

Editorial: Staggering cost of teen births

While teen birth rates have declined between 1991 and 2008, the cost to taxpayers is still staggering.

Staff Reports

Tuesday, September 13, 2011

A new analysis shows births to teen or preteen mothers cost the state of Mississippi \$154.9 million in 2009.

That's a high cost for a state struggling with budget issues and that leads the nation in a number of social ills and health issues.

The study was done by the Mississippi Economic Policy Center, a nonprofit, nonpartisan group. The Women's Fund of Mississippi sponsored the study.

There is a direct correlation between the short- and long-term impact of teen births and the staggering costs borne by states as a result.

The costs, according to the MEPC study, along with other studies, include foster care, social services, health care and the incarceration of young people born to teen mothers years ago.

The cost to the mothers is equally devastating. Teen mothers and fathers generally have lower education attainment, which steers them into low-paying jobs that, in some cases, mean years of poverty and public assistance.

Earlier this summer, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy released an updated analysis of the cost of teen childbearing on individual states.

In Arkansas, according to that study, the cost was at \$143 million in 2008, the latest figures available. Forty-nine percent of that figure were federal costs and 51 percent were state and local costs.

Teen childbearing in Tennessee cost taxpayers at least \$272 million in 2008. Forty percent were federal costs and 60 percent were state and local.

The NCPTUP study said the cost to Mississippi taxpayers in 2008 was \$159 million; 49 percent were federal costs and 51 percent were state and local costs.

Nationally, teen childbearing cost taxpayers \$10.9 billion.

Teen birth rates in the Tri-State area declined by more than 20 percent between 1991 and 2008.

Some of the decrease can be attributed to increased sex education in schools and more emphasis placed on the problem by mentoring programs.

Mississippi enacted a new state law this year requiring school districts to teach some form of sex education. Parents must give permission for their children to take the classes.

Ideally, teens should receive this information from parents but, unfortunately, too many don't.

Abstinence-only initiatives have had limited success.

Given the staggering costs in taxpayer dollars and societal ills, maybe it's time for states like Mississippi to make comprehensive sex education programs mandatory in schools, instead of voluntary.



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