



# THE OKLAHOMAN

TEEN CHILDBEARING HAS LARGE EFFECT

## Significant cost to Oklahoma when children have children

**A**T an age when they should be concerned with what classes to take as freshmen in high school or what dress to wear to the senior prom, too many Oklahoma girls are having babies instead. This comes at a cost, of course.

One of those is financial, and the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy has tried to measure it. According to its study, released last week, teen childbearing in 2008, when 7,581 Oklahoma teens gave birth, cost Oklahoma taxpayers \$190 million. Nationwide, the total in state and federal dollars was close to \$11 billion.

The organization broke it down this way in Oklahoma: \$36 million for public health care, such as Medicaid; \$27 million for child welfare expenditures (primarily foster care); \$29 million for increased rates of incarceration (primarily male children of teenage parents); \$56 million in lost tax revenue due to decreased earnings and spendings (estimated for children of teens as they become of working age); and \$42 million in loss of potential earnings.

The trickle-down effect is clear: When children have children, it begins a cycle that increases the chances of that child resulting in foster care or, worse, in prison. It diminishes the mothers' chances of completing school, particularly a higher education, which only enhances

the likelihood that she will need public assistance to get by. It increases the likelihood that girls' parents — the baby's grandparents — will wind up watching or raising the child, imposing a serious financial burdens on them.

In 2008, 89 Oklahomans who were 14 or younger gave birth. That was actually a slight improvement over the previous year, and 14 fewer than had been recorded by this age group in 2005. A small decrease over 2007 also was seen in the 18-19 age group (5,192 births). But in the 15-17 age group, the 2,300 births were seven more than in 2007 and nearly 300 more than in 2005.

The Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy noted that of the 7,581 births to Oklahoma teens in 2008, four out of five were to unmarried teens. That's not a surprise. The fact that one out of five (21 percent) was to girls who were already mothers is nothing short of distressing.

Nationally, 41.5 of every 1,000 girls aged 15 to 19 had babies in 2008. In Oklahoma, the rate was 61.6 per 1,000. Only Mississippi had a worse rate.

"Soon other states will be saying, 'Thank goodness for Oklahoma,' meaning they can count on us to be at the bottom of the rankings," said Sharon Rodine, director of youth initiatives for the institute. "That is not where we want to be."