



Preventing teen pregnancy saves taxpayers billions Sex education, contraception are effective ways to trim the budget

By Susan Reimer

When it comes to teens having babies, it's a matter of pay me now or pay me later.

You can pay for the programs that help teens understand sex and make good decisions about it, and you can pay for the health care services that provide them with options for contraception.

Or you can pay for the misfortunes that are more likely to befall the child of a teen mother: health problems, behavioral and educational issues, and a greater likelihood of criminal troubles in adolescence and young adulthood.

New economic research by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy shows that teen childbearing cost taxpayers \$10.9 billion in 2008, the latest year for which numbers are available. Maryland's share was about \$229 million, ranking 15th out of the 50 states.

"It is hard to put a price tag on the disrupted lives and broken dreams," said Bill Albert, chief program officer for the campaign. "The 16-year-old who doesn't finish high school because she is pregnant or the 17-year-old who has fathered a child he never sees.

"But you can put a reasonable price on taxpayer costs," he said.

The research was done by University of Delaware economist Saul Hoffman and updates similar research that was released in 2006 for the year 2004. Costs range from \$15 million in North Dakota to \$1.2 billion in Texas.

The cost estimates are conservative, said Albert. "There is no need to gild the lily."

And those estimates include health care costs (Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program), child welfare, incarceration and lost tax revenue because of decreased earnings and spending. And, you will notice, most of the costs are on the child's side of the ledger.

"We don't often focus on the person who takes it on the chin," said Albert. "And that's the baby."

There is another way to look at these numbers, of course. Teen pregnancy has dropped in this country by one-third since 1991. Look at all the money we've saved — approximately \$8.4 billion in 2008 alone.

"Some policymakers are motivated by the diminished prospects for children. And some are driven by dollars and cents," said Albert.

In these tough economic times, with so much political pressure to cut government spending on the federal level and with states and local governments just about broke, cuts to teen pregnancy prevention initiatives and to health care services are penny-wise and pound-foolish. Declining teen pregnancy rates have saved taxpayers billions.

But these kinds of cuts are on the table, and not just for economic reasons.

"It is unfortunate in the extreme that the discourse among policy makers is one where contraception has become a synonym for abortion," said Albert.

Exactly.

The recent debate over cutting federal funds to Planned Parenthood focused not on family planning and women's health services provided at all clinics, but the abortion services provided by some — even though federal dollars cannot be used to pay for abortions.

The report by the National Campaign is timely. Now is not the time to go to lawmakers with your hand out, asking for money for this program, that clinic or this initiative.

Instead, tell them how much money you're saving them by preventing teenagers from having babies.