

County's teen birth rate still above average

By Laurence F. Jones and Kenneth L. Stewart Special to the Standard-Times

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SAN ANGELO, Texas — No part of Texas is unaffected by teenage births. Our state, in fact, consistently turns in a teenage birthrate higher than the national level.

Moreover, a higher percentage of babies in Tom Green County, compared to the state, are born to teenagers each year.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation annually produces its KIDS COUNT Data Book to give local communities, states, and the nation a measured look at the well-being of children. With the 2010 version of the data book due for release in only a few weeks, a look at the 2009 version of KIDS COUNT is a reminder that births to teenagers remains a persistent challenge in our community.

The good news for the local community is that the percent of newborns to teen mothers shows a trend downward since the year 2000. That year, 19.4 percent births in Tom Green County were to young mothers between the ages of 13 and 19. That percentage was actually a decline from the 21.2 percent of births to teen mothers in 1999, a number that marks the highest level in the local community since 1990.

The most recent two years of available numbers show the best local results since 1990. In 2004, teen mothers gave birth to 15.8 percent of newborns in the county. This was significant drop of 3 percentage points from the previous year. Also, the lower numbers extended into the next year, 2005, when the percent of babies born to teenagers came in at 15.7 percent. Since the year 2000, the local community has achieved good progress on lowering the number of newborns to teens.

Still, it can't go without notice that even the most recent and best numbers for Tom Green County do not compare favorably statewide. The county's 15.7 percent of births to teens in 2005 compares to 13.5 percent for the state as a whole. The community, moreover, should not take a lift from the fact that the local 15.7 percent is lower than familiar surroundings like Taylor County (17.8 percent) or Midland (18.1 percent) and Ector (20.2 percent) counties. This is one instance when Tom Green County must look to Bexar, Dallas, Harris, Tarrant, or Travis counties. Each of these had lower percentages of births to teen mothers in 2005.

Recent local progress credited, another reason to stay focused on the work ahead is the disturbing knowledge that Texas lags most other states when it comes to teen births. The latest available data shows Texas ranking 48th among states in 2006. Only two states had birthrates that year higher than the Texas level of 63 teen births for every 1,000 females ages 15 to 19. The national rate for 2006 was 42 births per 1,000 female teens.

As in the local community, Texas did achieve some progress toward lowering the teen births over the last two decades. In fact, the 2006 rate of 63 per 1,000 teen females was down 19 percent from the state's 1991 rate of 78 per 1,000. Yet Texas teens in 2006 had 21 more births per 1,000 females ages 15 to 19 than did teens across the nation. That gap in 1990 was only 15 more births. The reason Texas trails further behind most other states is because reductions come more slowly.

Statewide policy action is slow in the making, too. In 2007, for example, Texas lawmakers introduced the Texas Prevention First Act to address the undesirable feature of leading the nation in teen pregnancies. Lawmakers intended the act to reduce unplanned births through a combination of sex education, outreach and changes in how tax dollars are spent on pregnant teens. At the close of the session, however, the legislation was left pending in the Senate's Health and Human Services Committee.

The lack of statewide action leaves the work to local communities. San Angelo, despite its progress, is a community with a high percentage of babies born to teenage mothers in a state where the Department of Health Services reports that a teen gets pregnant every 10 minutes, and another teen gives birth.

Solutions to the teen birthrate are not to be found by turning teenage mothers and their children into outsiders, or by looking the other way. Indeed, the valiant steps local agencies take to respond compassionately to teen mothers and families are commendable, and no doubt, responsible in some measure for progress made. Yet, many facts about teen births point to community dimensions that reach beyond agencies and treatments dealing with individual character and behavior.

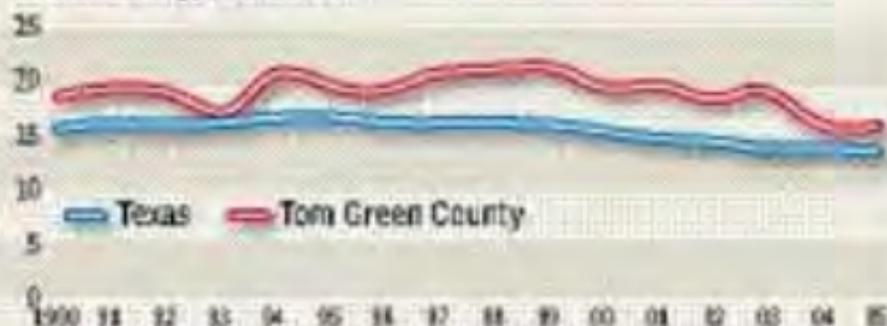
High levels of teen birth tax a community's social welfare system, contribute to school dropout rates, lead to higher prevalence of alcohol and substance abuse, and often entangle the criminal justice system. Plenty of studies also show that strong families, engagement in school, encouraging friends, and a safe environment make a difference for youth. These qualities of life, when they become widespread, are created by community actions and collaborations, not just individuals and agencies. There is community work to be done here at home, in San Angelo.

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TEEN PREGNANCY

Percent of live births to teens, age 13-19, in Texas and Tom Green County, 1990-2005.



TEEN BIRTH RATES, TEXAS AND US

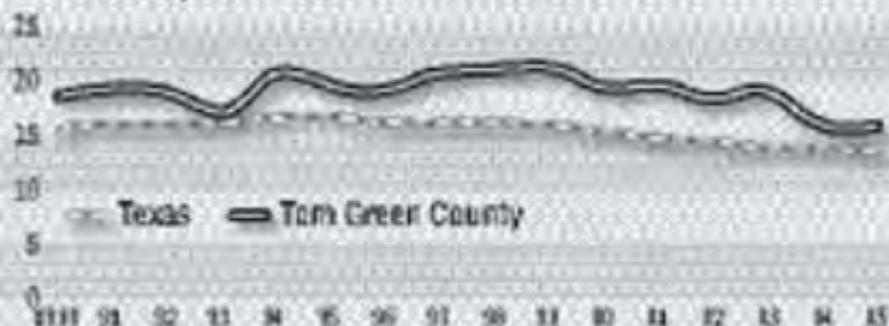
Births to teens per 1,000 females, age 15-19, 1990-2006.



Source: Karen L. Cox, Executive, Department of Health Services; Community Development Initiatives

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