

Trends and Recent Estimates: Sexual Activity Among U.S. Teens

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Overview. Rates of teenage pregnancy and childbearing have been declining in the United States among all racial/ethnic groups, among older and younger teenagers, and in all states. However, the most recent estimates indicate a slowing of the decline in the U.S. teen birth rates, with increases in birth rates in two states and an increase in the total number of births to teens.⁷ Moreover, U.S. teen pregnancy rates, birth rates, and rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) remain among the highest in the industrialized world.^{16,19,22} These high rates generate concern for multiple reasons. For example, the vast majority of births to teenage mothers are unintended and occur outside of marriage,^{2,8} and teenage mothers and their children have more negative outcomes than do women who delay childbearing.¹⁴ Moreover, the statistics continue to show large disparities, with especially high rates of teen pregnancy, childbearing, and STIs among racial and ethnic minorities.⁷

The most obvious ways for teenagers to avoid early and unintended pregnancy, childbearing, and STIs are by delaying sexual initiation or, if teenagers are sexually experienced, by reducing levels of sexual activity and the number of sexual partners, and by improving contraceptive use. Delaying sexual intercourse has been shown to be associated with multiple positive outcomes. Compared with teenagers who have sex at a young age, adolescents who delay their first sexual experience are less likely to regret the timing of their first sexual experience,¹⁵ have fewer sexual partners,^{6,20} and are less likely to be involved in coercive sexual relationships.¹

This Research Brief draws on recently released nationally representative data to provide information on teenage sexual activity. (For more detailed information on these data, see the box on page 2.) In this brief, we provide trends through 2002 on multiple indicators of sexual experience and activity for males and females, members of racial and ethnic groups, and for younger and older teenagers. These new analyses indicate declines in sexual experience among many subpopulations. However, we also identify subgroups of teenagers who engage in oral sex and have multiple sexual partners, placing them at a greater risk of unintended pregnancy and childbearing or of contracting a sexually transmitted infection.

SEXUAL BEHAVIORS AMONG TEENS

This report distinguishes between *sexual experience* and *sexual activity*, as defined below:

- A *sexually experienced* teenager has had sexual intercourse (defined here as heterosexual vaginal intercourse) at least once in his or her lifetime.
- A *sexually active* teenager has had sexual intercourse in the past three months.

SEXUAL EXPERIENCE

The earlier an adolescent has sex, the longer she or he is at risk of pregnancy and contracting a

sexually transmitted infection (STI), a fact that underscores the importance of encouraging adolescents to avoid or delay engaging in all types of sexual activity.

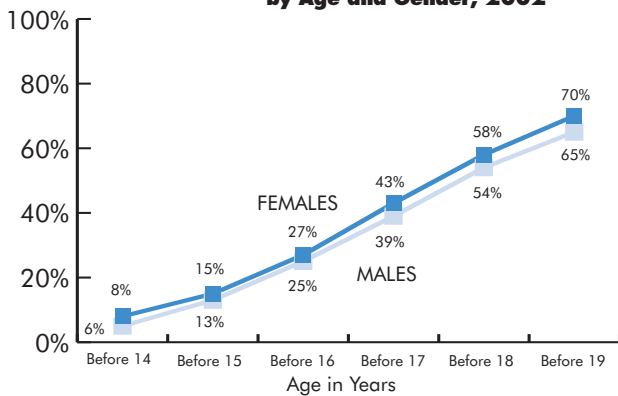
Sexual experience increases with age. In 2002, approximately one-quarter of never-married teenagers had sexual intercourse before the age of 16 (see Figure 1). This proportion increased with age, with more than one-half of females (58 percent) and males (54 percent) having sexual intercourse before the age of 18. Before the age of 19, 70 percent of females and 65 percent of males had had sex.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH SOURCE FOR THIS BRIEF

All 2002 data on adolescent sexual activity and contraceptive use reported in this brief are drawn from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG 2002), conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), CDC. The NSFG 2002 is a nationally representative cross-sectional survey (i.e., taken at one point in time) of males and females who were between the ages of 15 and 44 at the time of the survey. NSFG data discussed in this brief come from a report published by the NCHS² and are supplemented with original analyses by Child Trends. Trend data for females come from earlier rounds of these data (National Survey of Family Growth 1988 and 1995), while trend data for males in 1988 and 1995 come from the National Survey of Adolescent Males (NSAM). The NSAM is a nationally representative survey of never-married males between the ages of 15 and 19.

