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PREGNANCY AND CONTRACEPTION

The Gap Between Intent and Behavior

KEY FINDINGS

- Nearly all unmarried young adults feel strongly that pregnancy should be planned.
- Most say avoiding pregnancy is very important—at least right now.
- However, many are not using contraception carefully or at all.
- Many admit that they will likely have unprotected sex in the near future.

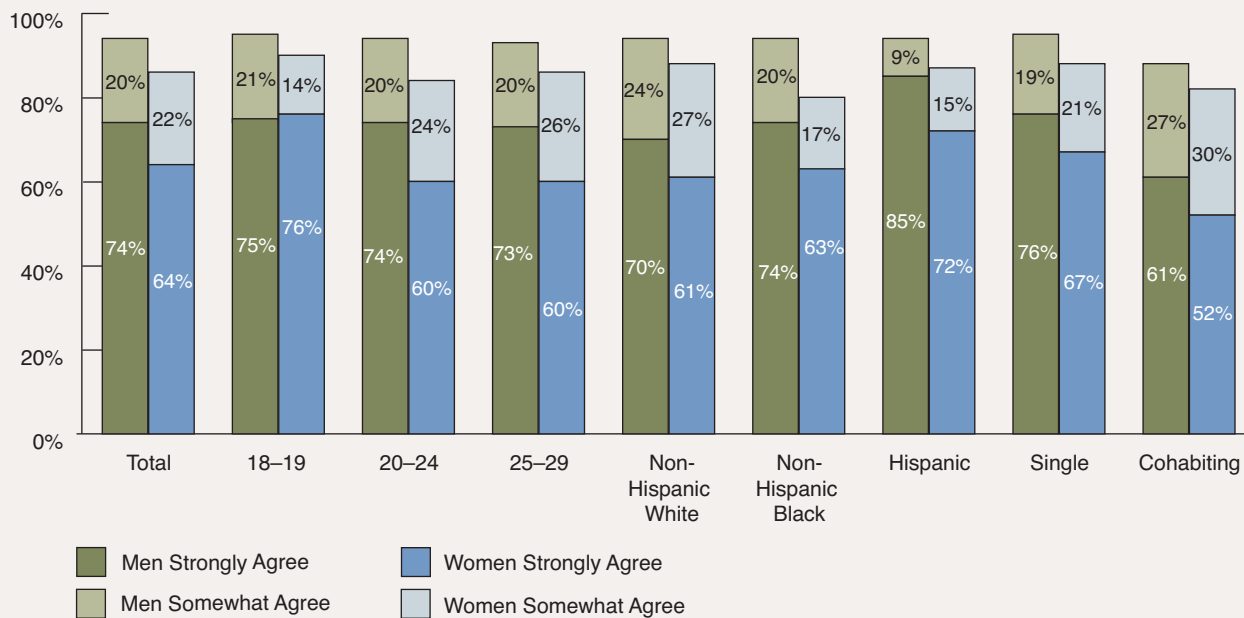
We turn now to the heart of this report—unmarried young adults’ beliefs, intentions, and behavior regarding pregnancy planning and prevention. As the title of this report suggests, there is a large gap between what young adults say they want and their actual behavior—a gap that puts them at risk of unplanned pregnancy. Several key findings stand out and are described in this section.

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

Nearly all unmarried young adults (94% of men and 86% of women) believe pregnancy should be planned. This includes roughly three-quarters of men and two-thirds of women who *strongly* agree that pregnancy should be planned (Chart 2).

In fact, more than 80% of unmarried young adults of all ages and ethnicities agree that pregnancies should be planned, although that figure is consistently somewhat lower for women than for men. The proportion who *strongly* agree that pregnancy should be planned is particularly high among men and women in their late teens and among Hispanic men and women. The belief that pregnancies should be planned is also widely shared among couples living together. More than 80% agree (over half of them strongly) on the importance of pregnancy planning.

CHART 2 Unmarried Young Adults Age 18–29 Who Agree that Pregnancy Should be Planned, by Gender



Based on response to the question: “How much do you agree with the following statement: Pregnancy is something that should be planned. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?”

Most have used contraception and have friends who think contraception is important.

