



Think only 'their' teens get pregnant?

By Susan Reimer

A report released last week reveals that most of us believe only teens from poor or single-parent families get pregnant.

And we are wrong.

According to research conducted for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, only 28 percent of those who report having given birth or fathered a child as a teen lived in families with incomes below the federal poverty line.

And just 30 percent of those who report having given birth to or fathered a child as a teen say they were living with a single parent.

We are not only wrong - and probably bigoted - about whose teens get pregnant. Those of us in middle-class, intact families have our heads seriously in the sand if we think it can't happen to us.

"When you talk to adults, and if you talk about young people in general, the conversation tends to be that they are going to hell in a handbasket," said Bill Albert, chief program officer for the National Campaign.

"But if you ask them to tell you about their daughter and her circle of friends, you will hear that they are fabulous. Directed, community-service-oriented, going to Princeton. It tends to be very positive."

But numbers don't lie, and it would be statistically impossible for all those teen births to be happening only in poor, single-parent families. Those families are simply outnumbered by middle-class, intact families.

If 3 in 10 girls in this country get pregnant at least once by the age of 20, a number that large can't be confined to a particular group, Mr. Albert said. However, he added, "it is also true that if you are from a family of limited economic means or a family headed by a single mother, you are disproportionately likely to become a teen parent."

Bottom line? Teen pregnancy is not completely a consequence of poverty - and it can happen in your community, your circle of friends, your family. (Just ask Sarah Palin.)

"The simple message of this research," said Mr. Albert, "is that teen pregnancy is not limited to a particular racial group or socio-economic status or a particular family structure."

And teen pregnancy is rising. After 15 straight years of decline, the number of teen births has risen in each of the last two years.

"The rates went down because of the magic formula of less sex and more contraception," said Mr. Albert. "It is now more sex and less contraception. That much we know."

There are any number of reasons why our teens have gotten lazy about birth control, but Mr. Albert believes the No. 1 reason is that teen guys, who never felt like teen pregnancy was their problem anyway, are not nearly as concerned about contracting HIV as they might have been before so many people stopped dying from it.

In addition, teen pregnancy has been pushed to the back burner by other, more high-profile health causes, such as childhood obesity, which has the outspoken attention of first lady Michelle Obama.

But if it is up to Bill Albert and the National Campaign to find a way to bring the spotlight back to the upward creep of teen pregnancies numbers, it is up to parents - middle-class, intact, we're-doing-it-right parents - to recognize that teen pregnancy is not somebody else's problem.

It could very easily be our problem. And when it is, it will be too late to say all those things to our children that we didn't think we needed to say.

Because they are such great kids.