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Wellesley College professor co-authors study that says MTV's '16 and Pregnant,' 'Teen Mom' helped reduce teenage birthrate

Posted by Matt Rocheleau January 14, 2014 01:51 PM

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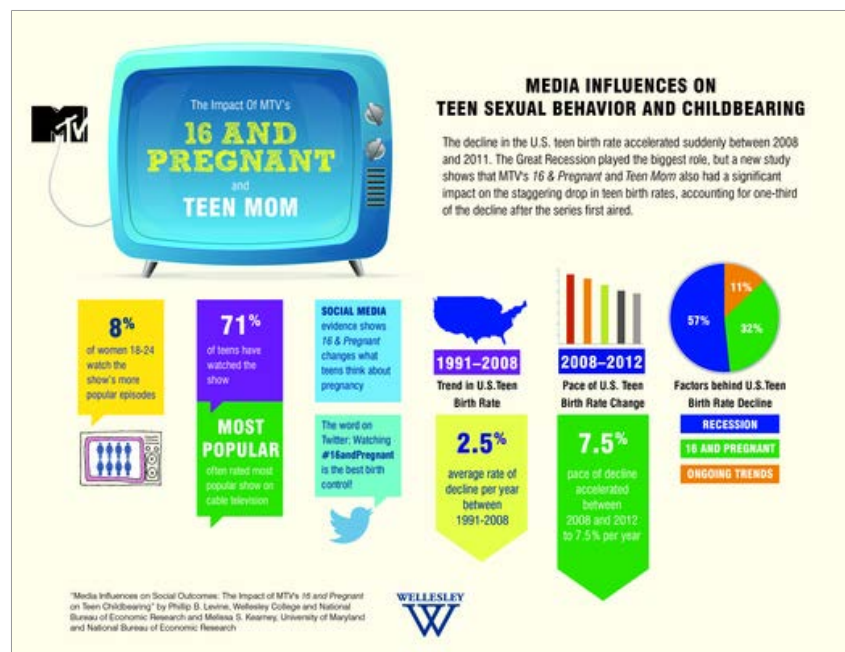
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By Matt Rocheleau, Boston.com Staff

A study co-authored by a Wellesley College professor suggests that MTV shows "16 and Pregnant" and "Teen Mom" have helped reduce the teenage birthrate in the United States, countering fears that the controversial reality programs glamorize teen pregnancy.

The two TV shows led to an estimated 5.7 percent reduction in teen births nationwide, which accounts for about one-third in the country's overall decline in teen births in the year-and-a-half after the programs debuted in 2009, according to the study by Wellesley College economist Phillip B. Levine and University of Maryland economist Melissa Schettini Kearney

The researchers said "data limitations" kept them from completing a separate analysis of how the show may have impacted the number of teen abortions in the US.

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But, “teen abortion rates also fell over this period – suggesting that the shows’ impact is likely attributable to a reduction in pregnancy rather than greater use of abortion,” according to a joint press release from Wellesley College and the University of Maryland.

The National Bureau of Economic Research published the study titled “[Media Influences on Social Outcomes: The Impact of MTV’s 16 and Pregnant on Teen Childbearing](#)” on Monday.

The research says that the Great Recession was the biggest factor behind a rapid decline in the country’s teen birthrate between 2008 and 2012, the release said.

But, the study says it also found that the MTV shows had a significant impact on the teen birthrate reduction as well.

Kearney and Levine said their study included analyzing Nielsen ratings data, metrics from Google and Twitter and Vital Statistics Natality microdata.

“Kearney and Levine show that 16 and Pregnant and Teen Mom have a large and highly engaged following, win ratings wars, and lead teens to search for and tweet about the themes within,” the release said.

“They also find that searches and tweets about birth control and abortion spike exactly when the show is on and in locations where it is more popular,” the release added.

The researchers said MTV’s ability to make such influential shows could be useful.

“This approach has the potential to yield large results with important social consequences,” Kearney and Levine said. “Typically, the public concern addresses potential negative influences of media exposure, but this study finds it may have positive influences as well.”

MTV president Stephen Friedman said the network is “incredibly heartened” by the study’s findings.

“When we developed '16 and Pregnant,' teen birth rates were reported to be on the rise, so we created this series as a cautionary tale on the hard realities of teen pregnancy,” he said in a statement. “We are deeply grateful to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy for their expert guidance. We've always believed that storytelling can be a powerful catalyst for change.”

Sarah Brown, CEO of The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, praised the MTV shows for their apparent role in reducing teen births and pregnancy.

“The entertainment media can be, and often is, a force for good,” she said in a statement. “One of the nation’s great success stories of the past two decades has been the historic declines in teen pregnancy. MTV and other media outlets have undoubtedly increased attention to the risks and reality of teen pregnancy and parenthood and, as this research shows, have likely played a role in the nation’s remarkable progress.”

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. Looking for more coverage of area colleges and universities? Go to our [Your Campus pages](#).

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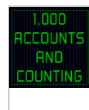
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OldMuscleCarLover 01/14/14 03:48 PM

The decline of America continues with stupid reality shows. You can add this show at the top of the list. The Wellesley Professor needs more education.

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Counting-Gilby 01/14/14 03:13 PM

Can't be true. The right wingers told me that MTV was responsible for the downfall of society.

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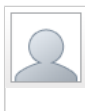
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You've got to make your voters stupid, if your the Party of Stupid.

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WoodYi 01/14/14 04:51 PM

Forced abortions under 21 unless you can prove your financial stability. Until then, get the vacuum out.

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BoGloComments 01/14/14 04:43 PM

The only person who would think that Teen Mom "glamorizes" anything at all would be a person who has never watched the show!

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