



Intimate Inaccuracies: Young Couples Don't Always Agree About Contraceptive Use

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Overview

The national teenage birth rate is now at the lowest level ever recorded. However, the rate remains much higher than in other industrialized nations, and pregnancy among teenagers is too often unplanned. Recent data show that more than three quarters of births to teenagers are unintended. Additionally, half of all births to young women just out of their teen years (aged 20-24) are also unintended.¹

It is therefore critical that teenage and unintended pregnancy prevention efforts remain effective and relevant.² To this end, some pregnancy prevention programs have recently expanded their efforts to more directly target men's contraceptive decision-making in addition to women's. This is a difficult thing to measure because it isn't clear if men report their contraceptive use accurately. They may have full knowledge of their condom use, but know less about their female partners' contraceptive method. They may also incorrectly assume that their partners use (or don't use) contraception, particularly hormonal or long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs).

In this brief, we use data from a sample of young adults in romantic relationships to assess the "accuracy" of men's reports of: 1) using any contraception, 2) using hormonal or long-acting reversible contraception (LARC) specifically, and 3) using condoms specifically. We measure this by comparing young men's reports of contraceptive use the last time they had sex with the reports of their sexual partners. In some cases, men reported using a method when their partner did not, while in others the opposite was found. These discrepancies suggest that pregnancy prevention efforts should focus on increasing awareness and communication about contraceptive use between teen and young adult sexual partners.

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Key Findings

- Looked at separately, young adult men and women who are in couples report fairly similar levels of contraceptive use the last time they had sex.
- However, there is much less consistency between partners in these relationships:
 - **Use of any contraception.** In roughly one in five couples, young men's and women's reports differed as to whether they used contraception the last time they had sex. That is, one in five young men: 1) reported that the couple used some type of contraception when their partner reported they had used none, or 2) reported that they did not use any method of contraception when their partner reported that they had.
 - **Condom use.** In one in five couples, young men and women provided contrasting reports of condom use the last time they had sex.
 - **Hormonal/LARC use.** In roughly one in seven couples, young men and women provided contrasting reports of hormonal/LARC use the last time they had sex.
- Young adult men are equally likely to over- or under-report the use of any contraception at all or the use of a condom. That is to say, it was just as likely for a man to report using some method of contraception while their partners did not, as for their partner to report using a method when they reported otherwise. The same is true for reports of condom use.
- However, men are more likely to under-report than over-report their partners' use of hormonal/LARC methods.

Data and Sample

Analyses in this brief use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health) romantic partner sample.³ Add Health is a nationally representative sample of U.S. adolescents who were in grades 7 through 12 in 1994-1995. Young adults in the romantic partner sample were re-interviewed between 2001 and 2002 when they were between the ages of 18 and 26. The sample includes data from roughly 1500 original Add Health respondents and their married, cohabiting, or dating partners (interviewed separately). To be selected into this sample, couples had to be: 1) heterosexual, 2) together for at least three months, and 3) both at least 18 years old. We restricted the analytic sample to couples with valid sampling weights and those "at risk" of pregnancy; that is, those who have ever had sex and are not currently pregnant (n = 1,175). Sample characteristics are shown in Appendix A. We weighted all analyses to represent the 8,206 couples eligible to be included in the subsample. All significant group differences are marked in the figures ($p < .05$). All numbers in the figures are rounded to the nearest whole number.

