

## Guest Columns

### Aspirations, teen pregnancy linked

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Despite recent declines, New Mexico continues to lead the nation in rates of teen pregnancy. In 2013, the state was second only to Arkansas in number of teen births, at 43.3 births per 1,000 teen girls, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.

A recent Legislative Finance Committee report concluded that inconsistency in how public schools teach required sexual education standards is likely partially to blame.

Yet even counties with school-based health clinics, which often provide confidential information about and access to contraception, have some of the state's highest teen pregnancy rates.

This suggests that another, more elusive factor may bear responsibility for the state's consistently high teen birth rate: the effect of poverty on how teens perceive their future economic potential. According to a 2011 study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research, teens who have low expectations for their future careers are likely to become parents as adolescents.

The study found that low-income youth in areas with high income inequality are the most likely to give birth as teenagers. The predictive relationship between income inequality and teenage parenthood is robust even when controlling for other factors such as welfare benefits, sex education and abstinence education.

The authors explain this phenomenon with a "culture of despair" model, which suggests that when poor young women face unpromising job prospects, they are unwilling to delay childbearing into their 20s or beyond, as they think doing so will fail to pay off through better economic outcomes anyway.

And these young women aren't wrong.

In 2012, the same authors published startling findings that, for young women already living in poverty, teenage childbearing has little to no effect on their lifetime earnings.

In other words, negative economic outcomes persist whether young women have their babies during adolescence or delay childbearing until adulthood. The high correlation of teen pregnancy with poverty likely reflects selection bias, since teens with already diminished economic potential are more likely to have children during their teenage years.

For example, teens from disadvantaged backgrounds are both more likely to drop out of high school and to become pregnant; it is not the case that teen pregnancy is necessarily the cause of dropping out among pregnant teens who discontinue high school.

Since the timing of childbearing doesn't seem to make a difference on career prospects for girls living in poverty, it is easier to understand why a teen seeking the purpose and direction she hopes a baby will provide might ask, "Why wait?"

This culture of despair may very well contribute to New Mexico's teen birth rate, as the state consistently has some of the highest levels of poverty and income inequality in the nation, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

My own findings from a 2012 study on teenage mothers in Doña Ana County, assisted by the county's Health and Human Services Department, corroborate this theory.

Some of the young mothers in the study, especially those from rural areas, were indeed simply lacking in contraception knowledge and resources. This made them further vulnerable to what I have termed the sterility cuento, an alarming trend in which the young women's boyfriends falsely told them they were infertile in order to have unprotected sex.

Yet many of the young women told me they had knowledge of and access to contraception, but they simply chose not to use it. For them, motherhood was a deliberate choice; prospects of a college education and lucrative career were chimerical and abstract, while motherhood promised a sense of purpose and motivation they found hard to come by in their other pursuits.

What does this culture of despair regarding career options among teenage girls mean for New Mexico's teen pregnancy prevention efforts? As one of my participants put it, "Some people have that drive and they have that determination to not get pregnant, but then there are other girls like me. ..."

This statement speaks to the role of aspirations to achieve goals that would be hindered by teen pregnancy in convincing girls to delay motherhood.

Teen pregnancy prevention projects not only need to prevent certain behaviors, but also must encourage alternative paths that provide the direction and meaning some girls seek through motherhood. As part of a multifaceted project to diminish the structural forces that contribute to poverty, our schools, parents and the community at large need to make it realistic for teens to reach promising futures if they delay pregnancy.

Further, we must convince teens that such futures will provide opportunities to achieve the meaningfulness and intimacy that motherhood provides.

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