

Teenage Pregnancy Costs R.I. Millions

One of the nation's great success stories of the past two decades has been the truly extraordinary declines in teen pregnancy and childbearing. Teen pregnancy is down 44 percent and teen birth rates have been cut in half. Both are now at historic lows. Importantly, there has been real progress in all 50 states and among all racial and ethnic groups.

The credit for this good news goes to teens themselves and the magic formula of less sex and more contraception. More teens are delaying sex and those who are having sex are using contraception more consistently and carefully.

That's the good news. The not-so-good news is that despite these impressive, remarkable, off-the-charts strides, three in 10 girls still get pregnant by age 20 and real disparities remain among racial/ethnic groups. The United States remains an outlier when it comes to teen pregnancy — our rates of teen pregnancy and childbearing remain far, far higher than in other industrialized nations.

The personal costs often associated with teens having children are well known and well documented. For example, just 38 percent of girls who have a child before age 18 get a high school diploma and one-third of teen girls who have dropped out of high school cite pregnancy or parenthood as a reason.

The public costs of teen childbearing are not so well known. New data recently released by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy spells out the still high taxpayer costs related to teen childbearing. Teen childbearing in Rhode Island cost taxpayers at least \$41 million in 2010 alone; for the nation overall, the cost was \$9.4 billion.

What taxpayer cost? Specifically, most of the public-sector costs of teen childbearing are associated with negative consequences often experienced by the children of teen mothers, during both their childhood and adolescent years. This includes public health care (Medicaid and CHIP), increased participation in child welfare, and lost tax revenue, among other costs.

Research has shown that children born to teen mothers are more than twice as likely to enter foster care compared with children born to mothers who were age 20-21, even after controlling for other characteristics. This increased likelihood

of participating in foster care leads to additional public spending, which factors into our estimates of the public cost of teen childbearing — a small piece of the overall public spending picture to be sure, but an illustrative one nonetheless.

The new data serve as a reminder of three very important truths:

First, now is not the time to hang out the "mission accomplished" sign. Even though teen pregnancy and childbearing are at historic lows, the still high public costs associated with teen childbearing remind us all that complacency should not hinder further progress and that progress should not be confused with victory. Here is a choke-on-your-cornflakes stat: Nearly 3 in 10 girls in the United States get pregnant by age 20. Now is decidedly not the time to shift attention, resources and funding to some other cause de jour.

Second, investing in prevention makes sense and saves money. Green eyeshade policymakers who are focused on the bottom line, please note: Between 1991 and 2010, there were 24,849 teen births in Rhode Island, costing taxpayers a total of \$1.2 billion over that period. These public sector costs would have been considerably higher had it not been for the huge decline in Rhode Island's teen birth rate during that time. The teen birth rate in the Ocean State declined 50 percent between 1991 and 2010. The impressive strides made saved taxpayers an estimated \$47 million in 2010 alone, compared to what they would have paid if rates had not fallen.

Third, in all this talk about dollars and rates and declines, let's not forget there are people involved. In noting some of the consequences often associated with early pregnancy and parenthood, we should remember that countless teen mothers are working heroically and successfully raising their children. They need and deserve our admiration and support.

The bottom line is this: In addition to improving the well-being of children, youth and families, reducing teen pregnancy and early childbearing saves taxpayers dollars. Investing in prevention should unite those who care deeply about educational attainment, about healthy children, and about happy and intact families with those who are more traditionally concerned with a robust economy, a competitive workforce and a lighter tax burden.