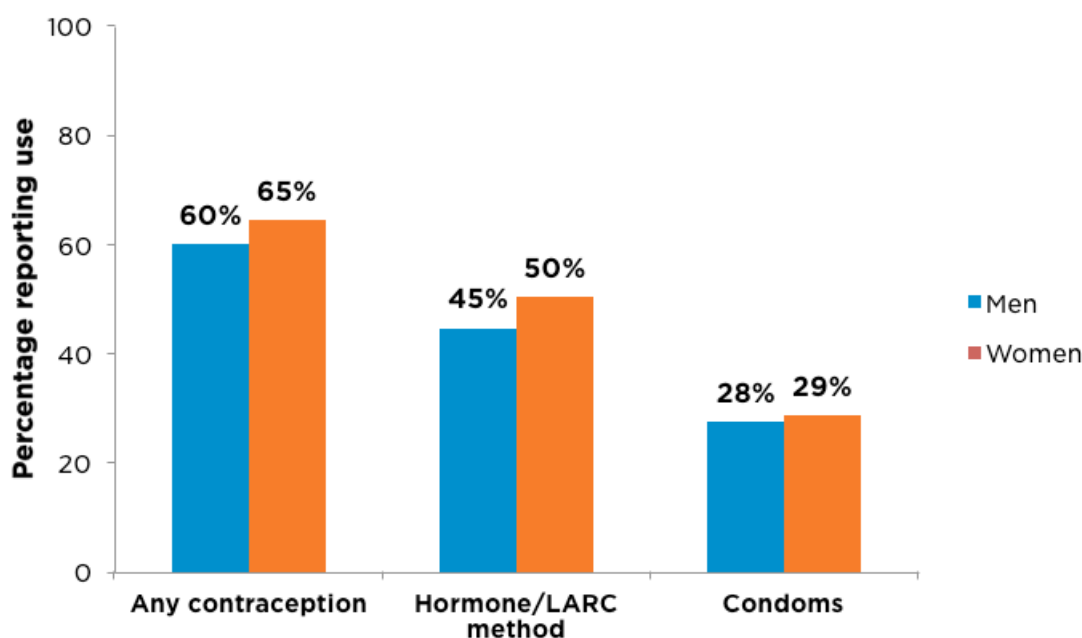
Findings

How do men's reports of contraceptive use compare to women's reports?

Figure 1 shows recent contraceptive use as reported by all the young men and women in the sample, separately. More specifically, it shows whether the reported method of contraception used most recently fits into the following three categories (each person could fit into more than one category):

1. Used any contraception^a
2. Used a hormonal or LARC method (pill, ring, injectable, IUD and implants)
3. Used a condom (regardless of other method use)

Figure 1: Men's and women's reports of contraceptive use at last sex, by type



Young adult women were more likely to report using any contraception, or a hormonal/LARC method, than young adult men in romantic relationships. Sixty-five percent of women reported using some method of contraception the last time they had sex, compared to 60 percent of men. Half of women reported using hormonal or LARC methods the last time they had sex, compared to 45 percent of men.

Young adult men and women in romantic relationships report similar, albeit low, rates of condom use. Just over one-quarter of men and women (28 percent and 29 percent, respectively) reported using a condom the last time they had sex. But generally, these young men's and women's reports are more similar than different.

^a This category includes condoms, withdrawal, rhythm, birth control pills, vaginal sponge, foam/jelly/cream/suppositories, diaphragm, IUD, Norplant, ring, Depo Provera, contraceptive film, and "some other method."

How accurate are men's reports of contraceptive use?

We defined a man's report as "accurate" when he reported using a contraceptive method in the same method category as the one his female partner reported. For the "any contraceptive use" category, for example, a man is considered accurate if he and his partner both report that: 1) they used any contraceptive method when they last had sex or 2) that they did not. Similarly, for hormonal/LARC use, a man is coded as accurate if he and his partner both report that: 1) they used a hormonal/LARC method or 2) they did not.^b