Figure 1

Cumulative Percentage of Never-Married Teens Who Ever Had Sexual Intercourse, by Age and Gender, 2002



Source: Abma et al. (2004). Teenagers in the United States: Sexual activity, contraceptive use, and childbearing, 2002. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.

The percentage of teenagers who has ever had sexual intercourse has declined among all age groups. In 2002, 46 percent of never-married male and female teenagers between the ages of 15 and 19 had ever had sexual intercourse (see Figure 2). Between 1988 and 2002, male teenagers between the ages of 15 and 19 experienced a 23 percent decline in sexual experience (from 60 percent to 46 percent). The proportion of female teenagers who had ever had sexual intercourse also declined during this same time period (51 percent in 1988 to 46 percent in 2002), but the decline was smaller and not statistically significant. Additional analyses indicate that there were declines in sexual experience among almost all age groups:

- Retrospective reports of sexually experienced teenagers suggest a decline in the proportion of very young teenagers (those under the age of 15) who had had sex. In 2002, 13 percent of never-married females between the ages of 15 and 19 reported having had sex before the age of 15, down from 19 percent in 1995. For adolescent males, the proportion reporting having had sex before the age of 15 declined from 21 percent in 1995 to 15 percent in 2002.
- Male and female teenagers between the ages of 15 and 17 showed a significant decline in sexual

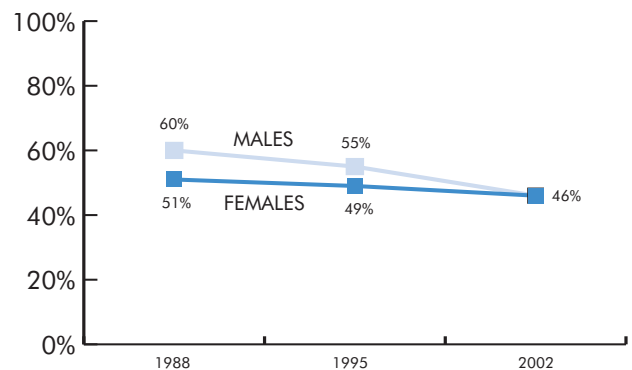
experience between 1995 and 2002 (from 43 percent to 31 percent for males and from 38 percent to 30 percent for females).

- Male teenagers, but not female teenagers, between the ages of 18 and 19 also experienced a decline in the proportion of those who had ever had sex during this time period (from 75 percent in 1995 to 64 percent in 2002).

White, black, and Hispanic teenagers all experienced significant declines in sexual experience for at least one gender. Never-married Hispanic female teenagers experienced a 29 percent decline in the proportion of those who were sexually experienced between 1995 and 2002 (53 percent to 37 percent) and were the least likely to have ever had sexual intercourse in 2002. In comparison, no significant declines were found in the proportion of never-married white or black teen females who were sexually experienced during this time period. In 2002, 45 percent of white females and 57 percent of black females between the ages of 15 and 19 had ever had sexual intercourse.

Figure 2

Trends in the Percentage of Never-Married Teens Aged 15-19 Who Ever Had Sexual Intercourse, by Gender



Source: Abma et al. (2004).

- Among never-married males, white teenagers and black teenagers both experienced declines in sexual experience from 1995 to 2002. White male teenagers experienced an 18 percent

decline in the proportion of those who were sexually experienced (from 50 percent to 41 percent), and black male teenagers experienced a 21 percent decline (from 80 percent to 63 percent).

