Investing in Teens: Saves Dollars, Makes Sense

While only a small percentage of youth get into serious trouble, research suggests “inadequate educational achievement, life-threatening habits such as addictions, risky sexual behavior, involvement in crime and violence, and too-early childbearing cost teens and society big time,” says Martha Burt, PhD, Urban Institute, Washington D C.

What’s wrong?

We can answer the question, “Over the course of a lifetime, what is the cost of not helping high risk youth?” We can measure the consequences in terms of things that carry individual value, that are of value to society and things that cost money.

- Each year’s class of high school dropouts will, over their lifetime, cost the nation $250 billion in lost earnings and forgone taxes.
- Over a lifetime, the average high school dropout will earn $230,000 less than a high school graduate and contribute $70,000 less in taxes.
- Each year, the U.S. spends roughly $20 billion in payment for income maintenance, health care, and nutrition to support families begun by teenagers.

The 1993 report from the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development has these and other data on how investing in youth saves money.

The Solution: Address Youth Needs, Not Problems

Too often, public policies and programs address youth problems as if each one happens in a vacuum. Life conditions of high risk youth — extreme economic deprivation, family conflict, family history of problem behavior and family management problems — lead to most or all substance abuse, delinquency, teenage pregnancy, school dropouts and violence. Too often programs treat single problems in isolation when we know many problems in adolescence cluster. Successful programs treat children, youth and families holistically, start young, offer many enriching activities and stay with youth for a long period of time.

Some things serve to protect teens from trouble, including:

- High self-esteem
- Absence of parental discord
- Good relationship with a parent
- Sense of control
- Family cohesion
- Good relationship with an adult

For More Information

If you want to know more about investing in youth or data like this from the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, contact:

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