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Teaching your children

Teen pregnancies cost us all

Most Oklahoma parents probably have a pretty good idea how much it costs to raise their own children. But do they have any idea how much they're spending to raise other people's children?

A new report shows that the costs to taxpayers for teen childbearing in 2004 were at least \$149 million.

Across the country, the total costs for teenagers having children exceeded \$9 billion in 2004, according to the November report by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

As shocking as those numbers are, it could have been worse. A companion report produced the previous year concluded that if steps had not been taken in recent years to bring down the teen birth rate significantly, there now would be thousands more Oklahoma children living in poverty, facing difficult futures and more than likely putting more strain on public services.

These statistics readily lead to at least one obvious conclusion: Bringing down the teen birth rate benefits everyone. What's more elusive is how to achieve that — though obviously we're doing something right. Clearly, though, we could do better.

Though teen pregnancy and birth rates have been falling since the early 1990s, the problem remains serious. And with tens of thousands of youngsters becoming teens each year, the effort to teach them well can not rest.

The National Campaign's latest report on the issue, the first state-by-state analysis since 1996 of the costs to taxpayers, estimates the cumulative costs for teen childbearing at \$161 billion between 1991 and 2004.



But thanks to a decline in teen childbearing of about 30 percent during that period, the taxpayers were saved \$6.7 billion in 2004, the latest year studied, in such costs.

The costs analyzed for 2004 included: \$1.9 billion in public health-care costs; \$2.3 billion in child welfare costs; \$2.1 billion in incarceration costs, and \$2.9 billion in lost revenue resulting from teen mothers' depressed earning potential.

Of the \$149 million taxpayers spent in 2004 on teen births in Oklahoma, 45 percent were federal costs and 55 percent were state and local costs.

Broken down, the taxpayers that year shouldered \$23 million in public health-care costs for teen births; \$20 million for child welfare; \$26 million for incarceration, and \$51 million in lost tax revenue from decreased earnings.

All told, taxpayers shelled out an estimated \$2.5 billion between 1991 and 2004 for the 108,900 teen births that occurred during that period.

But thank goodness some prevention strategies have worked. The analysts estimated that thanks to the prevention programs in place since the early 1990s, taxpayers were saved about \$56 million in 2004 alone on teen births — a year during which 6,963 births to teens were logged.

While Oklahoma has made progress in reducing the teen birth rate, other states have made more notable progress.

In 2004, Oklahoma's teen birth rate was 55.6 per 1,000 girls ages 15-19, compared with a national rate of 41.1 for that age bracket. Oklahoma has consistently ranked among states with the highest teen birth rates for decades, never achieving a better ranking than 17th place since 1991.

The cost data do not tell the whole story, of course. Children born to unmarried teen moms who dropped out of high school are 10 times more likely to live in poverty. Teen mothers are much more likely to be victims of violence, to remain unmarried and to be unable to advance their educations. Less than 40 percent of teen moms who drop out of school ever finish high school. And while the median income for college graduates has increased 13 percent over the last quarter-century, the median income for high-school dropouts has decreased 30 percent.

Daughters of teen mothers are more likely to become teen moms themselves, and sons are more likely to end up in prison.

Now for the good news. Were it not for the pregnancy prevention programs in place, the National Campaign estimates 14,000 additional children would have been born to teen moms in Oklahoma between 1991 and 2002, many if not most of them facing the dire prospects listed above.

There are many pregnancy prevention programs throughout Oklahoma, most under the aegis of the Oklahoma State Department of Health. Using a variety of funding sources, the health department staff and its contractors have adopted a variety of approaches and regularly refine their strategies in

an effort to continue bringing down the teen pregnancy rate.

One of the latest new programs is the Oklahoma Abstinence Education Project, which will receive more than \$750,000 a year in federal funds for five years and some matching state dollars. Its goal is to instill in teens "values about why they should wait until marriage to engage in sex."

Recent statewide data suggest these people will have jobs for a long time to come. A 2003 survey of high school students found that about 51 percent of males and nearly 49 percent of females had had sexual intercourse; nearly 6 percent had had sex before age 13. Of those who reported being sexually active, nearly 16 percent had had sex with more than four partners.

The Oklahoma Interagency Coordinating Council for Prevention of Adolescent Pregnancy and Sexually Transmitted Diseases has set a goal to reduce the teen pregnancy rate of 15-19 year olds by one-third by the year 2015.

A recent Brookings Policy Institute study suggested that the federal government could spend up to eight times more on teen pregnancy prevention and still break even, given the costs generated by teen births. Experience suggests the state could pour more funds into this effort with similar results.

These data prove that spending public money on effective interventions can work. The question is how much more will we be willing to spend to achieve even better results.

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