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Teen moms costly to state

Epidemic delivers \$154 million bill to taxpayers each year

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Written by Jerry Mitchell

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Mississippi's epidemic of teen pregnancies steals more than \$154 million a year from taxpayers, a new study shows.

These pregnancies also steal the dreams of "these young girls and these young boys who don't get to live them out," said Dr. Warren Jones, executive director of the Mississippi Institute for Improvement of Geographic Minority Health at the University of Mississippi Medical Center.

Carol Penick, executive director of the Women's Fund of Mississippi, which conducted the study, said the state's teen pregnancy problem is not "unsolvable."

Teen pregnancy

- One-third of teen mothers get a high school diploma.
- Sons of teen mothers are 13 percent more likely to wind up in prison, while teen daughters are 22 percent more likely to become teen mothers themselves.
- Children of teen mothers have lower birth weights, are more likely to perform poorly in school and are at greater risk of abuse and neglect.

Source: Women's Fund of Mississippi

Mississippi leads the nation in per capita teen births - a figure that continues to rise, with more than 83 percent of teen pregnancies unintended. One third of all Mississippi births now are to teen mothers.

The Mississippi Economic Policy Center calculated lost wages, reduced wages and lost taxes as well as other costs, such as foster care, incarceration and public assistance in figuring annual costs.

According to the study, the more than \$154 million lost to taxpayers each year could send 31,624 Mississippians to college.

In March, Mississippi lawmakers adopted a bill that requires public schools to have an abstinence-only or abstinence-plus program in place by June 2012.

Under this law, the abstinence-only program would inform students about healthy relationships, the benefits of abstinence and the consequences of premarital sexual behavior, including unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Students would learn abstinence is the expected standard and that sexual activity

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outside marriage has harmful consequences.

Abstinence-plus education also would encourage abstinence but would include information on contraception and disease prevention.

It will be up to the state Department of Education which programs to approve.

Rachel Canter, executive director of Mississippi First, said only one abstinence-only program has proven effective in reducing teen pregnancies. While teens sign pledges to remain abstinent, they fail to behave that way, she said.

Page 1 2 Next

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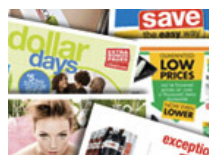
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