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Teen moms: Enormous social costs

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A new study shows Mississippi's epidemic of teen pregnancies is costing far more than previously thought - more than \$154 million a year from taxpayers.

As The Clarion-Ledger reported, that includes increased costs of foster care, social services and incarceration for young people born years ago to teen moms.

"This is not an unsolvable problem," says Carol Penick, executive director of the Women's Fund, which sponsored the study by the nonprofit Mississippi Economic Policy Center. The state's new "abstinence plus" sex education program for public schools can help address it.

And as Jamie Holcomb, director of programs for the Women's Fund said, parents "are part of the solution" by talking to their children about sex.

Districts must choose between teaching abstinence-only or "abstinence-plus," which includes information about contraceptives and sexually transmitted diseases. Each district must adopt a policy by June 30, 2012.

It is clear that Mississippi teens need comprehensive, fact-based sex education.

State Health Department statistics show that in 2009, there were 7,078 live births to mothers 10 to 19. That meant that for every 1,000 girls or women in that age group, 64.1 gave birth to a baby who lived. That's nearly double the national rate.

In the rankings last year, Mississippi rated poorly across the board regarding youth in the annual Kids Count study: worst in 7 of 10 categories. They included: highest percentage of low-birthweight babies; the highest rates of infant mortality, child deaths and births to teenagers; the highest percentage of children in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment; the highest percentage of children in poverty and the highest percentage of children in single-parent families.

State Rep. Alyce Clarke, D-Jackson, who introduced the sex ed legislation, said teen pregnancy creates a cycle where teen mothers' children also become teen mothers. It destroys lives.

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Parents want to discuss sex education with their children but don't know how, she said. The new curriculum, which is still be formulated, should help with that. Teens say that parents most influence their decisions about sex, love and relationships, Holcomb says.

The lack of sex ed is costly, in money and lives.

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