

Minnesota's rising teen birth rate driven by lack of hope for something better, annual state report says

Report seeks causes of jump in births to minority youths

By Jeremy Olson

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A lack of hope for young minorities appears to be fueling an increase in Minnesota's teen birth rate, according to the state's annual adolescent sexual health report.

Teens in the backs of cars may not be thinking about their futures, said Brigid Riley, of the Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention and Parenting, but grim economic realities are causing them to seek comfort and affirmation through sex and even misguided desires to be parents.

"Without a doubt, the most important thing young people need is hope for the future," Riley said, adding that teens "need a reason not to have sex."

Minnesota has the nation's 10th-lowest teen birth rate, but it used to have the fourth-lowest rate. Several trends have raised alarms. After 16 years of decline, the state's rate increased in 2006 and again in 2007, the latest year for which figures are available. Minnesota also is among the few states with a below-average teen birth rate for whites but an above-average rate for minority groups.

"We're ahead of the pack in a way that we don't want to be," Riley said.

The 2009 report, released Friday, showed a one-year jump of 15 percent in the African-American teen birth rate and an 11 percent jump in the American Indian rate. The overall rate nudged up 1.8 percent: There were 5,145 teen births in 2006, compared with 5,249 in 2007.

In releasing the report, Riley gathered sexual-health advocates from Minnesota's minority communities to discuss prevention strategies each needs.

Paul Kong, of Lao Family Community, said there is a unique challenge of combating the old Hmong norm of parenting at a young age.

Clarence Jackson, of Qhealth, discussed a fraternity program by which black role models teach young men about sexual responsibility.

Louise Matson, of the Division of Indian Work, said culturally sensitive sex education has helped American Indian teens better understand their roles in life and the consequences of unintended pregnancies. On the other hand, Matson said, the teens appear to need more education on how to get out of pressure situations.

"We're good at telling them, 'Don't do that,' " she said, "but not at telling them how" to refuse sexual advances.

Regardless of cultural differences, the advocates said the higher rates of poverty and joblessness in minority communities are common problems. The movies and images of a "sex-drenched culture" aren't helping, the advocates agreed, but impoverished teens often lack self-esteem and even see parenthood as desirable.

"They want something that says, 'I mattered,'" Jackson said, "and one of the easiest things to do is have a baby."

Prevention efforts in low-income Hispanic communities of Minneapolis have been tempered, because telling some teens they can get to college may not be realistic, said Dr. Maria Veronica Svetaz of Hennepin Faculty Care's East Lake Clinic. But there are many other goals they can consider and achieve if their parents, teachers and others support them.

The conversation mostly ignored the political debate on whether to teach abstinence or arm sexually active students with information and access to condoms and birth control. Matson did say there is a startling amount of confusion among teens over the fact that abstinence is the only 100 percent effective way to prevent pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections.

Riley said consensus on the right message must be found.

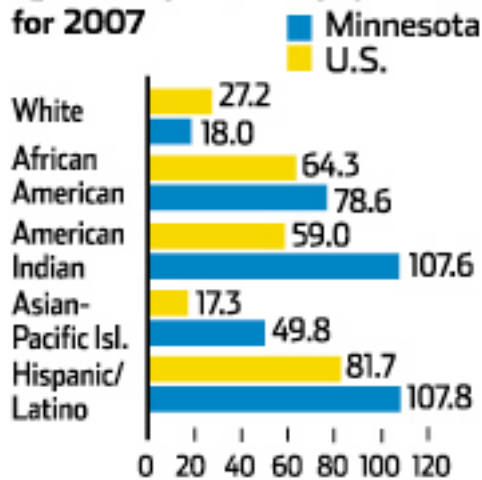
"While the adults are arguing," she said, "the teens are still getting pregnant."

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Disparities in teen pregnancy

Minnesota is one of the few states in which the white teen birth rate is below the national average but the minority rates all are above the national average. The overall teen birth rate has increased for the second straight year.

Adolescent birth rates, age 15-19, per 1,000 population for 2007



Source: MOAPPP PIONEER PRESS