

Pregnancies buck U.S. trend: Teens in suburbs face same pressures, risks as urban counterparts

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High school senior Monica Selby thought she would be busy this year planning for college, not preparing for the birth of her first child.

Monica Selby of Canton, Ohio, who's six months pregnant, will place her baby for adoption. She cries every night.

"I've been crying every day and every night. I keep on blaming myself for this," said the 18-year-old Ms. Selby, who is six months pregnant.

She cries about starting classes this week at Timken Senior High School with a bulging belly, about the emotions of planning an adoption, about becoming part of a statistic that has snagged the nation's attention: 64 of Timken's 490 female students — 13 percent — are pregnant.

The statistic at the school in the heart of this old steel city contrasts with a decade of declining teen pregnancy rates nationwide. But teen pregnancy experts say the problem is not exclusive to Timken High.

Experts, parents and students themselves struggle to explain why such pockets of high teen pregnancy rates appear. Are teens getting appropriate sex education? Do they have access to birth control and are they using it consistently? Has the stigma of unwed motherhood lost its edge?

"This might be a school that is forthright with its problems while others are not," said Jay Green, chairman of the Education Reform department at the University of Arkansas. "But this is a widespread issue."

Mr. Green wrote a study last year for the New York-based Manhattan Institute for Policy Research that said 20 percent of urban teenagers have been pregnant, compared with 14 percent of suburban teens.

Urban teens don't use birth control as consistently or often, according to his research, and often have less to lose financially and socially than those in the suburbs.

Mr. Green couldn't say whether those factors applied to Timken. The school of about 1,000 students draws teens from across the neighborhood and economic lines in the state's ninth-largest city.

Eric Wilson, 18, works at a hot dog shop a few blocks from the school while making plans to get his GED and caring for his 2-year-old son. He said the spotlight on Timken is magnifying an old problem.

"My mom had a kid when she was in school, and now I have a kid," he said. "It goes back to how you were raised. Down here, it's not looked too down upon because a lot of parents had kids when they were kids."

Last school year, both high schools in the city's district together reported 55 pregnancies. Ninety-nine pregnancies are expected in the district this year, most of them at Timken, where expecting students get six weeks of maternity leave.

"This has gotten to horrible proportions. I wish I knew the answer to why it's happening," principal Kim Redmond told the city's daily newspaper, The Repository. Ms. Redmond did not return several messages left by The Associated Press.

Joanne Hinton, whose 16-year-old daughter, Raechel Hinton, is eight months pregnant, said the school's abstinence-based sex education program isn't enough.

"It's time to take the blinders off and realize that these kids are having sex," she said. "Obviously, abstinence is not working. If we have to, just give them condoms."

Abstinence-based programs have been growing nationwide at schools over the past few years. In Ohio, the Bush administration and the state health department have awarded \$32 million in grants to Ohio agencies for abstinence education since 2001.

Ms. Hinton says that she doesn't condone teenage sex and that her daughter doesn't fit the mold some may think pregnant teens come from: The Hinton household has two loving parents with a strong relationship who asked the straight-A Raechel "45 times a week if she was having sex, doing drugs, drinking. We were constantly checking on her."

Raechel, who plans to return to the 10th grade at Timken after having her baby and putting it up for adoption, said many students are sexually active and need more information about birth control.

"It can happen to anybody no matter who you are, not just bad girls," she said.