

Unintended Teen Pregnancies on the Rise

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Unintended Teen Pregnancy has long been an issue in our country. The U.S. has the highest teen birth rate in the western developed world and California is one of the front running states that helps lead the nation in the number of teen birth rates. In 2006 there was a total of 52,770 teen births in the state of California. One might ask...why does this concern me? Well the answer to that question lies in the rates Kings County has contributed to this statewide number on a local level. According to the No time for Complacency 2008 Spring Update, published by the Public Health Institute, Kings County still remains amongst the top ranked counties in number teen live birth rates in the state. This study found that in 2006 Kings County had a teen birth rate of 71.1 per every 1000 female teen aged 15-19. This ranks Kings County as the third highest county for the most live teen births out of all the counties in California. Reports show, that although rates had been declining in the state of California for the past 15 years, between 2005 and 2006 the rates began to climb once more and have continued to do so.

So what attributes to this increase? This is not a question that can be easily answered. Some argue that it is due in part to the rapidly growing teen population, or the increase in taxpayer costs, or more recently our nations economic recession. There are many viable factors that can easily be named as a source, but no particular answer stands alone as the resounding culprit to this increase in teen pregnancies. What is certain however is the potential increase and the socioeconomic burden these increasing teen pregnancies will have. The No Time for Complacency Report estimated that the 2006 annual taxpayer costs for Kings County were about 12 million dollars, with the estimated annual societal costs adding up to about 26 million dollars. Given the latest trends and inflation these amounts are more than certain to be higher in the up coming years.

Research done by the Public Health Institute also demonstrates that there are other measurable consequences of teen pregnancy. Women who become teen mothers achieve lower levels of education, they are more likely to have unstable employment and their children are more likely to be brought up in single parent households. Of all age groups pregnant teen are also more like to smoke, and drink alcohol during and after pregnancy. As adolescents, children of teen mothers are more likely to struggle with school failure, and early sexual activity, thus repeating the cycle.

Is there a solution? Steps have been taken in California to educate teens about unintended pregnancy preventative measures. However just as the issue of teen pregnancy cannot be pinpointed to one cause, there neither exists a single solution to the issue to teen pregnancy. In October of 2007 Governor Schwarzenegger signed the Sexual Health education accountability Act, which requires all state funded or community based teen pregnancy and STD prevention programs to be medically accurate, age appropriate and comprehensive. Of the four Teen Pregnancy Prevention Community programs under the

Department of Public Health, Office of Family Planning, two have lost their funding in their entirety with the recent state budget cuts, The Male Involvement Program and the Teen SMART Program. Now only two programs remain, The Community Challenge Grant Program and Family Pact. With smaller budgets, educating teens and providing comprehensive sexual education has and will become a struggle for these programs.

The California Education Code has also developed standards that specify what California's public school students are expected to know about sexual health, HIV/Aids prevention for each grade kindergarten through 12th grade. It is however up to each school district discretion to ensure that these codes are in fact being met and that staff teaching this information is well trained and providing information that is medically accurate, objective, age appropriate and more importantly up to date.

If you are asking yourself as a parent what you can do to help combat this issue of unintended teen pregnancy, my recommendation is simply to become informed. Visit your local school and ask what is being taught in the classroom to ensure that the Education Code is being met when it comes to sexual health and HIV/Aids prevention. Visit the California Department of Public Health, Maternal, Child and Adolescent Health, Office of Planning website to see what community programs and clinics in your area are being funded to provide educational support and services regarding teen pregnancy. Use the Internet to investigate information and facts online so that as a parent you can ensure that the information you teach your child is medically accurate. Lastly, find resources that will help you talk to your teen about this issue and other issues that can affect their health.