thereby capturing the mother's age and county of residence. Encompassing the timing of program implementation and later birth rates allowed the researchers to conduct a "quasi experiment"—one that could potentially illuminate a cause-and-effect relationship, but without a random sample that is typical of traditional experimental research.

More specifically, they looked at teenage birth rates in 55 U.S. counties in the years leading up to their receiving TPP funding (1996-2009) and during the years they did receive this support (2010-2016). They then compared teen birth rates in the 55 funded counties to teen [birth](#) rates in more than 2,800 unfunded counties in the years before and after TPP funding.

Overall in these counties, teenage pregnancy rates dropped by 1.5 percent in the first year of TPP funding, but fell by approximately 7 percent in the fifth year of funding for an average reduction of over 3 percent during the studied period.

Mark and Wu note that a small decline in teenage [birth rates](#) shortly after the introduction of sex education programs is consistent with past research, adding that, over time, these rates decline further—perhaps

due to greater numbers of teens receiving the programming and coinciding with years in which they became more sexually active.

More significantly, they conclude, the work captures the timing and receipt of federal funding for comprehensive sex [education](#) in assessing its impact on teenage pregnancy.

More information: More comprehensive sex education reduced teen births: Quasi-experimental evidence, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2022). doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2113144119

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