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Sexual Health of Adolescents and Young Adults in the United States

The share of adolescents engaging in sexual activity has declined over the past few decades. Despite the growing attention to prevention and health education, recent data indicate that the rates of unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STI) remain higher for young adults than older adults and higher than the rates in most developed nations. This fact sheet provides key data on sexual activity, pregnancy, contraceptive use, prevalence of STIs among teenagers and young adults, and access to reproductive health services.

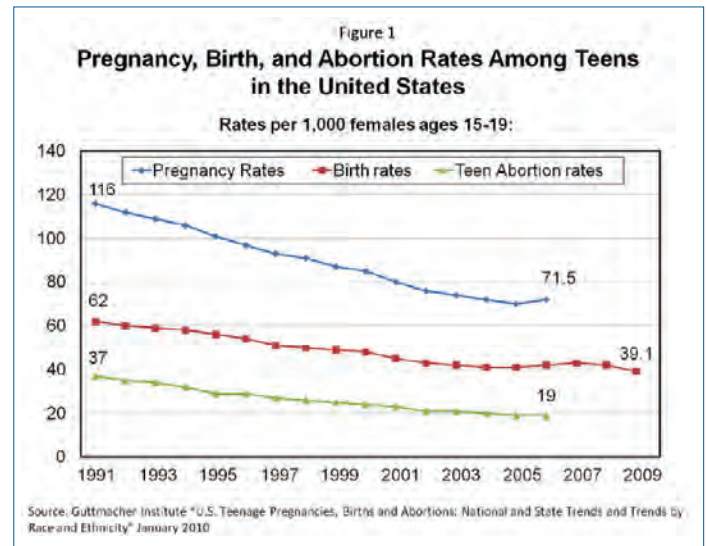
Sexual Activity

- Nearly half (46%) of all high school students report ever having had sexual intercourse in 2009, a decline from 54% in 1991. Males are no more likely than females to report having had sex (46%).¹
- There are racial/ethnic differences in sexual activity rates among teens. Black high school students are more likely to have had intercourse (65%) compared to White (42%) and Hispanic students (49%). More Black high school students (15%) and Latino students (7%) initiated sex before age 13 compared to White students (4%).¹
- Twenty-six percent of female teens and 29% of male teens have had more than one sexual partner. The percentage of high school students who report having had four or more sexual partners declined from 18% in 1995 to 15% in 2009.²
- Almost one-quarter (22%) of sexually active high school students reported using alcohol or drugs during their most recent sexual encounter, with males having a higher percentage (26%) compared to females (17%), and White males (28%) higher than Black males (21%).¹
- One in ten high school students reported having experienced dating violence. Seven percent of students have been physically forced to have sexual intercourse, with females (11%) more likely than males (5%) to report this experience.¹
- In 2006–2008 it was found that 7% of females ages 18–24 reported that their first sexual intercourse was nonvoluntary. This was more likely to be the case for female teens whose partner was three or more years older (13% nonvoluntary, 19% “really didn’t want it to happen at that time”).²
- “Sexing” is the exchange of explicit sexual messages or images by mobile phone. Ten percent of 14–24 year olds report having shared a naked photo or video of themselves via digital communication such as the internet or text messaging.³

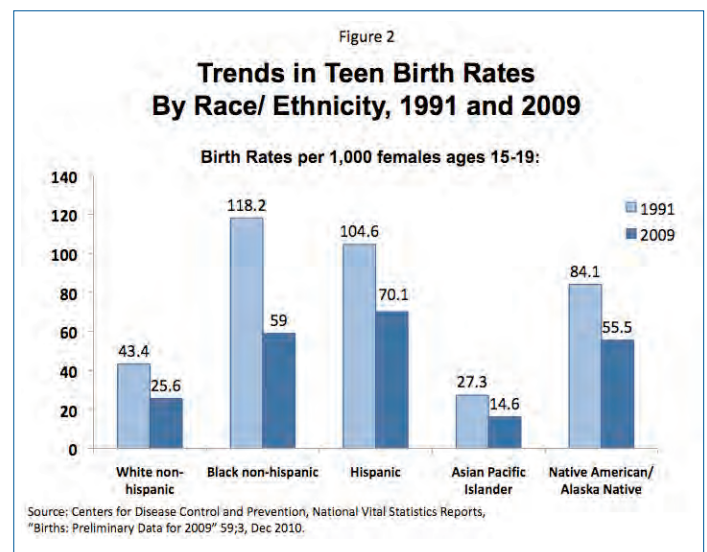
Pregnancy

- The U.S. continues to have among the highest teen pregnancy, birth, and abortion rates in the developed world.⁴
- The pregnancy rate among female teens ages 15–19 in 2006 was 71.5 per 1,000, a drop of 41% since the peak in 1990.⁵

