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As Teen Birth, Child Poverty Rates Fall Nationwide, N.M. Lags Behind

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Plummeting teen birth rates across the country have been accompanied by a welcome drop in child poverty, but New Mexico continues to lag behind.

Nationwide, teen birth rates have dropped 30 percent between 1991 and 2002, compared to a respectable 22 percent in New Mexico, according to a report by the National Campaign To Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

While the group says child poverty rates have dropped across the U.S. as a result, New Mexico still ranked 48th in 2002 for the percentage of poor children who live here— 34 percent compared to a national average of 23 percent.

Young mothers like Jocelyn Garcia of Socorro still struggle to pull themselves and their children out of poverty.

Garcia was pregnant at 15 and again at 18. Now 19, with a 3-year-old boy and a 1-year-old girl, Garcia collects some public assistance and often works two jobs while trying to finish her education.

Sylvia Ruiz, executive director for the New Mexico Teen Pregnancy Coalition, said that because so many teen mothers are already living in poverty when they give birth, it is difficult to break the cycle.

According to data from the New Mexico Teen Pregnancy Coalition, the number of teen births fell from 4,965 in 1993 to 4,592 in 2002. A total of 48,246 children were born to teen mothers in New Mexico during that decade.

"Teen pregnancy is directly related to poverty," said Ruiz.

"There is more dependence on public assistance. Children born to teens often have a higher rate of developmental disabilities and require remedial services. Mothers often don't complete their educations."

Not all experts agree improvement in child poverty levels is directly linked to the reduction in teen births. It may be a result of the economic boom of the 1990s, they say, and from government initiatives such as job training and tax credits.

"We are cautionary about the (National Campaign) report," said Avram Goldstein, spokesman for the Children's Defense Fund.

"Child poverty went down in the '90s, but it has been steadily going up since 2001. Teen birth is an important factor (in reducing poverty), but it is not the only one."

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy reports that even with recent drops, the U.S. has the highest teen pregnancy and birth rates in the industrialized world.

New Mexico went from a rate of 79.5 teen births per 1,000 girls ages 15 to 19 in 1991 to 62.4 per 1,000 in 2002.

Of the actual 4,513 girls aged 15 to 19 who had children in New Mexico in 2002, 66 percent were Hispanic, 18 percent were non-Hispanic white, 2 percent were black and 14 percent were Native American.

Teen childbearing costs taxpayers in the U.S. at least \$7 billion a year, reports the Federal Committee on Ways and Means.

A study from the University of New Mexico estimates that teen births cost the state \$88 million annually.

Garcia is a case in point.

Medicaid pays for medical care for both of her children, including a \$50,000 bill when her son was hospitalized with pneumonia. The Women, Infants and Children's Program supplies formula, cereal and juice.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families gives Garcia \$389 a month. She receives food stamps and child-care assistance money. Unemployment funds pay for vocational training in Albuquerque and for gasoline to get there.

Even with all the help, Garcia has struggled.

She works— sometimes at two jobs— to pay for household expenses. Garcia lives with her mother, who is raising two teenage boys.

She is also paying off \$25,000 in legal fees from a three-year battle for child support. Although court-ordered, Garcia has not received any money from her son's father. She said she will not seek support from her daughter's father.

Through pregnancy, motherhood and working upward of 50 hours a week, Garcia graduated from Socorro High School last year. She will graduate from an Albuquerque medical assistant training school in July.

"It's been a horrible strain," Garcia said. "I honestly don't know how I do it."

Ruiz said the state needs to continue its efforts to reduce teen pregnancy.

"Prevention (of pregnancy) is definitely the better idea," she said. "This is not the time to become complacent about this issue in our state."

Garcia is hopeful she can make a good life for her children. She has a job lined up in Rio Rancho when she graduates, "making real money."

"It will be a big move," she said. "I'm hoping it will work out."