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State's teen birth rate remains high

■ The number of young mothers in Oregon has fallen 7 percent since 1991, despite a 12 percent drop nationwide, a report says

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Oregon's high teen birth rate has declined only slightly since 1991 despite a marked drop in the number of teen mothers across the nation, according to a national report released Wednesday.

Oregon's teen birth rate ranks 30th in the nation, according to the most recent data compiled by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a national child research group.

"In the early '90s, we were very aggressive in talking to kids about the issues and that was good, but there's been a turnover of teens and teen parents since then," said Tonia Hunt, spokeswoman for Children First for Oregon, a child advocacy group.

The birth rate for girls ages 15 to 19 declined 12 percent nationwide between 1991 and 1996. In Oregon, the rate declined by 7 percent. The state with the lowest birth rate for girls in that age group is New

Hampshire; the state with the highest is Mississippi.

However, from 1994 to 1997, Multnomah County has seen a 30 percent drop in the number of pregnancies among girls ages 10 to 17, according to the Oregon Health Division.

In contrast, the number of teen births increased 15 percent in Washington County and 18 percent in Clackamas County during the same period, according to state records.

Any drop in counties' birth rates likely relates to educational outreach by social service agencies, said Linda Doyle, teen pregnancy prevention coordinator at the Multnomah County Health Department.

Widespread educational programs in schools and communities have helped teen birth rates plummet in many states, but those efforts are too inconsistent to cause a lasting drop in most areas of Oregon, Hunt said.

Reducing teen pregnancies is important because teen-age mothers are more likely to quit school and twice as likely to wind up on welfare, according to state officials.

"We see the effects of teen parenthood, and it's very troublesome," said Jim Neely, deputy administrator for Adult and Family Services.

As of November 1998, 1,350 of the 17,500 families on public assistance in Oregon were headed by teen parents, he said. But many people who were teen parents or are children of teen parents are still on welfare.

Teen mothers and their babies are also prone to greater health risks. Teen mothers are more likely to give birth to premature babies, because they often don't seek prenatal care, Doyle said. Children of teen mothers are more likely to live in poverty and to suffer abuse and neglect, she added.

Oregon did get some positive points in the report.

The number of unmarried teen births was below the national average, which could mean that many of the births are occurring to women in their later teens, Hunt said.

Only 19 percent of teen births in Oregon in 1996 were repeat births compared with 22 percent nationally.

Yet the state has a great deal of work to do, Hunt said.

"It's not something you can fix in one year or with one strategy. We have to make sure teens have clear, accurate information. They have to hear it from their parents, schools and their communities."