

Why the Left is Attacking Abstinence Programs

By Janice Shaw Crouse

It happens all the time — when Congress begins drafting appropriations bills dealing with the funding of sex education, the left starts undermining abstinence programs. The federal government disproportionately supports those sex education programs prominently featuring condom distribution from Planned Parenthood and other organizations that argue: “Teens are going to have sex anyway, so the best response is to teach teens to protect themselves and encourage them to practice ‘safe’ sex.” In fact, for every \$12 spent on condom-based programs, only \$1 is spent funding abstinence programs. Yet when appropriations hearings are held, you can count on well-timed research being released to “prove” that the few and relatively new abstinence programs don’t work. The left vehemently argues that the government is throwing money away to support abstinence programs. Translation: All the federal money should go to the groups promoting “safe sex” through the use of condoms.

Often, the attacks are extreme and partisan. For instance, this weekend, the media, including the *Washington Post*, gave considerable attention to a 20-page document from The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Advocates for Youth and the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) that simply regurgitated previous attacks on three abstinence programs. The letter criticized statistics from a 1993 program and attacked a program no longer published and one that has been updated and revised. Obviously, such unfounded criticism puts a political agenda before honest evaluation — never mind students’ well-being.

Last week, Mathematica Policy Research Inc. released a study of abstinence programs that was widely disseminated even though it was a very limited study — only four early abstinence programs — and was based on flawed methodology. The targeted children were in abstinence programs at age 9-11 and had no follow-up before being evaluated when they were 15-16 years of age.

The misleading Mathematica study made headlines in all media. An alarmist MSNBC report was headlined, “Blind faith on sex-ed approach puts kids at risk.” The politically-motivated subheading declared, “Bullheaded Bush administration puts abstinence ideology before lives.” The *Christian Science Monitor* put a positive headline on a very negative article. The headline: “Honesty about abstinence-only: To confront the *apparent failures* of these programs is not to give up on teen abstinence as a standard [emphasis added].” In spite of the headline, however, the article used 13 paragraphs to explain how abstinence programs have produced “zero effect. That’s right: zero.”

Common sense tells you that you’re not likely to find something that you’re determined not to see. One study of a D.C.-area program found that girls in the abstinence program were seven times less likely to engage in sexual activity than those who were not in the program. Common sense also says that something has been at work to bring down the rates of sexual activity by teens over the last 15 years. That “something at work” certainly isn’t the liberal sex education bilge that has polluted the minds of teens for the last 40-50 years; the “sex is no big deal” and “sex-without-consequences” agendas of such “education” programs are hard to distinguish from

the ones pushed by Hugh Hefner at *Playboy*. Those agendas produced unprecedented rates of teen sexual activity, out-of-wedlock births and abortions.

Yet frequently truth breaks through the darkness of lies and distortion. Truth can even spotlight the fallacies in special-interest agendas.

For instance, the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*¹ just published the results of a survey covering 1,052 inner-city adolescents. A team of pediatricians at New York City's Albert Einstein College of Medicine conducted the research and found that abstinent students have a stronger academic profile, while those who engage in sexual experimentation are more likely to exhibit academic and behavioral pathologies. The non-abstinent students were more likely to earn low grades, drop out of high school and experiment with drug and alcohol use. The Einstein scholars identified the "co-occurrence of substance abuse and dropping out of school with sexual activity" as a "problem behavior syndrome."

Abstinence programs don't as yet have a long track record; they've only been in place a few years, and only recently have they seen widespread use in schools across the nation. There aren't that many evaluations of the programs available, though 12 studies indicate remarkable effectiveness.²

The big story, however, is the trends revealed in the official data indicating dramatic and remarkable demographic changes that coincide with the broader use of abstinence-only programs across the nation. Official government statistics show reversals in trend lines that were resistant to change prior to the availability of abstinence-only programs. These data are available, but hardly anyone is paying attention; certainly, the following three trends aren't making the headlines — and they should.

