Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk

Volume 1
Issue 1 *Latino Children*

Article 10

9-30-2010

Everything is Bigger in Texas, Including the Latino Adolescent Pregnancy Rate: How Do We Eliminate the Epidemic of Latino Teen Pregnancy?

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Recommended Citation
Lau, May and Flores, Glenn (2010) "Everything is Bigger in Texas, Including the Latino Adolescent Pregnancy Rate: How Do We Eliminate the Epidemic of Latino Teen Pregnancy?," *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 10.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/childrenatrisk/vol1/iss1/10

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It can be argued that one of the most powerful means of ensuring a nation's economic prosperity is to reduce teen pregnancy. A woman who delays childbearing until after the teen years is significantly more likely to achieve higher educational attainment, a college degree, and employment. She is significantly less likely to be poor and raise a child in poverty.[1,2] More than half of U.S. Latino adolescent females less than 20 years old will become pregnant,[3] and most adolescent pregnancies are unplanned.[4] Given that Latinos are the largest and fastest growing racial/minority group in the U.S., reducing the Latino teen pregnancy rate can potentially influence our nation's future workforce, economic prosperity, and well being.

In this inaugural issue of the *Journal of Applied Research on Children*, Tortolero et al. review the disturbing state of adolescent pregnancy, sexual activity, and contraceptive use for Latino adolescents in Texas.[5] The Texas adolescent pregnancy rate for females 15-19 years old is expected to increase to 127 per 1000 by 2015 (from 88 per 1000 in 2005), due to anticipated growth in the Latino population.[6,7] Although Latino adolescents generally have a later onset of sexual activity, they are significantly more likely to become pregnant than their white peers.[8] Certain Latino normative cultural values, which include more positive attitudes toward early pregnancy and perceived advantages of pregnancy, may in part contribute to the higher Latino teen pregnancy rate.[9-11] In a study of Latino females, many expressed that the stigma of adolescent pregnancy can be eliminated by marriage.[9] Because a family history of adolescent births has been associated with a continued intergenerational trend of adolescent pregnancy,[12] breaking the cycle of adolescent pregnancy, especially in Latino families, is imperative.

Higher Latino adolescent pregnancy rates also may reflect low rates of contraception use.[9] Traditional and religious values, family beliefs, lack of family communication and social support, and misinformation regarding contraceptive safety, side effects, and failure might partially account for low rates of contraceptive use in young Latino women,[9-10,13-15] but more research is needed on how to enhance contraceptive use among Latinas.

Reducing the Latino adolescent pregnancy rate in Texas is an urgent public health priority that requires a multifaceted approach. Barriers to contraceptive access must be identified and eliminated. Because Texas state regulations prohibit the use of state funds for confidential contraceptive services, repeal of this law would enhance access to reproductive health services for sexually active adolescents.[16] Healthcare providers, pregnancy prevention groups, and public health efforts should

target parents, encouraging them to talk to their adolescents about abstinence and responsible sexual activity. Research has demonstrated that good parent-teen communication is an effective means of preventing teen pregnancy. For example, conversations between Mexican-American parents and their daughters containing strong messages supporting academic achievement and negative messages about pre-marital sexual activity and pregnancy are associated with delayed onset of sexual activity.[17] Comprehensive formal sexual education has been shown to reduce the risk of pregnancy and should be mandated for all Texas adolescents.[18]

The article by Tortolero et al. should provoke continued exploration into adolescent pregnancy prevention for Latinos. Identifying factors associated with adolescent pregnancy will enable healthcare providers and others to target adolescents at highest risk. It is especially important to clarify the relationships of acculturation, primary language spoken at home, limited English proficiency, generational status, and normative cultural values with sexual activity, contraceptive use, and unintended pregnancy. The adolescent male's role in pregnancy, especially for Latinos, is a neglected but important research area. Evidence-based, culturally-appropriate interventions are needed that assist Latino parents with effective communication with their children about sexual activity, contraception, and pregnancy. Carefully conducted qualitative studies are needed to acquire Latino adolescents' input on unintended pregnancy and its prevention. Such community-based, participatory approaches are crucial to designing and implementing effective, evidence-based pregnancy-prevention programs that will eliminate the epidemic of Latino teen pregnancy, ensuring a brighter, more prosperous future for Texas and our nation.

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