



Teen Pregnancy Losing Stigma: Report

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CityNews.ca Staff

It used to be that a teenager getting pregnant would cause a scandal and be hidden from public view. The baby would often be put up for adoption or raised surreptitiously by the mother of the affected teen's daughter.

That was then. But like most things from the Leave It To Beaver 50s, times have changed. And what was once considered a major vice is now an acceptable trend. The evidence: a disturbing increase in the number of teen pregnancies in both the U.S. and the U.K., the first such rise in more than a decade.

Alicia Edwards is just 19 and is expecting in April. She doesn't plan to move in with her boyfriend - the father - until both have finished high school. But she's keeping her baby. And she's not alone. "I do have a couple of friends who have just had babies within the last couple of months," she points out.

What's behind this sudden baby boom? Cathy Gulli, who's written a major cover piece for the new Maclean's Magazine, believes part of the acceptance is due to the growing influence of Hollywood celebrities.

"Unplanned pregnancy is now a pop-culture staple," she writes in her article. "Movies like *Knocked Up* and *Waitress*, and last season of *Degrassi: The Next Generation* ended with Emma realizing she might be pregnant. "The media is awash in it," says David Landry, senior research associate at the Guttmacher Institute in New York, a non-profit organization focused on sexual and reproductive health. Even *Grey's Anatomy* had a teen pregnancy storyline last year, and just last week so did *Gossip Girl*.

"As an idea, teen pregnancy is more socially accepted," says Andrea O'Reilly, a women's studies professor at York University in Toronto, and director of the Association for Research on Mothering. Evidence of a less outraged reaction was best summarized by Hollywood's most sought-after paparazzi muse, Lindsay Lohan: "Why does everyone think it's such a big deal?" she replied when asked what she thought of Jamie Lynn's situation.

Then came the statistical data confirming that something - something real - was happening: in 2006, for the first time in 15 years, the teen birth rate in America actually increased, said a report by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), a branch of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. Meanwhile, in England, the number of pregnancies among females under age 18 also rose in 2005 - to the highest point since 1998, according to the U.K.'s Department for Children, Schools and Families.

So far, the numbers aren't rising in Canada, but our statistics are a couple of years old - from 2005. Some experts say that when data does become available, we'll see the same rise as our neighbours. "Overall trends for these three countries tend to mirror each other," says Alex McKay, research coordinator of the Sex Information and Education Council of Canada. "If we're seeing an increase in the teen birth rate in the U.S. and the U.K.," he continues, "it is quite likely we may see the same thing occur in Canada."

Excerpt courtesy: Maclean's Magazine

"No one's suggesting that teens are running out to get pregnant because Nicole Richie got pregnant," Gulli admits. "But it is something that we consume and however nuanced, it does have an impact on us."

And the fact that there's more societal support than in the old days also plays a role.

But Alicia disagrees that what she sees on TV has any influence on her decision. "I don't think because Jamie-Lynn Spears is having a baby, that all girls are going to run out and have babies."