

Nation

Fewer teens are giving birth, but cost to taxpayers still steep

By Wendy Koch
USA TODAY

Teen childbearing has declined sharply since the early 1990s but remains costly to U.S. taxpayers, incurring a tab of at least \$9.1 billion in 2004, according to a report released today.

The children of teen mothers have higher health care, foster care and incarceration costs than those of older parents, says the report commissioned by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, a non-profit advocacy

group. Like their parents, they earn less as adults and pay less in taxes.

"It's important to remind people the problems are very serious and expensive," says Sarah Brown, the group's director. She welcomes a one-third decline from 62 births per 1,000 teen girls in 1991 to 41 births in 2004. She attributes the drop to social changes that have led teens to use contraception or abstain from sex.

The abortion rate dropped even more, from 37 abortions per 1,000 teen girls in 1991 to 22 in 2002, the last year for which figures are avail-

able, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a non-profit organization that studies sexual and reproductive health policy.

Still, Brown says, the teen birth rate is four to five times the rate in much of Europe and more than twice that of Canada. "We can't let this nation think everything's been done," she says, noting the rate of decline has slowed.

The report, *By the Numbers: The Public Costs of Teen Childbearing*, looks only at costs clearly linked to a teen birth rather than associated risks such as poverty. Written by

Saul Hoffman, an economics professor at the University of Delaware, it is based largely on 2004 data that have not been publicized.

Most of the costs in 2004 — \$8.6 billion — were incurred by mothers 17 and younger. Compared with women who have a first child at 20 or 21, those girls are more than twice as likely to have a child placed in foster care, to be reported for child abuse or neglect, and to have a son sent to prison. Their kids are far more likely to drop out of high school and their daughters to become teen mothers

themselves, the report states.

"Teen birth rates drive a lot of negative social indicators," says Wade Horn, assistant secretary for children and families at the Health and Human Services Department.

The report says the 2004 costs of teen childbearing include \$1.9 billion for health care, \$2.3 billion for child welfare, \$2.1 billion for incarceration and \$2.9 billion in lower tax revenue. That federal, state and local tab is offset slightly by family support for younger teens. The cost to government averages \$1,430 per child per year.

The price tag varies by state, depending on the number of births and benefit levels, from \$12 million in Vermont to \$1 billion in Texas.

Teen birth rates generally have fallen since 1957 but rose in the late 1980s. The subsequent drop saved taxpayers an estimated \$6.7 billion nationally in 2004, the report says. The savings ranged from more than \$1 billion in California to \$5 million in Wyoming.

The report updates a 1996 study on the costs of teen childbearing but is the first to provide state-by-state costs.

Strong messages get girls to wait on motherhood

Several factors pushing down pregnancy rate

By Wendy Koch
USA TODAY

A mastery of words landed 13-year-old Ashley White a spot at the Scripps National Spelling Bee in 1999 and a role in a documentary about the bee, *Spellbound*.

Four years later, the teen from a working-class home in Washington, D.C., got pregnant.

"I was so crushed," she says. She knew she had disappointed her mother, who was 17 when Ashley was born. Now 21, White attends Howard University full time while raising her 3-year-old daughter, Dashayla, and working 20 hours a week at a program that urges teenage girls to delay childbearing.

"I tell them my life story and how hard it's been for me," says White, who has been on welfare, lived in homeless shelters and lugged a baby onto buses in snow. "I want them to be incredibly aware of the consequences." As a teen mom, she says, "you have to grow up fast."

Girls are listening to that message. The teen birth rate fell 30% between 1991 and 2002, and the teen pregnancy rate even more, 36%, according to figures from the U.S. government and the Guttmacher Institute, a research organization.

Black teens have seen the most dramatic change. A decade ago, they had the highest birth rate. It fell by 45% from 115 births per 1,000 in 1991 to 63 in 2004.

"It's a combination of many factors," says Sarah Brown, director of the National Campaign to Prevent



Student, worker, mom: Ashley White, 21, and daughter Dashayla, 3, get ready in the morning. "I have to be a good role model," White says.

Teen Pregnancy. She says welfare reform reduced benefits, and more schools, churches and community groups offer abstinence- and sex-education programs.

"Teenagers are having less sex," she says. The percentage of high school students who said in surveys that they had had intercourse fell from 54% in 1991 to 47% in 2005, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says.

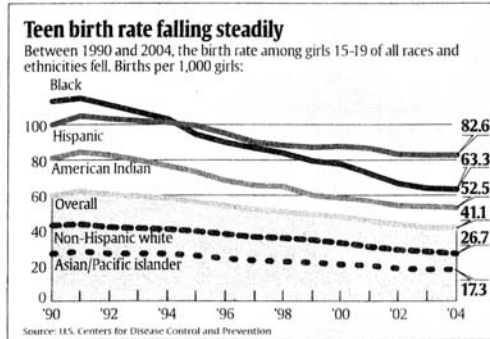
Sexually active teens are more inclined to use birth control, spurred by fear of AIDS and expanded contraceptive options, says Robert Blum, professor of family and reproductive health at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore.

A focus on abstinence has had an effect, Brown says: "It's no longer embarrassing to be a virgin."

Monessa Samuels, 15, a 10th-grader in New York City, says she sometimes feels pressure about sex when other students say, "Oh, you haven't done that yet." But she says if she tells them she's not ready, "They don't make fun of you."

Monessa participates in the Children's Aid Society Carrera Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Program, a privately funded program in New York City and several states, including Georgia, Maryland, Michigan, Texas and Florida.

"What works is not to separate sex messages from everything else that makes a person whole," foun-



der Michael Carrera says. Children starting in fifth grade are exposed to sports, the arts, job training, academic tutoring and sex education. To avoid pregnancy, he says, teens need to have goals and opportunity.

HIV- and sex-education programs nationwide are helping reduce teen pregnancy, says Douglas Kirby of ETR Associates, a health education organization. He says the biggest decreases tend to be in states where programs cover both abstinence and contraception.

The evidence for abstinence-only education is "very weak," he says.

Wade Horn disagrees. Abstinence programs are "a lot more than just saying no," says Horn, assistant secretary for children and families at the Department of Health and Human Services. He says most incorporate activities such as choir and dance with peer support. Pregnancy prevention should start with abstinence and move to contraception later, when teens are sexually active, he says.

2004. "In many Latina communities, teen childbearing is not seen as a bad thing," Rebecca Wind of the Guttmacher Institute says.

Consequences of teen motherhood can be dire. Only 63% of those 17 and younger finish high school or obtain a GED, and only 2% complete college by age 30, according to the report out today. Older teen mothers do slightly better, but only 3% finish college.

Ashley White, now a college junior studying communications and TV production, knows she's an exception. She wants to get a bachelor's degree and attend graduate school. She's thankful for scholarships, loans and government-subsidized housing and child care.

"It's a struggle," says White, whose one-bedroom apartment is a jumble of books and toys. "You have all these books to read, and they're not skinny little ones." After cooking dinner and putting her daughter to bed, she says, she's tired every night at 9 p.m., but she's pushing toward a goal.

"It was bad enough to be a teen mom," she says. "I didn't want to be an impoverished one."

Besides, she says, "I have to be a good role model for my daughter."

By Adrienne Lewis, USA TODAY