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Kids have kids ... then what?

Programs provide outreach to teen parents

By Colneth Smiley Jr. | Sunday, November 25, 2007 | <http://www.bostonherald.com>



Photo by Angela Rowlings

At 16, Danielle McAdoo gave birth to her daughter, Asia Marie. She knew she and her baby faced tough odds.

"A lot of people believe that when you're young and pregnant, you'll just get lazy and not be motivated to do anything," McAdoo said recently. "People just give up and get on welfare or something."

But the Dorchester teen decided to shake the stigma that teen mothers carry. Now 17, she and her boyfriend, Jose Santiago, 18, joined Boston Children's Hospital Young Parents Program.

They found help there at a time when a declining statewide teen birth rate has led to cuts to teen pregnancy prevention and youth development programs.

The Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy reports that in 2004 and 2005 the state teen birth rate reached its lowest point in three decades.

But though the state as a whole is seeing fewer teen births, some communities continue to be challenged by teen pregnancies, says Patricia Quinn, director of public policy for the Alliance on Teen Pregnancy.

According to the most recent statistics from the Department of Public Health, Holyoke, Chelsea, Lowell, Lynn and Revere have seen significant increases in teen births.

Quinn says those rises follow cuts leaving today's prevention programs funded at \$4 million, down from \$6.5 million in 2001.

In Holyoke, which had the highest teen birth rate in the state in 2005, 1 in 10 teenage girls gave birth. Chelsea ranked second, with 1 of 13 teenage girls having babies. Lawrence and Springfield had 1 in 14. Southbridge had more than 1 in 15.

In Boston, 1 in 35 teen girls gave birth in 2005. But individual neighborhoods tell a different story. Roxbury had the city's highest teen birth rate with 1 in 18. East Boston followed with 1 in 19. North Dorchester produced 1 in 22.

"These stats prove that there's a tremendous geographic diversity in teen pregnancy," said Quinn. "We need communities to respond to this through both teen pregnancy prevention programs, and supportive programs that can ensure teen parents can reach their potential." Angie Spears, a community monitor at the Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps of Lowell, founded the Teen Pregnancy Prevention and Support Initiative. Lowell's teen pregnancy rate ranked eighth among the state's 351 communities in 2005, with 1 in 20 girls from ages 15 to 19 giving birth. Working with youths who have gone through the Department of Youth Services, the state's juvenile justice agency, Spears noted a trend.

"When these kids turn 18 they think everything is going to be good. But reality sets in and they realize they are not prepared. They have no education, parents kick them out and they are stuck," she said. "We needed this program because kids in this situation would come to us pregnant or with pregnant girlfriends."

The Lowell program takes troubled teens through a three-part program of pregnancy prevention, pregnancy support and the first year of parenthood. Spears' clients, ages 14 through 21, learn to balance a budget, take sex-ed classes, and often get housing, health and relationship counseling.

"The kids are getting jobs, and getting off of the streets," Spears said. "They're learning to be self-sufficient, and taking on responsibility as parents."

Even as the amount of money available for these programs shrinks, the Alliance on Teen Pregnancy is looking to launch PROMISE (Promoting Independence and Success through Education) to help pregnant teens complete their educations.

"We have to help young people develop a vision for their lives and a future that's compelling to them," Quinn said. "We are not going to hold kids accountable for creating their own hope," she said. "That's part of the role for adults in the community. If we want our kids to be accountable we have to be accountable, too."

Or, as Danielle McAdoo put it, "Sometimes teens don't get that motivation to be good parents or to stay in school. (The Young Parents Program at Children's Hospital) helps you be a great person. "They pushed me to be all I can be for myself and my child."