

Summary



THE FOG ZONE

How Misperceptions, Magical Thinking, and Ambivalence Put Young Adults at Risk for Unplanned Pregnancy

In a Nutshell

THE PROBLEM. Becoming pregnant—or causing a pregnancy—and having a child are critical, life-changing events with generational effects. Yet at present, half of *all* pregnancies in the United States are reported by women themselves to be unplanned. Among unmarried women in their 20s, fully 7 in 10 pregnancies are unplanned, reflecting the fact that a significant proportion of sexually active, unmarried young adults—who themselves say they do not want to be parents right now—are not fully protecting themselves from pregnancy by the careful, consistent use of contraception.

The question is *why*. Why are so many pregnancies unplanned and, in particular, why is contraceptive use so uneven? Cost and access barriers can make contraception hard to secure—especially the better methods—and some women become pregnant unintentionally due to a contraceptive failure. But there are other barriers and explanations as well such as fear, misinformation and ambivalence that have not been well documented. These factors were explored in a new national survey on contraceptive and fertility knowledge and form the basis of this *Fog Zone* report. *The Fog Zone* survey focused on unmarried young adults—both men and women—and assessed their:

- basic knowledge about and attitudes toward contraception,
- motivation to use contraception carefully and consistently, and
- attitudes and aspirations about relationships and forming families.

MAJOR FINDINGS. The survey revealed a range of factors that put unmarried young adults at risk of unplanned pregnancy:

- Even though most unmarried young adults say it is important for them to avoid pregnancy right now, only about half of those who are sexually active use contraception every time. Some take a pass on birth control altogether, at least part of the time, and while others are more conscientious, they are often not careful or consistent enough. In addition, a significant portion expects to have unprotected sex in the near future.
- Many say they have little knowledge of even common contraceptive methods such as condoms and the pill, and most have not even heard of less common methods such as the implant.
- To the extent they have heard of various methods, many express little confidence in their effectiveness and strong concerns about side effects. Many even claim, “it doesn’t matter whether you use birth control or not; when it is your time to get pregnant it will happen.”
- They see parenthood in their future but are ambivalent about the timing and circumstances under which to start a family; in addition, the proportion that expects to marry and have children with their current partner is unrealistically high.

THE SURVEY. The national survey whose results are presented here is the first of its kind to focus in depth on the attitudes and behavior of unmarried young adults regarding pregnancy planning, contraception, and related issues. Commissioned by The National Campaign and conducted by the Guttmacher Institute, the survey gathered detailed results from a nationally representative, probability sample of 1,800 unmarried men and women age 18–29. It was designed so that the weighted results are statistically representative of this group overall as well as by age, gender, and race/ethnicity. Readers should note that all results presented in *The Fog Zone* are for unmarried young adults age 18–29 and various subgroups as noted.

Major Findings in More Detail

Sex and Contraception

Most unmarried young adults have had sex.

- 86% have ever had sex and 78% have had sex in the past year.

Most have used contraception and think it is important.

- Overall, 82% say they have used some method of contraception. Among them, 92% say they have used condoms and 79% of women report that they have used the pill.
- 85% of men and 86% of women say most of their friends think birth control is important.
- Just 13% view contraception as morally wrong.

86% of men and 88% of women say it is important to avoid pregnancy in their lives right now.

Intentions....

Most unmarried young adults feel strongly that pregnancy should be planned.

- 94% of men and 86% of women believe pregnancy should be planned.
- This includes 74% of men and 64% of women who *strongly* agree that pregnancy should be planned.

Avoiding pregnancy is very important to them, too—at least right now.

- Regardless of gender, age, or racial/ethnic group, and regardless of whether they are currently in a cohabiting relationship (that is, living together) or not, the overwhelming majority do not want to get pregnant or get someone pregnant at this time in their lives.
- 86% of men and 88% of women say it is important—74% of men and 80% of women describe it as *very* important—to avoid pregnancy in their lives right now.

...Don't Match Behavior

Many unmarried young adults are not using contraception carefully or at all.

