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'THESE YOUNG WOMEN FEEL THEY HAVE FEWER OPTIONS'

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BYLINE: By SHARI ROAN, TIMES STAFF WRITER

BODY:

Emma Rodriguez felt she was ready to become a mother.

Born to a Salvadoran mother and a Mexican father, Emma was the oldest of seven children.

Life was harsh in the crowded house in the San Fernando Valley, and school held no allure. So at 15, Emma and her 16-year-old boyfriend decided to start a family of their own. She got pregnant and the couple dropped out of school. Nine months later, a boy named Alex was born.

Emma is now 18 and living with Alex in St. Anne's Maternity Home in Los Angeles, where she is working toward her high school degree. But the problematic nature of Emma's young life is somewhat lost on her.

"People told me, 'You're too young.' But I saw other friends getting pregnant. I didn't think I was too young."

She stares at her shoes thoughtfully while sitting in the sun-filled foyer of St. Anne's, a comfortable and contemporary-looking residence.

"Sometimes I wish I would have waited."

Emma is right about one thing: Many of her peers -- young, poor and Latina -- were getting pregnant too.

Births to Latino teen-agers have exploded in California over the past decade, nearly doubling. While birth rates for Asian, white and African American teens dipped slightly in both 1992 and 1993, birth rates rose steadily among Latinas

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both in California and across the nation. In 1991 alone, births to Latino teens nationwide rose 6% compared to less than 1% for other ethnic groups, according to the U.S. Public Health Service.

To be sure, teen-age pregnancy is commonplace among all ethnicities in the United States; two-thirds of all babies born to adolescents nationwide are white.

But the disproportionately high number of births to Latino teens in California in 1993 -- 60% of all adolescent births, enough to require an additional 1,277 kindergarten classes per year -- has handed Gov. Pete Wilson and his colleagues in government a dilemma.

"Why should birth rates among Hispanics be going up? We all want to answer that question," says Kim Connor, a statistician with the California Legislature's Senate Office of Research who has analyzed teen pregnancy data. "We hear about the cultural reasons, such as a tradition among some Hispanic groups to have children at younger ages. I don't mean to dismiss that, but the data we have may point us in another direction. We have to look at the facts."

A close look at statistics and survey data show that four factors, in particular, seem closely tied to births among Latino teens in California.

* Poverty: Latinos are more likely to be poor than any other ethnic group in California, according to the state Office of Finance. While teens of all income levels get pregnant, poor and low-income women are far more likely to give birth.

* Education: Latinos are more likely to drop out of school, another factor that often precedes teen-age pregnancy. According to the state Department of Education, 7.8% of Latino adolescents in the 10th through 12th grades were dropouts in the 1992-93 school year, the highest percentage of any other ethnic group.

* Culture: Births to non-U.S. born women accounted for a staggering 66% of the increase in annual teen births in California between 1985-1993, the vast majority being Mexican-born, according to the state Department of Health Services. In 1993, 38% of the state's teen-age mothers were foreign-born. Recent immigrants to the state are more likely to be poor, according to state analyses, and may adhere to cultural traditions in Mexico and Latin America of bearing children at younger ages.

* Religion: Seventy percent of the Latino population in California is Catholic, according to the U.S. Catholic Conference's Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs in Washington. Catholic teachings prohibit sex before marriage as well as the use of contraception and abortion. While nationwide studies show that both Latinos and Catholic teens of all ethnicities are slightly less likely to have premarital sex compared to other ethnic and religious groups, those who do have sex are far less likely to use contraceptives or undergo abortion.

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At Women's and Children's Hospital at County-USC Medical Center, Maria Elena Sanchez pulls out sheets of statistics that tell a disturbing story in the center's adolescent pregnancy clinic.

Of 300 pregnant girls -- mostly Latinas age 17 and younger -- 80% had never used any form of birth control, says Sanchez, the program administrator. Sixty percent were school dropouts or had never enrolled in classes in this country. Half of the girls said they had been trying to get pregnant, and 60% of the 300 said their partners wanted them pregnant as well.

These teen-agers -- 81% who are foreign-born -- see little reason not to become parents, Sanchez says.

"In a typical American family, there is the expectation that the kids will be off to college, and parents feel pregnancy will interrupt a bright future," Sanchez says. "The expectation of the bright future for the girl in East L.A. is not the same. A 15-year-old from Mexico is not looking around at five or six colleges and wondering whether to be a

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computer engineer or a physician.

"These young women feel they have fewer options open to them. This is something they know they can do: Make a baby and have respect in the community that they are a woman now."