TEEN SEXUAL ACTIVITY IS DOWN

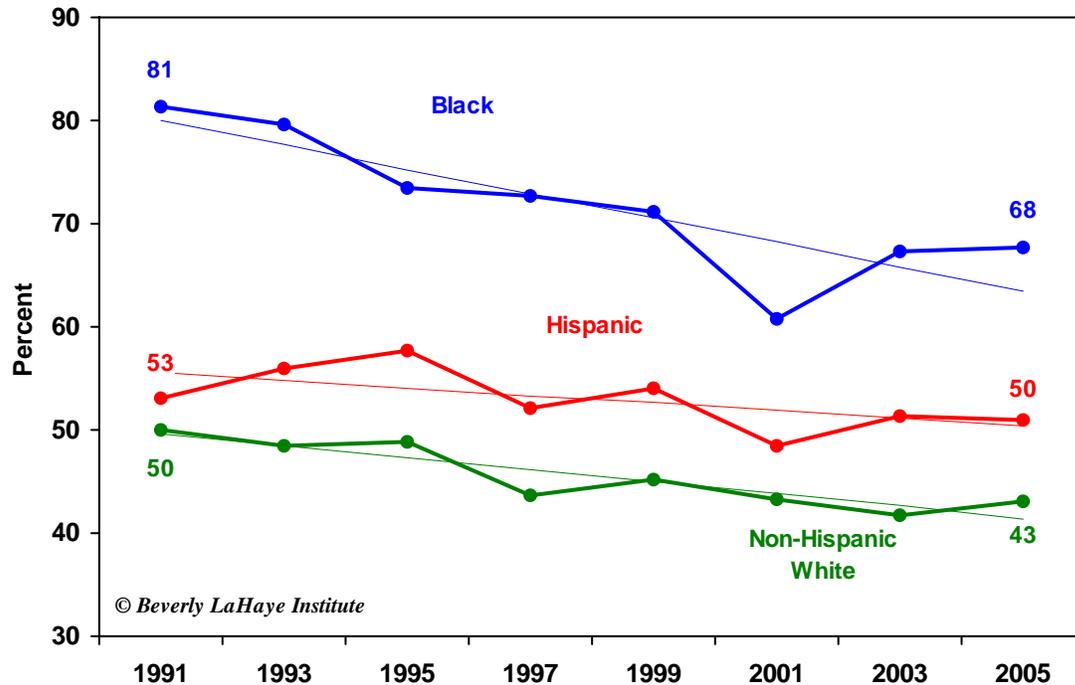
The Centers for Disease Control³ reports that teen sexual activity has decreased; the downturn is especially dramatic among black teens — dropping from 81.4 percent in 1991 to 67.6 percent in 2005 (see Figure 1 below). Among Hispanics, the drop is relatively small but in the right direction — from 53.1 to 51.0. Among whites, the reversal of the trend is important because the number has stayed below 50 percent since the mid-90s and now is at 43.0 percent.

The downward trends in three population groups represent documented changes in teen behavior — even with a slight blip upward in the early 2000s, rates are still well below that of the early 1990s.

Why would we go back to programs that encourage students to engage in behavior that we know is risky — behaviors that the Einstein pediatricians indicate produce "problem behavior syndrome"?



Figure 1. —Percent of High School Students Who Have Ever Had Sexual Intercourse: Selected Years 1991-2005



Source: National Center for Health Statistics, “Recent trends in teenage pregnancy in the United States, 1990-2002.” Health E-stats. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. Released December 13, 2006.

TEEN BIRTHRATES ARE DOWN

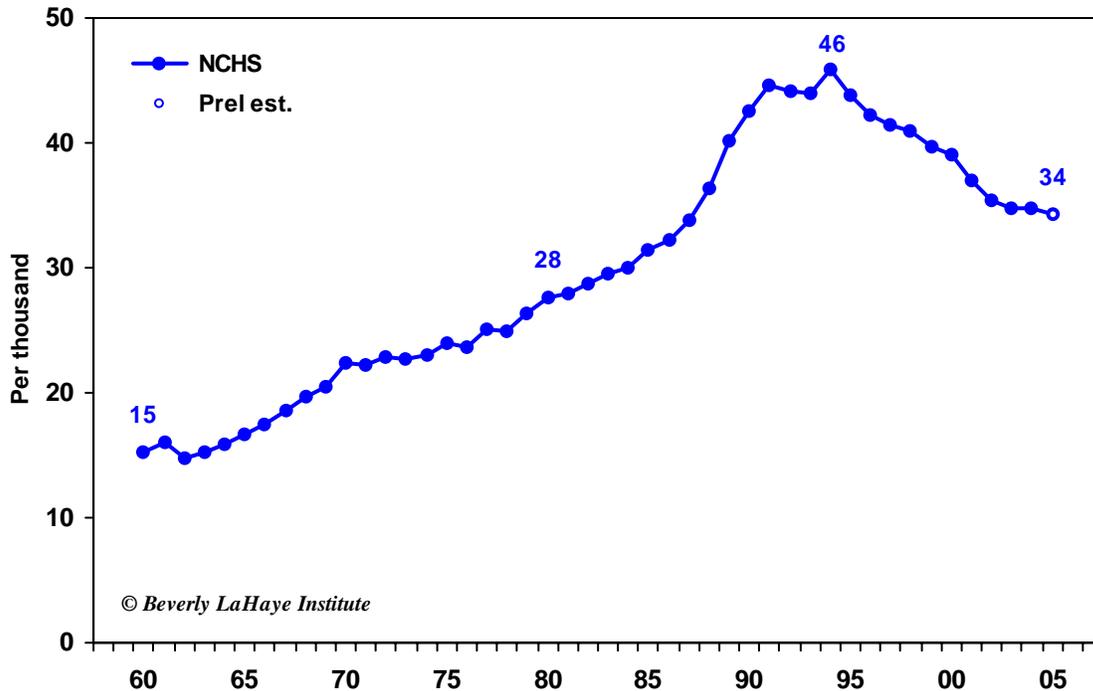
Between 1940 and 1954, the unwed birthrate for teens (15-19 years old) doubled; it doubled again by 1984, and increased another 50 percent before peaking in 1994. Since 1994, however — and in defiance of everyone’s expectations — unwed teen birthrates have steadily followed a downward trend (see Figure 2 below). The National Vital Statistics Report reveals that (based on preliminary data for 2005), teen birthrates are down by 25 percent since 1994.⁴

