

[Ed: This article is a commentary on figures supplied by the ONS¹.]

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Commentary on the conception rates for under 16 year olds from 1969 - 2009

We know that most young people under the age of 16 don't have sex. We've all seen the headlines, the teenagers using abortion as "*a form of contraception*" and how "*giving girls the Pill raises teen pregnancy*", but the Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures¹ on the conception rates for under 16s confirm what those of us who work with young people or in sexual health already know - that teenagers are far less likely to get pregnant now and in 2010 the rates (7.0 per 1000) are the lowest they have been for 40 years.

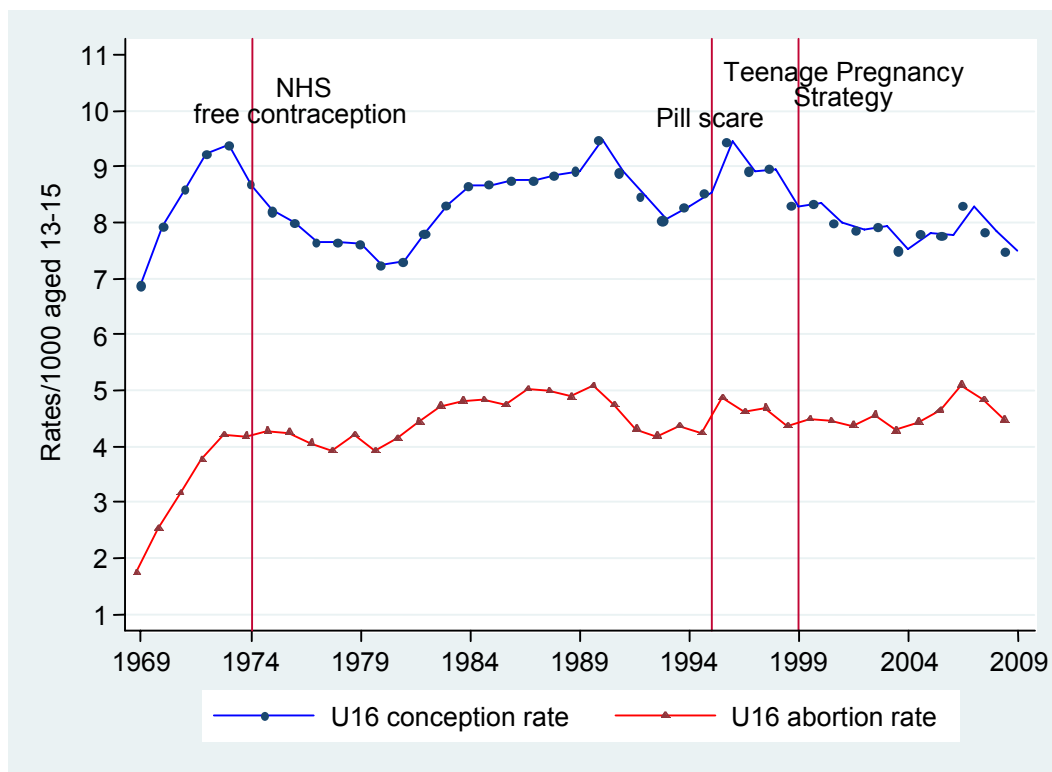
We also know that the myths young people hear about sex, and that they talk to us about on the Ask Brook helpline, such as you can't get pregnant the first time, or that the "*withdrawal technique*" is a reliable way to avoid pregnancy,

only add to the confusion and lead to further teenage pregnancies.

Such is the prevalence of myth and misunderstanding surrounding young people in the press that, in 2008, Brook resolved to commission a MORI public opinion poll - and it threw up some very interesting results: some 95 per cent of respondents overestimated the number of teenage pregnancies, and four in five also believed that teenage pregnancy rates had increased, when in fact they have declined since 1998.

The ONS figures are shown since records began in 1969 (Figure 1). Looking at the conception rates per thousand for every tenth year¹ it appears, at first glance, they are almost static, so should it come as a surprise to us that

Figure 1: Under 16 conception and abortion rates, England & Wales, 1969-2009



Note: Rates are per 1000 females aged 13-15 at time of conception.

Source is the Office for National Statistics.

