

# Plunge in teen pregnancies

**More sexually active teens are using contraception, say social workers**

**Theresa Tan**

The number of teenage girls who gave birth plunged to a record low last year, and it is not because fewer youngsters are having sex.

In fact, the opposite is true, said social workers. What has changed, they said, is that more sexually active teens are using contraception.

Recent court cases involving men and youths being dealt with for having sex with underage girls also hit home, and taught boys to use condoms to avoid making their girlfriends pregnant and getting found out by parents.

There were 487 babies born to girls aged 19 and below last year – a third fewer than the 731 babies born in 2003 and the lowest number in at least the past 25 years.

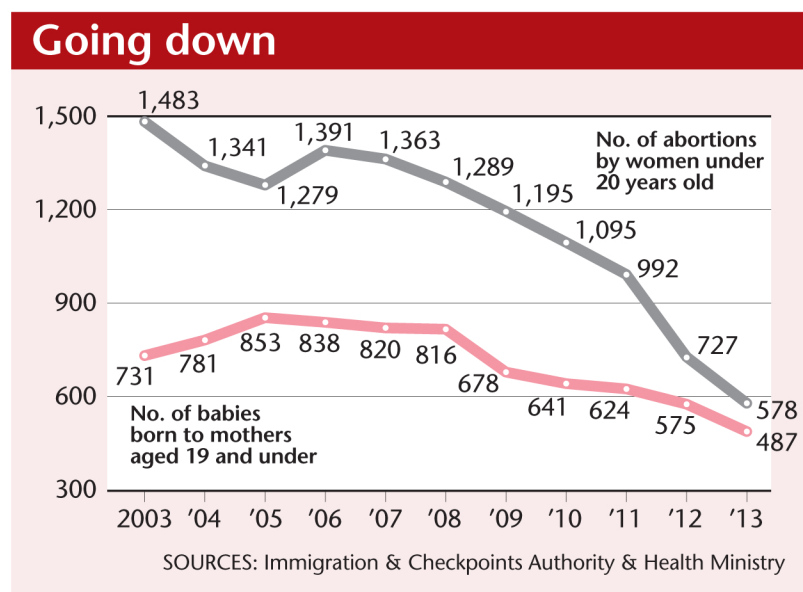
Most of last year's young mums were aged between 17 and 19. Six babies were born to girls under 15.

The latest data, from the Report on Registration of Births and Deaths 2013, was published by the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA) last Monday.

The number of abortions by girls and young women under 20 also fell from a high of 1,483 in 2003 to 578 last year, the Health Ministry told The Sunday Times.

Social workers told The Sunday Times they are seeing more teenagers than before having sex, and that teens seem to be more casual about sex. Some are having sex for the first time at 12 or 13 years old, compared with 15 or 16 a decade ago.

Ms Lena Teo, assistant director of counselling at the Children-at-Risk Empowerment Association (Care Singapore), said: "Youths see sex as the norm in a re-



lationship. And many have multiple short-lived relationships that last from a few weeks to a few months."

What has changed is that today's teens are more knowledgeable about contraception and get the facts from friends, the Internet and sexuality education programmes in schools.

The recent spate of underage sex cases in the news have made teenagers – especially the boys – afraid of falling afoul of the law, said Singapore Children's Society senior director of youth services Carol Balhetchet.

It is an offence to have sex with a girl under 16, even if she consents.

"Boys are more fearful of getting into trouble with the law if their girlfriends get pregnant, so they are keener to use condoms," said Dr Balhetchet.

Sexually active teens interviewed told The Sunday Times they found out about condoms from their peers, websites and in school, and use them to avoid pregnancy.

A 19-year-old dropout could not recall if she started having sex at 13

or 14, but said her boyfriends would ask for sex as proof that she loved them. She said she agreed as her friends were also doing it. A girlfriend told her how to avoid pregnancy.

Now dating her fifth boyfriend, she said: "My boyfriend doesn't like to use condoms but I tell him he must or we don't have sex. I'm afraid of getting pregnant."

A 19-year-old Institute of Technical Education (ITE) student said he had sex the first time at 16 and has had three girlfriends so far.

He learnt about condoms from friends and through sexuality education lessons. "I'm scared of getting my girlfriend pregnant. Who is going to take care of the baby? She is also scared of getting pregnant, so she asked me to use a condom," he said.

Social workers said many of the teenage girls who gave birth did so because they found out too late in their pregnancy to have an abortion.

In Singapore, abortion is allowed only for pregnancies of up to 24 weeks. Beyond that, pregnancies can be terminated only on medical

grounds.

Other young girls have their babies because they cannot bear to terminate their pregnancies, their religion forbids abortion, or they have support from their families to raise their child, social workers said.

A polytechnic student who spoke to The Sunday Times was 18 when she gave birth to a baby boy last year. She was 25 weeks' pregnant when she found out, too late for an abortion.

She said: "My period was not regular and I didn't have morning sickness or any symptoms, so I didn't think anything was wrong. I didn't use protection as I didn't think I would be so *suay* (Hokkien for unlucky) to get pregnant."

It was only when her waist swelled from size M to XL that she did a pregnancy test.

Her boyfriend of three years, also a polytechnic student, wanted the baby and their parents told them to get married. They got married a month before she gave birth.

She said she was not ready for marriage or motherhood.

"We are always arguing about money and my husband feels he has lost his freedom. But thank God both our parents really support us and dote on our baby," she said.

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**If you are a pregnant teen and need help, call the following helplines run by charities –**  
**Babes at 8111-3535;**  
**Pregnancy Crisis Service at 6339-9770.**



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