The unwed birthrate for younger teens (15-17) declined by 12 per thousand since 1994, while the rate for older teens (18-19) declined by 11 per thousand. The older teen drop is particularly significant because from 1974-1994 their unwed birthrate paralleled the rate for unmarried early 20s women. After 1994, though, the older teen rate dropped while that of the unmarried early 20s continued to climb (though at a slower rate than in the 1980s).

It is worth repeating that this reversal of trend in the unwed teen birthrate stands in sharp contrast to the fact that the unwed birthrate for women in their 20s has continued to go up — for unmarried women 20-24, a 5 percent increase from 1994 to 2005 and among unmarried women 25-29, an astounding 25 percent increase!



Figure 2. — Unwed 15-19 Teen Birthrate: All Races
Per Thousand Unwed Teens Age 15-19



Source: National Center for Health Statistics, "Births: Final Data for 2004," *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Vol. 55 (1), September 2006, www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr55/nvsr55_01.pdf

The drop in teen births is particularly encouraging in that it has occurred among both black and white teens and both younger and older teens, most especially among the younger 15-17 year-old teens who have not had a chance to complete their high school education.

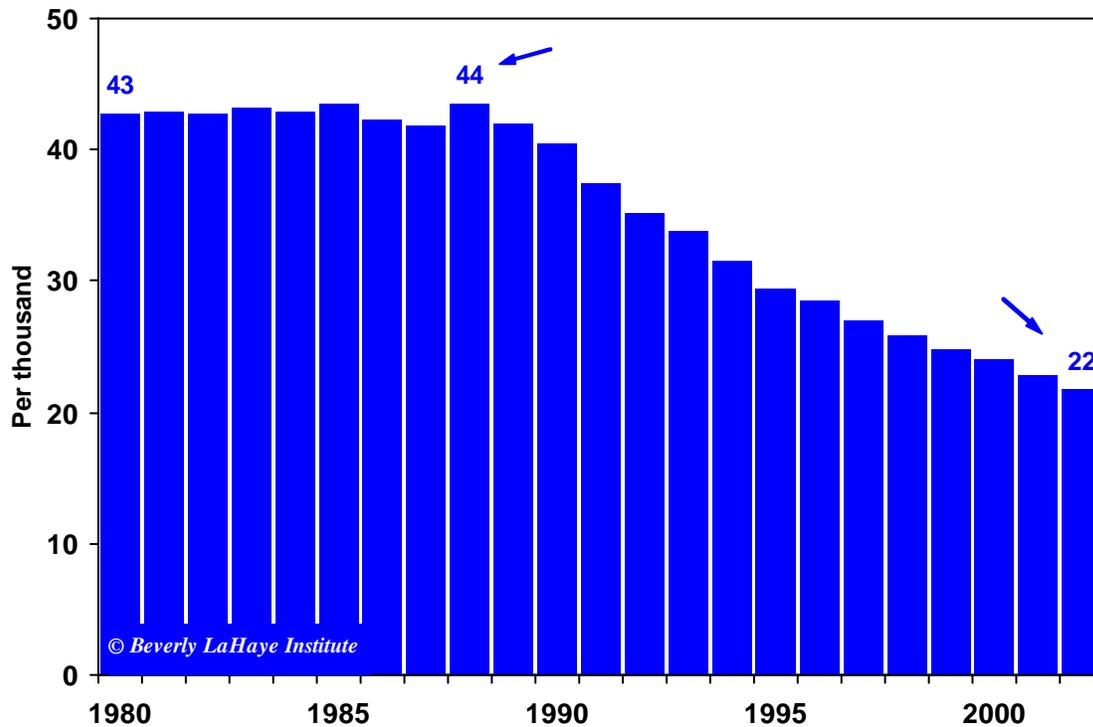
- The rate for black teens peaked in 1991 (for 15-17 year olds: 80 per thousand in 1991 to 37 per thousand in 2004 and for 18-19 year olds a drop of nearly one-third: 149 per thousand in 1991 to 101 per thousand in 2004).
- The birth rate among unmarried black teens in both age groups was lower in 2004 than it has been in over four decades.
- While birth rates among unmarried black teens remains high compared to rates for unmarried white teens, the gap between black and white teens narrowed considerably during the 1990s.
- For white teens the peak in unwed births was in 1994. In the post-WW II era, the birth rates among unmarried white teens in both age groups rose steadily until 1994 (from 3 per thousand to 24 among 15-17 year olds and from 8 per thousand to 56 among 18-19 year olds).

