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Panel of youth mulls pregnancy, race, policy

By [Megan Arredondo](#)
Tribune Reporter
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Andrea Garza was home schooled. When it came to sex education, she was taught that sex was something that was "sacred and special."

She became pregnant at age 18. "It wasn't until then that I learned about comprehensive sex education," said Garza, now 22.

Garza was one of six young people who participated in a panel discussion about race and sexuality among youth at a conference Tuesday.

The first of its kind in the state, the conference had about 300 participants discussing racial disparities in reproductive health care, juvenile justice and child welfare. Dubbed "Race Matters," the event was held at the University of New Mexico.

Garza moved to Albuquerque as a teen and now works with the non-profit organization Young Women United, based in Southeast Albuquerque. She said young women of color, particularly Hispanics, are at a crossroad when it comes to pregnancy.

Abortion and contraception, she said, are often against the young girls' religious beliefs. Even if they wanted to pursue those options, they wouldn't know where to get information about it and they wouldn't have money, she added.

Sex isn't a topic among many Hispanic families, said 18-year-old Martin Martinez, another panelist in the sex education discussion.

"In a Mexican family, it's usually about pride - getting your education and being a responsible person in society," said Martinez. "When you have to tell your parents you got your girlfriend pregnant, you feel like you're letting them down."

Seven of his 10 male cousins are teen fathers, he said.

They didn't know about contraceptives or where to get them, Martinez said, nor did they think they needed to.

"When it comes to being sexually active, none of these things crossed their mind because they didn't think it could happen to them," he said.

A recent graduate of South Valley Academy, Martinez couldn't recall sex education during school.

BY THE NUMBERS

Racial disparities among young people of color include:

55 percent of children in New Mexico's foster care system are Hispanic. The state's population of Hispanic children is **43** percent.

Black children are **2** times more likely to enter foster care.

Two-thirds of detainees in the nation's juvenile detention system are children of color.

More than **two-thirds** of teens 13 to 19 diagnosed with AIDS are black and Hispanic.

The teen birth rate is **2 to 3** times higher for black, American Indian and Hispanic youth than white youth.

Source: Annie E. Casey Foundation

"It was taught, but it never went into detail," he said.

Martinez works with the South Valley Male Involvement Project educating youth about sex education.

Kay Monaco wanted to host an event that would make people aware of the racial disparities among youth. She's the executive director of New Mexico Voices for Children - a nonprofit organization that works to improve the health and well-being of New Mexico's children, families and communities.

That group sponsored Tuesday's conference with the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Monaco said the conference was "about policies, not individuals." Among other issues, the conference touched on:

Why Hispanics tend to serve more time for lesser offenses than whites in the juvenile detention system.

Why young Hispanic women have a higher birth rate than other racial groups.

Why more blacks are involved in the child welfare system and tend to spend more time in foster care than other racial groups.

"The purpose is to look closely and decide if we don't want to be racist and we really care about the children, how do we develop policies that take race out of the equation?" she said.

One policy that came up was "zero tolerance," which speakers said inadvertently targets races and often leads to racial profiling.

Donovan Abeita, an American Indian who attends RFK Charter School in Albuquerque, said he fell victim to this policy in middle school when he was caught with drug paraphernalia.

He was taken to juvenile detention and put on probation, while other non-American Indian students who committed the same offense either before or after his incident were only suspended.

"It's not right," said Abeita, 17.

Joby Wallace, who works with the city of Albuquerque's Office of African American Affairs, said more needs to be done to reach out to and educate communities.

For example, she said, Hobbs has a large black population without access to health care.

"A lot of them suffer from diabetes or drug problems," Wallace said. "There's also a high rate of pregnancy."

Wallace said no one is reaching out to the community and because of the black culture, the community won't seek out the information.

"We need to hold people accountable and get the community involved," she said.

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