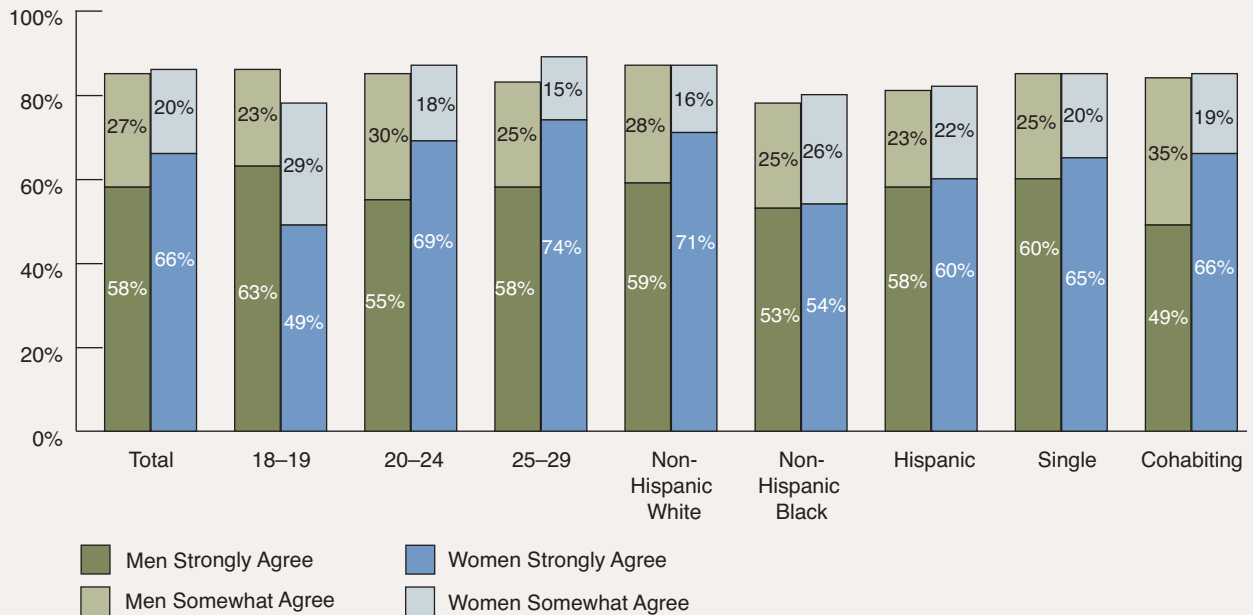
Fully 82% of unmarried young adults say they have used some form of contraception. Among them, 92% of unmarried young adults say they have used condoms and 79% of unmarried women report that they have used the pill. That so many unmarried young adults have used contraception suggests that it is important to them and valued. The apparent value they put on contraception is echoed by their friends. Most men (85%) and women (86%) agree that most of their friends think birth control is important (Chart 3).

The proportion whose friends look favorably on contraception is similar for most age and racial/ethnic subgroups, with some notable exceptions. The proportion of those who strongly agree that most of their friends think contraception is important is lowest among:

- women age 18–19 (fewer than half of this group strongly agree that their friends think contraception is important),

Nearly all young adults believe pregnancy should be planned.

CHART 3 Unmarried Young Adults Age 18–29 Who Agree that Most of Their Friends Think Birth Control is Important, by Gender