- Following a long-term decline, the teen birth rate increased slightly between 2005 and 2007. Since then, it has resumed a decreasing trend, and by 2009 dropped to 39.1 per 1,000 females (Figure 1).⁶



- Although birth rates have fallen for teens of all races and ethnicities, the rates for African American, Hispanic and Native American teens are over twice the rates of White and Asian American youth (Figure 2).



- The vast majority of teen pregnancies are unplanned. These pregnancies comprise a fifth of total unintended pregnancies annually in the US.⁷ Approximately 18% of women having abortions in the U.S. are teens and 33% are between the ages of 20 and 24.⁸

- Today, 34 states require some level of parental involvement in a minor's decision to have an abortion, up from 18 states in 1991. Twenty states require parental consent, ten require parental notification, and four require both.⁹

Contraception

- One study found that 53% of female and 45% of male adolescents talked about contraception or STIs with their partner before their first time having sex.¹⁰
- In a nationally representative survey of 14–17 year olds, 80% of boys and 69% of girls said they had used a condom at last sexual intercourse.¹¹
- Only 20% of currently sexually active high school students report that they or their partner used birth control pills to prevent pregnancy at last sexual intercourse. White students (27%) were more likely to use birth control pills compared to African American (8%) and Hispanic (11%).¹
- Twenty-one percent of teen females and 13% of teen males did not use contraception at first intercourse.² Research has shown that those who reported condom use at their sexual debut were more likely than those who did not to engage in subsequent protective behaviors.¹²
- Emergency contraception (EC) can prevent pregnancy when taken within a few days of unprotected intercourse. EC is available with a prescription for minors, and over-the-counter for those aged 18 and older. In 2006–2008, 11% of sexually experienced female teens had used Plan B, the first major method of EC in the U.S.²

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and HIV/AIDS

- Compared to older adults, sexually active teens and young adults are at higher risk for acquiring STIs, due to a combination of behavioral, biological and cultural factors. Though they make up 25% of the sexually active population, they account for nearly half of new STI cases.¹³
- HPV is the most common STI among teens. The CDC estimates that 35% of 14–19 year olds are infected with HPV.¹³ Currently, there are two vaccines (Gardasil and Cervarix) that protect against strains of HPV associated with cervical cancer and genital warts. The CDC recommends that all girls and women up to age 26 receive a vaccination.¹⁴
- Girls and women 15–19 years old had the largest number of reported cases of Chlamydia and Gonorrhea in 2009 of any age group. Females are at greater risk of acquiring infection, and the consequences include pelvic inflammatory disease, pregnancy complications, and infertility.¹⁵

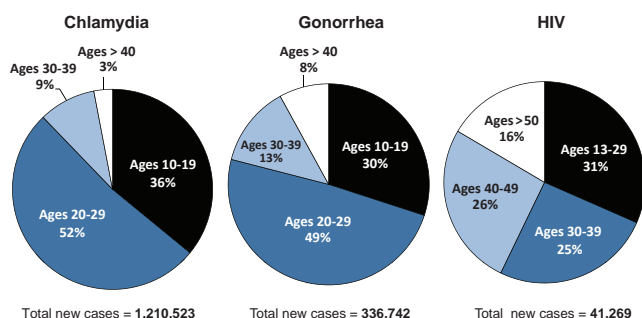
- STI screening rates vary among youth. One study estimates that 37% of young men and 70% young women had an STI test in the past year.¹⁶
- Over 61,000 young people, ages 13–29, were estimated to be living with HIV in the U.S. in 2007.¹⁷ This age group accounts for 31% of new HIV infections (Figure 3). Most young people with HIV/AIDS were infected by sexual contact.¹⁸
- In 2009, 30% of young adults ages 19–29 reported that they had been tested for HIV in the past 12 months.¹⁹ In 2009, 87% of high school students reported that they had been taught about AIDS or HIV infection in school.¹

