

Born: Mothers too soon

BORN

PART 2: Prenatal care, low birth weights

PART 3: Maternal health care: An analysis

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Samantha Disley's daughter is 13 months old. Kelly Panama has a 16-month-old daughter and is expecting her second child in January. Both Newmarket women, now 20, were single teenagers when they gave birth.

Participants at Rose of Sharon Services for Young Mothers, both women are dotting, albeit inexperienced moms, enthralled with motherhood and unhindered by hindsight.

Both describe their upbringing as middle class.

While Ms Disley and Ms Panama are not wholly representative of the thesis that rates of teen moms are highest where incomes and educational achievements are low and poverty is high, they were part of Born, a groundbreaking Metroland investigation of 535,000 Ontario birth records.

The comprehensive analysis of four years of maternal health data also shows low rates of teen mothers are closely tied to higher incomes, higher levels of educational achievement and lower poverty levels.

The Metroland analysis identified communities across the province where, between 2006 and 2010, as many as 40 per cent of births were to teen mothers. Meanwhile, communities such as Vaughan, Markham, Richmond Hill, Oakville and Caledon had teen mother rates below 1 per cent.

Specifically, in 2008, the teen pregnancy rate in York Region was 9.8 per 1,000 females 15 to 19 years old, according to a regional community and health services report released last year.

The teen pregnancy rate in Ontario was 24.5 per 1,000 females. In all years, the York Region teen pregnancy rates were significantly lower than the Ontario rates.

In fact, our teen pregnancy rate has been decreasing over time.

The total number of teen pregnancies in York Region was 365 in 2008 and 437 in 2003.

The findings, derived from data collected by Ontario's Better Outcomes Registry and Network, have implications for the Ministry of Health, public health units and social pro-



STAFF PHOTO/SUSIE KOCKERSCHIEDT

Teenage mothers Samantha Disley with Emma (left) and Kelly Panama with Shelby spend time at Rose of Sharon in Newmarket.

grams operated by municipalities province-wide, the Metroland report stated.

Additionally, the cyclical character of teen motherhood could have implications for future generations.

"The reality is that children born to teenage moms don't tend to do as well and they tend to end up being teenage moms themselves," said Dr. Chris Mackie, a Hamilton associate medical officer of health.

"Often they aren't able to be economically successful and have the supports they need for the child to grow up and be healthy. It's really not a great start in life."

Rose of Sharon executive director Anna Pavan understands the empirical evidence, but wants people to understand the regional reality.

"What's interesting for us, through the statistics we collect, is the spectrum of families we serve," she said. "We have women from low income backgrounds and those from affluent families with support."

The non-profit organization, providing assistance and educational services to pregnant and parenting young women younger than 25 across York Region, graduates 300 participants annually. Of its 284 current clients, more than one-third are from Newmarket and Aurora. Georgina residents total

65, Markham 20, Vaughan 22 and Richmond Hill 23. Of the total, 89 are teenage moms.

Comments such as those by Dr. Mackie and provincial statistics can create undeserved perceptions, Ms Pavan said.

"If you label (teenage moms) and hear it enough, it'll happen," she said. "If you offer support and focus on strength-based paradigms, then you'll have successful outcomes."

The connection between teen motherhood and poverty is particularly pronounced in Ontario's north end and native communities, where the proportion of mothers that are teens is as much as 11 times higher than the provincial average of 3.7 per cent, the Metroland study noted.

In those communities, the median household income is typically a fraction of the Ontario average of \$60,455, few adults finish high school and unemployment rates are as much as five times the provincial average of 6.4 per cent, according to data from the 2006 Statistics Canada census.

York Region shouldn't be painted with that analytical brush, Rose of Sharon program director Kelley Oswin said. Dispelling stereotypes is a constant challenge for the agency and those it serves, she said.

Poverty presents more challenges for

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teenage mothers, Ms Oswin said.

And while the agency doesn't promote teen parenthood, given supports, care and understanding, it can be positive.

"When you're marginalized, having a child creates change," she said. "It gives you someone who relies on you and can motivate you to reach goals. It gives you the status of being an adult, a parent and the opportunity to move out of a socioeconomic level."

Motherhood for the young women at the Newmarket agency certainly detoured, but didn't derail their lives, Ms Disley and Ms Panama said.

Their pregnancies weren't planned. Both were shocked when it was confirmed. Then excited. Ms Disley quit high school and lives with her baby's father and parents. Ms Panama is estranged from her first child's dad and lives with her new baby's father.

Both women are two credits away from earning a high school equivalency diploma through the agency.

The study's hypothesis suggests intergenerational links among teenaged moms who begat the same. That's not the case with Ms Disley and Ms Panama.

Their experience and those they've heard anecdotally suggest teenaged moms are dedicated to responsible parenting, welcome supports and discover the upsides outweigh the down.

"You do lose out on a big chunk of your teen life," Ms Disley said. "It's a time when you should be finding who you are. But, you just put that on hold."

Many peers don't want to hang out with friends with kids, said Ms Panama, who plans to wed in 2012.

"I would say to other teens to live life now, finish school and have your priorities in order, she said.

Ms Disley's advice is to plan.

"Being a parent is hard," she said. "If you're having sex, use protection. Don't hurry to grow up."

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