- Never-married Hispanic male teenagers experienced a 6-percentage point drop in those who were sexually experienced (from 61 percent in 1995 to 55 percent in 2002), a finding that was not statistically significant.

OTHER SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

Some adolescents who have not engaged in sexual intercourse have nonetheless engaged in oral sex (see Child Trends DataBank indicator for additional details).⁴ Many teenagers do not consider oral sex to be sexual activity and, thus, may be unaware of or downplay risks associated with this sexual behavior.¹⁷ While teenagers who engage in oral sex are not at risk of pregnancy, research has shown that they are at risk of contracting a sexually transmitted infection.^{5,9}

One in six 15- to 17-year-olds has had oral sex but not sexual intercourse. In 2002, almost one-third of male and female teenagers between the

Hispanic and 8 percent of black youth in this category (see Figure 3).

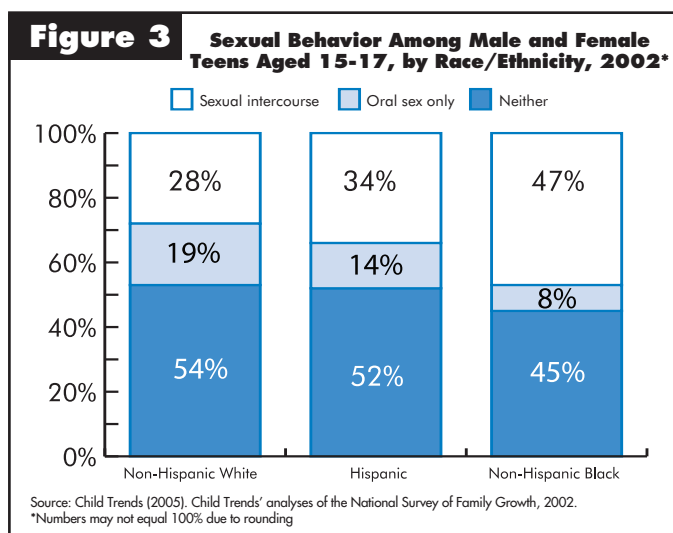
- Female and male adolescents between the ages of 15 and 17 were similarly likely to have had sexual intercourse (30 percent and 32 percent, respectively) and to have engaged in oral sex without ever having had sexual intercourse (15 percent and 17 percent, respectively).
- Separate analyses indicate that only 11 percent of females and 15 percent of males between the ages of 15 and 17 who had ever engaged in oral sex reported using a condom the most recent time that they had engaged in oral sex.
- Among 18- to 19-year-olds, 71 percent of females and 65 percent of males had ever had sexual intercourse; 11 percent of females and 12 percent of males had engaged in oral sex without ever having had sexual intercourse; and 19 percent of females and 24 percent of males had experienced neither.

SEXUAL ACTIVITY

Not all sexually experienced teenagers remain sexually active or are consistently sexually active. For many teenagers, relationships are often short-term and episodic. Nevertheless, teenagers who do become sexually experienced and remain sexually active place themselves at risk of pregnancy and contracting an STI each time that they have sex or have sex with a new partner. Research has found that teenagers with multiple sexual partners are more likely to report having a sexually transmitted infection, compared with teenagers who have only one sexual partner.¹¹

Approximately one-quarter of all teenagers had had sexual intercourse in the previous four weeks. As mentioned earlier in this brief, in 2002, almost one-half of never-married teenagers between the ages of 15 and 19 had had sexual intercourse at least once (46 percent). Further analysis indicates that only one-third of adolescents (34 percent of females and 31 percent of males) had had sex at least once in the three months prior to answering the survey. Even fewer teenagers had had sex at least once in the previous four weeks (28 percent of females and 25 percent of males). Indeed, some teenagers may have had sex only once, reflecting teenagers' often short-term sexual relationships.

