

EDITORIAL

# Predators and teens

**A**DMITTEDLY, THE data may be incomplete, but the statistics provided by the Women's Centre Foundation of Jamaica is cause for concern even as we note the broad strides being made against teenage pregnancies in Jamaica.

Indeed, as was noted in the **Sunday Gleaner's** report of June 4, pregnancies among girls 15 years and under have declined sharply in recent years by over 60 per cent between 1999 and 2004, when the number of births to girls in that age group dropped from 709 to 278, according to data from the Statistical Institute of Jamaica (STATIN).

That is good. It suggests, as do other demographic data, that Jamaica is making headway in dealing with the problems facing adolescents and the broader, important matter of family life education and social responsibility.

But these numbers may mask a deeper, and growing problem. For according to the Women's Centre Foundation, in the 2005/2006 financial year, 58 thirteen-year-old girls accessed its services; that is, these are girls who became pregnant and went to the foundation's centres for help.

The gross number, it may be argued, is relatively small. But critically, the figure represents a 41 per cent hike in the number of pregnancies among thirteen-year-olds seen by the Women Centre Foundation over a four-year period.

It should be borne in mind, too, that these centres do not see all the thirteen-year-olds and preteen girls who become pregnant. So, it could be, as has been suggested by some social workers, that we are really seeing only the tip of the proverbial iceberg in this matter.

Of particular concern and worry is the claim that most of these children are being made pregnant by mature men, sexual predators, who care little about the consequences of their actions. Children of 13, in the context of our society, are, we insist, incapable of managing the consequences of sex and motherhood. No thirteen-year-old child should be made to bear such burdens.

We hear the calls of child-care activists, who worry about this problem, for stiffer penalties for men who have sex and otherwise abuse under-aged girls. There may be merit to tougher laws, but we remain unconvinced that this is the solution.

Indeed, we recall in the 1980s when the matter of incest and the sexual abuse of children was shrouded in the fog of silence, the minister then responsible for social matters for Jamaica raised the age of consent to 16.

That might have been an important initiative, but it unfortunately did not deal with the problem. For, like the previous laws, this, too, remained unpoliced, which, we believe is the problem.

There is legislation on the books and that is the scaffolding. If men who have sex with under-aged girls were really so certain that the law would take action against them and that there would be penalties, even those now on the books, they would likely consider the potential of their behaviour before acting.

But beyond legal penalties for such abuse there has to be societal sanctions. Instead of the code of silence that so often accompanies sexual abuse, there has to be outrage in the community and family – the precincts within which so much of this abuse takes place.

# PREDATORS!

Gareth Manning  
Gleaner Writer

- More 12 and 13-yr-olds being impregnated
- Women's advocates want tougher laws



**F**ACED WITH an increase in the number of pregnancies among pre-teen and early teenage girls, women's advocates are agitating for stronger laws to rein in carnal abusers.

The Women's Centre of Jamaica Foundation, with offices island-wide, reports seeing an average of 55 pregnant young girls per year, ages 12-13, over the last four years. In fact, one 11-year-old pregnant girl was seen by the agency during the period.

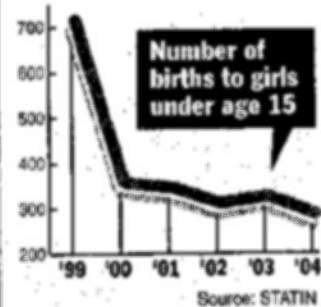
In general, the incidence of pregnancy among girls under the age of 15 is decreasing, moving from 709 babies born in 1999 to 278 births in 2004, according to the state-run Statistical Institute of Jamaica. But it is the rise in pregnancy among pre-teen and early teenage girls that has alarmed caregivers such as Beryl Weir, the executive director of the Women's Centre Foundation of Jamaica.

## WORRYING TREND

"It's a worrying trend because what it is saying to us is that these girls are really having sexual intercourse too early," says Mrs. Weir. She notes in some cases

## Under-15 pregnancies

Though there is a decrease in the total number of teen pregnancies, the Women's Centre has seen an increase in the number of 12 and 13 year old pregnant girls seeking medical care.



## Accessing women centres

Age	02/03	03/04	04/05	05/06
11	0	1	0	0
12	13	11	6	9
13	41	38	46	58

Source: Women's Centre of Jamaica

the girls have never menstruated because they become pregnant as soon as their ovaries mature.

The main perpetrators of carnal abuse, Mrs. Weir points out,

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# PREDATORS

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are males 20-23 years and sometimes older. She says there are very few fathers who are the same ages as young mothers. Data from researchers Hope Enterprises corroborate this find.

A 2001 survey by the group showed nearly 44 per cent of 10-19-year-olds reported being pregnant, but only 10 per cent boys the same age said they impregnated a girl. Mrs. Weir says the girls are usually coerced into sexual relationships with older men because of varying social and economic circumstances.

Three months ago at a primary school in the Corporate Area, a 12-year-old girl was discovered pregnant. She had been raped by a man living in her tenement yard.

