

Girls at high risk:

How many wake-up calls do we need?

by Michele St. Martin and Amy Farrar

Girls in Minnesota, in particular girls of color, are at higher risk than ever to engage in risky behaviors such as using drugs and having unprotected early sex, according to a new report released by the Women's Foundation of Minnesota (WFM) and the Institute for Women's Policy Research.

"You could call it a wake-up call except I think we've had this wake-up call before," said Molly Greenman, president and CEO of Family and Children's Service, who compared the report to "Mind the Gap," a 2005 study by the Brookings Institution for the Twin Cities-based Itasca Project, "[with an] overlay of gender on the disparities of race, class, and geography. If you're a poor person of color who lives in the city and you're female, you are at great risk of having a not-very-good life.

"It's like an alarm going off and we hit the snooze alarm. How many wake-up calls do we get before we actually do something?"

Listening to the village

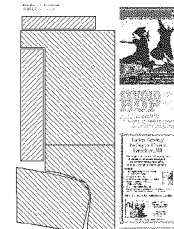
WFM President and CEO Lee Roper-Batker agreed on the need for change. "Research without action is pointless," she said. As a result, WFM has taken its show on the road, so to speak: Beginning with a May 5 stop in Marshall, the foundation is traveling to nine Minnesota communities in May and early June to discuss the report's findings. Interspersed between the geographical community meetings are metro-area meetings with members of the women of color, GLBT and disability communities. In July the foundation will meet with individual donors and institutional funders. "We see this road tour as a wake-up call and a call to action," she said.

Roper-Batker hopes the tour will lead to a "transformative agenda for women and girls" in Minnesota. At its conclusion, she said, the foundation will draft a new report based on findings from the tour, which will identify several public policy agendas to ensure that girls in Minnesota can reach their fullest potential. She hopes the reports will influence educators, health-care workers, business and faith leaders, people working in the criminal justice field, policymakers and others who impact the lives of Minnesota's girls.

Linda Keene, CEO of the Girl Scouts of Minnesota and Wisconsin River Valleys, agreed with Greenman about the study's findings. "I'm not really surprised. The results are consistent with some of our observations of challenges, particularly [those faced by] girls of color." She thinks that organizations serving girls need to work more closely together to make an impact. "We have to really attack the big issues [facing girls] in a more coordinated way. There are a lot of people concerned about issues—can we collaborate? Can we mobilize our resources to support girls better?" And Keene thinks engaging the communities themselves is crucial. Entry points she suggested include partnering with faith communities, immigrant-based community organizations and girls.

In talking about the current patchwork quilt of organizational services and programming, Keene said, "It's slicing and dicing—everyone wants to do their own things. I'd like to see us leverage the talent of all organizations. I'm less concerned about who gets the credit."

Key findings



The report draws a number of disturbing conclusions. Among them:

Violence and abuse have a major impact on girls' lives and futures.

According to the study, physical and sexual abuse rates among American Indian, African and Hispanic girls make them more vulnerable to risky behaviors such as smoking, drinking and unprotected sex, which compound the challenges they face.

- American Indian girls have the highest rates of being physically abused by a family member or nonfamily member (21 and 26 percent respectively) while Hispanic girls have the highest rates of being sexually abused by either a family member or nonfamily member (9 and 13 percent respectively).
- Teen birth rates among girls of color are also much higher than for white girls.

Between 2001 and 2005, white girls had 18 live births per 1,000 families while Hispanic girls had 111 live births per 1,000 families, and American Indian girls had 97 live births per 1,000 families.

A high percentage of poor families are headed by single women.

This exists across all racial and ethnic lines, with the exception of Asian Americans. Broken down by ethnicity, they represent about 72 percent of poor African American families with children, 67 percent of poor American Indian families with children, and nearly 60 percent of poor white families with children.

