Louisiana’s Teen Pregnancies: Causes & Solutions

Fifteen-year-old Shanterrica Piper was a freshman in high school when she gave birth to her daughter. But she is not the only one in her family. Her mom, grandmother and sister were all teen moms. She admits that she barely knew the father of her daughter, who is almost ten years older than her. Shanterrica mentions that she was angry, insecure and did not feel valuable when she was having unprotected sex (Collins). Although teen pregnancy rates in the United States have decreased in the past 100 years, Louisiana continues to rank high in teen pregnancies. As a state in the “bible belt,” the discussion of sex is often substituted with the abstinence-only method of teaching. Louisiana state law does not require sex education to be taught (“Sexual Health Education Louisiana”). However, if a Louisiana school decides to teach sex education, the curriculum must encourage abstinence between unmarried people (“Sexual Health Education Louisiana”). The abstinence-only method is not an effective way to teach teenagers about their sexual life and what follows. Teaching comprehensive sex education would be most effective at lowering the teen pregnancy rate in Louisiana. Along with comprehensive sex education, parents need to conversate with their children about sex, relationships and growing up. Teaching teenagers about making their own healthy choices, being in healthy relationships, understanding their sexual lives, bodies and their self-esteem will allow them to be more aware and knowledgeable, help decrease the number of teen pregnancies in Louisiana and protect adolescents.

Louisiana is plagued with sexual and reproductive problems that are contributing to their high teen pregnancy rate. The Louisiana government’s ignorance shows in their rankings. Louisiana’s birth rate is 27.5 births per 1,000 women. Pediatrician Scott Hamilton expresses that
this is due to the lack of conversation with the parents and a lack of sex education in schools (qtd. in “Teen Pregnancy Rates By State 2020”). In addition to their high birth rate, Louisiana has high STD rates. The CDC reported that Louisiana ranks first in rates of P&S syphilis and in 2015, about 1,129 adults and adolescents were diagnosed with HIV (“Louisiana–State Health Profile”). In addition, 24% of 9th graders and 35.7% of sophomores nationwide reported having sex in 2015 (“Louisiana–State Health Profile”). Teenagers are having sex and Louisiana’s avoidance towards the subject of sex is simply hurting their people. The lack of comprehensive sex education in schools has led many adolescents to experience preventable problems. Their ignorance towards comprehensive sex education can be linked to Louisiana’s conservative and religious beliefs. Places that are more conservative and religious are prone to higher rates of teens giving birth (“Teen Pregnancy Rates By State 2020”). Louisiana state leaders want their youth to learn abstinence-only because of their political and religious beliefs. However, this is not helping Louisiana teenagers that, surprise, are still having sex. Louisiana lawmakers continue to vote against bills requiring comprehensive sex education despite the fact that many teenagers will decide to have sex at some point in their adolescence. One study conducted by the Louisiana Public Health Institute and the Institute of Women and Ethnic Studies revealed that “84% of Louisiana parents believe that sex ed. is an important part of a school’s curriculum” and “74% believe that schools should be required to offer sex education” (Kueffner). The Louisiana government is not listening to the parents who want their children to be safe and aware. As important as it is for parents to talk to their children about sex, it is also important to consider that information about sex and STDs have drastically changed over the years and not every
parent knows enough to provide medically accurate advice. However, the Louisiana government thinks otherwise and therefore the ineffective abstinence-only method persists.

Decisions about sex education are made at the state and local level. Because state and local governments dictate sex education, they can also decide whether or not birth control and LGBTQ education is discussed, as well as how much stress is put on abstinence ("Sex Education Laws and State Attacks"). As aforementioned, if schools in Louisiana teach sex education, they can only teach the abstinence-only method ("Sexual Health Education Louisiana"). So, the only sex education that teenagers are receiving is to not have sex until marriage. That is absurd.

Planned Parenthood states that "Legislators have used a variety of tactics to limit access to sex education, promote conservative values, and anti-abortion messages through sex education, and push Planned Parenthood sex educators out of schools" ("Sexual Health Education Louisiana"). Louisiana teenagers are not receiving medically accurate and valuable information to have them informed about their changing bodies and their sexual beings. This avoidance is stripping teenagers of their right to knowledge and education about themselves. Louisiana has also prohibited organizations that provide abortions to teach sex education ("Sexual Health Education Louisiana"). Planned Parenthood is a reproductive healthcare organization that also provides abortions. It is a credible organization that has medically accurate information that could help and inform students, but they are banned from teaching in Louisiana schools. Providing students information about abortion does not mean they are going to get an abortion. It is about being aware of having a choice and reproductive rights. Despite the demand for comprehensive sex education, "HB499’s author, Representative Smith, has brought this bill four or five times now, and it has been defeated every time" even though the bill has good intentions for promoting
“comprehensive, age-appropriate and medically accurate” sex education to Louisiana adolescents (Kueffner). This ignorance is increasing risky behavior which is increasing teen pregnancy and STD rates in Louisiana. The Louisiana government is too concerned with maintaining a conservative state that it does not recognize the various ways they are harming their youth.