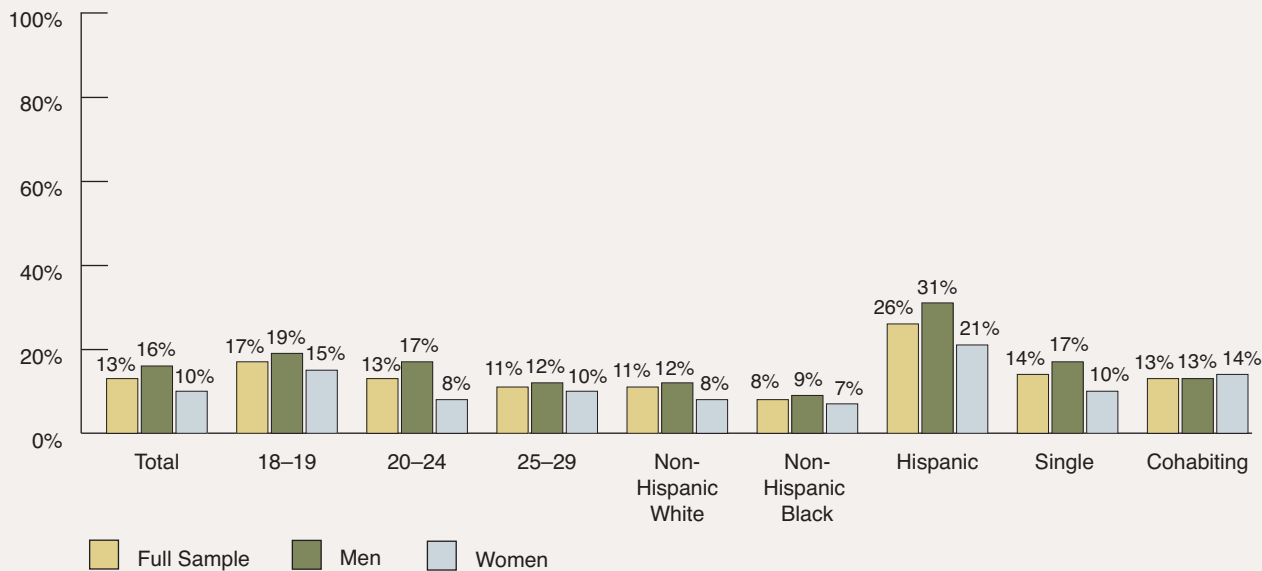
Based on response to question: “Please think about your own life and tell me how much you, personally, agree or disagree with each statement: Most of my friends think using birth control is important. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree?”

- non-Hispanic black men and women, and
- men who are cohabiting.

What about those who are opposed to contraception? Overall, 13% believe that birth control is morally wrong (Chart 4).^a Across nearly all racial/ethnic groups and regardless of age, less than one in five believe that contraception is morally wrong. Men are more likely than women—across all ages and racial/ethnic groups—to believe that contraception is morally wrong. Unmarried Hispanic young adults (26% overall, 31% of men, and 21% of women) are more likely than those in other racial/ethnic groups to view contraception as morally wrong.

a. Not surprisingly, the proportion who agree that birth control is morally wrong is somewhat lower when looking just among those who have ever had sex—11%, 15%, and 8% for all respondents, men and women respectively (not shown).

CHART 4 Unmarried Young Adults Age 18–29 Who Agree that Birth Control is Morally Wrong, by Gender



Based on respondents who answered “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” to the question: “Using birth control is morally wrong. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?”

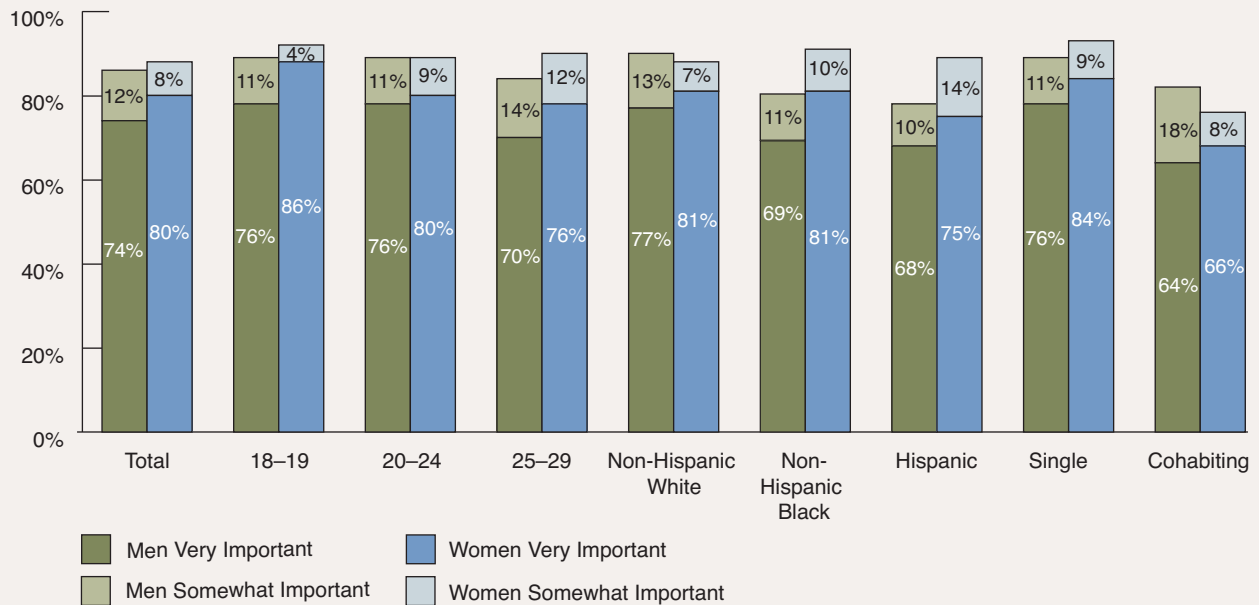
Avoiding pregnancy is very important to young adults, at least right now.