Indeed, poverty has been the major overlooked factor in teen-age childbearing.

"Middle-class girls get pregnant, they just don't have the baby. They have abortions," says Judith S. Musick, author of "Young, Poor and Pregnant" (Yale University Press, 1993) and the founder of the Ounce of Prevention Fund for pregnant and parenting teen-agers in Chicago.

"They say, 'If I have this kid I won't be able to go to college or do this or that.' They not only have the desire to do something else, they have the means. And they have the family to support them," she says. "For poor women, the mistakes of irresponsible adolescence are often with them for life."

About 42% of all children and adolescents nationwide are poor or low-income, according to a report from the Russell Sage Foundation in New York.

Studies of inner-city youths show that many believe they have "something to gain" by becoming parents, says University of Pennsylvania researcher Elijah Anderson.

For a man, the pregnancy often serves to reinforce his masculinity when there is little else in his life to take pride in, says Anderson in the 1994 report "Sexuality, Poverty and the Inner City," from the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation.

Jake Zaragoza, 18, a recent graduate from a continuation high school in Reseda, hates it when his friends pity him because his girlfriend is pregnant. The couple's baby is due in September. "They say, 'Damn, I feel sorry for you, man,' " says Zaragoza, a thin young man with a long ponytail and a serious demeanor. "I said, 'Don't feel sorry for me.' They'll all be the same way two years from now.

"I feel more like a man, to be honest. I say to them, what have they got? School? I can handle this. Maybe they can't. Even my girlfriend's mom is surprised that I stuck around."

For a girl, Anderson and others have found, a pregnancy may be desired as a means to secure a husband or a ticket out of her parents' house via a welfare check. If neither of those scenarios pans out, the baby is a nice "consolation prize," Anderson says.

The desire to love someone is a strong component of teen pregnancy among poor and disadvantaged youths.

"The girls here haven't had someone be a parent to them," says Stephen Altbaum, the director of residential care at St. Anne's. "They have a child thinking that the child will be the parent. They often refer to the baby as 'my mommy' or 'my daddy.' And this cycle goes on and on because no one intervenes."

Darlene, a 16-year-old Latina, says her 5-month-old daughter is the only good thing that has ever happened to her. She grew up in Pico Rivera with a mother who "ignored her" and her several siblings.

Darlene, whose last name cannot be revealed because she is in protective custody, moved out of the house at 14 to live with her 24-year-old boyfriend. After becoming involved in a gang, she was placed in a juvenile hall. She found out then, at age 15, that she was pregnant. But when she went searching for her boyfriend to share the news, she discovered that he had been sent to prison for 26 years for carjacking and robbery.

It all looked pretty hopeless to Darlene until the baby was born.

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"At that point in my life, I had nothing," she says in a soft voice. "I have no one in my family. To be honest, my daughter saved my life. She got me back in school. She motivated me to get a job. I'm sober now. If I hadn't kept her, I wouldn't have changed. I'm so happy that my life has changed now."

She works part time in a department store and hopes to graduate from high school next year and live with a grandmother.

For other desperate teens, a baby is simply a means of escape.

Lucy Holguin, 19, gave birth to a daughter at age 16 and named her Baby for lack of inspiration. When Baby was 2, she was relinquished to the custody of Holguin's father in Mexico because Holguin was dealing drugs with her daughter in tow. Heavily addicted to rock cocaine, Holguin got pregnant again last year while living at home with her mother in Huntington Park. But she hated living at home and took shelter on the streets. Eventually, she was placed in a drug treatment program for pregnant women.

Holguin gave birth in April and says her goal now is to be the best mother she can be. But she speaks point-blank about the "benefits" of motherhood.

"I hate kids. I was going to get an abortion; I even had an appointment . . . (but) I wanted the welfare money to get out of the house. Since my sister was on welfare, I knew I could do it too. Here in Huntington Park, when a girl gets pregnant, she gets her own apartment and gets out of the house. That was the only reason I had her," she says, her face drawn and her eyes glistening.

At Holguin's feet, baby Julissa -- who appears to be healthy -- snoozes in a pink blanket, her tiny, clenched fists drawn up against her cheeks.

"Once she came out it was different," Holguin says. "But I still didn't care if she was taken from me."

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For some Latinas, a tradition of young motherhood is simply difficult to resist. According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute 1994 report "Sex and America's Teen-agers," Latino teens who become pregnant are more likely than blacks or whites to intend to get pregnant, or not care.

"Many of the teens come from families where teen motherhood is very natural," says Alicia Thomas, executive director of the East Valley Community Health Center, which serves many Latino adolescents in West Covina and Pomona. "Their mothers may have been teens when they had them; their grandmothers too."

