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Los Angeles Times

July 9, 1995, Sunday, Home Edition

**SECTION:** Life & Style; Part E; Page 1; View Desk

**LENGTH:** 455 words

**HEADLINE:** A SIGN OF THE TIMES

**SERIES:** 1 in 8. Who's to Blame for Teen Pregnancy. First of four parts.

**BODY:**

There is a baby boom in California -- one that isn't very positive.

Between 1988 and 1993, the last year for which statistics are available, births to teen-age mothers rose almost 19%. Overall, one in eight babies in California is born to a teen-age mother, who is typically unwed and poor.

This trend, which is happening in other states too, has not escaped the attention of policy-makers.

Teen-age mothers have become pawns in the debate on welfare reform; they pop up in just about every political speech out of Washington on family values, and they're on the Sacramento agenda, the subject of a handful of proposed programs or laws currently under discussion.

But adolescent mothers are only part of the problem, according to dozens of health professionals, lawmakers, educators -- and teen-agers -- interviewed by The Times for this four-part series. Indeed, the facts show that teen-age childbearing is heavily influenced by circumstances created and controlled by adults.

\* Two-thirds of the fathers of babies born to teen mothers are adults.

\* While the failure to use contraception properly or at all has long been associated with teen-agers, in fact adults are poor role models with similarly poor habits and high rates of unintended pregnancy. (Sixty percent of pregnancies nationwide are unplanned.)

\* As many as half of all teen-agers who give birth are prior victims of sexual molestation or rape.

\* Despite Americans' faith in school-based sex education, only about a dozen programs -- out of about 2,000 -- have been proven successful at preventing teen pregnancy.

\* Eighty-seven percent of teen mothers are poor or near poor, and lacking guidance and support from adults, view parenthood as one of their few options. Psychologist Judith S. Musick, one of the nation's leading authorities on teen-age pregnancy, calls adolescents scapegoats for many of society's larger problems.

"The fact is teen-age motherhood is not a problem. It's a symptom -- a symptom of adults failing children, and not just the children of the poor, but they are the ones who are really showing it.

"When adults -- schools, families and adult role models -- don't raise their kids properly, when they don't offer kids a different vision and the tools to make that vision a reality, then you have guys involved in crime and girls involved in motherhood. But instead we turn on them and shake a finger and say, 'You are bad girls.' We need a change of heart here, a real understanding of what this problem is about."

In today's installment of "1 in 8: Who's to Blame for Teen Pregnancy," Times health writer Shari Roan examines poverty as a major cause of the escalating birth rate among Latino teens in California.

**LOAD-DATE:** July 10, 1995