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TEENAGE CONCEPTION RATES: A 30-YEAR BATTLE

The latest figures for conceptions in England and Wales for 2004 were published in February. From 2003-2004 the conception rates for the under 18s decreased by 1.4% while those for 18 and 19-year-olds increased by an average of 1.9%. The largest decline, 9%, was observed for 14-year-olds.

Figures for regions of the country vary widely. For example, in the North-East, the conception rate is 50.5 conceptions per year per 1000 females under 18, while in the East of England the figure is 32.8 per 1000 females. In Wales, the figure for Torfaen are highest at 66.9 per 1000 and lowest in Monmouthshire at 21.6 per 1000.

Beverley Hughes, Minister for Children, Young People and Families, speaking to the Association of Directors of Social Services in April, appeared to take some comfort from the figures, citing a 15.2% fall in conception rates for the under-16s between 1998 and 2004. She emphasised that the government's teenage pregnancy strategy was focused on deprived areas with high rates of conceptions.

Critics of the government's strategy point to the failures in meeting target conception rates and the fact that in some regions the money spent on sex education, condoms and the morning-after pill has had little impact on conception rates. But who is right, and is the government's strategy working?

Weighing up the oft-quoted facts and data doesn't produce a clear answer to this question.

A problem with expressing yearly conception rates as conceptions per 1000 (of all) females is that it masks information helpful to the question. Since the 1970s, conception rates expressed in this way have wandered up and down an average figure but with no clear overall direction. Conceptions expressed by number per 1000 of sexually-active females, however, have shown a steep and largely uninterrupted decline from the 1970s to the present day. An obvious interpretation of this trend is that the contraceptive policy of successive governments since then has been effective in reducing conception rates.

Two additional points need consideration, however, in order properly to understand this trend. First, since the 1970s the number of sexually-active females has increased dramatically, in some age groups by nearly 100%. It also appears that the sexual activity of individuals has increased substantially.

Thus, successive governments have been fighting a battle in which the promotion and use of contraceptives has been countered by increasing numbers of sexually-active females with higher rates of sexual activity. The latter has been driven by the liberal agenda of the media and others, with the implicit support of government bodies, and is directly evidenced by huge increases in rates of sexually-transmitted infections.

The commonly-presented conception rate figures simply reflect this battle; sometimes contraception wins out and conception rates decline for a time and sometimes sexual activity wins and conception rates increase.

Secondly, the clear downward trend in conception rates per 1000 sexually-active females is slowing down and levelling out. This means that the contraceptive strategy has almost reached the stage where there are very few gains to be made from current methods and approaches. Simply interpreted, current conception rate strategy has reached the stage where it effectively asks teenagers to act in a more disciplined, organised and responsible manner than many adults in stable relationships. This, of course, is asking too much.

The government could possibly meet its targets if it could persuade all teenagers to behave as those in the better regions of England and Wales, or as teenagers in the Netherlands. However, social engineering on this scale seems improbable.

Overall, the data indicate that the government's strategy will fail. It needs to recognise this and seriously promote approaches based on abstinence in order to reduce the numbers of sexually-active teenagers and their rate of sexual activity. The government also needs to set an example for the media and others, who promote sexually-liberal attitudes and lifestyles with depressing and awful consequences.

Peter Fearnley

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