Among those unmarried young adults who are currently in a sexual relationship and who are not trying to get pregnant or cause a pregnancy:

- 19% use no contraception at all and 24% use contraception inconsistently (contraceptive use is unknown among 7% of unmarried young adults).

- In other words, only about 50% are well protected against unplanned pregnancy.

In fact, many say it is likely that they will have unprotected sex in the near future.

- 17% of women and 19% of men surveyed freely admit it is either extremely or quite likely that they will have unprotected sex in the next three months. An additional 12% of women and 23% of men say it is *slightly* likely they will have unprotected sex in the near future. Put another way, 29% of women and 42% of men say it is at least slightly likely they will have unprotected sex in the next three months.
- Even among those who say it is very important to avoid pregnancy right now, 34% say it is likely they will have unprotected sex in the near future (12% say it is extremely likely, 5% quite likely, 17% slightly likely).

Not surprisingly, many say they have been pregnant or gotten their partner pregnant unintentionally.

- 31% of the women surveyed say they have had an unplanned pregnancy when they were not intending to.
- 69% of women say many of their friends have had an unplanned pregnancy.

In short, the overwhelming majority of unmarried young adults have had sex and have used contraception, do not want to get pregnant or get their partner pregnant at present, and strongly believe that pregnancy should be planned. Yet many are not taking adequate measures to prevent pregnancy; unplanned pregnancy is common in their lives and among their friends; and a small but important portion believes it is likely they will have unprotected sex soon.

Why the Gap Between Intent and Behavior?

Many unmarried young adults know little or nothing about contraception, even the most commonly-used methods.

- 30% say they know *little or nothing* about condoms.
- 63% say they know *little or nothing* about birth control pills.
- 56% say they have *not heard* of the birth control implant.

Myths and misinformation about pregnancy and contraception are prevalent.

- Among those who have relied on birth control pills, nearly half (44%) incorrectly believe that you should take a break from the pill every few years.

29% of women and 42% of men say it is at least slightly likely they will have unprotected sex in the next three months.

Many unmarried young adults say they know little about even the most commonly-used methods of contraception.

- Among those reporting they had relied on the rhythm method or natural family planning, 40% do not know when a typical woman's most fertile time of the month is (midway between periods).
- Among those who have used condoms, 37% incorrectly believe it is okay to use petroleum jelly as a lubricant for latex condoms.

Many unmarried young women, in particular, fear the side effects of contraception and these fears reduce their likelihood of using the more effective methods.

Despite current clinical evidence suggesting otherwise:

- 27% of unmarried young women believe that it is *extremely or quite likely* that using birth control pills or other hormonal methods of contraception for a long period of time will lead to a serious health problem like cancer.
- Half of unmarried young women believe that cancer or other serious health risks due to pill use are at least *somewhat likely* and report that this concern reduces their likelihood of using birth control pills or other hormonal methods.
- 30% say it is extremely or quite likely that using an IUD will cause an infection.
- 36% say it is likely that the pill will cause them to gain weight and 40% say it will likely cause *severe* mood swings *and* that these concerns reduce the likelihood of their using the pill.

Many unmarried young adults, both men and women, simply don't believe that contraception is very effective.

- For example, 42% of men and 40% of women believe that the chance of getting pregnant within a year while using the birth control pill is 50% or greater (despite research suggesting that the pill is typically 92% effective).

And many unmarried young adults believe they are infertile.

Although available data suggest that about 8.4% of women 15–29 have impaired fecundity (measured as an inability to conceive or carry a baby to term):

- 59% of women and 47% of men say it is at least slightly likely they are infertile (19% of women and 14% of men describe it as quite or extremely likely).

Myths and misinformation about pregnancy and contraception are prevalent.

- Three-quarters of women (76%) who express fertility concerns are not basing their concern about infertility on actual information from a doctor.

Despite the myths, inflated fears, gaps in knowledge and more, nearly all unmarried young adults say they have the knowledge they need to avoid an unplanned pregnancy.

- 90% believe (and 66% *strongly* believe) they have all the knowledge they need to avoid an unplanned pregnancy.

Moreover, many are fatalistic about fertility and pregnancy...

