

By JANICE TAI

THE number of babies born to teenage girls in Singapore last year reached its lowest level in at least two decades.

Last year, 404 were born to girls aged 19 and below, provisional figures from the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority showed.

Over the years, the numbers have dropped significantly, from a high of 953 in 2000 to 853 in 2005 and 641 in 2010. In 2013, there were 487 teenage births.

But this is not because more teenagers are going for abortions. The number of abortions by girls aged below 20 fell from a high of 1,483 in 2003 to 578 in 2013.

Social workers and youngsters believe more young people are using contraception and turning to alternative sex acts.

Dr Carol Balhetchet, senior director for youth services at the Singapore Children's Society, said: "Compared to past generations of teens, what has changed now is that there is more awareness about contraception because community groups are running more outreach programmes. In the past, sex education was left mostly to parents and schools."

Sexually active young people said they also sought out information about the Pill and condoms themselves, either from the Inter-

net, friends or professionals.

A 23-year-old woman, who started using condoms at 16 and went on the Pill a year later after requesting them from a gynaecologist, said: "The Internet keeps us informed, especially if it's too awkward finding out from parents or school."

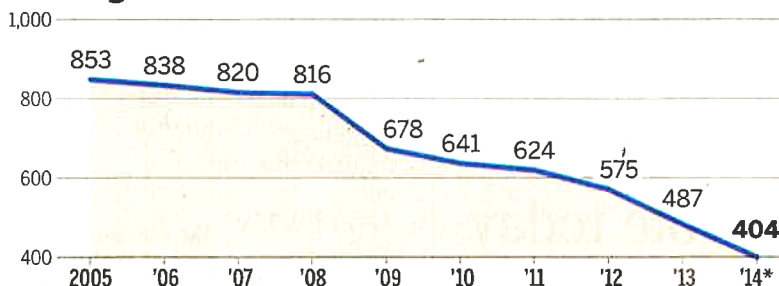
"Taking the Pill is my own decision and I can control it rather than leave the decision to my partner, who can be reluctant to wear condoms."

Besides savvy teenagers who are more knowledgeable about contraception, Dr Balhetchet has met kids aged 12 and 13 who touch each other sexually rather

Teen births drop to 20-year low

More young people believed to be using contraception

Teenage births over the last decade



NOTE: *Provisional figure

Source: REGISTRY OF BIRTHS AND DEATHS, IMMIGRATION & CHECKPOINTS AUTHORITY
ST GRAPHICS

than have full intercourse.

Stigma or the fear of reproach also plays a part in deterring teen-

age pregnancies.

"The perception of pregnant teenagers is still quite negative,"

said Ms Shaziah Wasiuzzaman, executive director of Babes Pregnancy Crisis Support (Babes), a group which helps pregnant girls aged 21 and below. It worked with 69 such pregnant girls last year, up from 25 three years ago.

A recent survey by Nanyang Technological University undergraduates found almost half of the 591 respondents aged between 18 and 25 felt that teenage pregnancy causes shame and embarrassment in their community.

Ms Leung Yan Wah, 23, one of the students behind the survey, said: "Pregnant teens avoid talking about it because they will be the subject of gossip and ostracism."

Despite the possible stigma, counsellors say there will still be teenagers who put themselves at risk of pregnancies.

Ms Shaziah said: "It isn't so much that they don't know about contraception, but that they don't really think pregnancy will happen to them."

For instance, a 23-year-old woman, who started having sex weekly since she was 15, said she does not use condoms and relies on the withdrawal method.

She said: "Honestly, I haven't given much thought to whether I could get pregnant from the withdrawal method until an article I read recently said it was risky."

✉ jantai@sph.com.sg