

## Teen childbearing costs Nebraskans millions

By JoANNE YOUNG / Lincoln Journal Star  
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Amiah Rashel Bredemeier's mother wears braces on her teeth. She practices after school with the step team. She goes to driver's education classes three times a week. Becky Bredemeier, who just turned 17, is set to graduate from Lincoln North Star in June.

Amiah came into her world last Christmas Eve, one of between 200-300 babies born to teenage moms last year in Lancaster County.

According to a recently released report, babies like Amiah annually cost taxpayers an average of \$4,393.

Taxpayers paid an estimated \$50 million in Nebraska in 2004 for health care, child welfare and other costs related to teen births, including an estimated \$15 million in lost tax revenue.

Teen births actually are declining across the country, according to "The Public Costs of Teen Childbearing" from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. They are declining in Nebraska, too, but not as much as elsewhere.

Nebraska ranks 50th out of 50 in the percentage of decline. The state's 15 percent decline was the smallest drop measured.

In Lancaster County in 2004, 286 babies were born to moms age 19 and younger — nearly 7 percent of all births. The rate was down 12.6 percent from 2001.

Nationwide, teen births declined 33 percent in the 13 years between 1991 and 2004. Despite that, the United States has the highest teen-pregnancy and birth rates in the industrialized world. Much of Europe has rates one-quarter to a half as high. Canada's is less than half that of its neighbor's.

The cost to taxpayers comes in lower earnings to young mothers and the cost of public assistance.

For the children, the costs include those for public health care, foster care, welfare, incarceration and lost tax revenue.

Only about 40 percent of young teen mothers graduate from high school, according to the report. Another 23 percent earn a GED.

Lincoln Public Schools is trying to increase that graduation percentage with parenting classes, services in 17 schools and student-child learning centers at four high schools, including Bryan Community.

The district has a 76 percent graduation rate for its teen parents, said Deila Steiner, LPS director of federal programs.

Other LPS teen parent facts:

n 216 student parents were served in 2005-06.

n 5 of 10 middle schools had student parents last year

n 41 babies and toddlers of students are enrolled at student-child learning centers at the high schools this year. The centers have a capacity for 72 children. Nine more will enroll when their student moms give birth.

School personnel do what they can to lessen barriers to parents finishing school, said Diane Fern, social worker at Lincoln North Star. Those barriers are huge, she said.

A large percentage of single teen moms end up on welfare. Their babies have lower birth weights and are more likely to perform poorly in school. These children are at greater risk of abuse and neglect.

Many teen parents come from dysfunctional families that don't provide boundaries and support. Some parents are addicted to drugs and alcohol. Domestic violence and incest may be factors.

In the past two years, she said, the schools have seen increases in teen moms having more than one child.

At North Star, six babies — age 2 months to 11 months — are enrolled in the student-child learning center. The moms are 15 to 19.

They pay between \$21-\$35 a day. Right now, all receive Title XX funds to pay for the care, said Nancy Falter, center director.

"The number of dollars invested in prevention is much less than the amount put into the babies once they're here," she said.

The school offers parenting classes, and 19 students are enrolled. Seven of those students are pregnant. The rest have children.

In addition to the financial costs, the emotional costs of teen births are great, she said.

These girls lose their childhoods, their responsibility increases and some drop out of school.

"A lot kind of buckle under; they just kind of cave," Fern said.

Becky Bredemeier plans to make it. She and her daughter live in a double-wide trailer with Becky's three brothers, a sister, her father and grandmother.

Amiah's father, a 17-year-old Northeast student, broke up with her mother before she was born. He visits occasionally but offers no financial or other support.

Becky has filed for support but has not received an answer.

"I have an advantage. I have a loving family," Becky said.

She gets formula and rice cereal from the WIC program. Her dad buys the diapers.

Becky works at McDonald's about 10 hours a week and is saving her money for later, when she graduates from Southeast Community College.

Her dream is to get a degree in child development and someday open her own daycare center.

Before she got pregnant, Becky was doing poorly in school. She met a boy and fell in love.

She let her feelings take over.

"That's dangerous," she said.

When she got pregnant, her grades improved, along with her attitude about school.

"It's for her. I wouldn't have shaped up if not for her," she said of her daughter.

"I want Amiah to finish school. That's why I have to finish."

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