

Study reveals inequalities for Minnesota's girls

By Marie Nitke

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Out of 86 counties in Minnesota, Itasca County has the second-largest gap between a woman's income and a man's. On average, women in Itasca County earn about \$22,500 a year, while men earn about \$37,000. This nearly \$15,000 difference is second in the state only to St. Louis County.

This is one of the most striking pieces of information regarding Itasca County to come out of a new research study called "The Status of Girls in Minnesota," conducted by the Women's Foundation of Minnesota and the national Institute for Women's Policy Research.

Officials from the Women's Foundation of Minnesota, including President and CEO, Lee Roper-Batker, and Vice President of Community Philanthropy and Programs, Carol McGee Johnson, visited Grand Rapids last week to present the findings of the study and to hold a discussion with local community, business and political leaders. It was the last of 17 such discussions in communities across the state. The Foundation plans to use information gathered at these meetings to help shape its future public policy priorities and focus.

"This is research - with action," said McGee Johnson. "Its purpose is to improve the lives of women and girls."

The study gathered information that may be shocking to some people and disappointing to others. To still others, it confirms what they had already believed to be true - that girls in Minnesota face some significant challenges and pressures that are unique to their gender, and that poverty and race are major roadblocks on a girl's path to success.

Just to skim the surface, the study found that girls are at a higher risk of abuse than boys,

suffer from lower self-esteem and body image, and are less college-ready. As they enter adulthood, they face a greater likelihood of poverty than men, do not make as much money, are less likely to hold leadership positions, and are expected to do a disproportionate share of caretaking within their families. Such disparities are usually more severe for girls and women of color than for white girls.

So what were some of the study's key findings, more specifically?

First some (sort of) good news: Less teenage girls are getting pregnant now than at any other time in recent history. The Minnesota teen pregnancy rate is low compared to other states, and has been gradually decreasing over the last 30 years or so, thanks in large part to an increased use of contraceptives.

That's the silver lining. The cloud here is that pregnancy rates

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vary substantially by race and ethnicity. Birth rates in the state have actually risen for Hispanic and American Indian girls. Hispanics have the highest teen pregnancy rate, with about 133 out of every 1,000 girls (ages 15 to 19) getting pregnant. Caucasian girls have the lowest pregnancy rate, at about 28 out of every 1,000 girls.

During the Women's Foundation's presentation, participants pointed out some more bad news: More and more younger teens, ages 13-15, in communities of greater Minnesota, in particular, seem to be getting pregnant. They said this seems to be especially true for white and American Indian girls, and there is evidence of this in the Grand Rapids area.

The (mostly) bad news? Unfortunately, there's a lot of it, although some positive findings are mixed in.

First, the study has shown that

girls have a lower self-esteem than boys, and are less satisfied with their bodies. This is true at every grade level, and within every racial and ethnic group. Low self-esteem can lead to unhealthy and dangerous behaviors like binge drinking, smoking, drug abuse, eating disorders, depression and suicide. Among all teenagers, girls - especially American Indian girls - are at the highest risk of having suicidal thoughts or of making suicide attempts.

Next, girls are substantially underperforming their male counterparts on standardized tests. Despite spending more time studying than boys, getting better grades in school, having a more positive outlook on school and holding higher aspirations for their educational futures -- all good news for girls -- they are considered less college-ready than boys due to their lagging test scores in math and science. While 36 percent of boys meet the college readiness benchmarks of the tests, just 28 percent of girls do. Discussion at the presentation revealed that this could be due to the tests being male-biased somehow, and/or to the fact that girls spend much more time on household chores and caring for siblings.

Also, girls are faced with more risks to their safety and security than boys. The number of girls reporting physical and sexual abuse is remarkably high: 1 in 4 American Indian girls, 1 in 5 African American, Hispanic and Asian American girls and 1 in 9 white girls. In isolated areas like Itasca County, experts say the numbers are probably even higher.

And while girls are less likely than boys to drink heavily, they are more likely to drink or use drugs to relax, to escape their problems, or because they feel sad, lonely or angry. About eight percent of girls in Itasca County reported using some type of drug in the past 12 months. Only three other counties



in the state reported a higher percentage than that.

In terms of economic security, female-headed families and families from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups appear to be getting the shorter end of the stick. According to McGee Johnson, such families are at a higher risk of living below the poverty line than others, and while boys and girls have similar poverty rates in childhood, girls are more likely to remain poor into adulthood. Women in greater Minnesota -- including Itasca County -- are at a greater risk of being poor than women in the Twin Cities metro area.

And finally, girls and youth of color are at a much higher risk of homelessness than boys and white youth. In addition, many homeless girls under the age of 17 end up trading sex for shelter, food, clothing or other basic needs. Girls in Minnesota outnumber boys in arrests for just one offense -- prostitution.

"The Status of Girls in Minnesota" paints an often grim picture for girls, but the 'up side' is that the results of this study are likely to spark positive change. From grassroots task force efforts to policy changes at the legislature, the Women's Foundation -- with the help of community leaders from communities across the state -- has come up with some possible solutions to the inequalities identified in the research. To address low body image, for example, the Foundation recommends that Minneso-

ta's public school system include information about eating disorders in its health curricula.

As the only grant-making organization in the state dedicated exclusively to equality for women and girls, the Women's Foundation will also use this study to help determine where future grant awards would be most needed or appropriate. The Women's Foundation of Minnesota is a non-profit organization founded in 1983, and is the oldest and second largest statewide women's foundation in the nation.

"The foundations of women's economic stability and independence, academic and career opportunity, and physical and emotional well-being are established in childhood and adolescence," reads a line in a printed overview of the study. "A healthy girl who believes in herself, is confident in her talents and abilities, and respects herself and her body will be ready to pursue her dreams and succeed in her adult life... As such, promoting a positive future for girls now is crucial to the long-term social and economic health of Minnesota communities."

"The Status of Girls in Minnesota" is one of the first reports of its kind in the nation. The research draws on data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the Minnesota Student Survey Interagency Team, the Minnesota Department of Health, the Minnesota Department of Education and other sources.

To read a copy of the overview, or the full report, visit www.wfmn.org.