Gloria, 19, from Los Angeles, seemed to be destined to be the first member of her large immigrant family to forsake teen-age childbearing and earn a college degree when she became pregnant shortly after enrolling in community college. A solid B student with a good part-time job, Gloria says she'll postpone college for a while.

"I don't think of this as a crisis. It's going to set me back a little, but I know I can still do it," she says of her dream of completing college.

Gloria says she did not intend to become pregnant, but she risked not using contraceptives because she was afraid her parents would discover them. Her boyfriend, who took off for Mexico and hasn't been heard from since, resisted using condoms.

"Many Latinas come from homes where the parents are stricter about sexual activity," Sanchez says. "Maybe having birth control pills lying around is less acceptable. Sex is not an open topic in many Hispanic homes. It comes from the thinking, 'If they know too much, they'll do too much.' "

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The taboo against discussing sex and pregnancy may be especially strong in Catholic homes. In one study of poor white girls in a largely Catholic suburb of Philadelphia, researcher Patricia Lynn Stern of the University of Pennsylvania found many girls who believed that using contraception made the sin of sex worse because it was premeditated.

Among Catholics, "the double dilemma of having premarital sex and using contraception can be managed in part by having unprotected sex," Stern said in the Kaiser report.

Moreover, pregnant Latino teens are least likely to seek abortions, according to several surveys. While the number of teen births in California skyrocketed in the last 12 years, abortions have remained constant.

"A lot of times there is that very strong religious, Catholic overtone with Latino families" regarding decisions on reproduction, says Randall Ramirez, an expert on teen pregnancy with the March of Dimes' Health Professional Advisory Council. "There is a strong prohibition against abortion. And . . . we know that (the girl's mother's) influence on obtaining abortion or relinquishment for adoption is still highly influential in Latino groups."

There is no evidence that Latino parents are any less crushed when their teen-agers become pregnant, knowing the hardships that await them. But even against the negative repercussions of teen pregnancy, newborn Latino babies are often celebrated. Part of that sentiment may lie in the belief, deeply rooted in Latino culture, that mothering is what women do best, Sanchez says.

"It's an expectation that this is what a woman does: She stays home and has children."

The Series at a Glance

Today: High pregnancy rates among Latinas.

Monday: The invisible fathers.

Tuesday: America's family planning problem.

Wednesday: The failure of sex education.

Decline and Rise in Pregnancy Rates

Over the last two decades, the pregnancy rate among sexually active teen-agers (15-19 years) has declined due to better use of contraceptives, from 254 pregnancies per 1,000 teens in 1972 to 207 pregnancies per 1,000 in 1990, according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute.

However, since more adolescents are having intercourse, the pregnancy rate among all teen-age women has increased from 95 pe 1,000 in 1972 to 117 per 1,000 in 1990.

Births to Teen-Agers

Percentage of births to teen-agers by race/ethnicity in California.*

Asian and other

1980: 5%

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1985: 6%

1990: 6%

1993: 6%

African American

1980: 15%

1985: 15%

1990: 12%

1993: 11%

White

1980: 40%

1985: 36%

1990: 28%

1993: 23%

Latino

1980: 40%

1985: 43%

1990: 54%

1993: 60%

* Births to women age 19 years and younger

Sources: Department of Health Services, Vital Statistics Section 1995, Alan Guttmacher Institute 1994, Senate Office of Research

Increased Birth Rates

Birth rates per 1,000 Latino and African American teen-agers age 15-19 years grew at a significantly higher rate than for teens overall during the last 10 years.

Birth rates	1983	1993	Change
Latino	85.1	123.2	+44.8%
African American	75.0	97.9	+30.5
White	35.6	36.2	+1.7
Asian, other	30.3	30.6	+1.0

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GRAPHIC: Photo, COLOR, Lucy Holguin, 19, had her first child at age 16 and named her Baby for lack of inspiration. She lost custody of the girl because of a rock cocaine addiction. Since the birth of her second daughter, Julissa, this past April, she has gotten sober and says her goal now is to be the best mother she can be. ; Photo, Lucy Holguin and Julissa, left; Anissia Philpot and Madelaine, 8 months, and Luana Ybarra with Marcos, 2, at March of Dimes news conference. IRIS SCHNEIDER / Los Angeles Times; Chart, Decline and Rise in Pregnancy Rates, Los Angeles Times ; Chart, Births to Teen-Agers, Los Angeles Times ; Table, Increased Birth Rates, Los Angeles Times

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