



# 4

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

### KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Sex education for adults.
- Make information available in ways and in settings that are well suited to single young adults.
- Ensure providers are well trained in family planning and encourage more counseling about pregnancy planning and prevention.
- Foster changes in the social environment.

The survey results presented in this report reveal several striking characteristics of unmarried young adults. The overwhelming majority do not want to get pregnant or get their partner pregnant at present, they strongly believe that pregnancy should be planned, most have used contraception, and very few are opposed to it on moral grounds. Yet they clearly are not taking adequate measures to prevent pregnancy—less than half are well protected—and a small but important portion believe it is likely they will have unprotected sex soon.

This apparent irrationality—this fog zone—has many components, detailed in the previous section, that increase the risk of unplanned pregnancy. Many of these young adults are confused about their own fertility, about the probability that unprotected sex will lead to pregnancy, and, in particular, about contraception itself. They underestimate the effectiveness and the benefits of many methods and they overestimate the risks associated with them as well. They are not only afraid that serious side effects from using certain methods are highly likely, but also say that such fears reduce the chance of their using these methods. In addition, the majority express a desire to become parents someday, yet are conflicted about when and under what circumstances this fits into their future plans, and although many expect to settle down with their current partner, national data indicate that this is less likely to happen than they believe.

These findings suggest a number of steps that would help to reduce unplanned pregnancy among this key group. They fall into four clusters:

- Education
- Communicating with young adults,
- The health care system itself, and
- The broader social environment in which young adults live.

We stress up front that the suggestions detailed below apply equally to men and women. This survey shows that young men know less than young women about the risk/probability of pregnancy, the types of contraceptive methods available, the risks and benefits of various methods, and related topics as well. While most contraceptive methods are used by women, it is important that men, as partners, be more informed about family planning and reproduction overall so that they can play a major role in pregnancy planning and prevention.

## Education

Twenty-two percent of the unmarried young adults surveyed reported they never had sex education in school and of those who had, more than one-quarter had it before they were 15-years-old. Clearly, many do not know what they need to know to navigate the sexual realities of single young adulthood in contemporary America.

We need, in essence, sex education for young adults that:

**1. Presents clear, balanced information about the basics—anatomy, reproduction, fertility, pregnancy, sexuality, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and related issues.**

**2. Includes full and accurate information about contraception, including at least the following:**

- The various types of contraceptive methods available, especially longer acting, more effective ones such as the IUD.
- How these methods work and how to use them correctly. This must also include information about what to do when problems arise—a missed pill, a broken condom, a troubling side effect, and more.
- The *benefits* of contraception—both of specific methods and in general. Many unmarried young adults fail to recognize that in addition to providing protection from pregnancy, some contraceptive methods also provide protection from such serious health problems as ovarian

and endometrial cancers. More positive and clear information about the benefits of various contraceptive methods might help improve attitudes toward these methods.

- The risks associated with each method and—equally important—how such risks compare to those of other methods and to pregnancy as well (which, after all, is what one is trying to prevent when using contraception). That is, side effects need to be placed into some sort of broader context so that they are neither dismissed outright nor viewed with disproportionate alarm.
- The extent to which various methods do or do not reduce the risk of contracting or transmitting STIs and HIV/AIDS.
- The types of sexual behavior—including number of sexual partners—that affect the risk not only of unplanned pregnancy but also of STIs and HIV/AIDS.

### **3. Counteracts and corrects specific myths and misinformation.**

Providing good education as suggested directly above is critical, but this survey also suggests that there is a real need for direct “myth-busting” and for information that counters inaccurate rumors, misinformation, and inflated fears.

**4. Directly addresses healthy and respectful relationships, the common desire of most young adults to have children, and the family structures that research suggest are best for children.** In addition, it is important to acknowledge that the vast majority of teens and young adults want to have children. The education advocated here needs to acknowledge this widely shared, deep desire more directly and then go on to address how this powerful desire can affect contraceptive use in particular (see issue #8 in Section Three above). 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 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.

