

# TAUNTON DAILY GAZETTE

## State Teen Birth Rate Hits a Record Low; Disparities Still Remain

---

While teen birth rates in Massachusetts have reached record lows, wide disparities between whites and minorities have health advocates concerned.

The Massachusetts teen birth rate for 2012 was the state's lowest on record and has dropped by more than 50 percent since peaking in 1989, according to data the state recently released.

“Even though we have made all this progress nationally and in all 50 states, there remain great disparities in rates among different groups of teens,” said Bill Albert, chief program officer for the nonprofit National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

Massachusetts, according to a report the Department of Public Health released this month, had a 2012 teen birth rate of 14 per 1,000 girls ages 15-19. That compares to a national rate of 29. There were 3,220 babies born to teen mothers statewide in 2012, and 305,388 nationally.

Statewide, the teen birth rate has declined steadily since hitting a peak of 35.9 per 1,000 in 1989.

Taunton's Donna Carroll was just 16 when she had her first baby boy. By the time she was 18, she had a second son and was working three jobs as a single mom, after dropping out from school.

“I don't regret my children, but I wish I could have done things different so I could have provided for them, and it wouldn't be a struggle doing things on my own,” Carroll said. “I wish I had given myself the chance to be a teenager.”

In Taunton, according to the report, there was a teen birth rate of 23.5 in 2012, compared to the teen birth rate of 14 statewide. There was a total of 41 teenagers from age 15-19 who gave birth that year. The 23.5 teen birth rate in the city gives Taunton the 14th high-

est teen birth rate in the state, according to the report. (Holyoke had the highest teen birth rate in 2012 at 57.1.; Fall River ranked at No. 7 with a 36.3 teen birth rate.)

But the recently released figures showed that the 2012 teenage birth rate in Taunton actually represents a 16 percent decrease of teen births in the Silver City, when compared to the Taunton statistics collected two years prior. In 2010, Taunton had a teen birth rate of 28.1 teenagers giving birth for every 1,000 females in that age span, for a total of 49 teenage births.

For Carroll, who is now 26 with a family of five, being a teenage mother was overwhelming. At one point, she had to live in a “teen shelter,” she said.

“I was really scared,” said Carroll, adding that she did not have any support from parents. “I wanted to be better and I really didn't know how to be. I had to learn for myself. I didn't know what it was going to be, being a young mom. I had a lot of fears.”

Carroll said that she never got to go back and get her education, and that's her biggest regret resulting from becoming a teenage mother. Carroll said if she could tell girls, young women and teen mothers one thing, it's to get their education.

“My message is to stay in school,” Carroll said. “Make sure you take care of yourself first, before you get ahead of yourself. Think about you first, and your future. If you have a child, it's kind of hard. All I think about now is what can I do to make child's life better.”

While experts say the recently released data on teenage birth in Massachusetts overall is encouraging, and that positive strides have been made in all populations, a persistent disparity still exists between whites and some minority groups. The teen birth rate for whites was 7.5 per 1,000 in Massachusetts, compared to 23

per 1,000 among blacks and 46.1 per 1,000 among Hispanics.

“I think you can look at teen pregnancy as both a cause and a consequence of poverty,” Albert said.

Despite the gap, teen birth rates have declined dramatically in minority communities statewide. Ten years ago, for example, the teen birth rate was 42.5 per 1,000 among blacks and 81.3 per 1,000 among Hispanics.

“Youth behavior data shows that rates of sexual activity have not changed significantly, so it appears that much of the decline in teen birth rates can be attributed to increased youth access to shame-free medically accurate, comprehensive sexuality education and contraception,” Brenda Madura, executive director of the Massachusetts Alliance on Teen Pregnancy, said in a statement.

Albert discussed factors contributing to a national decrease in teen birth and pregnancy rates, including more effective education and greater awareness of sexually transmitted diseases, particularly HIV.

“Also throw in the MTV effect,” he said. “For several years, MTV has been airing two popular reality shows, ‘16 and Pregnant’ and ‘Teen Mom,’” he said. “Teenagers describe these shows as more sobering than salacious.”

This past spring, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy released an analysis concluding that teen childbearing in 2010 cost taxpayers \$154 million in Massachusetts and \$9.4 billion nationally. The analysis included projected costs associated with public health care, increased participation in child welfare, increased rates of incarceration and lost tax revenue resulting from decreased earning and spending.