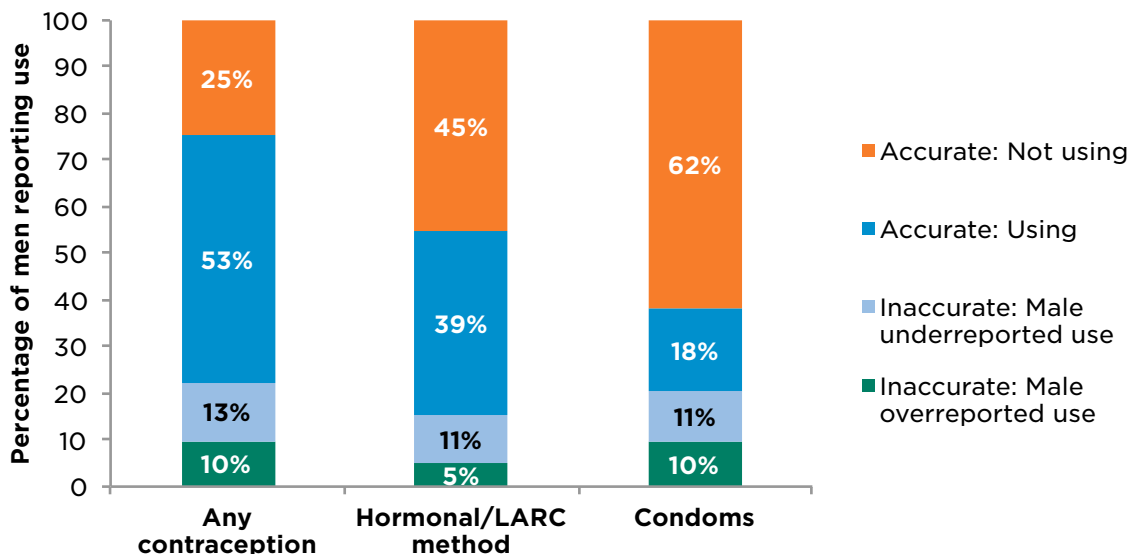
For the purposes of this report, we are using the female's report as the basis for comparison. This stems from an assumption that women are more likely than men to know about their own use of many contraceptive methods, particularly hormonal/LARC methods. We acknowledge, however, that men and women are likely to have similar knowledge of condom use.

We defined a man's report as "inaccurate" when the reported contraceptive method did not fall into the same category as his partner's. We identified the nature of the inaccuracy as follows:

- **Male over-report.** For each category, an over-report indicates when a man reported using contraception in that category when his partner did not.
- **Male under-report.** For each category, an under-report indicates when a man's partner reported using a method of contraception in that category when he did not.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of men and women in our sample who report using contraceptives in each category. The percentages are fairly comparable for men and women. However, a somewhat different picture emerges when we compare the reports of men and women who are in relationships with each other (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Men's inaccuracy and accuracy in reports of contraceptive use at last sex, by type



^b Note that we are interested in accuracy of reporting within method category (any method use, hormonal/LARC use, or condom use). Therefore some men will be categorized as "accurate" even if they do not report the exact same method as their partner. For example if a man reports the birth control pill while the woman reports the IUD, his response to the any hormonal/LARC use would still be "accurate" as both the birth control pill and the IUD fall into the hormonal/LARC category. Conversely, men will be coded "inaccurate" for the hormonal/LARC category if they report condom use and their partner reports the birth control pill.

Accuracy of reports of any contraceptive use. In more than one in five young adult couples (22 percent),^c men inaccurately reported the use of contraception. That is, they reported differently than their partner. Similar percentages of men over- and under-reported contraceptive use: 10 percent of men reported using contraception while their partner reported otherwise, and 13 percent of men reported that they did not use contraception, while their partner reported that they did.

