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Data point to US spike and racial disparity

By Tatishe M. Nteta
Liza Winston

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THE NEWS that vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin's 17-year-old unmarried daughter is five months pregnant has heightened media concern regarding teen pregnancies. Given that we are the industrialized nation with the highest adolescent birth rate in the world, however, this is not a new problem. According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies, after a 15-year decline in teen birth rates, the rate rose 3 percent in 2006. It is important to note that media attention regarding the problem of teenage pregnancy has risen in the past year, with high-profile white teenage pregnancies seen recently in Gloucester and now in Alaska.

However, according to the Guttmacher Institute, African-American and Latina teenagers are almost three times as likely to become pregnant as their white counterparts. It is unlikely that cultural depictions of teen pregnancy - most notably the movie "Juno" and the pregnancy of Jamie Lynn Spears, which have been said to glamorize teenage pregnancy - can explain the racial disparity in teenage pregnancy rates. Only when we begin to move away from simplistic explanations for complicated situations can the problem of teen pregnancy be accurately discussed and properly solved for all our communities.