

Teen Births Cost Millions to Miss. Taxpayers, Study Shows

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Groups in Mississippi advocating for comprehensive sex education in schools are pointing to a study showing teen births cost the state's taxpayers an estimated \$155 million in 2009.

Moreover, the majority of taxpayer costs are associated with negative outcomes for the children of teen mothers and fathers, says the new study by the Mississippi Economic Policy Center, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization.

The costs include lost tax revenue from their lower wages and consumption as adults and higher costs for the foster care and criminal justice systems, says the report titled, "Economic Impact of Teen Births in Mississippi," released Friday.

If policymakers and community leaders make a comprehensive commitment to teen pregnancy prevention in Mississippi, they would see a reduction in many of the issues the state is working hard to address, such as poverty, school failure, delinquency, child abuse and neglect and underemployment, asserts the report sponsored by Women's Fund of Mississippi.

With \$155 million the state could send 41,416 4-year-olds, or roughly 97 percent of all 4-year-olds in Mississippi to pre-kindergarten, says Jamie Holcomb of Women's Fund, which works to improve the lives of women and children in Mississippi. Or the state could send 31,624 Mississippians to a 4-year public college or university, or fund the salaries of 4,937 fire fighters for a year.

The report recommends "abstinence-plus" sex education in public schools "that is evidence-based and medically accurate." As opposed to abstinence-only, the abstinence-plus involves the knowledge of contraceptives and sexually transmitted diseases.

"Research demonstrates that helping adolescents postpone sex while equipping sexually active youth with medical information about contraception on a confidential basis is one of the best strategies available to reduce pregnancy, STDs and HIV/AIDS," the report suggests.

A total of 7,078 infants were born to teens aged 19 or younger in the state in 2009, according to statistics cited in the report. About one-third of them were born to women 17 years of age or younger. Mississippi's teen birth rate of 64.1 births per 1,000 teens aged 15 to 19 exceeds the national rate for women of the same age.

The report also notes that 76 percent of Mississippi teens report having had sex by 12th grade. Therefore "it is important to reach young people while they are in school," the report says.

"Teens in Mississippi have sex at greater rates and younger age than kids in other parts of the country. We don't necessarily think that would be the case because we are in the Bible belt, we are the heart of the Bible belt in some ways," the Mississippi Public Broadcasting reported Rachael Canter from the non-profit Mississippi First as saying. Canter's group also supported the study.

The report complains that the trend is not being dealt with properly. "Unfortunately, the state of Mississippi has invested considerable financial resources in pursuing an abstinence-only message," it remarks.

"Abstinence-only-until-marriage programs are not evidence-based. These programs rely on fear and shame-based messages to encourage students to remain abstinent, typically include inaccurate or misleading sexual health information and do not provide complete information to young people," the report maintains.

A new law enacted this year requires school boards in every public school district to adopt an "abstinence-only" or "abstinence-plus" sex education policy, but it does not require school boards to implement an evidence-based, medically accurate sex education curriculum, the groups say. "Nor does the law provide districts any additional funding to start teaching the curriculum they select."

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