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Health and sex education push may reverse the trend of teen pregnancies

By Erica Molina Johnson / El Paso Times
Posted: 08/28/2009 12:00:00 AM MDT



Susan Tortolero, director of the Center for Health Promotion and Prevention Research, speaks to more than 35 area health workers and educators about the high teen pregnancy rates in El Paso and the state of Texas. (Photo by Ruben R. Ramirez / El Paso Times)

EL PASO -- Children are having sex for the first time at younger ages, and Texas has the third-highest teenage pregnancy rate in America.

El Paso's teen pregnancy rate is even higher than that of Texas. In certain El Paso neighborhoods, as many as 131 of every 1,000 teenage girls become pregnant.

Those findings received most of the attention when educators and health outreach workers gathered Thursday. They said they hoped to reverse the trend of teens having babies by increasing health and sexual education, including knowledge of contraception, pregnancy and abstinence.

"We're hoping a coalition comes out of this discussion because it's going to matter how we work together in collaboration," said Lelia Onsurez, community health educator for University Medical Center's Women's Health Center.

The health center hosted a workshop at the city Department of Public Health on the problems of unprotected teen sex and teen pregnancy. Directing the session was Susan Tortolero, director of the Center for Health Promotion and

Teen pregnancy in El Paso

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Yes, because of a lack of parental guidance.

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No, it's not much a problem in El Paso.

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"Part of the problem is we're not talking to our kids early on," Tortolero said. "Just like kids don't want to admit their parents are sexual beings, parents don't want to admit their kids are sexual beings."

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports about 48 percent of high-school students nationally in 2007 said they'd had sex. That figure climbs to about

53 percent in Texas. Data weren't available for El Paso.

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Among sexually active teenagers in El Paso, one in five reported first having sex at age 12, according to a 2003 study by the Paso del Norte Health Foundation.

The study also found that 53 percent of those sexually active teens reported having one or more partners, 34 percent did not use a condom at least once, and 32 percent were 13 years old when they had their first sexual experience.

"It's something we are not acknowledging. Teens are going to have sex. That's what we know," Tortolero said.

She said the community needed to find ways to educate teens to make better decisions about whether to have sex at all and whether to protect themselves with condoms.

"The adults are failing their responsibility," Tortolero said. "We are not taking responsibility for this problem and this public health crisis."

Only Mississippi and New Mexico had higher teen pregnancy rates than Texas, according to the Census Bureau.

Nationally, the birth rate is about 41 per 1,000 teen girls. In Texas the rate is 63 per 1,000.

El Paso's rate is even higher, Tortolero said -- about 72 per 1,000 teen girls.

Census Bureau figures show that in El Paso, the 79901 ZIP code has a birth rate of more than 131 births per 1,000 teen girls, one of the higher rates in the city.

Two other ZIP codes with similar birth rates are 79853 and 79849, which are home to Tornillo and San Elizario. Other far east and central neighborhoods had slightly lower rates.

The East Side and West Side generally had lower rates of 33 to 62 births per 1,000 teenage girls.

The lowest rates were on Fort Bliss and on the West Side in 79922. They had six to 33 births per 1,000 girls.

Tortolero said teen parents are more likely to live in poverty, less likely to complete high school or attend college, and more likely to remain single parents. Teenage fathers, she said, are more likely to have children with multiple women and to engage in substance abuse or other crime.

She said children of teenage mothers often do not do as well in school as other children, and are more likely to drop out of high school. They also are likely to be abused and become teen parents themselves. Male children are more likely to serve time in prison.

To prevent many of the problems, parents need to begin educating their children about healthy relationships and providing accurate information about their bodies at a young age, she said. Abstinence-based sex education should begin at middle school, if not earlier, she said. Also crucial is to provide good information about contraception options in case they decide to have sex, she said.

Tonie Ponce-Kreye, principal of the El Paso Independent School District's School Age Parent Center, said she would like more access to information and access to prevention methods for students. Her school helps pregnant students and teenage mothers obtain high-school diplomas.

"If this makes a team of community or school educators, if we can come up with a plan to provide this access, maybe I'll be out of a job one day and that would be a good thing," Ponce-Kreye said.

Tortolero said effective sex education can also reduce the spread of sexually transmitted infections.

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