Limiting knowledge to curious teenagers is inefficient and it is hurting Louisiana teenagers. A University of Georgia study reports that, “abstinence-only education does not reduce teen pregnancy rates” and it “does not lead to abstinent behavior” (Toledo). In addition to this, they concluded that the abstinence-only method “may even contribute to the high teen pregnancy rates” (Toledo). Other studies reveal that “Americans who have only received AOUM [abstinence-only until marriage] education are statistically less likely to use condoms or be aware of STD testing and how to prevent pregnancy” (Murphy). Clearly, teaching abstinence-only is not effective and it is harming adolescents in Louisiana. Laura Lindberg, a researcher for the Guttmacher Institute, comments that abstinence-only sex education “‘withhold[s] important sexual health knowledge and provide medically inaccurate information that compromises young people’s healthy sexual development’” (Wind). The Guttmacher Institute also found that abstinence-only sex education fails “to provide pertinent sexual health information to sexually active adolescents and those who are already pregnant or parenting” (Wind). This is leading the Louisiana teenagers who are having sex or who will eventually have sex to be unaware of their sexual development, bodies and consent. These aspects are crucial to preventing sex crimes, STDs and teen pregnancies. In addition, many teen parents are left clueless on parenting and pregnancy which can be detrimental to them and their baby. Along with this, Louisiana’s sex education programs are not inclusive to LGBTQ adolescents. Eight states have limits as to what
can be taught about homosexuality. This avoidance increases stigmas and harassment of LGBTQ teenagers (Murphy). Studies found that states that taught inclusive comprehensive sex education had significantly lower rates of bullying towards LGBTQ youth (Murphy). With our society becoming more accepting towards LGBTQ people, it is important that we provide resources that will be important to their sexual and mental lives as well. Without inclusive education, Louisiana is placing their LGBTQ youth in danger of harassment, rape, mental illness and STDs. Limiting knowledge from the youth will not improve society in the future.

Raising a child is hard enough for two adults. Now, imagine two teenagers. There are many negative aspects and outcomes that surround a teen pregnancy. Teen mothers are “more likely to drop out of school and never return in order to raise a child” (“Teen Pregnancy Rates By State 2020”). Many young teen moms never finish their education because they need to constantly work and provide for their child. In addition, not every teenager has a family willing or able to support the mother and her baby. These factors can bring a huge financial burden and induce stress on the child, the family and the mother. Teen pregnancies are influential to the community as well because “a less educated population and unskilled workforce negatively affects the economy” which makes it difficult “for communities to break aggressive cycles of poverty and crime” (“How Adolescent Parenting Affects Children, Families, and Communities”). Children born to teen mothers living in poverty have lower chances of advancing socially and economically in society which will affect their lives and possibly produce the teen mom “cycle” that Shanterrica Piper’s family went through. Along with this, “children who are born to teen parents are less likely to ever reach their full potential” (“How Adolescent Parenting Affects Children, Families, and Communities”). This is because children born to
teenage parents, “are more likely to drop out of school, have more health problems, face unemployment and become teen parents themselves” (“How Adolescent Parenting Affects Children, Families, and Communities”). Because teen mothers are still young themselves, they may not have the maturity level to raise a child successfully. Many times, teen moms become the only parent because “too often, teen fathers abandon their parenting responsibilities due to fear and inability to adequately provide for their child, leaving the mother with even less social support and financial assistance” (“How Adolescent Parenting Affects Children, Families, and Communities”). Like Shanerrica, her father left when she was five years old and that affected her self-esteem (Collins). Without both parents in the child’s life, children could begin to feel resentment, guilt and depression. These feelings hurt the child and often lead to risky decisions. Again, the mother is left to support the child and without an education, financial difficulties arise. A child raising a child is not ideal. Teenage pregnancies are problematic, but they are highly preventable when teenagers are given the knowledge to be safe.

