

Curbing Teen Pregnancy Crucial Objective

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After showing some decline in the last decade, teenage pregnancy has increased in the United States. Alabama's rate is fluctuating, but remains relatively high. Teen pregnancy costs Alabama taxpayers about \$178 million per year, according to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

Some of these costs are related to public health care assistance (\$40 million), child welfare (\$27 million), incarceration of pregnant teens due to delinquency (\$16 million), loss in tax revenue as these teens' earnings are relatively lower due to their lower skills (\$59 million), and other factors account for the rest of expenses (about \$36 million).

A recent report from the Guttmacher Institute shows that Alabama has the 16th highest teenage pregnancy rate at 73 pregnancies per 1,000 among girls aged 15-19 years, compared to 70 per 1,000 for the United States overall. More importantly, a substantial number of these pregnancies occur among girls below age 15.

High rates of teen pregnancy are a burden not only to taxpayers, but also to the teen mothers themselves, their children, their families, and local communities. Research shows that being a teenage mother significantly reduces a woman's opportunity for higher education and diminishes her chance of marriage and marital stability.

Early childbearing is also associated with larger families, lower paying jobs, unemployment, and intergenerational transfer of poverty. Children born to teenage mothers are at a higher risk of being born prematurely and at a low birthweight. Such children are also more likely to die in infancy than those born to women 20 years and older.

What are the main causes of teenage pregnancy? What can be done to actually prevent teenage pregnancy? Certainly poverty, the absence of a father figure, and other structural factors contribute to the high rate of teenage pregnancy, but the lack of adequate information for teenagers, their parents, and the communities should not be overlooked.

Prevention is the best remedy for teen pregnancy. A good prevention effort requires adequate knowledge of the magnitude of the problem, its geographic distribution, the vulnerable population, and the socio-economic and cultural environment.

To keep teen pregnancy prevention a front-burner issue, researchers at the Center for Demographic Research at Auburn University at Montgomery are compiling teenage pregnancy data for the state of Alabama and each of the 67 counties to be included in the upcoming 2010 Alabama HIV/AIDS and STDs Data Sheet. This data sheet, which is sponsored by AIDS Alabama and other agencies, will be released on World AIDS Day, Dec. 1.

Like the first edition published in 2009, this 2010 edition will be an 18-by-24-inch data sheet poster and will be made available to all Alabama residents. The Center for Demographic Research needs more sponsors to help with the production and distribution of this important data sheet.

There are successful stories all over the country. Various states and local communities have significantly delayed the onset of sexual intercourse, reduced rates of sexually transmitted infections, and lowered teenage pregnancy. Such positive results can be attributed to the application of locally and culturally appropriate models approved by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

For example, the state of California has conducted a winning campaign since 1992. Their teen pregnancy rate declined from 157 pregnancies per 1,000 women aged 15-19 in 1992 to 75 per 1,000 in 2005, which is far above the national decline rate of 37 percent over the same period. To achieve such a substantial decline, California has made teen pregnancy prevention a high public policy priority.

Other efforts are being carried out in several states, including South Carolina and Massachusetts. The strategy has been the same. First, study the specificities of the state, the county, and the local community. Second, select the evidence-based model that best fits the conditions of the target area. And third, work collaboratively with school systems, parent associations, and local youth organizations to reach adolescents and provide them with comprehensive culturally suitable information and resources to reduce teenage pregnancy.

As stated by the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs, "Today's teens are tomorrow's workforce, parents and leaders; and their future is shaped by the opportunities we create for them today."

Help reduce teen pregnancy in your community, county, and state. Give young people a brighter future. We can reduce teen pregnancy if we put proven initiatives to work.

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