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Texas' high teen birth rate carries price beyond dollars

Part 1 of 3

For Miranda Berdecia, getting pregnant as a teen seemed like a good idea — at first.

She met Jesse Vasquez online when she was 15. He seemed like a nice guy. They hung out together at Ingram Park Mall and grew close.

“I thought it would be this whole love story where we would meet, fall in love and have a baby,” she said, smiling wryly.

After awhile, she began to rethink having a child and so started taking birth control pills. Her mother found them and threw them away.

Not long after, she got pregnant by Vasquez when they were both 16. Her mother kicked her out. She now lives with her boyfriend and his mother in an apartment on the Northwest Side and attends Healy-Murphy Center, an alternative high school, where she juggles caring for her five-month-old baby, Matthew, with working toward a diploma.

“It’s hard,” she said. “I want to go to the mall and stuff with my friends, be a regular teenager.”

Late-night feedings and dirty diapers are hardly the worst fate to befall these girls.

Teenage mothers are more likely than older mothers to drop out of school, end up on welfare and have their children placed in foster care because of abuse or neglect. Their daughters have a greater chance of becoming teen mothers and their sons of going to prison.

Occasionally a teen mother makes headlines: Julie Navejar, sentenced in March to 12 years in prison for the 2009 abuse-related death of her 7-week-old infant, was 16 at the time Jayda De La Rosa died. The baby’s father, just two years older, is serving an 18-year sentence. The couple also had a malnourished 1-year-old son at the time of their arrest.

In the last six years, 15 teen parents in Bexar County caused the death of their children and 2,093 committed child abuse or neglect. But there is some good news: Nationwide and in Texas, the teen birth rate has gradually fallen in the last two decades, hitting a record low in 2010, the most recent year available.

But Texas still ranks fourth highest for teen birth rate — 52 per 1,000 girls ages 15-19 — as of 2010. In the central

and southwest sections of Bexar County, the rate is 137 per 1,000, almost four times the national average that year. Latinas have the highest teen birth rate of any ethnic group in the state and Bexar County.

Like Texas, California had soaring numbers two decades ago, and despite having demographics similar to Texas, has more than halved its teen birth rate. It now ranks 29th in the U.S.

How did California make this dramatic reduction while Texas’ ranking has barely budged?

Three ways, experts say: Embracing education that promotes abstinence and contraception, increasing access to contraception and creating a host of teen pregnancy prevention programs via private-public partnerships.

“We stopped looking at teen pregnancy as a segmented issue and came together,” said Sharla Smith, with the California Department of Education.

A comparison between the two states is striking:

California spent \$102 million on teen reproductive care alone in 2010 — compared with the \$37.9 million Texas will spend in the current two-year state budget for family planning for all age groups.

Birth control is explicitly encouraged in California classrooms. In Texas, school instruction must emphasize abstinence over contraception. Many sex education classes here have cast birth control in a negative light, if it is mentioned at all, although that is changing.

Minors of any age in California are guaranteed the right to confidential contraception. In Texas, a state law forbids teens to receive birth control without parental consent in many instances — a known deterrent to its use.

A costly problem

Texas’ policies have proved expensive. It’s estimated that teen pregnancy costs the state \$1.2 billion a year — more than \$70 million in Bexar County alone, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

The high price tag springs mostly from the negative consequences for the children of teen mothers, including lost tax revenue. An analysis by the University of Texas Prevention

Research Center found that Bexar County, which had about 3,200 teen births in 2010, would have averted more than 1,800 of them if it had matched California's rate.

Teen mothers are disproportionately Latinas for reasons that have nothing to do with skin color or the language spoken at home, experts say.

“The (high rate) is a reflection primarily of the economic and educational outlook among Hispanic youth,” said Dr. Janet Realini, who leads Healthy Futures of Texas, a non-profit that seeks to prevent teen and unplanned pregnancies. “If teens see a pathway for them to delay parenthood, they will.”

Teen pregnancy is a major reason students — male and female — leave high school without a diploma, which may partly account for the higher drop-out rate among Latinos. According to a U.S. study, more than 17 percent of Latinos dropped out of high school in 2009, compared to 9.5 percent of blacks and 5.5 percent of Anglos.

Studies also show Latina teens are more likely to live in poverty and lack health insurance, two factors that greatly increase unplanned pregnancy.

Cultural factors may play a role as well, experts say.

“Having a child in Latino culture is celebrated, not seen as an obstacle,” said Julio Marcial, program director of the California Wellness Foundation, which has spent \$100 million on teen pregnancy prevention since 1995. When his brother became a father at 16, the family didn't foresee he'd have to drop out and work the graveyard shift for 24 years, he said.

At Girls Inc., where 70 percent of teen girls enrolled in the group's pregnancy prevention programs are Latina, president and CEO Rhonda Williamson said girls see pregnancy as a way to meet emotional needs.

“They think: ‘If I have a baby, there's always going to be someone to love me,’” she said. “If you're in a place where this is normalized, where teen mothers are glorified on MTV reality shows, girls think, ‘This is not going to be a hindrance to me.’”

Girls Inc. Program Director Zelina Cruz cites three underlying reasons girls get pregnant: There's no reason not to. They're home after school with no adult supervision. They believe the myths that you can't get pregnant your first time, if you're on your period, with certain sexual positions.

“They also have the idea there'll be lots of help — food stamps, WIC (a state nutrition program for women, infants and children), a grandmother who'll take care of the baby,” Cruz said.

Often, the fathers of babies born to teen mothers are considerably older.

“Many families are thrilled when a girl is involved with an older man, because they see him as someone who can take care of her,” said Dr. Dawn G. Mayo, whose downtown obstetric practice is made up of one-third teen patients.

Flying blind

When Berdecia and Vasquez met, she was largely in the dark about birth control, she said, having received no instruction at the Catholic middle school she attended or later at Sam Rayburn Middle School.

After getting some basic information at John Jay High School, she decided to protect herself and went to a clinic that received federal funds, allowing her to get birth control pills without parental consent. After Berdecia's mother had found them and thrown them away, she told her daughter: “‘This just gives you a free pass to do what you want to do,’” Berdecia recalled.

The mother, who asked not to be named for privacy reasons, confirmed her daughter's story. She now regrets throwing out the pills, but justified her actions by saying Berdecia is “real forgetful, so I don't know what good the pills would have done.”

Today Berdecia and Vasquez attend Healy-Murphy, where many students are pregnant, parents or both. On weekends, they operate rides at Kiddie Park on Broadway.

She finally got in-depth sex education at Healy-Murphy — after she was pregnant.

Berdecia picks up Matthew and nuzzles him.

“I'm going to tell my son everything about sex,” she said.