After examining Louisiana’s high teen pregnancy rate and it’s causes, it is vital that lawmakers consider the importance of comprehensive sex education. Comprehensive sex education would not only include a discussion about safe sex, but it would distinguish healthy and unhealthy relationships, STDs, violence, abuse and self-esteem. These topics are essential for an adolescent to understand in order to protect themselves. From an early age, children are familiar with technology and when they become curious about sex and their bodies, they can easily Google it. However, this can be very harmful. Not only does the internet have loads of false information, but it also has porn. Studies show that “porn sites [that] are harmful to mental and spiritual development” and because of this “sexual harassment also has spread in almost all
states and cities that make parents worry about the safety of their children” (Tirtawinata). Porn dramatizes sex which leads adolescents, typically boys, to have unrealistic expectations and violent tendencies towards women. Providing comprehensive sex education can get rid of these stigmas and “rape culture”. Abstinence-only education also belittles women because it “sends a slut-shaming message that disempowers women” by encouraging the idea that a woman’s worth and marriageability is based on her virginity (Murphy). If Louisiana schools utilized comprehensive sex education, they could work towards eliminating gender roles and stereotypes that plague our society. This may seem unrealistic but providing education about different genders and relationships could make people more open-minded and aware of different people in society. Without factual discussions about these topics, many adolescents will not understand or be discriminatory towards another group/person. A decrease in sex crimes, violence and teen pregnancy can all be an outcome if comprehensive sex education was taught in schools. Studies show that “non-judgmental, comprehensive sex education (CSE) has been linked to higher self-esteem and safer sexual practices among adolescents and young people” (Murphy). Puberty and the teenage years are not easy for teen girls and boys. Many teenagers experience depression, body issues and low self-esteem and do not understand it or know how to handle it. Low self-esteem is linked to girls being pressured into unprotected sex (Brown). Self-esteem is crucial to a teenager, especially teenage girls. Comprehensive sex education would not only help adolescent girls but protect them in a way that abstinence-only teachings do not. The Dutch education system starts sex education early and it is age appropriate. Sex education in their schools must “promote sexual diversity and assertiveness” (Murphy). The Netherlands have very low teen pregnancy rates and their system does not “led Dutch teenagers to start having sex any
earlier than American or European teenagers from other countries” (Murphy). Comprehensive
sex education works. The positives of comprehensive sex education refute the negative beliefs
that Louisiana lawmakers hold.

Optimally, Louisiana lawmakers need to pass a bill that would bring comprehensive sex
education in their schools in order to reduce teen pregnancies. Realistically, lawmakers have
voted down multiple bills despite Louisiana parents vouching for approval. So, as Louisiana
parents keep trying to have comprehensive sex education required in schools, they must talk to
their children about sex, relationships and their bodies while keeping an open mind. Many
sources revealed that “parents are the most important influence on a teen's decisions about sex
and relationships” (“Talk to Your Kids about Sex”). Shanterrica mentions that she was unaware
about the variety of birth control before she got pregnant and that learning that in school would
have helped her spark the conversation at home (Collins). It is equally the parents and the
school’s job to teach their children about healthy choices, sex and the options. Both of these
aspects of a teenager’s life must work together. Avoiding the discussion of sex only heightens
potential teen pregnancies (“How Adolescent Parenting Affects Children, Families, and
Communities”). Parents are very influential in their adolescents' life. So are schools. If both
crucial aspects of a teenager’s life are there to support and inform, teenagers will be more
knowledgeable about themselves, their bodies and the surroundings. Although a lot of parents
are unsure about some topics, they can still provoke discussion about sex, STDs, preventing
pregnancy and self-esteem. Teenagers say that “it would be easier to make decisions about sex if
they could talk openly and honestly with their parents” (“Talk to Your Kids about Sex”). To get
to the point where adolescents and their parents are having open conversations about sex, parents
must take initiative. Without comprehensive conversations about sex and relationships, parents are putting their teenager(s) at risk. To ease into the conversation, parents must use these three tips: “ask questions and listen rather than simply sharing information”, “foster closeness with your teen” and lastly, “don’t preach abstinence-only and forgo sharing other relevant information” (Carter). These three tips are important to developing a healthy and open relationship with the parent and their teenager. These honest and open talks will help teenagers make healthier decisions and be more involved in their family life.

Sex education is essential for every person. Louisiana’s lawmakers do not understand this. Not only will comprehensive sex education lower teen pregnancy rates in Louisiana, it will allow adolescents to understand their bodies, establish healthy habits, have healthy relationships, improve their self-esteem and protect them from engaging in risky behavior. Many states are suffering from high teen pregnancy rates. If Louisiana implements comprehensive sex education into their schools, they could make an impact nationwide. Obviously, everyone has been or will be a teenager. It is not an easy time. Growing up, I was fortunate enough to have open-minded, honest conversations with my parents about everything from sex and healthy relationships to my body and self-esteem. This was healthy for our relationship and allowed me to understand myself more. As much as parents are influential to their child’s life, not everyone has parents that they can be open and honest with like I had. Comprehensive sex education would allow adolescents exposure to different aspects of sex and life which could potentially spark conversation between them and their parents or a trusted adult. It would allow Americans to love their bodies and not be ashamed of sex. If sex is still shamed and forbidden, our society will get nowhere in breaking through gender roles, decreasing mental illness rates in teens and preventing teens from
pregnancy. Understandably, the South is more conservative and religious, so sex is often forbidden until marriage. But, study after study proves that teenagers are going to have sex regardless which method of sex education they receive. The abstinence-only method leads to unprotected sex which leads to teen pregnancies and STDs. Keeping generations of people away from the conversation of sex and relationships is not bettering society in anyway. So, Louisiana, you need to change. Teach comprehensive safe sex and everything that comes along with it. Inform your youth. Keep them aware.
Works Cited