The overwhelming majority of unmarried young adults say they do not want to get pregnant or get someone pregnant at this time in their lives. This is true for both men and women, across every age and racial/ethnic subgroup, regardless of whether they are currently in a cohabiting relationship or not.

Nearly nine in ten unmarried young adults (88% of women and 86% of men) say it is important to avoid pregnancy in their lives right now. This includes eight in ten women and three-quarters of men who say it is *very important*. Most couples living together agree—roughly three-quarters of those in cohabiting relationships say it is important (two-thirds say it is *very important*) to avoid pregnancy at this time in their lives (Chart 5).

Nine in ten young adults think it is important to avoid pregnancy in their lives right now.

CHART 5 Unmarried Young Adults Age 18–29 Who Say it is Important to Avoid Pregnancy Right Now in Their Lives, by Gender



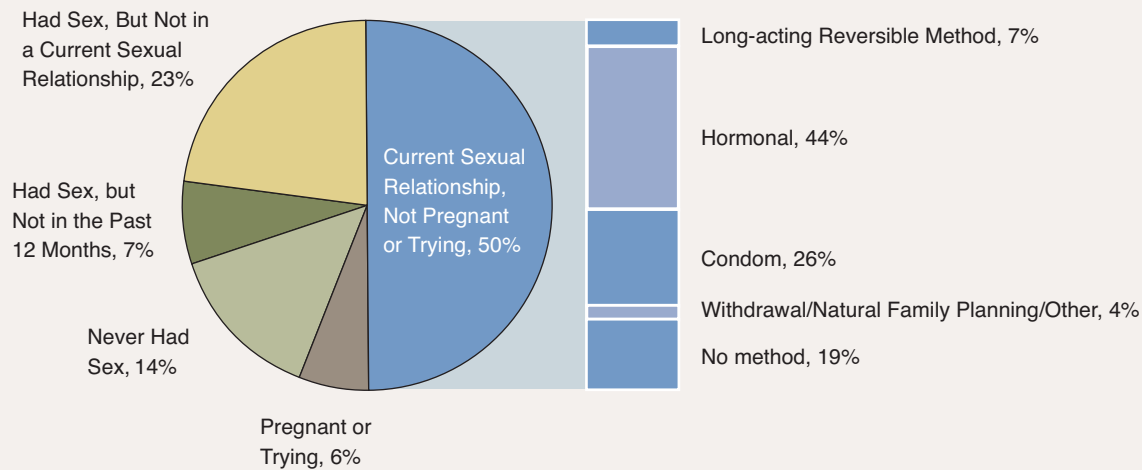
Based on response to the question: “Thinking about your life right now, how important is it to you to avoid (IF FEMALE: becoming pregnant/IF MALE: getting someone pregnant)? Would you say very important, somewhat important, a little important, or not at all important?”

Despite these beliefs, many young adults do not use contraception carefully, and sometimes they don’t use it at all.

Half of young adults are currently in a sexual relationship and are not pregnant, trying to get pregnant, or trying to cause a pregnancy (see left side of Chart 6). The remainder have either had sex but are not in a sexual relationship at present (30%), never had sex (14%), or are currently pregnant or trying to get pregnant (6%).

Among those in a current sexual relationship, about one in five are using *no* contraception at all despite reporting that they are not trying to get pregnant. Specifically, of the 50% of young adults who are in a current sexual relationship and not pregnant or trying, 19% used *no* contraception at all in the past month (see right side of Chart 6).

