

The Washington Times

Teen birthrates on the rise again



CHERYL WETZSTEIN
On the Family

2008 could be called the Year of Teen Pregnancy.

Starting with the award-winning movie "Juno," (which actually debuted at Christmas 2007), teen pregnancy has regularly popped up in national headlines - Jamie Lynn Spears became pregnant and gave birth at 16; 17-year-old Bristol Palin became pregnant; a group of Gloucester, Mass., teens purportedly became pregnant together as part of a "pact"; and "The Baby Borrowers" reality TV show showed the trials and tribulations of five teen couples as they coped with parenthood for a few weeks.

All of these were teachable moments about how complicated life can become when one gets pregnant while young and single, a panel of experts said at a recent "Thursday's Child" public-policy forum held by the Urban Institute and Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.

These teachable moments may have been squandered. New birth data is coming in a few weeks, and there's concern that teen birthrates will rise for a second year.

Yes, for 14 years in a row, from 1992 to 2006, teen birthrates fell, said Saul Hoffman, University of Delaware economics professor and editor of the new edition of "Kids Having Kids: Economic Costs and Social Consequences of Teen Pregnancy." But teen birthrates also declined between 1960 and 1985 - and then they "rose six years in a row and wiped out 20 years of progress," he said.

High teen birthrates have substantial, widespread negative effects, Mr. Hoffman said.

For instance, a high teen birthrate costs an estimated \$7.5 billion a year, he said. Teen

parents have lower earnings - and lower tax revenues - and they absorb more public services, both in welfare programs, and, sadly, in incarceration costs for their children.

Research shows that the sons of teen mothers are twice as likely as other youths to spend time in prison, Mr. Hoffman said. The risk is seen even among sons who have the same mother - if the first son is born when his mother is a teen, his risk for incarceration is 15 percent higher than his younger brother born a few years later.

If women would delay having their first baby until they are in their 20s, there would be many benefits for the parents, the children, schools and neighborhoods, Mr. Hoffman said.

Robert Goerge, a research fellow at Chapin Hall, offered shocking data showing that in the last 20 years, more than 60 percent of children entering Illinois foster care were born to teen mothers.

Even more sadly, these children of teen mothers were likely to spend two to three years in foster care - encompassing their entire infancies and crucial attachment stages of development.

In addition to delaying parenthood until one's 20s, it's important to encourage teen mothers to delay having a second child until they are older, said Pat Mosena, project director of the Illinois Subsequent Pregnancy Project (ISPP).

"Many young mothers can make it with one child," she said, but that's rarely the case when they have additional children too soon.

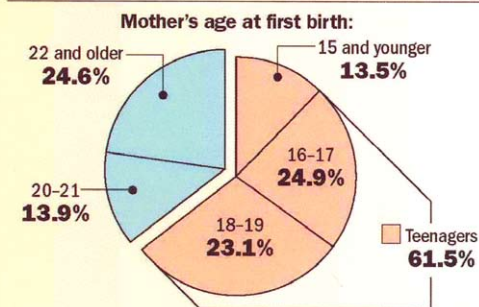
The ISPP offers teen mothers personal support from caseworkers who act like surrogate mothers, and the curriculum focuses on the wisdom of delaying a second birth. Out of 3,000 mothers who participated in

Family snapshot

TEEN PARENTHOOD AND FOSTER CARE

In Illinois, more than 60 percent of children entering foster care for the first time were born to a teen parent, a study showed.

■ Foster care entries 1982-2003
118,206 first placements



Source: Robert Goerge, Allen Harden and Bong Joo Lee, Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

the program, only 3 percent had a second pregnancy and 85 percent stayed in school and/or graduated, she said.

"Information alone [about avoiding teen pregnancy] is not enough," Ms. Mosena added. To influence these mothers' behaviors takes long-term support and ongoing relationships to help them process that information in their real-life situations.

Finally, it's important to simply reinforce the notion that "babies need adult parents," said Sarah Brown, chief executive of the National Campaign for Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

Getting pregnant, having babies and raising children is perhaps the most important thing we do in life, she said. Therefore, it should be thought about carefully, not "stumbled into."

Cheryl Wetzstein can be reached at cwetzstein@washingtontimes.com.