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THE ISSUE: TEEN PREGNANCY

## Answers long overdue to ease cost to society

In this sex-drenched culture, talk of teen pregnancy still makes people queasy. That incongruity may help explain why the United States has the highest teen pregnancy and birth rate in the industrialized world.

So before you turn the page, consider this: It is your business.

It doesn't matter if you are a parent, a nun sworn to celibacy or a retiree whose children turned out just fine, thank you very much. Teen pregnancy costs you.

Cold hard cash.

A new study by the Arizona Coalition on Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting takes a look at how much. The coalition worked with the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy to make Arizona the first state in which the numbers were crunched.

Excluding the costs of childbirth itself, which frequently happens on the public's dime, research found that childbearing by teens ages 15 to 19 cost taxpayers \$268 million in 2004.

That includes costs for the children, who are statistically more likely to be low-birth weight, poor, live in single-parent homes, experience abuse/neglect, enter the child welfare system and, if they are boys, wind up incarcerated, or, if they are girls, become teen moms themselves.

The figure includes costs for the teen moms, who generally don't get good jobs and become reliable taxpayers. Instead, they are more likely than other teens to drop out of school, remain single, parent another child as a teen and live in poverty.

Not exactly what every mom and dad hopes for a daughter. And, yes, parents are the most potent force in shaping their chil-



dren's behavior. But parents face daunting competition from an adolescent's raging hormones and a popular culture in which casual sex is glorified as consequence-free and exceedingly cool.

Between 1991 and 2004, there were more than 158,000 teen births in Arizona. Each one of those moms might have become a talented job applicant on her way up the corporate ladder. But few probably did. The fact that Arizona ranks near the top nationally for its teen pregnancy rate has consequences for business and the politicians who want to attract business with the promise of a well-educated workforce.

Arizona's teen pregnancy rate did go down 23 percent during those years, but the figure remains too high. Prevention programs may be having an impact, but research is scant on which ones do the most good. Programs to help teen moms return to school and get the skills needed to beat the odds are also in short supply, says Patty Jo Angelini, executive director of the Arizona Coalition on Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting.

This is a problem with more questions than answers. It is an issue that touches families, businesses and communities with deep emotional and cash costs. Families, businesses and communities would all benefit from looking for some answers.

In a culture where cleavage and biceps are sufficient credentials for fame and fortune, an open discussion about the proper public policy response to teen pregnancy is long overdue.

For more information, go to [www.azteenpregnancy.org](http://www.azteenpregnancy.org).