But she never spoke about what happened to her because he threatened her. It was not until four months later that her grandmother realised that she was pregnant after her belly appeared to be protruding. The incident is still being investigated by the police.

Attorney-at-law Margaret Macaulay is disappointed that perpetrators of carnal abuse of young girls get off on easy prison sentences, noting, "The conviction rate is not as it ought to be."

## MISDEMEANOUR CHARGE

She discloses that while the Offences Against the Person Act stipulates that a man prosecuted for carnal abuse receives a sentence of life imprisonment, a man between the ages of 20-23 can be found guilty of only a misdemeanour, if he can prove he had reasonable cause to believe the child was over 16 years old the first time he is charged for the offence.

Mrs. Macaulay wants that



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offending provision in the law to be removed.

The attorney also believes justice for victims comes too slowly and painfully. She is particularly troubled by the fact that children have to be cross-examined under the current law. Under the Offences Against the Person Act, a victim must be cross-examined by lawyers representing the accused.

## SEXUAL PAST

"That the complainant can be questioned in such a way will upset anyone about their sexual conduct, their sexual experience, their sexual past. In fact, [what they do] is put sexual blame on the child rather than where it should fall," complains Macaulay. "Quite frankly, I don't see how a girl's sexual past is relevant to a particular incident of abuse that you are complaining about ..."

She says this factors into why many cases of carnal abuse go unreported and why many perpetrators are not prosecuted. Many victims get frustrated with the process and stop showing up for court.

Ms. Macaulay, therefore, wants the law to be amended. She says a cross examination should only be allowed if the judge admits it. But her pleas have landed on deaf ears. A bill,

which was tabled in 1995 to amend this section of the Offences Against the Person Act, has since been laid to rest in Parliament.

## HEALTH INSTITUTIONS NOT REPORTING CASES

However, while more young girls are getting pregnant, police say health institutions are not reporting these cases of carnal abuse. Some 95 per cent of these babies are born in health institutions, but police say only a few cases come from there.

This has been so despite the advent of the Child Care and Protection Act (2004) that mandates health facilities, school administrators and guardians to report incidents of sexual or physical abuse of children. Inspector Grace Gordon of the Centre for Investigation of Sexual Offences and Child Abuse (CISOCA) says only a few of their cases come from hospitals. She says the majority

of their reports come from walk-ins and police reports.

"We have cases from the institutions yes, but they are not many," she relates, adding that in rare instances, the police are sometimes called by the hospitals. There were 278 babies born to mothers under age 15 in 2004 when the act was promulgated, but Inspector Gordon says most of those cases were not reflected in the 409 carnal abuse cases reported to them that year.



MACAULAY

Chief executive officer of the Child Development Agency, Allison Anderson, says it is difficult to know how many cases are being reported because the children's register has not been put in place. Under the Child Care and Protection Act, a children's register and registry is to be established to lodge and keep information about offences against children.

"I guess when the registry is up and running, then we would know. Because right now I wouldn't be able to say yes or no (about whether hospitals are reporting carnal abuse). But I know some of the worst cases of abuse always come through hospitals," she says.

While that may be so, Mrs. Macaulay says there is no excuse for not reporting incidents of carnal abuse among young girls. She says the incidents can be reported to the child services office in the parish or the Family Court.

# Phillips wants all-out attack on carnal abuse

**Edmond Campbell  
Gareth Manning**

*Gleaner Writers*

THE ALARMING rise in the incidence of carnal abuse will have to be tackled from various fronts in order to eliminate this scourge from the Jamaican society.

This is the view of National Security Minister, Dr. Peter Phillips, who attributes the 40 per cent increase to date, when compared with last year, to a crisis in social relations.

Dr. Phillips told the media a day following his contribution to the sectoral debate in the House of Representatives on Tuesday that the problem could not be effectively addressed by the police alone.

Pointing to a wider social problem, Dr. Phillips said Jamaica has the largest number of children born out of an unstable family environment in the world. This, he said, was at the root of many of the problems that the country is currently facing, including carnal abuse.

"Many of the persons guilty of carnal abuse are persons who are in positions of trust within a household. That requires a solution which is not

strictly speaking a policing solution," he emphasised.

However, the National Security Minister said the police, as part of its community security initiative, would try and reach out to non-governmental organisations and other groups, including the Child Development Agency, to renew social relations at the level of family and schools.

## CONTRIBUTING TO PREGNANCIES

Recently, Dr. Grace Kelly, head of the behavioural science department at Northern Caribbean University, noted that incest was one of the factors contributing to the high number of pregnancies in the under-15 age group.

Between 1992-2004, the incidence of incest jumped by 62 per cent, according to police statistics.

"It's unfortunate that even some of the real fathers wait until the opportune time when their wives are not at home to make the children into their wives, and these are common events. It happens when the children do not know they are in danger of being pregnant," she told **The Sunday Gleaner**.