CHART 6 Unmarried Young Adults' Reports of Current Contraceptive Method



Based on yes/no response to the question: "Have you used (FILL IN METHOD) in the past 1 month?"; grouped by most effective method noted.

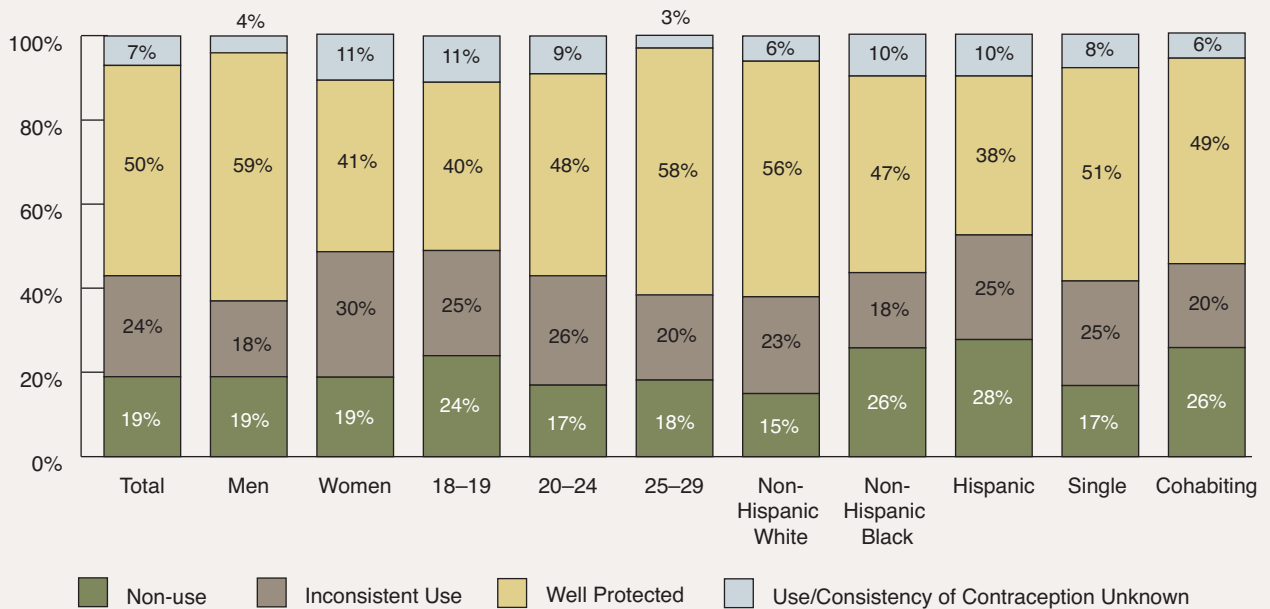
In addition to the 19% who use no contraception at all (noted above), nearly one-quarter (24%) use contraception inconsistently (Chart 7).^b Taken together, this means that of those who are sexually active and who are not pregnant or trying, *only about half are well protected from pregnancy.*

Full protection is particularly low (38%) among Hispanic young adults. In fact, even among unmarried young adults who are sexually active and who believe that pregnancy is almost certain when having sex without contraception, nearly a third still fail to use contraception consistently (not shown).

Perhaps even more notable, the proportion who are well protected is small even among those who say it is "very important" to avoid pregnancy at this point in their lives—a finding consistent with current theory on contraceptive behavior.⁷ Among those in a current sexual relationship

b. Non-use is defined as using no method in the past month. Inconsistent use is defined as skipping birth control pills in the past three months, using condoms but not every time you had sex in the last three months, or getting a Depo-Provera injection late. Well protected is defined as using a long-acting method (IUD or Implanon) or using a hormonal method (the birth control pill or Depo-Provera) or condoms consistently in the past three months. There is also a small residual category for which contraceptive use and consistency is unknown, including those using a method for which consistency is more difficult to assess, such as natural family planning, withdrawal or some other method, or those who did not provide a response to the contraceptive question.