Hard work doesn't always pay off. The study found that that girls study more than boys, work more in the home doing chores and caring for younger children. They are also

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Molly Greenman



Lee Roper-Batker



Linda Keene

more likely than boys to work outside their homes for money. "Girls are working really hard," Roper-Batker said. "But our question is, are we working hard enough for them?" She said that families need to look at their expectations for their daughters compared to those they have for their sons, and why girls' hard work isn't translating into future success. "An interesting 'Ah ha' for me is that even though girls are earning better grades than boys, it isn't translating into college readiness," Roper-Batker said.

Despite recent publicity about boys struggling in school, test scores from the state's ACT tests reveal that only 28 percent of girls in Minnesota (compared to 36 percent of boys) meet the college readiness benchmarks in four key areas: reading, math, science and English, said Roper-Batker. Researchers don't know the reasons for this; she speculates that there may be some gender bias in the tests themselves, and that cultural/community expectations and/or girls' lower levels of self-esteem may somehow play into the lower scores.

"Girls have aspirations for the future, but if they're the first ones in their families to go to college, they may not know how to make that dream a reality," Roper-Batker said. She added that communities need to make sure there is enough programming and financing to help these girls, and low-income and single women with children need early and full daycare that they can afford.

You have to want to change

Greenman said that while she wouldn't fault the study or its recommendations, "I would guess a number of people are going to look at it [and say], OK, what is one more task force going to do? What is it going to take for the adults of our state to really come together and do things differently to ensure the success of all of our children?"

She said it's "frustrating" that rather than finding common ground to come together and move forward, "instead, we're pointing fingers ... there's not a lot of willingness to give up some things—maybe money, maybe closely held ideas. Whether you're liberal or conservative or regardless of what community [you represent], you have to be willing to move toward somebody else's ideas to make a difference."

In the current economic climate, recommendations that cost money are up against more resistance than ever. But it's not only programs that require a large outlay of money that face an uphill battle. An example is the nine-year battle waged at the Capitol by The Coalition for Responsible Sex Ed, a broadly based Minnesota alliance of 54 community organizations. Their goal is to pass legislation that would implement statewide standards for teaching what Lorie Alveshere, public policy director for the Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention and Parenting (MOAPPP), calls "evidence-based sex education," which is defined as information based on scientific research rather than ideological beliefs. According to recent studies, including one by the University of Minnesota, an overwhelming majority of parents support this type of curriculum.

Though the legislation has come tantalizingly close to passage, Alveshere and MOAPPP Executive Director Brigid Riley said that

the roadblock has been the governor's office. Last year, after the Minnesota Family Council (MFC) organized a phone calling campaign with recorded messages asking call recipients to call the governor's office, Gov. Pawlenty made it clear he would veto any legislation with language enabling such a curriculum.

Though the legislation passed both houses of the Legislature, MFC opposed it again, and it was stripped out of the K-12 education bill after Gov. Pawlenty made it clear he would veto the entire bill if it contained the provision.

"It's so frustrating that the governor is in thrall to the Minnesota Family Council," Riley said.

Looking ahead

Greenman hopes that what she refers to as "not the big dogs, but the community organizations that are doing the work" are part of WFM's focus on generating solutions to help girls. She also thinks it's important that the word "community" include "not only the people who have the power to do things, but those who might have some solutions but not the power to make it happen." She includes girls themselves in that equation. "Youth don't see the world the way we [adults] do," she pointed out. "Because of our experience, we do know things they don't—but we have to acknowledge their wisdom, because if we don't, the solutions we come up with won't be as effective."

When asked how she hopes to influence white male decision-makers at local and state levels, Roper-Batker responded, "We have to keep it ever present on their plate. A lot of men are good allies throughout the state." She said these men want their daughters to have the same opportunities as boys do.

"When we invest in girls and women, communities thrive, and a lot of men see that," Roper-Batker said. "Raising successful girls contributes to the state of Minnesota and affects the ability of our communities to thrive and of democracies to flourish."

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— Linda Keene

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Go to www.wfmn.org/StatusofGirlsResearch.shtml to read the entire "Status of Girls in Minnesota" or a summary of its findings.

For more information about the Institute for Women's Policy Research, which conducted the study, go to www.iwpr.org.