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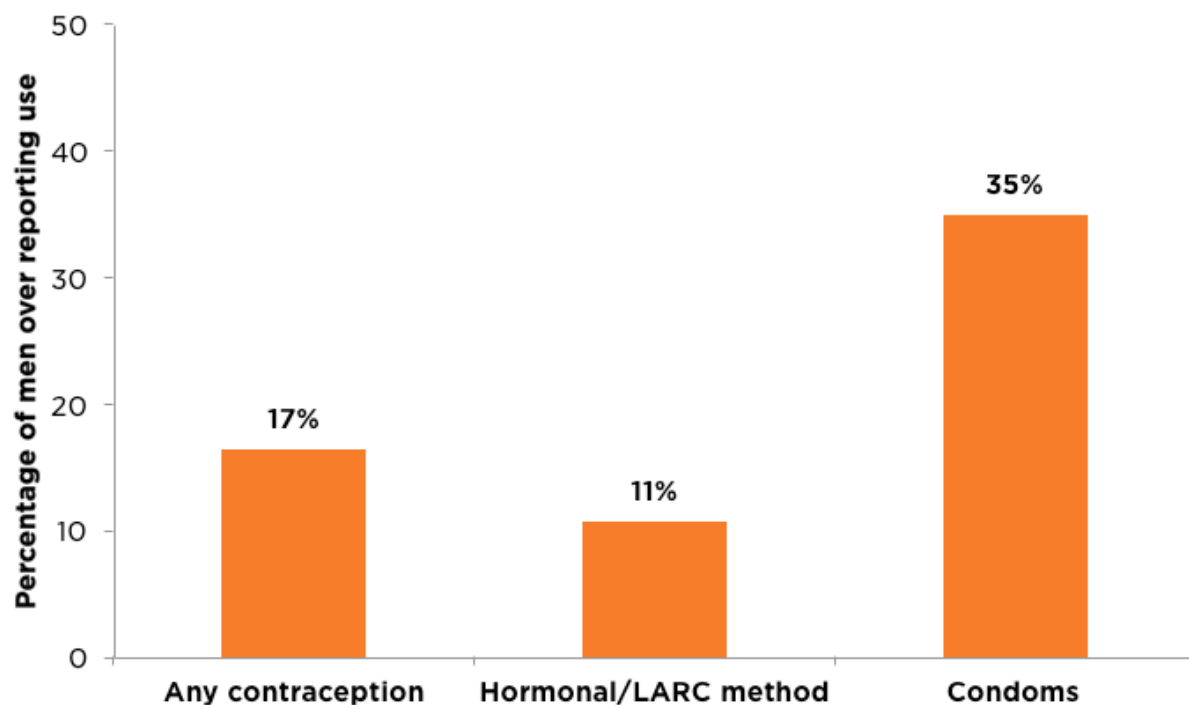
Accuracy of reports of hormonal/LARC use. In 15 percent of the young adult couples, men inaccurately reported the use of hormonal/LARC methods. In this case, men were twice as likely to under-report hormonal/LARC use (11 percent) than to over-report (5 percent). This suggests that a substantial percentage of men may not be aware that their partners are using hormonal/LARC methods.

Accuracy of reports of condom use. In roughly 20 percent of the young adult couples, men's reported condom use didn't match their partner's report. Similar proportions of men over-reported and under-reported condom use during the most recent sexual experience (10 percent and 11 percent, respectively).

How much do men overestimate their contraceptive use?

Taken together, the two sets of findings shown above reveal how many young men who report using a contraceptive method overestimate contraceptive use in their romantic relationships (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Among men reporting use of contraception, percent over reporting, by method type



^c Numbers do not add due to rounding error.

Overestimating contraceptive use. Although 60 percent of young adult men in a couple reported using contraception the last time they had sex (Figure 1), 10 percent over-reported using a method (Figure 2). This means that roughly one-sixth (10/60) or almost 17 percent of young men who reported using contraception had partners who did not report any method of contraception.

Young men in romantic relationships most accurately report hormonal/LARC use compared to other methods.

Overestimating hormonal/LARC use. Although 45 percent of young adult men in a couple reported using a hormonal/LARC method the last time they had sex (Figure 1), 5 percent over-reported this method. In other words, 11 percent (5/45) of men who reported hormonal/LARC use had a partner who reported otherwise.