- Differences by race/ethnicity were found in the proportion of teenagers who were currently sexually active. Among males between the ages of 15 and 19, white teenagers were the least



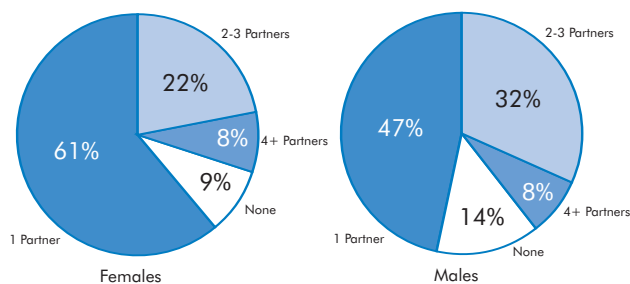
ages of 15 and 17 (31 percent) had had sexual intercourse at least once. An additional 16 percent had engaged in oral sex but had not had sexual intercourse. The remaining 53 percent of teenagers in this age group had not engaged in either oral sex or sexual intercourse.

- White teenagers between the ages of 15 and 17 were more likely to have had no experience with sexual intercourse but to have engaged in oral sex than were Hispanic and black teenagers. Nineteen percent of white youth (almost two out of 10) had engaged in oral sex but had never had sexual intercourse, compared with 14 percent of

likely to have had sex in the previous three months, followed by Hispanic and black teenagers (29 percent, 38 percent, and 40 percent, respectively).

- Among females, however, white and black teenagers were more likely to be sexually active than were Hispanic teenagers (36 percent for white teenagers and 35 percent for black teenagers, compared with 29 percent for Hispanic teenagers).
- Not surprisingly, younger adolescents, regardless of gender, were less likely than were older adolescents to have had sex recently. Among 15- to 17-year-olds, 20 percent were sexually active in the previous three months, compared with 51 percent of 18- to 19-year-olds.

Figure 4 Number of Sexual Partners in Last 12 Months Among Sexually Experienced Never-Married Teens Aged 15-19, by Gender, 2002*



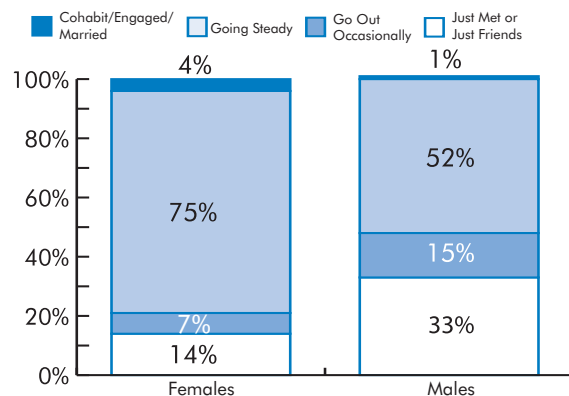
Source: Child Trends (2005). Child Trends' analyses of the National Survey of Family Growth, 2002. *Numbers may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Most sexually experienced teenagers had either one or no partners in the previous year. Almost one-half of sexually experienced male teenagers (47 percent) and 61 percent of sexually experienced female teenagers reported having one partner in the year before responding to the survey (see Figure 4). Nine percent of sexually experienced female teenagers and 14 percent of sexually experienced male teenagers did not have any sexual partners in the previous 12 months. However, among both male teenagers and female teenagers who were sexually experienced, almost one in 10 (8 percent) reported having four or more sexual partners in the previous 12 months. An additional one-third of male teenagers (32 percent) and 22 percent of female teenagers reported having two to three partners during that time.

PARTNER CHARACTERISTICS

This section presents information on the first sexual partners of teenagers who have ever had sexual