1. The conception rates for under 16s in England and Wales every ten years: 1969 [6.9] 1979 [7.5] 1989 [8.9] 1999 [8.3] 2009 [7.5]. Rates are per 1000 females aged 13-15 at time of conception. Source is the Office for National Statistics.

so many people believe little progress has been made?

The thing is, to get a clearer picture, you have to *read between the lines*, and look at the many fluctuations that have occurred in the preceding years, because a huge amount of good work has taken place, and real progress has been made. There has been a big decrease in the conception rate for under 18s, and conception rates for under 16s have followed a similar downward trend - but, because their numbers are smaller, they are subject to greater change and may not look as impressive to the casual observer (or tabloid reader).

Free contraception

Since the introduction of free contraception on the NHS in 1974 (see Figure 1), the overall trend has actually been one of decline, and, where spikes have occurred the reasons have usually been pretty clear cut, such as fears over patient confidentiality. Research has consistently shown that young people won't use services unless they can be sure they are confidential, and our experience at Brook confirms this: in the early 1980s many under 16s were confused about their right to confidential contraception advice and were concerned that their confidence would be broken, so it followed that attendance figures for this age group at both Brook and family planning clinics in England showed a significant drop during this period.

It was a combination of this, along with cuts in funding to community health services (similar to those we are experiencing now) that lead to the closure of many family planning clinics and young person's services, further restricting people's access to contraception.

Although the legal issues surrounding contraception and confidentiality were resolved in the House of Lords, in 1985, it took at least a further five years to rebuild confidence in the system, and for attendance figures to recover.

The early to mid-nineties saw an expansion of both young person's services and specialist health services, bringing with it a 16 per cent reduction in the teenage pregnancy rates for under 16s over the same period; sadly, much of this good work was undermined by the 1995 pill scare, which saw the percentage of Brook's clients choosing the contraceptive pill drop by 32 per cent among under 16 year olds.

Teenage Pregnancy Strategy

The Teenage Pregnancy Strategy was developed in 1998; it both focused on and highlighted the good work being done, and, critically, it provided an excellent analysis of how to work effectively with boys, black and minority ethnic groups and looked after children. This, together with the historical ups and downs in the stats, means that we are clear about what works to improve young people's sexual health and wellbeing, we know how to reduce rates of unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, and we need to get on with making that happen consistently across the UK.

The system in the Netherlands is often highlighted as the best model to follow, and it's not difficult to see why: Holland has the lowest teenage pregnancy rate in Europe, one sixth of that in the UK, and also one of the lowest abortion rates for teenagers too - but they also have an open and accepting attitude toward teenage sexuality, widely available information and sex education, and easy access to confidential contraceptive services. Evidence from the last ten years shows that when we put those things in place in the UK we see our rates going down too, for example: in Oldham, where Brook has one of its busiest services, the under 18s pregnancy rate fell by just over 36 per cent between 1998 and 2010.

Conclusion

Looking at the statistics over time, it's clear to see that when access to services and information is restricted, the rates go up, so it's incredibly important that, in these times of austerity, these figures are there to serve as a warning of what can happen as we head down this route again.

But, while we must continue to keep an eye on these figures, of ultimate importance is the young people behind the statistics. Yes, recent tabloid headlines might scream that "*three girls have had EIGHT abortions*" but there will always be extreme cases - and, like most extreme cases, the young people involved are often some of the most vulnerable members of society.

If we really want to make big changes in the numbers of teenage girls getting pregnant, to bring us in line with our Northern European neighbours, we need to grow up and start dealing with the issues responsibly - then we

have to make big changes in the way we think about sex: we need to ensure a culture that is open and positive about sex and relationships; we need to stop ignoring young people and start engaging with them, and we need to have high expectations for them so they have high expectations for themselves. All of us involved with young people and sexual health talk about informed choices, but a choice is only a choice if you know you have it, and have the skills, confidence and opportunity to make it.

Brook is the country's largest young people's sexual health charity. We have been providing sexual health services, support and advice to young people, under the age of 25, for over 45 years.

Our mission is to ensure that all children and young people have access to high quality, free and confidential sexual health services, as well as education and support. To enable them to make informed, active choices about their personal and sexual relationships so they can enjoy their sexuality without harm.

You can read our Position Statement on [Teenage Pregnancy @ www.brook.org.uk](http://www.brook.org.uk)

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