This education should also address what research shows are the family structures in which children are most likely to thrive. In so doing, it would be important to discuss the relative fragility of cohabiting relationships, the particular stresses caused by unplanned pregnancy within cohabiting relationships, and the importance to children of having present, involved and committed fathers in their lives. In other words, the desire for children that so many unmarried young adults expressed in the survey needs

to be linked to what is in the best of interest of children that they want to have in the future.

## Communicating with Young Adults

**Information on these topics should be made available in ways and in settings that are well suited to the active lives of single young adults, such as:**

- Specific educational programs in two- and four-year colleges and other institutional settings where there are large numbers of young adults, including job training sites, workplaces, social service agencies, and the military as well;
- Internet-based services and systems that are tailored to the media habits and culture of single young adults; and
- Direct efforts in digital media to counter the inaccurate rumors and bad news that often circulate about contraception with more balanced information, stories, and experiences.

## The Health Care System

It is also apparent that the health care system could do far more to help young adults plan and prevent pregnancy, as they themselves say they wish to do. Both financing systems and professional norms should:

**1. Ensure 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 their patients.**

Contraceptive options have changed significantly in the past few decades, and many providers may not be aware of the methods now available. In addition, expert opinion about who can use certain methods and about specific contra-indications has also changed over time, and it is important to ensure that providers are aware of these changes. This means more family planning education and training, including continuing medical education for those not currently in school.

**2. Encourage providers to do more counseling about pregnancy planning and prevention.** Young adults overwhelmingly say that their most trusted source of information about contraception is a medical provider, which suggests many opportunities for progress. In addition to more training, noted above, both reimbursement for and time devoted to

contraceptive counseling need to be fully adequate. Additional time with clients, especially those at increased risk for an unplanned pregnancy, provides the opportunity to, for example:

- Discuss the full variety of contraceptive methods now available;
- Dispel myths and answer questions;
- Offer anticipatory guidance about common problems with their chosen method and how to manage them;
- Highlight the importance of supportive partners;
- Stress the importance of avoiding gaps in protection; and
- Increase their commitment to using their method consistently and carefully.<sup>38</sup>

## The Social Environment

The survey gives many indications that young adults are sensitive to their larger social environment, as we all are. This truism suggests that:

**1. Parents and other caring adults should communicate with their teens and young adults about the importance of pregnancy planning.** More than one-third of unmarried young adults live with their parents, suggesting that parents remain an important part of their lives. Parents can help their grown children set overall goals for their future, including when to start—and when to postpone—a family. In particular, they can address the desire that so many unmarried young adults express for children and family life, and they can talk about the importance of planning a pregnancy—when, with whom, and under what circumstances. They can also present the simple proposition to their children that sex has meaning and sex has consequences, and that therefore it is to be managed in a responsible, careful manner.

**2. Parents, other caring adults, and larger social systems should also encourage young adults to align their plans for pregnancy and family with their sexual and contraceptive behavior.** Having clear goals for pregnancy and family is important, but it must also be matched by appropriate behavior. Young adults need clear guidance, messages, and conversation about how to align intent and behavior—for example, that using protection “most of the time” isn’t good enough, that if one method of birth control is causing problems there are many others that can be tried, and that gaps in protection must be avoided (as the Brits say, “mind the gap”). In other words, the fog zone needs to be entered and mastered.

**3. We suggest a new social norm: unless both partners seek pregnancy and are committed to each other and to the years it takes to raise children, they are to take active steps to avoid pregnancy now.** In other words, one important aspect of personal responsibility and responsible behavior among both men and women is careful attention to pregnancy planning and prevention.

Finally, we note again in closing as we did at the outset, that there are many cost and access barriers that help to explain the high levels of unplanned pregnancy in the United States. These remain serious, important, and pervasive. A comprehensive approach to reducing unplanned pregnancy must include attention both to systemic barriers as well as to the issues discussed in this report.