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Youth

New research on girls from the Women's Foundation of Minnesota shows girls have promise but face challenges

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Sandra Vargas

The Women's Foundation of Minnesota in partnership with the Institute for Women's Policy Research (Washington D.C.) recently released research on the status of girls in Minnesota.

"The research shows that despite the fact that girls work hard inside and outside of the home, get good grades and hold high aspirations for their futures, they are confronted with the challenges of poverty, racism, sexism, physical and sexual abuse, and low self esteem," said Lee Roper-Batker, president and CEO of the Women's

Foundation of Minnesota.

According to Roper-Batker, huge disparities between the social, economic, and health conditions of girls of color and white girls in Minnesota threaten all our futures.

Socioeconomic status

The research shows that among poor families with children, female-headed families make up the largest share for every racial or ethnic group except Asian Americans. Among poor African American families with children, 71.5 percent are female-headed; among poor American Indian families 67.2 percent are female-headed; and among poor white families with children 59.5 percent are female-headed.

Poverty among female-headed families of color foretells an ominous future for girls of color in the state, in which, without new interventions, many are likely to experience a life of low earning, high poverty, and sole child rearing responsibility.

Reproductive and mental health

Teen birth rates in Minnesota are drastically higher for girls of color than for white girls. Between 2001 and 2005, Hispanic girls aged 15 to 19 had 111 live births per 1,000, while American Indian girls had 97 live births and white girls had just over 20.

On the whole, even though girls are high achievers by a number of measures – getting better grades than boys, doing more chores around the house, helping more to care for

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siblings, and working more for pay -- Minnesota's girls feel worse about themselves than boys do. Girls have lower levels of self-esteem than boys within every racial and ethnic group and at each grade level. Whereas boys' self esteem gradually increases from 6th to 9th to 12th grade, most girls' self esteem drops in the 9th grade.

Security, safety and risky behavior

American Indian, African American, and Hispanic girls report physical and sexual abuse at startling levels. Between one in four and one in five American Indian and African American girls reports physical abuse by a family member inside or outside of their home.

Hispanic girls are the most likely among girls to be sexually abused by a family member in their household or a non-family member.

Education and aspirations

The report also finds that while Minnesota's girls report higher grades than boys, spend more time studying, report a more positive outlook on school, and hold higher aspirations for their educational futures than boys, their lower standardized test scores may put their college opportunities at risk.

ACT data for Minnesota show girls only 28 percent of girls compared to 36 percent of boys meet the college readiness benchmarks in English, math, reading and science.

"We know the foundations of women's economic stability, academic and career opportunity, and physical and emotional well being are established in childhood and adolescence," said Roper-Batker. "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." The report provides recommendations on specific actions that can improve girls' futures.

Roper-Batker says we need to work harder for our girls.

2008 Road to Equality Tour

To deepen the understanding of the research and gather more information about girls around the state, the Women's Foundation will go on a 15-community Road to Equality Tour in the month of May. The information gathered from the tour will culminate in a new report of public policy recommendations related to women and girls in Minnesota.

Research Overview and complete report at www.wfmn.org.

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