Sex, Birth Control, and Unplanned Pregnancy Among Single Young Adults

Roughly half (54%) of unmarried 18–29 year-olds say they are currently in a sexual relationship. Another 24% say they have had sex in the past year, while only 14% say they have never had sex. Non-Hispanic black single young adults are somewhat more likely to currently be in a sexual relationship (65%). Non-Hispanic whites (16%) are more likely than others to say they have never had sex.

At the same time, roughly three-quarters of unmarried young adults of all racial/ethnic groups strongly agree that they want to avoid pregnancy right now (not shown). Even so, only 55% of those in a sexual relationship report being well protected (that is, they use birth control carefully and consistently). Fully 24% use a method inconsistently, and 22% say they use nothing at all. Only about four in 10 (42%) Hispanic young adults say they are well-protected and nearly one-third (31%) say they use no contraception at all.

Given that so many unmarried young adults want to avoid pregnancy yet just over half use contraception carefully and consistently, it is not surprising that many have experienced an unplanned pregnancy at some point in their lives—nearly one-third overall. Twenty-six percent of non-Hispanic white women, 50% of non-Hispanic black women, and 34% of Hispanic women say they have ever had an unplanned pregnancy.

In fact, in 2008 (the most recent year for which official statistics are available), more than two-thirds (69%) of pregnancies among unmarried young women age 20–29 were unplanned. This ranged from a low of 59% among Hispanic young women to a high of 73% among non-Hispanic black young women. This resulted in 1.3 million unplanned pregnancies, including roughly 542,000 among non-Hispanic white women, 394,000 among non-Hispanic black women, and 315,000 among Hispanic women (not shown).
Roughly half (51%) of all unplanned pregnancies among single young women end in abortion. This leads to about 590,000 abortions each year, including roughly 220,000 among non-Hispanic white women, nearly 190,000 among non-Hispanic black women, and more than 140,000 among Hispanic women (not shown).

Although rates of teen pregnancy are at historic lows, there has been little progress in reducing rates of unplanned pregnancy for single, young women (measured as the number of unplanned pregnancies per 1,000 unmarried women age 20–29). In fact, the unplanned pregnancy rate rose slightly from 2001 to 2008, among single, young women overall, among non-Hispanic white women, and among Hispanic women. Rates have fallen somewhat for non-Hispanic black women, though their rate remains significantly higher than for other women.

Sources
1. Author tabulations based on data in Kaye, K., Suellentrop, K., & Sloup, C. (2009). The Fog Zone: How misperceptions, magical thinking, and ambivalence put young adults at risk for unplanned pregnancy. Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Statistics on sexual activity and contraception exclude those saying they (or their partner) were pregnant or trying to get pregnant.