CHART 7 Pregnancy Protection Status Among Unmarried Young Adults Age 18–29 Currently in a Sexual Relationship and Not Pregnant or Trying to Get Pregnant



who say avoiding pregnancy is very important to them, 39% are not fully protected from pregnancy when having sex, including 24% who are using contraception inconsistently and 15% who are not using contraception at all when having sex (Chart 8). Slightly more than half (53%) are well protected. For 8% of unmarried young adults who say avoiding pregnancy is very important, protection status is unclear.

Another striking indication of the disconnect between the intent and behavior of unmarried young adults is the percent who fully admit that they expect to have unprotected sex in the near future. Some 17% of women and 19% of men report it is either extremely or quite likely they will have unprotected sex in the next three months. This proportion is particularly high among older teen girls, men in their late twenties, and non-Hispanic black women (Chart 9). An additional 18% of unmarried young adults say it is slightly likely they will have unprotected sex in the near future (not shown).

The proportion of unmarried young adults who say it is likely they will have unprotected sex in the near future is about the same among those who think it is very important to avoid pregnancy and those who do not

About one in five young adults say it is likely they will have unprotected sex in the next three months.

CHART 8 Pregnancy Protection Status Among Young Adults Age 18–29 in a Current Sexual Relationship and Not Pregnant or Trying to Get Pregnant, by Reported Importance of Avoiding Pregnancy Right Now

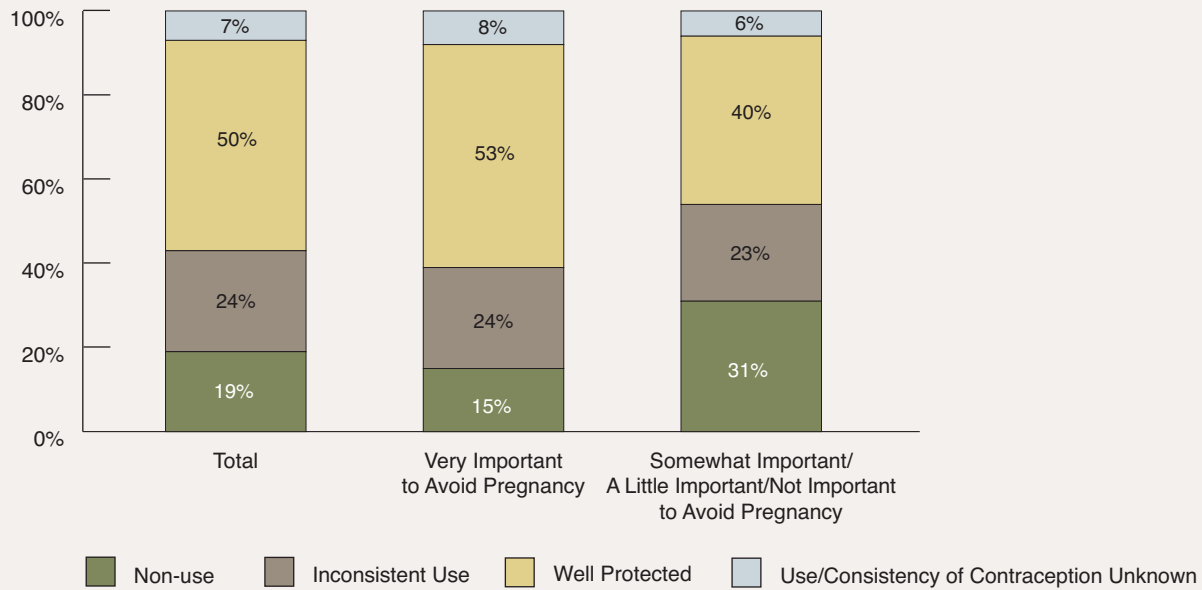


CHART 9 Sexually Experienced Unmarried Young Adults Age 18–29 Who Report it is Quite or Extremely Likely That They Will Have Sex Without Any Birth Control in the Next 3 Months

