



Alleged pact puts new focus on teen pregnancy

America's teen pregnancy rate is rising for the first time since 1991, worrying experts.

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By Eloise Quintanilla and Uri Friedman

Gloucester, Mass. - A shocking assertion that underage girls promised one another they would become pregnant and raise their babies together has focused a bright light on the resurgent problem of teen pregnancy in America.

Whether there was such a plan in this overwhelmingly white city on Boston's North Shore is in dispute. After Gloucester High School witnessed 17 pregnancies this school year - more than quadruple last year's average of four - the school principal attributed the surge to a "pact" among "seven or eight" girls in a Time magazine article. But at a press conference Monday, school Superintendent Christopher Farmer said there was a "distinct possibility" that the girls simply decided post-pregnancy to "come together for mutual support."

Yet the incident is alarming whether or not students entered into a pact, experts say. At a time when the nation's teenage pregnancy rate is rising for the first time since 1991, the Gloucester High controversy has rekindled a longstanding debate over how best to discourage teen pregnancies.

"What's happening in Gloucester is a microcosm in some ways for what we're seeing at the national level," says Bill Albert, chief program officer for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy in Washington. "The good news is that we have made extraordinary progress as a nation [since the early 1990s] in convincing

people to delay sexual activity and delay pregnancy and parenthood. The bad news is that that progress seems to have come to a complete standstill and, in some ways, has reversed."

Birthrates for teenagers age 15 to 17 rose by 3 percent between 2005 and 2006, the first increase since 1991, according to preliminary data released in December by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Stephanie Ventura, head of CDC's reproductive statistics branch, says it's too soon to say whether the reversal represents a national trend toward more teen births or is simply a "one-year blip." But she adds that the rapid pace at which teen births declined in the US during the 1990s had grown sluggish in recent years, perhaps setting the stage for the 2006 results.

Another CDC report released this month found that condom use among sexually active high school students was essentially unchanged between 2003 and 2007 after steadily increasing from 1991 until 2003. Teen-reported sexual activity rates also underwent no changes between 2005 and 2007.

"There are two things that matter when it comes to preventing pregnancy: not having sex and using contraceptives consistently and carefully," says Mr. Albert. "Both are leveling off at the very best. That may be why we're seeing an increase" in the teen birthrate.

But finding a solution is contentious; there is considerable disagreement over whether educators should emphasize safe sex or abstinence.

Despite spending more than \$1 billion since 1996, federal "abstinence until marriage" programs have not taught young people to be sexually responsible, says David Landry of the Guttmacher Institute in New York, a think tank on sexual and reproductive-health issues. A nine-year Mathematica Policy Research study released in 2007 also found that such programs had no effect on teen sexual abstinence.

The federal abstinence programs fall short in mandating that instructors mention contraception only in terms of its failure rates, Mr. Landry says. "The misconception of many is that simply talking about using contraception promotes sexual activity."

He supports "comprehensive sexual education," which includes encouraging youth to delay sexual activity and providing medically accurate information about contraception.

Yet those who advocate for abstinence education - which teaches teens to abstain from sexual activity - are equally adamant. In an April report, the Heritage Foundation in Washington detailed 11 studies of abstinence programs that yielded positive findings. The authors censured the government for "spending over \$1 billion each year to promote contraception and safe-sex education - at least 12 times what it spends on abstinence education."

The same debates now echo in Gloucester, a blue-collar city with deep Catholic roots. Last month, two officials at Gloucester High's health center resigned in protest because the local hos-

pital refused to distribute contraceptives to students without parental consent. Mayor Carolyn Kirk said Monday the school committee would review a city policy prohibiting the distribution of birth control in schools as it revamps Gloucester's teen-pregnancy policy.

Gloucester residents are also divided.

"As far as birth control pills, they should not be given out at school," says parent Pam Cilluffo, adding that they should be available at home. "Condoms should be distributed at school."

Gloucester graduate Barry Sousa thinks that while more sex education would be beneficial, the problem begins with family dynamics. "My feeling is that these kids don't have a good family life," he says.

Teen pregnancy rates may be surging because officials are diverting resources to social services that seem more pressing, says Albert of the pregnancy-prevention campaign.

Annette Dion, a private music teacher in Gloucester, agrees: "There's plenty of money but [city officials] aren't spending it well."

"There's still an awful lot of questions we need to answer as a community," says Ray Lamont, editor of the Gloucester Daily Times. "We are getting bogged down in the details of how to define 'pact' when the real issue is that 17 girls decided to get pregnant. We need to find out why they got pregnant."