- 38% of men and 44% of women believe “it doesn’t matter whether you use birth control or not; when it is your time to get pregnant it will happen.”
- Hispanics (49%) and non-Hispanic blacks (50%) are more likely than non-Hispanic whites (34%) to believe that birth control doesn’t matter much.

...and many are suspicious of the whole birth control enterprise.

- 31% overall (40% of non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics) agree with the statement, “the government and public health institutions use poor and minority people as guinea pigs to try out new birth control methods.”
- 32% overall (44% of non-Hispanic blacks and 46% of Hispanics) agree with the statement, “the government is trying to limit blacks and other minority populations by encouraging the use of birth control.”

Many unmarried young adults want to be parents but are ambivalent about the timing and circumstances under which to start a family.

- 53% of men and 52% of women say they would like to be parents now “if things in their life were different.”
- Even among those who say it is important to them to avoid pregnancy right now, 20% of women and 43% of men say they would be at least a little pleased if they found out today that they or their partner were pregnant.

In short, many unmarried young adults say they know little about even the most commonly used methods of contraception, are confused about their own fertility, and hold many myths about contraception as well. They underestimate the effectiveness and overestimate the risks of many methods. Many are afraid that serious side effects from some of the most effective methods are *highly* likely, which in turn reduces the chance of their using them, and many are conflicted about when and under what circumstances to start a family.

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What to Do?

The survey results presented in *The Fog Zone* suggest a number of steps that might help to reduce unplanned pregnancy among unmarried young adults, both men and women:

EDUCATION. One in five unmarried young adults (22%) say they have never had sex education in school and of those who had, more than one-quarter had it before they were 15-years-old. This fact, coupled with the high levels of confusion and misinformation that young adults have about fertility and contraception, suggests the need for organized, direct sex education directed to this age group that:

- Presents clear, balanced information about the basics—anatomy, reproduction, fertility, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, sexuality, and related issues.
- Includes full and accurate information about contraception, including the types of methods available, how to use them correctly, and their benefits as well as their risks.
- Counteracts and corrects specific myths and misinformation about contraception.
- Directly addresses healthy and respectful relationships, the common desire of most young adults to have children, and the family structures that research suggests are best for children. In fact, for many unmarried young adults, it might be best to speak less about *preventing* pregnancy and more about *delaying* pregnancy—that is, postponing pregnancy until, for example, adequate education has been secured (in order to increase the chances of solid employment and reduce the risk of poverty), until a stable committed relationship is in place, and until some economic security has been attained.

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUNG ADULTS. Information on these topics should be made available in ways and in settings that are well-suited to the lifestyles of unmarried young adults, including:

- Specific educational programs in two- and four-year colleges and in other settings such as job training sites, workplaces, and the military.
- Internet-based services and systems that are tailored to the media habits and culture of young adults.

THE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM. Through both more adequate financing and changes in professional norms, the health care system can do more to help unmarried young adults plan and prevent pregnancy by:

- Ensuring that providers who care for young adults are well trained in family planning, aware of the full range of contraceptive methods now available, and comfortable providing them to young adults.
- Encouraging providers to do more counseling about pregnancy planning and prevention, touching on, for example, the many contraceptive methods now available, the importance of supportive partners, myths and inflated fears about birth control, common problems with their chosen method and how to manage them, and the critical importance of avoiding gaps in protection.

THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT. We are all influenced by the larger social environment around us. This truism suggests that:

- Parents and other caring adults should communicate with their teens and young adults about the importance of pregnancy planning—when, with whom, and under what circumstances it might be best to start a family. They should also acknowledge the desire that so many unmarried young adults express for children and family life, and how such feelings relate to longer term goals.
- Parents, other caring adults, and larger social systems should also encourage unmarried young adults to *align* their plans for pregnancy and family with their sexual and contraceptive behavior—for example, using protection “most of the time” is not a reliable way to prevent pregnancy.
- A new social norm should be fostered: unless both partners are seeking pregnancy *and* are committed to each other and to the years it takes to raise children, they should always take active, careful, and consistent steps to avoid pregnancy now.