



Sex education has little impact on teen pregnancy as figures have remained unchanged over last 40 years

- **Academics believe teen pregnancy rates have remained 'almost exactly the same' between 1969 and 2009**

By [Sarah Harris](#)

School sex education has made little impact on teenage pregnancy rates, according to new research.

Professor David Paton, chair of industrial economics at Nottingham University, said pregnancies among under-16s in England and Wales have proved 'resilient' over the last 40 years.

This is despite the fact that different Governments have implemented policy initiatives, which often have sex education in schools at their core.

Family campaigners have long argued that some lessons are at risk of encouraging youngsters to experiment sexually.

The academic examined the teenage pregnancy statistics between 1969 and 2009 and discovered that they have remained 'almost exactly the same'.

In 1969, there were 6.9 pregnancies per 1,000 girls aged 13 to 15-year-olds. By 1979, they had risen to 7.5 per 1,000, the same figure as in 2009, according to the paper published in the latest issue of the Education and Health journal.

Professor Paton argues there have been a 'number of temporary movements' in the figures over this period.

However it is 'very difficult to establish a strong case that standard policy interventions have been at the root of such changes'.

For example, the underage conception rate reached an historic peak in 1996 at more than nine per 1,000 girls, just four years after the launch of a major initiative called The Health of the Nation.

He refuted the 'conventional wisdom' that school-based sex and relationship education (SRE) and access to family planning for young people have had an impact on pregnancy rates despite being central to many policy drives.

He said: 'Implicit (and sometimes explicit) in these approaches has been an assumption that access to family planning will reduce pregnancy rates amongst those teenagers who were already having sex but will not cause an increase in the proportion of all teenagers who engage in sexual activity.'

'Standard economic models, however, suggest that the two factors are irretrievably interlinked. Easier access to family planning reduces the effective cost of sexual activity and will make it more likely (at least for some teenagers) that they will engage in underage sexual activity.'

Professor Paton points out that researchers have previously been 'unable to find a correlation' between those local authorities judged to have the best SRE and those with the biggest decreases in teenage pregnancy rates.

He said: 'In conclusion, despite recent decreases in the overall underage conception rate, unwanted pregnancy amongst minors in England and Wales has proved remarkably resilient to policy initiatives implemented by different Governments over the past 40 years.

'Looking forward, the time appears ripe for a shift in focus from policies aimed at reducing the risks associated with underage sexual activity to those which are aimed more directly at reducing the level of underage sexual activity.'

Sexual health charity Brook argued in the same journal that 'real progress' has been made in reducing the rates of teenage pregnancy since 1969.

Last September, Schools Minister Nick Gibb revealed that the Coalition would not implement controversial plans put forward under Labour to make sex education compulsory for children as young as five.

Primary school head teachers and governors currently decide whether or not to provide sex education and what it should involve beyond the compulsory science requirements - such as the biological facts of reproduction - laid down by the national curriculum.

They must have a policy on whether or not they provide sex education. If they do provide it in PSHE lessons, parents have the right to withdraw their children.

Secondary schools must provide sex education but they are not required to follow the current frameworks or programmes of study for PSHE. This is decided on a school by school basis.

Meanwhile a primary school sparked fury earlier this month after showing pupils as young as five a sex education video that was deemed so explicit it was removed from sale after a government minister intervened.

The Living and Growing DVD, produced by Channel 4 and featuring cartoon couples having sex, was shown at Westbury Leigh Primary School in Wiltshire, leading to a governor stepping down in protest.