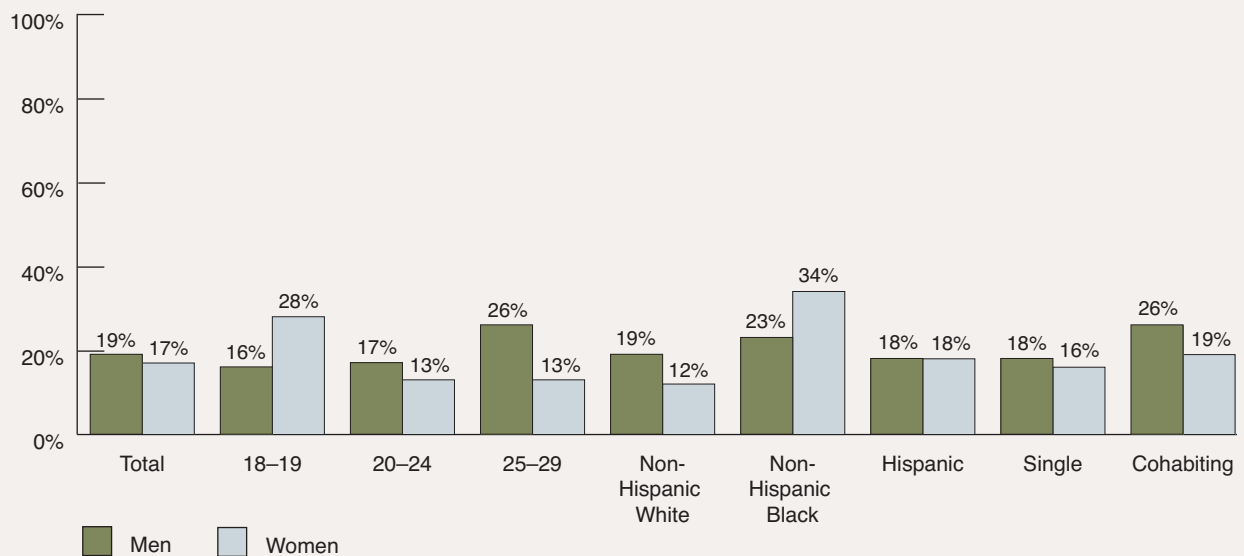
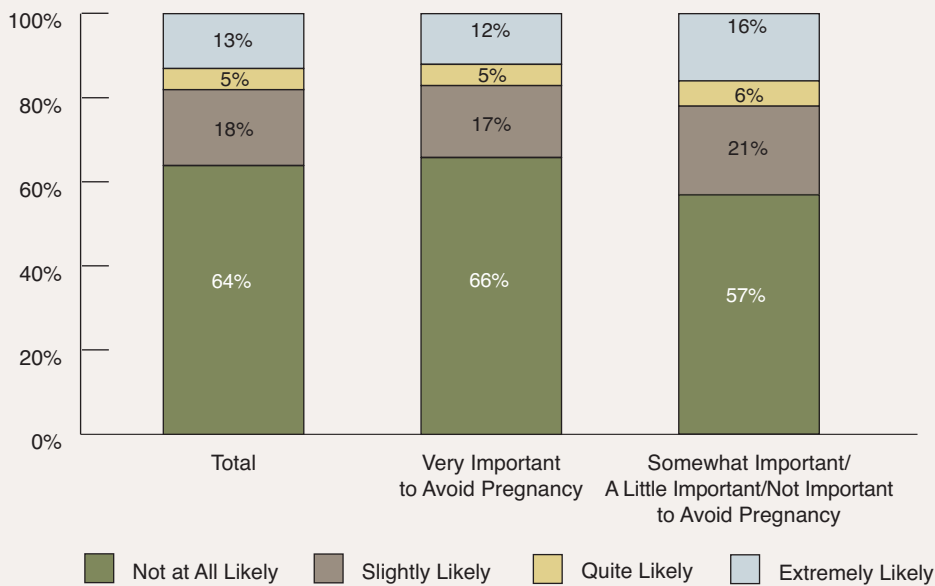


CHART 10 Among Unmarried Young Adults Age 18–19, Report of the Likelihood of Having Sex Without Birth Control in the Next 3 Months by Their Reported Importance of Avoiding Pregnancy Right Now

