

Sexual Health of Young Women

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In the years leading up to Hurricane Katrina, the young women of New Orleans and Louisiana experienced some of the highest rates of sexually transmitted infection, HIV/AIDS infection and unintended pregnancy in the country. This report will provide a snapshot of the sexual health of the young women of New Orleans and Louisiana in the years just prior to Hurricane Katrina and after. Results from a national survey are examined, as are trends in teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted infection and HIV/AIDS among the young women of Louisiana.

New Orleans Teens and the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey

Every two years, students in grades 9 through 12 in New Orleans public high schools, along with students in other schools around the country, participate in the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey, developed and conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.¹ The 2005 survey responses from New Orleans teens about sexual risk-taking point to the need for greater awareness and education about pregnancy and disease prevention methods. New Orleans teens were more than twice as likely as teens nationally to report having sexual intercourse before age 13 (15.5 percent in New Orleans vs. 6.2 percent in the U.S.), and twice as likely to have had four or more sexual partners (28.1 percent New Orleans; 14.3 percent U.S.). Although New Orleans teens were more likely to use a condom to prevent pregnancy at last intercourse than the average teen nationally (79.2 percent New Orleans vs. 62.8 percent U.S.); they were much less likely to have used birth control pills (7.4 percent in New Orleans vs. 17.6 percent

U.S.). Finally, students in New Orleans' public schools were less likely to have been given any information in school about AIDS or HIV infection (78.6 percent New Orleans vs. 87.9 percent nationally).

Responses to other survey questions point to some disturbing trends in sexual violence among New Orleans students. Teens from New Orleans were more than twice as likely as their peers to report being hit, slapped or physically hurt on purpose by their boyfriend or girlfriend during the past year (20.8 percent in New Orleans vs. 9.2 percent United States). In addition, 11.6 percent of New Orleans teens reported that they had been forced to have sexual intercourse when they did not want to; this percentage is demonstrably higher than that of their peers nationally (7.5 percent).²

Teen Pregnancy and Birth Rate

Teen pregnancy is a serious problem in Louisiana; over 3 in 10 young women become pregnant before the age of 20. In 2000, Louisiana had the 19th highest teen pregnancy rate in the country with 87 pregnancies per 1000 teen females; in 2005, Louisiana had the 11th highest teen birth rate at 49.1 births per 1000 teen females.³ While the teen pregnancy rate decreased in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina as indicated in Table III-3, there is still reason for concern. Nationally, research has shown that parenthood is the leading cause of school drop-out among teen girls. Of the young women who have a child before 18 years of age, only 40 percent ever graduate from high school compared to 75 percent of young women who delay child bearing until age 20 or 21.⁴

Louisiana Women are Disproportionately Affected by the STI Public Health Crisis

Louisiana continues to record some of the highest rates of sexually transmitted infection in the United States, and the women of Louisiana—particularly our young women—are disproportionately affected by this public health crisis. In 2005, Louisiana women experienced nearly twice the national rate, and the 3rd highest rate, of gonorrhea infection in the country (576.9 cases vs. 119.1 cases per 100,000 females nationally). Also in 2005, Louisiana reported the 13th highest rate of chlamydia infection among women in the country. The brunt of Louisiana's chlamydia and gonorrhea outbreaks falls on young women ages 15 to 24. In 2005, young women in this age range accounted for 78 percent of all chlamydia cases and 73 percent of all gonorrhea cases.⁵

The 2008 Louisiana legislature approved a bill requiring school boards that provide information relative to immunizations to include information on the human papillomavirus (HPV) to the parents of students in grades six through twelve. While the bill did not provide funding for a HPV vaccination program, the dissemination of information about HPV is an important first step in educating the public about health risks of sexually transmitted infections.⁶

HIV/AIDS and Louisiana Women

In recent years, the rate of new HIV/AIDS infection among the women of Louisiana has risen. In 1995, 26 percent of all newly-diagnosed HIV/AIDS cases were women, but by 2004 that number had increased to 31 percent of all new cases. The increase has been particularly acute among young women between the ages of 13 and 24. In 2004, 58 percent of those diagnosed with HIV were female. In 2005, Louisiana reported the 7th highest rate of new AIDS cases among young adult and adolescent females in the country, at 15.7 cases per 100,000 teen females; this was nearly twice the national average of 8.6 new cases

per 100,000 teen females.⁷ Clearly, HIV/AIDS is now affecting the young women of Louisiana, particularly those living in New Orleans where, in 2006, 29 percent of all new HIV cases were diagnosed. Of the women currently living with HIV/AIDS in the New Orleans metropolitan area, 81 percent are African American.

