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Teen births fall in Indiana, but toll remains high

Advocates stress that state still has much to do to limit teen pregnancy

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The number of Indiana teens giving birth has dropped by more than 25 percent since 1991, but the rate remains above the national average -- and the births cost taxpayers more than \$195 million in 2004.

Those findings were included in a report released Monday by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. For advocates, the figures only underscored the need to continue public and private efforts to curb teen pregnancy.

"We have made some great strides," said Bill Stanczykiewicz, head of the Indiana Youth Institute. "But we need to continue talking about this important issue, because teen pregnancy is at the heart of so many of the societal challenges we face today."

Most of the public costs cited in the report are tied to problems facing teen mothers and their children.

Compared with women who don't have children until they are at least 20, teen mothers face increased odds of dropping out of school, remaining unmarried and living in poverty. Their children are more likely to be victims of abuse and neglect and to enter the child welfare system.

For Indiana in 2004, the most recent year for which comparative data are available, the report said costs to taxpayers included:

\$37 million for public health care.

\$40 million for child welfare.

\$33 million for incarceration.

\$64 million in lost tax revenue as a result of lower earnings over the children's careers.

About one-third of the costs are for federal programs, with the other two-thirds borne by state and local governments.

The study, "By the Numbers: The Public Costs of Teen Childbearing," gives the first-ever look at the state-by-state economic impact of teen pregnancy.

A Washington nonprofit established in 1996, National Campaign works to improve the lot of children and families by reducing teen pregnancy. Its goal is to cut the teen pregnancy rate in the United States by one-third by 2015.

Only those costs "associated with a teen birth rather than other associated risks" were considered in the study, which compares the costs tied to teen mothers, their partners and their children with "the same costs for women who delay childbearing until they are aged 20 or 21."

Nationally, the report estimates the public-sector cost of teen childbearing at more than \$9 billion a year.

Without the reduction in Indiana's teen births, Hoosier taxpayers would have paid an additional \$123 million -- for a total of \$318 million -- in 2004. Since 1991, Indiana has had more than 157,100 teen births, costing taxpayers about \$3.6 billion.

Stanczykiewicz said the reduction in teen births can be directly linked to a number of local, state and federal programs that address teen pregnancy. Some focus on abstinence, while others address principles of safe sex and birth control.

Although the study contains some good news for Indiana, Betty Cockrum, president of Planned Parenthood of Indiana, said the decline in the state's teen birth rate has leveled off since 2002. She said a 2005 study by Indiana University showed many teens are not being taught medically accurate sex education in public schools.

Cockrum said another study, by the Guttmacher Institute, ranked Indiana 49th in the availability of contraceptive information and services, while the state's sex education policy was ranked worst.

"Our teenagers are not getting the information they need, and that is putting them at risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases," she said. "We have 31 teens get pregnant in Indiana every day, and 10 of them are under 17."