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Taxpayers left holding the bag Teen pregnancies cost Utahns more than \$86 million

By Wendy Leonard, Deseret News

SALT LAKE CITY — Teen pregnancy weighs heavily on not only parents, but taxpayers as well, who often end up footing the bill for babies born to teen moms.

Teen childbearing in Utah cost taxpayers more than \$86 million in 2008, according to an analysis from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Of those costs, 43 percent were federal costs, and the remaining 57 percent came from state and local sources.

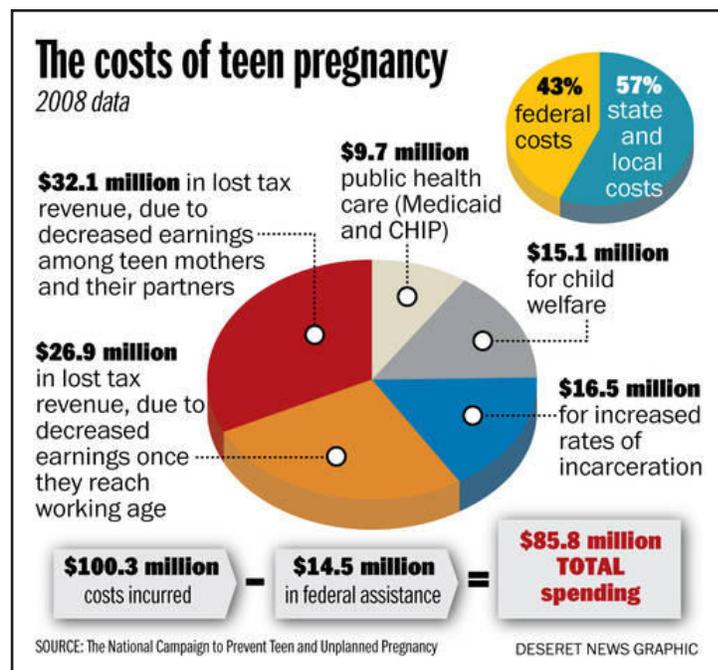
Research indicates that bearing a child during adolescence is associated with long-term difficulties for the mother, her child and society.

The largest portion of the costs is estimated to be about \$32 million — lost tax revenue from potential earnings of teen mothers and their partners, as they often end up caring for their children instead of pursuing education or careers. Another \$26.9 million is expected to be lost due to children of teen mothers often ending up taking the same route as their parents, according to the study.

Other costs come from \$9.7 million spent on public health care and \$15.1 million on child welfare and participation in social services. Another chunk, more than \$16 million, is made up of increased potential for children of unmarried mothers to end up in jail.

“There is a host of negative outcomes that happen because of teen pregnancies,” said Terry Haven, director of the Kids Count program at Voices for Utah Children. “We know from the research that for girls who have babies, the babies are more likely to be in poverty, they’re more likely to drop out of school, they’re more likely to have babies themselves as teenagers. There is a lot of potential for bad outcomes.”

Thursday’s report, which contains the latest numbers available, highlights a nationwide decline in teen birth rates over the years between 1991 and 2008. Utah, which has traditionally boasted lower birth rates than much of the rest



of the country, has also experienced a recent decline, saving an estimated \$40 million over the costs it would have incurred had the rates not fallen.

Officials credit the decline in teen pregnancy and teen birth rates to increased prevention efforts and expanded education, providing knowledge about the options available to teens.

“Nationally, more teens are delaying sexual activity, which is good and responsible, and more teens who are having sex are using contraception a bit more consistently and carefully, which is also the right thing to do,” said Bill Albert, chief program officer with the National Campaign, which supports a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women, as well as responsible policies in the public and private sectors.

While policymakers are looking to cut costs, Albert said teen pregnancy prevention is a place where money is needed “and the return on investment is good.”

“It is one of these social issues that takes constant care, attention and, frankly, funding,” he said.

Locally, little to no money is spent on sex education and the Utah Department of Health’s adolescent and school health programs rely on federal funding to deliver abstinence and personal responsibility programs to teens.

“I think not all teenagers are the same and they need to be presented with as many options as possible,” Jennifer Mayfield, an adolescent health coordinator with the UDOH, said. “Ideally, we would like for our youth to practice abstinence before marriage, but, as we can see by the numbers, that is not occurring.”

Education, however, is not single-handedly changing the numbers, as society, as well as parenting and religion, play a role in a teen’s decision-making process, Mayfield said.

It is hard to know what is causing the increases and/or declines over the years, as those questions aren’t asked of teens, Haven said.

“We know the kids are having sex,” she said. “Even if they are not getting pregnant, they’re having sex and it’s obviously unprotected sex because of the increase in STDs.”

Haven said there needs to be a shared responsibility between parents and schools, and if the parents aren’t talking to their kids about sex, “we need to give them a place to go for information and help.”

“It’s a hard row to hoe,” she said. “It causes a lot of stress in the family, among other things.”

Nationally, more than \$10.9 billion is spent each year on the negative consequences of babies born to teen, according to the report. More than 400,000 babies were born to American teens in 2008.

State costs of teen childbearing vary widely across the country, driven in part by the size of the state, the incidence of teen childbearing, and the participation in publicly funded programs. For example, in 2008, the costs ranged from \$16 million in North Dakota, to \$1.2 billion in Texas. As Utah ranks about 18th in the nation as far as teen pregnancy goes, the same middle ranking is true for state expenditures on the issue.

Despite recent progress and a decline in the teen pregnancy and birth rates, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that about one-third of teen girls get pregnant by age 20.

“It would be nice if the trend holds,” Haven said, adding that it would also be nice to know what to attribute for the changes. “Because then we could keep doing it.”