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Parents' help sought to cut Latina teen-pregnancy rates

Grace Chung | McClatchy Newspapers

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WASHINGTON — A coalition of Latino organizations said Tuesday that teen pregnancies in their community wouldn't drop without more help from parents.

"To say that we are in a crisis is an understatement," said Amy Hinojosa, the director of leadership initiatives at MANA, a national Latina organization that's a coalition participant.

More than half of Latina teens will get pregnant before they turn 20, the coalition reported, which is nearly twice the national average and the highest pregnancy rate of any U.S. ethnic or racial group.

With Latinos predicted to make up one-quarter of teens nationwide by 2025, the success of efforts to curb their teen-pregnancy rate is key to reducing unwanted pregnancies across the board. U.S. rates, the developed world's highest, declined steadily from the early '90s through 2004 but rose again from 2005 to 2007, mainly because the Hispanic rate didn't decline.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy found, after surveying more than 1,600 Hispanic teens and adults nationwide, that both generations thought that parents need more help when talking about sex and relationships.

Its survey found that 76 percent of teens said their parents most influenced their decisions about sex. Yet most parents, the study found, said they "don't know what to say, how to say it or when to start," and want help.

This was particularly true, the study found, among parents who speak only Spanish.

Ruthie Flores, a co-author of the study, said that realistic and culturally appropriate information must be made more readily available for parents of teens.

What they're up against are large numbers of Hispanic teens who think that early pregnancy will merely "delay them from reaching their goals." In reality, only 40 percent of women who have their first children as teenagers graduate from high school, according to the National Campaign. Half of all mothers on welfare had their first children as teenagers.

Latino teens and adults have "a different mind-set" from other ethnic groups when it comes to early pregnancy, said Ana Sol Gutierrez, a member of the Maryland House of Delegates who's a participant in the coalition.

Latino culture celebrates motherhood even at a young age, Gutierrez said, so programs to reduce unwanted pregnancies need to show that they're not against maternity, but "about helping girls choose when and how."

Another challenge, according to three-quarters of teens surveyed, is that parents give a conservative message to daughters and a more permissive one to sons.

What parents need to do, in the National Campaign's view, is hold boys equally responsible for preventing pregnancies.

Flores said the solution was education for parents and cultural sensitivity. She's optimistic.

"In 10 to 20 years we'll reach a different state," Flores said.

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