The effect of these declines in birthrates has been dramatic and is an under-reported success story about young African-American women; perhaps what has been happening among black teens can best be appreciated by translating it into the number of teen births averted. Total births

to black teens declined from 136,000 in 1996 to 107,000 in 2005, a decrease of more than 21.5 percent. More than 90 percent of this decline was accounted for by the decrease in unwed teen births.



Figure 3. —Teen Abortion Rate: All Races
Per Thousand Teens Age 15-19



Source: National Center for Health Statistics, "Recent trends in teenage pregnancy in the United States, 1990-2002." Health E-stats. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. Released December 13, 2006.

TEEN ABORTIONS ARE DOWN

The National Center for Health Statistics reports that the rate of teen abortions has been cut in half since 1988.⁵ At its peak, teen abortions were at 44 per 1000. Now at a dramatic low, the number is 22 per 1000. Obviously, we cannot credit today's declining teen birthrate to teens turning to abortion.

Interestingly, as teens become more abstinent, there are fewer abortions, too. One has to ask if a greater appreciation for life is a byproduct of the self-discipline and self-esteem that is required for a teen to remain abstinent.

Let's do the math. Three out of three's not bad! Especially considering that liberal researchers can't seem to find any effect from abstinence programs. During the 30-year reign of condom-based sex education, teen sexual activity increased, teen births dramatically increased and teen

abortions were going up. What's different now? Have teens suddenly learned how to use condoms more effectively and consistently than adult women who are using contraception but are frequently surprised nonetheless to find themselves pregnant? Somehow, I doubt it!

Clearly, many teens have heard the truth and are abstaining from sex — a decision that is best for them in every way. Along with decreased sexual activity among teens, we are seeing corresponding decreases in teen births and teen abortions. These simultaneous reverses in trends indicate that teens are choosing a path that is proven to lead to a bright and promising future both in their personal lives and in every other aspect of their well-being.

¹ Ellen Johnson Silver and Laurie J. Bauman, "The Association of Sexual Experience with Attitudes, Beliefs, and Risk Behaviors of Inner-City Adolescents," *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 16:1 (2006), pp. 29-45.

² Studies Validating the Efficacy of Abstinence Education Programs, National Abstinence Education Association, 4/12/07, http://www.abstinenceassociation.org/docs/NAEA_Abstinence_Works_041207.pdf

³ Trends in HIV-Related Risk Behaviors Among High School Students -- United States, 1991-2005. www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5531a4.htm#tab

⁴ Martin JA, Hamilton BE, Sutton PD, et.al., "Births: Final Data for 2004," *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Vol. 55, No 1, September 29, 2006. www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr55/nvsr55_01.pdf and Hamilton BE, Martin JA, Ventura SJ, Births: "Preliminary data for 2005." Health E-Stats. Released November 21, 2006 www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/hestats/prelimbirths05/prelimbirths05.htm

⁵ Ventura SJ, Abma JC, Mosher WD, Henshaw SK, "Recent trends in teenage pregnancy in the United States, 1990-2002." Health E-stats. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. Released December 13, 2006.