Programs of Sex-Education

It is well documented that education is the key to successful public health initiatives. There is a clear need to better educate and inform Louisiana's young adults about the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies in order to improve health and overall well-being.

The need for high quality comprehensive sex education in public schools is not unique to the post-Katrina era of New Orleans history. In Louisiana, schools are not required to teach sex education and data is not available to show which New Orleans schools provided pregnancy and disease prevention programs pre-Katrina. For over 10 years, Louisiana has received Federal funding for abstinence-only sex-education programs. Made available through the 1996 Title V Welfare Reform Act, these funds are granted to states, and used to fund education programs that teach abstinence as the only effective method of pregnancy and disease prevention. Unlike comprehensive sex education programs, abstinence-only programs omit information about the effectiveness of other contraceptive methods, like condoms and birth control pills, which may be valuable to young women throughout their reproductive years. A number of studies, including an extensive national study funded by the United States Department of Health and Human Services, have demonstrated that abstinence-only programs do not help teens delay sexual intercourse.⁸ Despite these findings, in 2006, Louisiana received over \$1 million in Federal Title V Abstinence-only money,

and matched this grant with \$1 million in state funds. This money has been used to fund abstinence-only programs in public and private schools in New Orleans and throughout the state.⁹

Researchers have compiled a list of sex-education programs that produce positive results with regard to helping teens delay sexual activity, and use contraceptives effectively if they do have sex.¹⁰ Some of these programs, including, *Making Proud Choices*, *Becoming a Responsible Teen* and *Safer Choices* are part of the Louisiana Department of Education's HIV/AIDS Prevention Education Program. The Department's Cadre of Trainers provides training for school personnel and community-based organization staff

in these evidence-based programs so that the programs can be implemented in the school environment.¹¹ The transformation of New Orleans' public school system in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina opens opportunities for re-imagining the educational mission and responsibility of educators. One of these opportunities can be to provide students with accurate information to enable them to make informed decisions about their present behavior and future lives, particularly concerning reproductive health. Effective sex education in schools, including practical information about abstinence and contraception will be a vital part of helping the young women of New Orleans complete their education and become empowered members of society.

Endnotes

- 1 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2005. *Youth Risk Behavior Survey. 2005*. <www.cdc.gov/yrbss> Accessed January 4, 2008.
- 2 CDC. 2005. Ibid.
- 3 Births: 2005. National Vital Statistics Reports, Volume 56, Number 6, December 5, 2007. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
- 4 Hoffman, S.D. 2006. *By the Numbers: The Public Costs of Adolescent Childbearing*. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. Washington DC; National Association of State Boards of Education. 1998. Policy Update: *The Role of Education in Teen Pregnancy Prevention*. Policy Information Clearing House: Alexandria, VA.
- 5 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2006. *Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance*. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. November 2007. <<http://www.cdc.gov/std>> Accessed January 4, 2008; Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, Office of Public Health. STD Control Program. 2007. <http://www.dhh.state.la.us/offices/publications/pubs-272/2006_percent20STD%20Annual%20Report.pdf> Accessed January 4, 2008.
- 6 Louisiana House of Representatives. 2008 Regular Session. House Bill 359 (Act 210) <<http://www.legis.state.la.us/billdata/byinst.asp?sessionid=08rs&billtype=HB&billno=359>>
- 7 Louisiana HIV/AIDS Surveillance Quarterly Report. June 30, 2007. Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, Office of Public Health. <<http://hiv.dhh.louisiana.gov/>>; Louisiana HIV/AIDS Epidemiological Profile and Annual Report. 2004. HIV/AIDS Surveillance Program. Louisiana Department of Health and Hospitals, Office of Public Health.
- 8 Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. 2007. *Impacts of Four Title V, Section 510 Abstinence Education Programs*. <<http://www.mathematica-mpr.com/publications/pdfs/impactabstinence.pdf>> Accessed January 4, 2008.
- 9 SIECUS Public Policy Office State Profile. Louisiana. <<http://www.siecus.org/policy/states/2006/mandates/LA.html>> Accessed January 4, 2008.
- 10 Kirby, D. 2007. *Emerging Answers 2007: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases*. Washington D.C.: National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/EA2007/EA2007_full.pdf> Accessed January 4, 2008; Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. 2007. *Impacts of Four Title V, Section 510 Abstinence Education Programs*. Ibid.
- 11 Louisiana Department of Education. HIV/AIDS Prevention Education Program. <<http://www.doe.state.la.us/lde/up-loads/2622.pdf>> Accessed January 4, 2008.