Figure 5 Self-Reported Partner Relationship Type at First Sex, by Gender, 2002



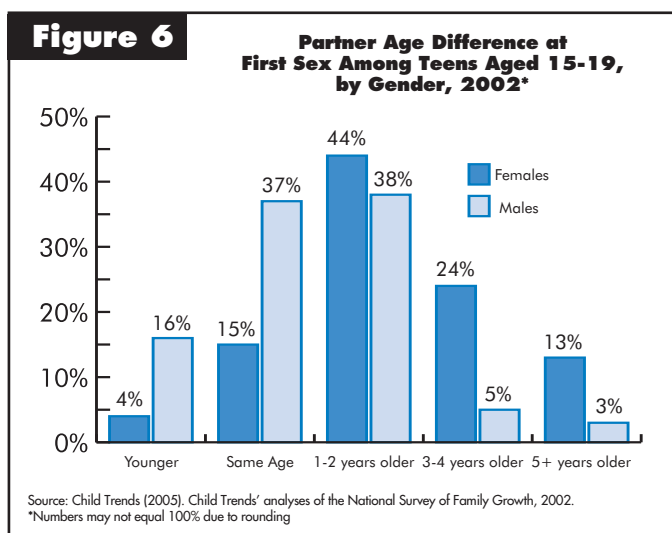
Source: Abma et al. (2004); Child Trends (2005). Child Trends' analyses of the National Survey of Family Growth, 2002

intercourse, a topic that has important bearing on adolescents' reproductive health. Among teenagers, being in a relationship viewed as romantic is associated with a greater likelihood of having sexual intercourse.¹⁸ Teenagers with older dating partners are more likely than are teenagers with similar-age partners to engage in sexual intercourse.^{10,13} Having sex at an early age or with a much older partner is associated with nonvoluntary sexual intercourse,¹ which is linked to having multiple sexual partners.²¹

Female teenagers are more likely than are male teenagers to report being in a steady relationship with their partner when they had sex for the first time. Among sexually experienced teenagers, a large majority of females who were between the ages of 15 and 19 in 2002 (79 percent) reported that they were going steady with, cohabiting with, engaged to, or married to their first sexual partner at the time of their first experience with sexual intercourse (see Figure 5). In comparison, only about one-half of male teenagers (53 percent) reported this level of commitment at the time of their first sexual intercourse. In fact, the proportion of males who had just met or were just friends with their first sexual partner was more than double that of females (33 percent, compared with 14 percent).

- For both genders, differences existed within racial/ethnic groups. Hispanic females were slightly more likely to report being in a steady relationship than were white or black females. More specifically, 82 percent of Hispanic female teenagers reported going steady, cohabiting, being engaged to, or married to their first sexual partner, compared with 79 percent of their white counterparts and 74 percent of their black counterparts.

- Among males, white teenagers were more likely to report that they were going steady with their partner at their first sexual relationship than were black teenagers and Hispanic teenagers (59 percent of white males, compared with 42 percent of black males and 41 percent of Hispanic males.)
- Teenagers who were older when they first had sex were more likely to report being in a steady relationship than were teenagers who were younger when they did so, regardless of gender. Among females, 91 percent of those who were between the ages of 18 and 19 when they first had sexual intercourse reported that they were going steady, cohabiting, engaged to, or married to their partner, compared with 82 percent of those between the ages of 15 and 17 and 65 percent of those who were 14 and younger when they first had sex. Among males, the comparable percentages are 81 percent, 53 percent, and 36 percent, respectively.



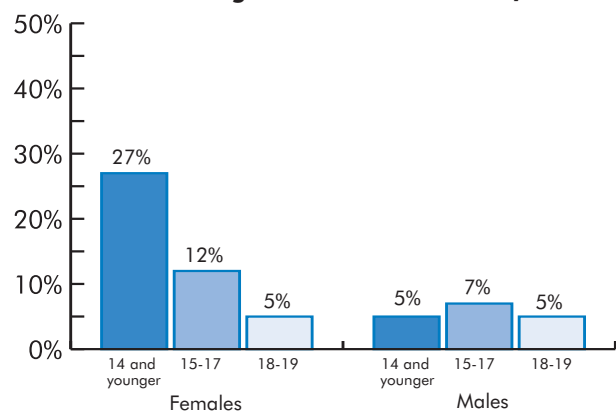
Female teenagers are more likely than are male teenagers to have had an older first sexual partner. In 2002, eight out of 10 female teenagers had a partner who was at least one year older than they were at first sexual intercourse (81 percent), compared with just under one-half of males (46 percent) (see Figure 6). Among teenagers who had an older sexual partner, an age difference of one or two years was most common, regardless of gender. Nevertheless, 24 percent of female teenagers had a sexual partner who was three to four years older than they were at first sexual intercourse, compared with 5 percent of male teenagers. An additional 13 percent of female teenagers and 3 percent of male teenagers had a partner who was five or more years older. In

