

Voices for VI Children, Judith Richardson, columnist
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Title: May is National Teen Pregnancy Prevention Month

The United States still has the highest teen birth rate of all modern nations (with a rate of 41.7 births per thousand girls age 15-19) -- and a higher rate than over 50 developing countries. Alarming, the USVI rate (of 48.4/thousand) is higher than the nation's.

Let's take a look at teen pregnancy and teenage births here in our community. "What's the big deal?" you might say. "For as long as anyone can remember, babies have been born to young mothers in the Virgin Islands."

True, but there are plenty of reasons why teenage parenthood is a reason for concern.

Here in the USVI, there are 216 *new* reasons to be concerned: the most recent USVI KIDS COUNT 2005 shows that 73 babies were born in 2003 to girls age 15-17, and an additional 143 babies were born to teen girls age 18-19.

At least 80% of teen births occur outside of marriage, resulting in a high predictability of negative outcomes to both mother and child. National data on early sexual relationships stresses both the short duration of these relationships, and the experience of some form of abuse by up to one quarter (25%) of the teens involved.

Pregnancy interrupts a teen's development, and especially her plans for an independent future. When a young girl has an early pregnancy and childbirth, she sets into motion a future that carries a significantly high risk of not finishing school, low wage employment and poor health...for both herself *and* her child.

Teen mothers and their babies are even less likely to be sustained financially, immediately or as the child grows, by a father in a teenage relationship. Children living without their biological father are on average two to three times more likely to grow up in poverty. Current data shows that a third (32.3%) of the USVI child population lives below the poverty threshold (federally defined as \$18,660 in yearly income for a family of four).

Single mothers who lack educational skills increase the poverty risk to their children further. Nationally, while half of all teen mothers drop out of school before becoming pregnant, the demands of child-raising often become the compelling reason not to give school a second chance. Two-thirds of these dropouts never resume their education.

A high-school diploma, which will allow them workplace-entry and career advancement, may not be the only credential they lack. These young mothers often have not mastered the practical knowledge, emotional skills and social supports needed to adequately care for their baby, and foster their child's healthy development. Furthermore, at least 20% of teen mothers go on to have a repeat unplanned teen pregnancy resulting in the birth of a child.

It is incumbent on us as a caring community to provide guidance and support to our teenagers, female *and* male. Our responsibility includes helping them make informed, intelligent choices to postpone sexual activity and pregnancy until they are emotionally and financially able to give their babies a strong, healthy start. To learn more about strengthening teens and ways to help, visit www.advocatesforyouth.org.

Each of us can be a voice for improved outcomes for teenagers, and for a stronger, healthier community.