Overestimating condom use. Young men in romantic relationships were more likely to overestimate condom use than other methods. Although 28 percent of young adult men in a couple reported using a condom the last time they had sex, 10 percent over-reported condom use. In other words, 35 percent (10/28) of young adult men who reported using a condom the last time they had sex had a partner who reported otherwise.

Are certain men more likely to report accurately?

In this section, we examine whether men's accuracy in reporting contraceptive use varies across important sociodemographic characteristics (Table 1).

Any contraceptive use. Young adult men's accuracy when reporting the recent use of any contraceptive method was quite consistent across age, race/ethnicity, parental education, and relationship type. Although there were some differences in accuracy across categories, none of these were statistically significant.



Table 1: Male accuracy in reports of contraceptive use at last sex, by type and by sociodemographic factors

	Any contraception	Hormonal/LARC	Condoms
	% accurate	% accurate	% accurate
Overall	77.6	84.6	79.6
Male age			
18-21	80.1	87.3	79.6
22-23	75.8	82.4	75.9
24+	77.1	84.3	82.4
Male race		*	
White	80.5	84.1	82.3
Black	73.8	78.4	71.4
Hispanic	68.0	91.9	75.3
Male's parents' education			
Less than HS**	73.8	83.8	79.8
HS Degree	76.4	83.2	76.9
Some college or more	80.6	84.6	78.9
Relationship status			*
Married	79.5	86.6	86.3
Cohabiting	75.8	82.5	82.1
Dating	77.6	84.8	74.7
Sample size	1175	1175	1175
* p < .05			
** HS = high school			
Note. Accurate includes couples where the male and female agree that they are or are not using a contraceptive method in each method category.			

Hormonal/LARC use. Men's accuracy in reported recent use of any hormonal/LARC method was also quite consistent across age, parental education, and relationship type. In this case, however, there were significant differences by male race/ethnicity. Specifically, 92 percent of Hispanic men reported accurately on hormonal/LARC use compared to 84 percent of white men and 78 percent of black men.

Condom use. Men's accuracy in reported use of condoms was also relatively consistent across age, parental education, and race/ethnicity. There were differences by relationship status, however. Married (86 percent) and cohabiting (82 percent) men were more likely to report accurately on condom use than men in dating relationships (75 percent).

Implications

As noted above, current efforts to reduce teen and unintended pregnancy are increasingly focused on young adult men. This makes sense, because men can play a critical role in the discussions and decision-making around pregnancy prevention in any type of sexual relationship.⁴ However, we found fairly high inconsistencies in reported contraceptive use between young adult men and women in sexual and romantic relationships. These inconsistencies go both ways. In some cases, men reported using a method when their partner did not, while in others they reported no method use when their partner did. These inconsistencies suggest that pregnancy prevention efforts should be focused on increasing awareness and communication between young adult sexual and romantic partners on contraceptive use.

We found fairly high inconsistencies in reported contraceptive use between young adult men and women in sexual and romantic relationships.

Limitations

The Add Health romantic partner sample is somewhat dated (2001), and features older teen and young adult couples that have been together for at least three months. It is important to keep this in mind when reviewing the findings in this brief, because we know that patterns of contraceptive use have changed for these age groups over the past 15 years, particularly the use of LARC methods. At the same time, young adults at very high risk of teen or unintended pregnancy—including homeless, disengaged, and low-income youth—might have difficulty accessing or affording hormonal/LARC methods which, in turn, will shape patterns of contraceptive use.⁵ Additionally, results for these couples will not necessarily reflect results that would be seen if our sample included a wider population of sexually active youth.

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Appendix A: Sample characteristics

	Total sample
	%
Male age	
18-21	31.1
22-23	30.2
24+	38.7
Male race	
White	66.1
Black	17.4
Hispanic	10.5
Male's parents' education	
Less than HS	10.6
HS Degree	38.4
Some college or more	51.0
Relationship status	
Married	25.7
Cohabiting	25.4
Dating	48.9
Total N	1175

Endnotes

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