Access to Services

- Health insurance coverage and the ability to pay for services affect teen access to reproductive health care. Approximately 33% of young adults 19–25 years old were uninsured and 13% were covered by Medicaid in 2009. Six in ten (59%) young adults lives in a low-income household (below 200% of the federal poverty level).²⁰
- The new health reform law requires private insurance plans that offer dependent coverage to children to extend that coverage to young adults up to age 26.
- The Federal Title X program provides confidential contraceptive services and STD screening and treatment for low-income teens and young adults by funding approximately 4,500 clinics, public health departments and hospitals, available in 75% of US counties.²¹
- Currently, Medicaid funds 71% of family planning services in the U.S.²² Family planning is a mandatory service under Medicaid and states are not permitted to charge cost-sharing for family planning services.
- Confidentiality affects youth access to health services. Twenty-one states and DC have policies that explicitly allow minors to consent to contraceptive services, 25 allow consent in certain circumstances, and 4 have no explicit policy.²³

¹ CDC. Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System: US, 2009. *MMWR*, 57(SS-4). 2010.
² Abma JC. "Teenagers in the United States: Sexual Activity, Contraceptive Use, and Childbearing" National Survey of Family Growth 2006-2008. National Center for Health Stats, Vital Health Stats, 2010.
³ AP/MTV Digital Abuse Study, 2009 (www.athinline.org)
⁴ Guttmacher Institute. Teen Pregnancy and Lessons Learned, 2002. Singh S. Adolescent Pregnancy and Childbearing: Levels and Trends in Developed Countries. *Family Planning Perspectives* 2000;32(1):14-23.
⁵ CDC, 2010 Teen Pregnancy Data.
⁶ CDC. *National Vital Statistics Reports*, 2007 56(7); "Births: Preliminary Data for 2009";59(3)2010.
⁷ Finer LB et al. Disparities in Rates of Unintended Pregnancies in the US: *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 2006, 38(2):90–96.
⁸ Guttmacher Inst. Characteristics of U.S. Abortion Patients, 2008. May 2010
⁹ Guttmacher Inst. Parental Involvement in Minors' Abortions. *State Policies in Brief*, 2010.
¹⁰ Ryan, S. "Adolescents' Discussions About Contraception or STDs with Partners Before First Sex" *PSRH*, 39(3):149–157, 2007.
¹¹ Reece, M. "Condom Use Rates in a National Probability Sample of Males and Females Ages 14 to 94 in the United States" *Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 7 (5), 266-276. 2010
¹² Shafiq T. Association Between Condom Use at Sexual Debut and Subsequent Sexual Trajectories: A Longitudinal Study Using Biomarkers. *AJPH*, 97(6). 2007.
¹³ CDC. *Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance*. 2009.
¹⁴ CDC. "FDA Licensure of Bivalent HPV for Use in Females and Updated HPV Vaccination Recommendations from the ACIP," *MMWR*, May 28, 2010.
¹⁵ CDC. *STDs*, 2009
¹⁶ Cunningham, S. "Relationships Between Perceived STD-Related Stigma and STD Screening Among a Household Sample of Adolescents" *PSRH*, 2009
¹⁷ Calculation based on CDC, *HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report*, 2010.
¹⁸ CDC. *HIV/AIDS Surveillance in Adolescents and Young Adults*, 2007.
¹⁹ Kaiser Family Foundation Survey, March 2009.
²⁰ KFF unpublished analysis of Urban Institute tabs of 2009 ASEC supplement to CPS, 2010.
²¹ USDHHS Office of Population Affairs: Family Planning (www.hhs.gov)
²² Guttmacher Inst. "Next Steps for America's Family Planning Program: Leveraging the Potential of Medicaid and Title X in an Evolving Health Care System";2009.
²³ Guttmacher Inst. Minors' Access to Contraceptive Services. *State Policies in Brief*. 2010.

Figure 3
New Cases of Sexually Transmitted Infections, by Age, 2008



Note: Estimated new diagnoses of Chlamydia and Gonorrhea from 50 states reported to CDC, Estimated new HIV diagnoses among men and women >13 years old from 37 states.
 Source: Calculations based on Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance*, 2008. Atlanta, GA: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; November 2009.