contrast, male teenagers were more likely than were female teenagers to have had a first sexual partner who was the same age (37 percent versus 15 percent) or to have a younger first sexual partner (16 percent versus 4 percent).

- Analyses show differences in partner ages by race/ethnicity. Among females, Hispanic teenagers were the most likely to report a first sexual partner five or more years older (19 percent, compared with 11 percent for black teenagers and 10 percent for white teenagers). White, black, and Hispanic male teenagers were similarly likely to have a much older partner.

Perceptions of the first sexual experience as unwanted vary by age and gender. Survey respondents were asked to describe which of three responses came closest to describing how much they wanted their first sexual intercourse to happen: “I really didn’t want it to happen at the time” (unwanted); “I had mixed feelings – part of me wanted it to happen at the time and part of me didn’t” (mixed); and “I really wanted it to happen at the time” (wanted). Analyses (not in a figure) indicate that only one-third (34 percent) of females who had first sexual intercourse before the age of 20 reported that they “really wanted it to happen at the time”, compared with 62 percent of males holding this view. In contrast, 13 percent of females and 6 percent of males who had first sexual intercourse before the age of 20 reported that they “really didn’t want [their first sexual intercourse] to happen at the time.”

- Among females, those who were younger when they first had sex were the most likely to report that they really didn’t want that sexual experience to occur. More than one-quarter of those who were aged 14 or younger at first sexual intercourse (27 percent) didn’t want their first sexual experience to happen, compared with 12 percent of those between the ages of 15 and 17 at their first sexual experience and 5 percent of those between the ages of 18 and 19 (see Figure 7).
- Among males, however, those who were younger teenagers when they first had sex were no more likely than were those who had sex in their later teenage years to report that the experience was unwanted (5 percent for males aged 14 or younger, compared with 7 percent of those between the ages of 15 and 17 and 5 percent of those between the ages of 18 and 19).
- Among females, 14 percent of both white and Hispanic teenagers reported that their first

Figure 7**Unwanted First Sexual Experience, by Age at First Sex and Gender, 2002***

Source: Abma et al (2004). *Note: Based on retrospective information by 18-24 year-olds. "Unwanted" is defined as respondents reporting "I really didn't want [my first sexual intercourse] to happen at the time."

sexual experience was unwanted, compared with 10 percent of black teenagers. Among males, 5 percent of white teenagers and 4 percent of Hispanic teenagers reported that their first sexual experience was unwanted, compared with 9 percent of black teenagers.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

U.S. teenagers continue to have pregnancy rates, birth rates, and sexually transmitted infection (STI) rates that exceed those of teenagers in other developed countries.¹⁶ Nevertheless, this *Research Brief* has documented several positive findings about adolescent sexual activity among U.S. teenagers, as noted below:

- **Fewer teenagers are having sexual intercourse.** Results of analyses conducted for this brief show declines in sexual experience among males between the ages of 15 and 17 and between the ages of 18 and 19, as well as among white and black teenagers between 1995 and 2002. Our analyses also show that females between the ages of 15 and 17, as well as those who were Hispanic, experienced declines in sexual experience during this time period.
- **Sexually experienced teenagers are less likely to report that they had had sex at a very young age, that is, at or before the age of 15.** From 1995 to 2002, the proportion of sexually experienced teenagers reporting that they had such early sexual experiences dropped significantly. This trend suggests that teenagers themselves are recognizing that sex is inappropriate at young ages.
- **Sexually experienced teenagers don't always remain sexually active.** Not all teenagers remain sexually active once they have had sexual intercourse for the first time. Among

teenagers who have ever had sexual intercourse, the majority reported that they had one or no sexual partners in the past year.

