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Nonprofit Group Hopes Education Can Reduce Latina Teen Pregnancy Rate

“I’m glad because I got good news today,” she said, as she averted her eyes from the other ninth- and 10th-graders sitting in a circle. “I’m sad, because I’m afraid my mom might find out.”

“Ohh,” the instructor, Reyna Trinidad, replied. “You’re in love.”

Trinidad and her co-instructor, Jonathan Bibb, have gathered this group of 10 Latino students at Wheaton High School after classes to aid them on their journey of self-actualization. On this cold March day, a simple question — *Como estas, tu?* — would open another week of discussions about listening to emotions, having a sense of self-worth and handling the feelings that can make an adolescent’s cheeks redden.

They hope these sessions will help fix a stubborn problem affecting some of the region’s most affluent suburbs: the great disparity in birthrates between Latino teenagers and other groups. For every 1,000 adolescent females in Montgomery County, an estimated 23 Latinas between 15 and 17 give birth.

Even as the Latino birthrate has fallen in Montgomery over the past two decades, it remains more than 2.5 times higher than the rate for the county’s black girls in that age group and more than three times the rate for white girls.

Similarly high rates are found in Alexandria. They are presumed to be similar in Fairfax County, officials there said, even though the county’s health department does not parse birthrate data for Hispanics.

Since 1996, the earliest year in which Montgomery officials have published data, the great disparity between birthrates for Latino and white teenagers has hardly changed. Meanwhile, the gap between black teenagers and Latino teenagers has increased. This has perplexed local officials at a time when teen pregnancy rates in the nation are plummeting and the gaps between all races and ethnic groups continue to shrink.

For advocates, the disparity has come to symbolize the socioeconomic gulf between Latinos, largely a population of

new immigrants, and more established populations in one of the country’s most affluent counties.

“If the gap between Latino and other groups continues to widen in terms of teen pregnancy rates, we can expect the cycle of poverty to continue in these communities, in addition to other negative consequences for the children and higher economic costs for taxpayers,” said Diego Uriburu, the co-chairman of Montgomery’s Latino Youth Collaborative Oversight Committee and director of the nonprofit Identity.

In 2011, Identity and the social services agency Mary’s Center began using an annual \$1 million federal grant for a coed, bilingual pregnancy prevention curriculum tailored to Latino youths, part of a national push to invest in teen pregnancy prevention. The program is held at 12 schools in Montgomery, including Wheaton High.

Working with professors from the George Washington University School of Public Health, they are trying to scientifically measure the program’s success. The first results will be available later this year.

The partnership is trying to test whether holistic discussions using examples germane to the experiences of being a Latino in Montgomery will delay “the sexual debut” of Latino girls and boys.

So, yes, there will be discussions in the sessions about condom use and birth control. But first, there is discussion about the difference between an avocado and an orange.

Playing catch-up

The orange, Trinidad and Bibb remind them, might look gorgeous on the outside. Still, it will collapse under pressure. The avocado, though, might look bruised. But the core — its “pit” — remains strong and untarnished.

“Always remember your pit,” Trinidad tells the group. “That is the person who you are, your inner self.”

Meanwhile, researchers and nonprofit groups are trying to discover the core of disparity in Montgomery.

When Genevieve Martinez- Garcia, now a senior researcher at the Healthy Teens Network, studied Montgomery's Latino youth in the mid-2000s, the birthrate was nearly twice what it is today.

Those teenagers were a part of the wave of immigration from Central America that transformed the makeup of some cities in Montgomery, such as Wheaton. The pregnancy rates in that age group began to fall as those young people became more likely to take sexual education in schools, she said.

"But what I found is that there needed to be more than sexual education," Martinez-Garcia said. "You have to look at what's going on in the kid's life. Where they live, go to school and where they play matters. Having two-parent households matters."

Even so, Latina teenagers in the county are far less likely to get pregnant when compared with the national average of an estimated 46.9 births to Latina girls for every thousand adolescent girls. But those averages have fallen so rapidly that there is now only a slight difference between the rate for Latinas and blacks, while nationally, the gap between Latinas and whites has decreased.

Bill Albert, chief program officer at the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, called the declines "one of the nation's great success stories of the past two decades," a result of "a magic combination of less sex and more contraception." Still, he said, "only in the past several years has the sex education business caught up with [educating] Latinos."

In Montgomery, the gap remains more outstanding because Latino youths are more likely to live in impoverished areas than white teenagers in the county, Martinez-Garcia said. The poverty rate for Latinos is nearly four times higher than it is for whites, county data show. They are also more likely to live in households with less-traditional family structures. For example, teenagers frequently live with extended family while a parent lives in Central America, leading to less supervision at home.

Pressuring young girls

In focus groups, Martinez- Garcia said, she began to notice that young girls were often dating boys who were two or three years older. Those older teenagers were pressuring the girls into sex, Martinez-Garcia said, leading to girls losing their virginity as early as 12. Meanwhile, some held on to myths that birth control might cause cancer.

"A disturbingly high number of them had an early initial sexual debut," Martinez-Garcia said. "And the parents were not giving them the skills or the self-esteem to say 'No.'"

This program doesn't pitch itself to teens as a pregnancy prevention program. Instead, students volunteer for the camaraderie and the planned camping trip.

"I joined because my friends told me how fun it was," said Aristides Garcia, 15. "And, I don't mean to be racist, but it's good to spend some time with other Latinos because it is a way to feel more comfortable when talking about things."

So they gather for nearly two hours after school, sitting around a table drinking water and eating chips and salsa. They warm up playing games of "Huggy Bear." At this session, instructors conducted exercises about listening to others and how frustrating it is to not be heard.

Bibb then glided the conversation into another type of listening.

"What do you think happens when you don't listen to your pit?" Bibb asked.

"You won't be happy," Wendy Flores, 15, volunteered. "And when you don't listen, maybe sometimes you make the wrong decision."

Then the two facilitators handed out three scenarios about fictional teens in situations all too real. All three were from countries in Central America living with either one parent or no parents at all. All three were in relationships, one of them secret, in which the girlfriend was younger than her boyfriend. Each of the scenarios ended in pregnancy.

Working in pairs, the teenagers tried to figure out how they might feel in the situation.

"Seventeen is okay to have a kid, if [the father is] working," Aristides said. "But not with a 16-year-old. That's too young."

"I guess he'd be happy for bringing a life into this world, but how could he afford the child?" said Steven Villacorta, 15. "He has no money."

As the program goes on, the facilitators have deeper discussions about pregnancy and sexuality. But they said the first step was to have the group learn to make decision on their own.

"This is really tough," added Wendy, who said she needed more time to figure everything out. "I joined to meet new people and make friends. But I'm learning about how to think for myself, and how to be me."