

Rural teens at high risk for pregnancy, analysis finds

By Michelle Healy, USA Today

Nationally, the birth rate for U.S. teens has plunged to record low levels, but a new analysis shows that a disproportionate share of teen births are in rural communities.

In 2010, the birth rate for girls ages 15 to 19 in rural counties was 43 per 1,000, nearly one-third higher than the rate for metropolitan counties (33 per 1,000), says a report released Thursday.

The national rate in 2010 was 34 births per 1,000; preliminary 2011 data show an 8% drop to a historically low 31 births per 1,000.

The new report uses the National Center for Health Statistics urban-rural classification system, which identifies rural counties (also called non-metro counties) as those with populations of less than 50,000. Metropolitan counties have populations of 50,000 or more.

“The prevailing stereotype is that teen parenthood is primarily an urban and suburban phenomenon,” says Bill Albert, chief program officer for the Washington, D.C.-based non-profit. In fact, “the landscape of teen childbearing is more open spaces and fresh air than gridlock and high-rises,” he says.

Researchers used county-level data from the National Center for Health Statistics for 2010, the most recent year available, to find out if rural teen childbearing is higher or lower than in other places, which Albert says had not been previously studied.

The results indicate that “the rates are far, far higher in rural areas compared to other parts of the country,” he says. That suggests a greater need for efforts directed at helping rural teens avoid too-early pregnancy and parenthood.

Among findings from the analysis:

- Between 1990 and 2010, the birth rate among teens in rural counties declined by 32%, far less than in major urban centers (49%) and suburbs (40%). Nationwide, the decline was 43%, from 60 per 1,000 teen girls to 34.

- Rural counties account for one in five teen births; only 16% of teen girls live in rural counties.

- The teen birth rate is higher in rural counties than major urban centers for all ethnic and racial groups: whites (36 per 1,000 in rural areas vs. 16 in urban areas); blacks (61 per 1,000 vs. 53); Hispanics (72 per 1,000 vs. 52); and Asian/Pacific Islanders (26 per 1,000 vs. 9). Among Native Americans, the rate is more than three times higher in rural areas, 66 per 1,000 vs. 18.

What’s behind the high rural teen birth rate? One factor is that even with all of the improvements in birth control methods, availability “lags far behind availability for teens living in urban and metro areas,” says Julia De Clerque, a research fellow and investigator at the University of North Carolina Sheps Center for Health Services Research. She was not involved in the study.

Another factor: “For many rural families, teen pregnancy and parenting are cultural norms, repeated generation after generation,” says Josie Weiss, an associate professor at the Christine E. Lynn College of Nursing at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton.

Ultimately, it’s “a combination of factors that range from availability of clinical services to poverty and educational opportunities,” says Albert.