Study shows Louisiana teen abortion rate low

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Figures ranking Louisiana 15th in the nation for teen-age pregnancy but third for teen-age motherhood add up to one fact, says the state head of Planned Parenthood:

"If young women get pregnant in Louisiana, they have the baby," said Terri Bartlett, executive director of Planned Parenthood of Louisiana.

The study by the Alan Guttmacher Institute in New York found that 76 out of every 1,000 Louisiana women aged 15 to 19 gave birth to children in 1989.

Only Mississippi, with a birth rate of 82.7, and Wyoming, at 78.7, were higher in the list compiled by Sonheila Singh, a senior research associate at the institute.

Louisiana has one of the nation's lowest abortion rates for teen-agers and a pregnancy rate slightly above the national average, the report said.

"The low abortion rate is clearly the reason that we then are at such a high level as far as teen-age live birth," said Joan Smith of the state Department of Health and Human Resources.

The Guttmacher study, published in Family Planning Perspectives, found that Louisiana's pregnancy rate among teen-age females was 118.1 per 1,000, putting it 15th in the country.

The national rate was 111 per 1,000 girls in the age group, it said.

"I guess all of us who work in this area do a lot of speculating" about the reasons for the high pregnancy rate, said Smith.

She said poverty, a high dropout rate and lack of sex education all probably have something to do with it.

The Guttmacher report found that only eight states had a lower abortion rate among teen-age females than Louisiana's 24.4 per 1,000.

"The low abortion rate, I think, has to do with fact that Louisiana is still a pretty conservative state," Smith said.

Bartlett attributed the low abortion rate partly to the large Catholic and fundamentalist populations in Louisiana, and partly to the lack of abortion services anywhere but in major cities.

The high teen-age birth rate means that more children are being born of their own, she said, because 94 percent of teen-agers who give birth are keeping their babies.

Nevada had the nation's highest pregnancy rate in that age group — 144 out of every 1,000 young women. Mississippi, with 133 pregnancies per 1,000 teen-agers, was ranked eighth. Wyoming, at 126.6, was sixth.

California, at 140.2, was ranked second and Texas, 137, third.

However, the rate of live births in California — 52.3 — was far below that in Louisiana and 25th in the nation, the publication said.

Texas had the nation's sixth-highest rate of live births for the age group, at 74.3.

The highest abortion rate, 68.2, was in California. Nevada's 67.1 was the second-highest. Texas was No 13, at 63.5. Mississippi was 46th, at 22.3.