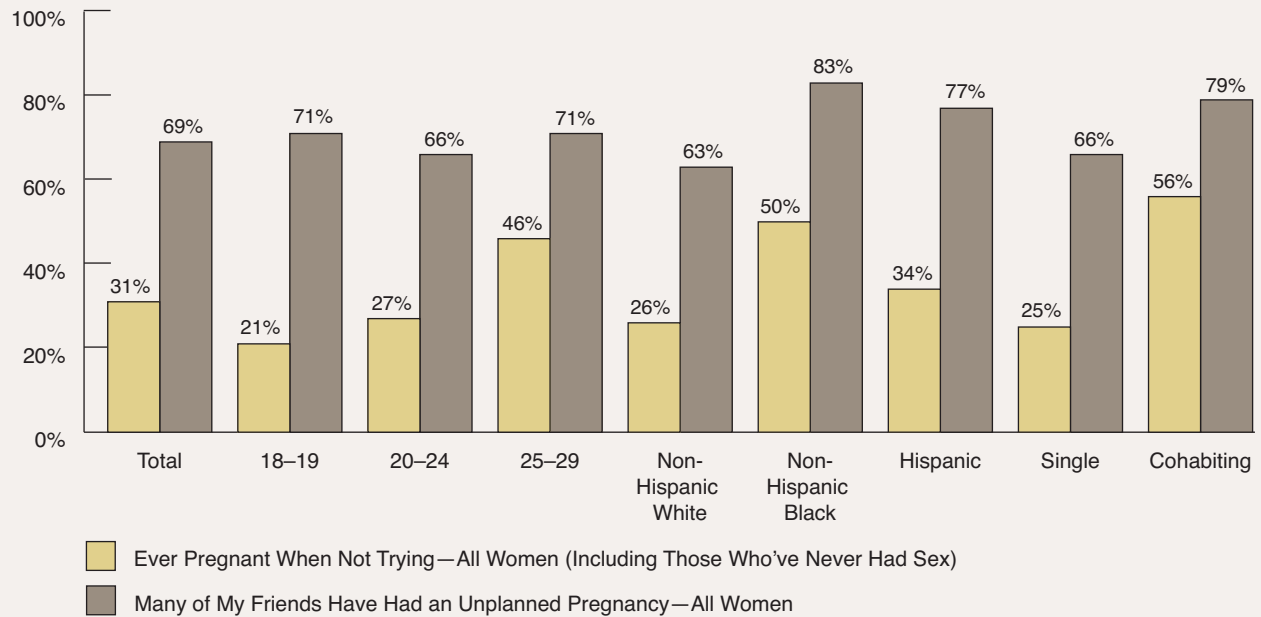


feel as strongly. Of those who say it is *very* important to avoid pregnancy right now, 17% say it is either quite likely or extremely likely they will have unprotected sex in the next three months. Two-thirds (66%) of those who say avoiding pregnancy is very important say it is not at all likely that they will have unprotected sex in the near future, compared to 57% among those who say avoiding pregnancy right now is somewhat important, a little important, or not important (Chart 10).

The high level of risk among unmarried young adults is mirrored by high levels of unplanned pregnancy.

Given the risky behavior noted previously, it is not surprising that many of the unmarried young adults in this survey report having had an unplanned pregnancy. Nearly one-third of women (31%) report they have ever been pregnant when not trying (Chart 11), and 18% of men report they’ve gotten someone pregnant when not trying (not shown). When those who are surgically sterile or currently trying to get pregnant are excluded (not shown), more than one-third (36%) say they have gotten pregnant when they were not trying to do so. The proportion of unmarried young women who have had an unplanned pregnancy is particularly high among:

CHART 11 Unmarried Women Age 18–29 Who Report Ever Having an Unplanned Pregnancy and Who Agree That Many Friends Have Had an Unplanned Pregnancy



Based on women answering “yes” to the following questions: (1) “Have you ever become pregnant when you were not expecting or trying to become pregnant” and (2) answering “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree” to the question “Please think about your own life and tell me how much you, personally, agree or disagree with each statement. ‘Most of my friends have had an unplanned pregnancy. Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree?’”

- Women in their late twenties (46% have had an unplanned pregnancy);
- Women in cohabiting relationships (56%); and
- Non-Hispanic black women (50% have had an unplanned pregnancy compared to 26% of non-Hispanic white women and 34% of Hispanic women).

Moreover, more than two-thirds (69%) of women say many of their friends have had an unplanned pregnancy (Chart 11). The proportion of women who agree that unplanned pregnancy is common among their friends approaches or exceeds two-thirds across every subgroup. These results suggest that unplanned pregnancy is very much part of the unmarried young adult experience and is viewed as quite common—which indeed it is.