# 'Parents force girls to have sex with older men for cash'

Gareth Manning  
Gleaner Writer

**W**OMEN'S ADVOCATES are concerned that early and preteen girls are being forced into sexual relationships with older men by their parents.

Executive director of the Women's Centre Foundation of Jamaica, Beryl Weir, says many girls are coerced into having sexual intercourse with older men because they come from poor families headed by a single mother who is marginally employed.

"What is more worrying is the trend where more parents are allowing their daughters to have relationships with older men because the older man has money," she says. She says sometimes girls as young as 13 and 12 are encouraged to enter into these relationships so their basic needs, like schooling, can be funded.

Behavioural specialist and head of the department of behavioural sciences at Northern Caribbean University, Dr. Grace Kelly, acknowledges this.

"If a child is in need they supply the need and in return they want something from the child," she says. And this payment is usually in the form of sexual intercourse.

## ECONOMIC DEPRIVATIONS

Police Inspector Grace Gordon of Centre for the Investigation of Sexual Offences Carnal Abuse (CISOCA) confirms this too. She says while no formal study has been done there are cases, mostly in inner-city communities, where girls are forced into relationships because of their economic deprivations. She says sometimes the mothers of these girls give their children over to inner-city dons in return for economic support. But she says sometimes the parents are forced to comply with the don's request or they are threatened with violence. When



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one known girl did not comply, she explains, she was beaten and raped by gang members.

But Mrs. Weir explains that the perpetrators are not always that unfamiliar to the victim. Often, they live in the same household as the child or are close to the family.

Thirteen-year-old Beverley\* from an inner-city community in Kingston was one such victim. Her mother's boyfriend, who visited the house regularly, raped her and she became pregnant. She told police that a stranger had raped her because her poor mother was not willing to have the family's purveyor impris-

oned. For years she hid the truth until one day he tried to rape her nine-year-old sister. Beverley stabbed him.

Dr. Kelly says incest is one of the contributing factors to the high number of pregnancies in the under 15-age group. She says incest tends to be rampant in households where there is extended family, but there are still many cases where biological fathers impregnate their daughters:

"It's unfortunate that even some of the real fathers wait till the opportune time when their wives are not at home to make the children into their wives and these are common events. It hap-

*'Yes some of them just have their first period, their periods are just settling out, they are just becoming aware of their sexuality and this is the vulnerable age where they need guidance.'*

pens when the children do not know they are in danger of being pregnant," she says.

Incest is a rising crime in Jamaica. Between 1992 and 2004, the data jumped up by 62 per cent according to police statistics.

Mrs. Weir says many of the cases that come to the Women's Centre are hushed. Most times they do not discover that some pregnancies were caused from incest until several years after the girls have moved on with their lives.

"Many times they say they were raped by an unknown person. We'll have our suspicions, but we can't go on suspicion," she says.

Sex with older men put many of these young girls at high risk of contracting sexual transmitted infections, Dr. Kelly explains. The 2004 National HIV/STI Prevention and Control Programme Epidemic Report supports this. The report noted that adolescent females between 10 and 19 were three times more at risk than boys the same age.

## SOCIAL FACTORS

"This is as a result of social factors where by young girls are having sexual relations with HIV infected older men. On average 50 per cent of young women reported that their sexual partner [was] five to 10 years older than them," the report stated. The 2005 Epidemic Report adds that 15 of every 1,000 pregnant women were HIV positive.

Dr. Kelly says many girls are put at risk because some men still

believe virgins can cure their sexual infections. "It's unfortunate but it still exists," Dr. Kelly says. She adds that when some men discover they are HIV positive also, they avenge themselves by having as much sexual intercourse with as many people as they can. Many of their victims end up being vulnerable young girls.

Mrs. Weir agrees, but she says what puts many girls at risk is the fact that they are not able to negotiate condom use. She says this is usually because adult males coerce them into sex. In their 2006 report on the State of the World's Children, UNICEF also identifies this. The report states that 20 per cent of teenage girls are forced into early sex.

## RESPONSIBLE SEX SKILLS

Mrs. Weir says limited access to information and responsible sex skills are also adding to the rise in infections among young girls. She says while all clinics offer information, adolescents are sometimes shunned because health servants are judgemental.

She says there are still some guidance counsellors in schools who refuse to talk about sex, though the Ministry of Education mandates it, because they feel adolescents are too young to be having sex. She also says the children need more parental guidance.

"Yes some of them just have their first period, their periods are just settling out, they are just becoming aware of their sexuality and this is the vulnerable age where they need guidance," she says.

UNICEF states that correct knowledge among girls is only 36 per cent among those in schools and 31 per cent among those outside school.

Pregnancy puts a young girl at even greater risk because often they are forced out of school Mrs. Weir says. She says while the Women's Centre Foundation has a high success rate in placing girls back into school, there are many who still never go back because principals do not want their schools' names tainted. Nearly 33 per cent of females between 15 and 24 had their first child when they were in school UNICEF states and only 34 per cent of that group return to school.