

## Latina Teen Pregnancies Spur Push for Family Talks

By Alison Bowen

NEW YORK (WOMENSENEWS)--At 25, pushing her 22-month-old son Diego through Brooklyn's sweltering summer streets, Maricela Estrada says she is not planning on any more children. Along with Diego, peeking out from the stroller, the soft-spoken woman, who became a mother at 20, has two other children, ages 4 and 5, at home with her husband of seven years. "For me, it's not bad to have children as a young person," Estrada said in Spanish near her Brooklyn home.

Estrada's story is part of the eye-catching fertility statistics among Hispanic American women, who, on average, begin families earlier, have fewer abortions and, in their younger years, produce almost twice as many babies as other groups: 82 births per 1,000 among females aged 15 to 19, compared with the national average of 42 per 1,000.

National teen pregnancy rates have declined about 35 percent since 1991, but the rate for Hispanic teens is dropping at half that pace, according to a March report by the Washington-based National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, which has a goal of reducing teen pregnancy by one-third between 2006 and 2015.

In the medley of explanations for the sluggish decline, the lack of education about sex and birth control--both in schools and in families--deserves special attention, said Rosie Molinary, author of the 2007 "Hijas Americanas: Beauty, Body Image and Growing Up Latina," which she wrote after surveying 500 Latina women on issues including sexuality.

### 'Conversations Don't Happen'

"Those conversations don't happen," Molinary says. "These girls are in a vulnerable situation." The National Campaign launched a Latino initiative in March that highlights a startling figure: 51 percent of Latina women are pregnant at least once by age 20. The program includes partners such as the New York-based Latina magazine and the Washington-based National Council of La Raza.

Bill Albert, deputy director of the National Campaign, said the first step of the Latino initiative was the release of research findings and beginning to work with partners such as La Raza--which works with Hispanic families--to ensure they include teen pregnancy prevention in existing programs. "It is very clear from Latina teens that they really want to hear from their parents on these issues, but parents don't necessarily believe that," Albert said.

Molinary, who grew up in South Carolina and whose parents are from Puerto Rico, said her own sex education consisted of her father handing her a quarter before her first date and telling her to keep it between her knees until her wedding night. She said sex, for religious reasons, is often a topic only discussed in the context of marriage. That leaves teens connecting sex more with the idea of a lifelong partner than the risk of becoming pregnant. "They're told that you save sex for marriage. So the idea becomes, sex becomes love for life," she said. "At 15, this great guy in front of you says, 'This is something I want to do.' You don't really think, 'oh you could get pregnant.'"

### Sex Delayed Longer

Hispanic teens delay sex longer than other teens. They are four months into a relationship on average before having sex, compared to an average three-month waiting period for other teens, according to Child Trends, a social science research nonprofit based in Washington, D.C. A higher percentage of Hispanic teens marry the fathers of their children. Sixty-five percent think they will marry the fathers of their children; 15 percent actually do. Among all teens, 56 percent say they will marry the fathers; 8 percent do.

Latinas are less likely to use birth control. Only 12 percent of Hispanic high school females used the pills, compared to 21 percent overall, according to Child Trends. Many Hispanic teens do not consider having an abortion. But even if they do, young Latinas are often uninsured, which can cause them to put off a doctor's visit until an abortion is no longer an option.

Estrada, who met her husband when she was 18, said starting a family while young seems normal. She is happy with her family of five, including a 4-year-old with Down syndrome who, she says, needs plenty of care but is always content.

According to Child Trends, 60 percent of all teens said they would feel upset if they got pregnant, but only 46 percent of Hispanic teens would be upset. Twenty-five percent said they would be pleased.

Albert said anti-teen pregnancy messages can incorrectly come across as anti-children to teens who look forward to being mothers. "The spirit of it is a timing issue," Albert said. "It's not a child issue, it's a question of timing: When is the best time to begin thinking about family formation?"

### **Poverty Linked to Teen Pregnancy**

Poverty is closely linked to teen pregnancy. The National Campaign estimates that if teen birth rates had not declined since 1991, an additional 460,000 young children would be living in poverty today. Latino children represent 18 percent of all U.S. children but 30 percent of those who live in poverty, according to Child Trends.

Molinary said the reluctance to discuss sex leaves teens dependent on friends or boyfriends for information about contraception. Out of the women she interviewed, only 6 percent said their parents had counseled them about sex. Molinary--who counted herself as part of the 6 percent because of her father's instruction about the quarter--now tours the country with workshops at college campuses geared to young Latinas about the impact of sex education and other issues. "Some of these parents feel like, if I'm talking to my child about sex, I'm green lighting sex," she said. "That's not the correlation." In her research, Molinary said she found that parents and teens who discussed sex reported the healthiest relationships overall.

Dr. Angela Diaz is director of the Mount Sinai Adolescent Health Center in New York, which provides free, matter-of-fact conversations with 15,000 teens--half of them Latinos--who make up the clinic's patient population. These teens, she said, have lower pregnancy rates than the average New York State rate of 9 percent. Teens are responsible when equipped with the tool of education, Diaz said. "They are very responsible once they know," Diaz said. "Many of these kids, they don't feel like they have a voice or a choice."

Alison Bowen is a New York-based reporter for Women's eNews. Women's eNews welcomes your comments. E-mail us at [editors@womensenews.org](mailto:editors@womensenews.org).

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For more information:

National Campaign Latino Initiative:

<http://www.teenpregnancy.org/espanol/initiative.asp>

Child Trends 2005 Hispanic Teen Pregnancy Report <http://www.childtrends.org/Files/HispanicRB.pdf>

Teens Opt for Unsafe Sex, Not Parents' Consent:

<http://www.womensenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/2152/>

Ten Tips for Parents to Help Their Children Avoid Teen Pregnancy:

<http://www.teenpregnancy.org/resources/reading/tips/tips.asp>

State by State Pregnancy Statistics

<http://www.teenpregnancy.org/america/default.asp>

Hijas Americanas Latina Blog:

<http://hijasamericanas.wordpress.com/>