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Teen pregnancy: The costs go beyond individuals

By O. Ricardo Pimentel

Texas shouldn't always feel compelled to do things bigger. It accounts for 8 percent of the U.S. population, but its teen pregnancies account for 11 percent of the cost to taxpayers nationally.

Woo hoo, way to go, Texas!

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy last week released updated figures for this cost to taxpayers.

Yes, this same report lauded Texas for posting a steep decline — 20 percent — between 1991 and 2008. Please note, however, that this dip lagged the national dip — 33 percent. In other words, Texas trended the same as everyone else, but worse. Yup, Texas is still a national leader in teen pregnancies.

Texas teen births cost taxpayers \$1.2 billion of the \$10.9 billion spent nationally in 2008, the latest figures available. Of these costs, according to the Campaign, the feds paid 57 percent and state and local taxes the remaining 43 percent.

There's little reason to believe that these figures will have dipped in 2011.

Here's how it works:

Christine Villarreal of San Antonio had a baby at 18 — as a high school senior.

Though living with her mother, she had meager financial support before and after her baby was born. She went to work waiting tables, but she still needed food stamps and Medicaid for Kailey, now 5.

Don't get me wrong. This was money well spent. It proved to be a wise investment. Villarreal, 24, will soon earn a two-year degree in paralegal studies. That's short of her lifelong goal of Harvard Law School, but it's far better than what might have occurred.

When Villarreal got pregnant, it was as an 18-year-old high school dropout. This actually caused her to re-enroll and to finish high school. What was it like to be a pregnant high school senior? There was the usual painful high school drama, but then there was this: "I can't describe how people look at you," she said. "People who don't know you, think of you as the pregnant girl."

The baby's father vamoosed shortly after learning that Villarreal was pregnant, and this caused some needed introspection on Villarreal's part.

"I didn't want to bring a child into the world knowing I had nothing going for me," she said.

She has some words for teens: "My advice I would give to teens and especially to young girls (Latinas), is you don't need to have sex to be cool. Remember that you are just a kid; don't be in such a rush to grow up because once you get older you are going to wish that you were younger."

Today, Villarreal is poised on the brink of a career. But as a pregnant teenager there was depression and illness. There was the need to grow up too early. While others partied around her, she didn't have the luxury.

For society, there are other kinds of consequences, those initial Medicaid and food stamp costs being just one of many.

And Villarreal, who works with the city of San Antonio's "Me Now, Baby Later" campaign and Healthy Futures, illustrates another feature of teen pregnancy — the cycle.

Her mom was a teen mother, giving birth to Villarreal's older brother at 15. She has a brother who was a teen father. That Villarreal is breaking the cycle does not alter the statistics that show that so many more aren't.

The rest of us pay in other ways. Remember that figure: \$1.2 billion. I'm still looking for that urgency in Austin on teen pregnancy.