- **Teenagers who have had sex tend to initiate sexual intercourse within the context of a serious relationship.** Most female teenagers and about one-half of male teenagers reported their first sexual experience occurred within a relationship in which they were going steady, cohabiting, engaged to, or married to their partner.

Despite these encouraging signs, this *Research Brief* also has documented several factors that are associated with a greater risk of STIs and/or unwanted pregnancy among teenagers and has identified several subgroups of teenagers that face greater risks of negative reproductive health outcomes:

- **Oral sex.** A substantial minority of teenagers, particularly white teenagers, have never had sexual intercourse but have had oral sex, which places them at risk of STIs. Specifically, one in six young teenagers aged 15-17 has not engaged in sexual intercourse, but has given or received oral sex, and very few of these teenagers have used a condom.
- **Multiple sexual partners.** Although the majority of sexually experienced teenagers report one or no recent sexual partners, close to one in 10 male and female teenagers have had four or more sexual partners in the previous year. A larger number of sexual partners is associated with an increased risk of STIs.³
- **Females and young teenagers.** The gender gap in sexual experience among 15- to 19-year-olds has disappeared, with the same proportion of males and females reporting they had ever had sexual intercourse in 2002. However, females are more likely than are males to have sexual partners who are older than they are at first intercourse, and females are also more likely to report that they really didn't want their first sexual experience to happen at the time that it did. Female teenagers who were younger when they first had sex were more likely to report that their first sexual experience was unwanted.
- **Racial and ethnic minorities.** There have been declines in sexual experience among Hispanic teenage females, as well as among white and black teenage males. However, black teenage males and females and Hispanic males are still more likely to ever have had sex than are their white counterparts.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In order to continue declines in teen pregnancy and childbearing and to reverse rising rates of STIs, it is important to continue efforts to increase the proportion of adolescents who remain abstinent. And among adolescents who do become sexually experienced, it is important to prevent pregnancy and reduce the likelihood that they will have multiple sexual partners. The following approaches to addressing these concerns warrant consideration:

- **Reinforce messages that abstinence is a critical approach to avoiding unwanted pregnancy and STIs.** While fewer teenagers are having sex in the U.S. than in previous years, many still are. Helping teenagers choose not to engage in sexual activity can play a notable role in ensuring that the nation's teen pregnancy and childbearing rates continue to decline.
- **Encourage teenagers to reduce the frequency of sexual activity and the number of sexual partners if they do become sexually experienced.** A small percentage of teenagers engage in sexual experiences with multiple sexual partners, placing them at a higher risk of negative reproductive health outcomes. Educating teenagers about the risks of multiple sexual partners and frequent sexual encounters may help teenagers to avoid early pregnancy and STIs.
- **Educate teenagers to understand that oral sex poses a risk of transmitting STIs.** A substantial minority of teenagers is engaging in oral sex as an alternative to or precursor to sexual intercourse. Programs and parents should inform teenagers of potential risk factors associated with oral sex, which include a risk of gonorrhea, chlamydia, herpes, and HIV, among other STIs.^{5,9}
- **Expand interventions to address high-risk populations.** Racial and ethnic minorities, young sexually experienced teenagers, and, in some cases, females (especially young females) are groups that are at an especially high risk of unintended pregnancy, childbearing, and STIs. Effective pregnancy prevention programs will address the unique cultural, age, and gender needs of the populations that they are serving.¹²

CONCLUSION

This *Research Brief* has focused on trends and characteristics of sexual behaviors among teenagers in the U.S., including sexual experience, sexual activity, and partner characteristics. Expanding our understanding of teenagers' sexual activity, as well as contraceptive use behaviors, will help us to identify positive trends, as well as at-risk populations to focus on, in order to reduce the relatively high levels of unintended pregnancy, childbearing, and STIs among U.S. teenagers.

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