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Citizen Columnist

Teens bearing kids cost state \$268M a year

Teen pregnancy. Not in your family. Not your issue. Not your concern. Right? Wrong.

Teen childbearing in Arizona costs taxpayers at least \$268 million a year, according to data released today by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

Arizona is the first state to get its numbers from the first comprehensive study of the nationwide costs of teen pregnancy, said Patricia Jo Angelini, executive director of the Arizona Coalition on Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenting.

National numbers will be available in October.

The Arizona costs, based on 2004 figures, are about half federal dollars and half state and local dollars.

Angelini said the analysis is conservative, leaving out the costs of the delivery itself, which the government picks up 82 percent of the time.

"They're saying, 'Let's look at the children, the children that come from these teen parent families. What happening to them and what's the cost to taxpayers?'" Angelini said.

Much of the expense is tied to negative results for the children.

The annual costs include \$48 million for public health care, \$32 million for child welfare (foster care and

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Anne: Between '91-'04, Arizona girls gave birth to 158K, cost taxpayers \$3.7B

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other services), \$88 million in lost tax revenue because of decreased earnings and spending and \$43 million for incarceration costs of sons born to teen mothers.

With more explanation, some of these numbers take on a tragic tone.

"The sons of teen mothers are three times more likely to be incarcerated" than the sons of adult mothers, Angelini said. "The children of teen parents are twice as likely to be abused and neglected."

It's not because a teen can't be a good parent, but because they're young and don't have the skills or support, she said.

Between 1991 and 2004, Arizona girls gave birth to more than 158,300 children, costing taxpayers \$3.7 billion.

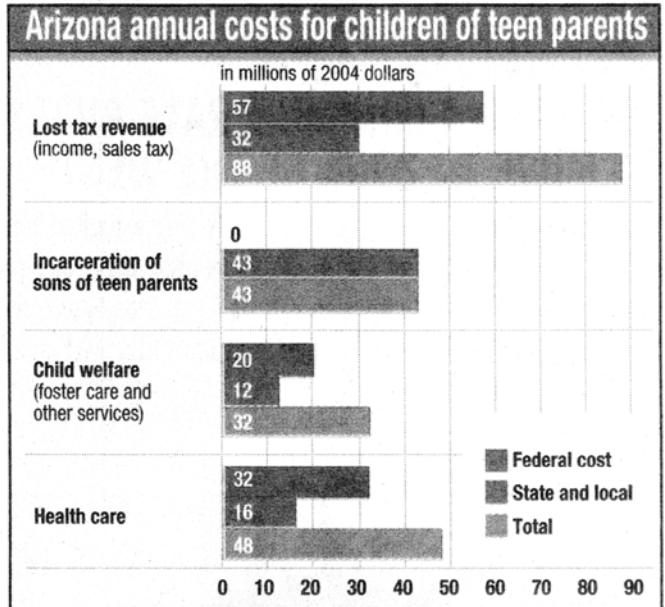
Teen births declined 23 percent during that same period, but Arizona still has the fourth highest teen pregnancy rate in the country.

Researchers attribute the decline nationally to girls using more effective birth control and having less sex and to increased rates of sexual abstinence.

In what everyone hopes is a anomaly and not the start of a trend, the teen pregnancy rate for Arizona rose slightly in 2003-2004, the most recent year for which figures are available.

Angelini said we have one important weapon in the fight against teen pregnancy: We already know what works. It's a combination of prevention and teen parent support programs.

On the prevention side, abstinence-only programs are appropriate for younger children, while a comprehensive sex education program can teach older teens that saying "no" is the right thing to do and if they choose to say "yes," that using condoms and birth control is the right thing to do, Angelini said.



Source: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

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The Teen Outreach Program, a national youth development program with a focus on community service, also has proved effective in reducing teen pregnancy rates, she said.

On the support front, Teenage Pregnancy and Parenting Programs, such as those in place in several school districts in Tucson, keep teen parents in school and help prevent repeat pregnancies, Angelini said.

The lack of a high school diploma and multiple children can catapult a teenager into a life of poverty.

In recent years, the state has limited its funding for teen pregnancy prevention primarily to abstinence-until-marriage programs, with spending peaking at about \$4 million.

Angelini's group tried unsuccessfully this past legislative session to get statewide funding for TAPPs.

But armed with this new data, Angelini will approach the Legislature next year with a request for up to \$10 million for comprehensive prevention and support programs.

She will find an ally in Rep. Pete Hershberger, a Tucson Republican who chairs the House human services committee.

"I'm always concerned about our conservative Legislature but I hope that (the report) helps to shape public policy and to put resources in this area," Hershberger said.

He said this is a societal problem and the prevention and support programs are designed to teach young people about being responsible for the sexual choices they make and the families they create.

Before today, we might have guessed at the high cost of teen pregnancy.

Now that we know the true cost, are we ready to do something about it?

If not, here's one last fact to chew on: Another 38 Arizona teens became pregnant today.

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