

Briefly...

Relationships and Contraceptive Use Among Community College Students

Helping students prevent unplanned pregnancy is an important way to help increase student retention and completion. Unplanned pregnancies increase the risk of dropping out or stopping out of college—61% of women who have children after enrolling in community college fail to finish their degree, which is 65% higher than the rate for those who didn't have children.

Community college students are experiencing many of the same life transitions as their peers who are not in college. Socially and economically, however, they are at higher risk of unintended pregnancy than their peers in traditional four-year colleges. While most community college students recognize that having a (or another) child would threaten their ability to complete their education, there is a gap between their goals and their behavior. In effect, many students put themselves and their partners at risk of having an unplanned pregnancy, which could in turn make it harder to achieve their goals for education, career, and family.

About the Study

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy commissioned Child Trends (ChildTrends.org), a nonprofit, nonpartisan research center, to conduct a qualitative study with community college students to gain a better understanding of why students would put their educational goals at risk by not fully protecting themselves from unplanned pregnancy. In particular, the in-depth interviews explored students' relationships and contraceptive behavior, and how these may be related to their goals and aspirations. Child Trends conducted interviews and focus groups with students from one urban and one rural community college. Some 101 students participated in the initial interview and 85 participated in a second interview six months later. Another 41 students participated in six focus group sessions. Three focus groups were also conducted with 28 faculty and staff members from the same two campuses, as well as an additional rural campus. Responses from

the interviews were coded and tabulated to produce a quantitative picture of the students and their views. When possible, percentages were calculated to give a sense of the importance or extent of an issue in this sample of students.

The results are not intended to be representative of all community college students, although they do embody a diverse student population and campus characteristics. In addition, it is worth noting that many of the findings are consistent with a nationally-representative survey of unmarried young adults regarding pregnancy planning, contraception, and related issues.¹ The key findings presented here summarize a forthcoming report, *Peeking into the Bedroom*, that builds on this survey data and provides a more in-depth look at the reasons why students do not use birth control consistently or effectively.

Key Findings

- **Students understand that an unplanned pregnancy would interfere with their goals.** Community college students reported they were not yet ready to be parents. In fact, 82% of students said they used birth control because having a child while still in school would make their goals harder to accomplish—the most frequent response. One student said, "Pregnancy is like the biggest thing because if I get pregnant, that's going to mess up my future, my school... it's like the foundation of my failure." Other reasons for using contraception included not being emotionally, psychologically, or financially prepared for parenthood (35%); concerns about family's or parent's reaction to a pregnancy (28%); not wanting to repeat the mistakes of their parents, other family members, or friends (20%); and fear of catching a sexually transmitted infection (STIs) (15%).

- **Students use birth control—but not consistently.** While the majority of students viewed using birth control as important, many were not using the most effective methods or were using their birth control method inconsistently. Even students who said that avoiding a pregnancy was very important to them also reported inconsistent use of birth control. Moreover, many students who thought their behavior and goals were aligned were not. In fact, six percent of students reported that they or their partner became pregnant and 11 percent had a pregnancy scare in the six months between the initial and follow-up interview. It seems that a combination of factors rather than a single reason accounts for why students did not use birth control consistently and effectively.
- **They don't already know everything.** Many faculty, staff, and students themselves, assume that students are already informed about the various methods of contraception by the time they reach college—how they work, how to use them, and where to get them. However, although most students were aware of the range of birth control options available to them, their knowledge about how they work, how they should be used, and how effective they are was quite limited. While many cited their sex education classes in middle and high school as a source of information, many also noted that they had forgotten much of what they were taught or that they ignored it at the time because they were young, immature, or not yet sexually active. One student said, “We took sex education, but I don't even remember what they taught us... I wasn't having sex in high school, so I wasn't interested.”
- **What they know (or think they know) isn't always correct.** Misinformation, misperceptions, and concerns about side effects of birth control were prevalent among participants. Many students underestimated the effectiveness of various methods and therefore did not believe that the method they were using was providing adequate protection against pregnancy. As one student noted, “you think that you're going to get pregnant even if you are on birth control pills,” even though the Pill is 99.7 percent effective if used correctly. In fact, almost two-thirds (64%) reported that their concerns about side effects were significant enough to limit the birth control options students are willing to consider for themselves or their partners.
- **Relationships play a key role.** Students' relationships with their partners play an important role in their use of birth control. Both male and female students said they struggled to use birth control when they were asked by a partner not to use it or if their partner was simply uncooperative. Trust also played a key role—some students voiced a lack of trust in their partners' motives and others suggested that their choice of method and/or their choice to not use anything signaled intimacy and trust in a relationship. Students' changes in relationships—breaking up or getting more serious—were likely to trigger changes in their contraception choices as well. More than one-third (35%) of students said they had stopped using a birth control method because of a change in their relationship in the six months between interviews.
- **Parents still matter.** Many community college students live with their parents. For these students, parents play an important role in their daily lives and shape their decisions about whether or not to use birth control and which method of birth control to use. For some students, parents offered support and advice, or helped their son or daughter obtain birth control. However, other students were so fearful that their parents would discover they were sexually active that they would avoid going to a doctor, clinic, or pharmacy to get birth control. Many students were still on their parent's insurance plan and were concerned that their parents would receive a bill for contraception. As one female focus group participant noted, “one day you get a phone call from the clinic or you have your appointment and get that bill or something like that. So I think that most girls don't get [hormonal methods] so they won't get caught that they are sexually active.”
- **Guys can do more.** Although men's birth control options are limited, being supportive of their partners can have a positive effect on the consistent birth control use. One female student said, “If you're afraid to go to the clinic and get more birth control, or like, your boyfriend went with you to get condoms so that you could be more comfortable with it. Just involved in general—both parties involved and committed to it. That really helps.” Students may benefit from approaches that encourage couples to share the responsibility for birth control, including ways that men can be more included in contraceptive decisions.
- **Plan B is sometimes Plan A.** At the follow-up interview, 40 percent of students reported that they or their partner had used emergency contraception (EC) in the last six months. Although EC is intended as a back-up method to be used in the event that primary birth control fails, some students reported planning to use the method before having sex, mean-

ing that for some students Plan B is in fact Plan A. Males were almost as likely as females to report using EC (by their partner), suggesting that men are not only familiar and comfortable with its use, but that they had discussed it with their partner. This presents an important opportunity for further communication that may result in young people switching to a more effective method of primary birth control.

- **Colleges can help.** Students, faculty, and staff agreed that there are ways community colleges can address preventing unplanned pregnancy, often using strategies that require little investment of resources. The most popular strategies suggested by students were ones that focused on increasing knowledge in a way that students do not feel they are being preached or lectured to. Students frequently suggested that classes or seminars on relationships, contraception, or sex be offered at their college, or that this material be integrated into other coursework. African-American and Hispanic women in focus group discussions expressed particular interest in getting help on how to respond when their partners ask them to forgo birth control altogether. Most colleges do not have a health center on campus, but they can help to make students more aware of resources available to them in the community.

Clearly there is a need among students to learn more about delaying pregnancy and parenting. Once students, faculty, and staff begin discussing this issue and how it is connected with college completion, most are highly engaged and motivated to do more. Some colleges have already begun to take action and a number of resources have been developed to help students, faculty, and staff:

- **Curricular content:** Several community colleges have created curriculum-based strategies in a variety of disciplines, some of which use service learning as a focus, to improve student retention and provide resources that students need to prevent pregnancy and complete their college goals. As part of its *Make It Personal: College Completion* program, the American Association of Community Colleges has made these course templates available at www.aacc.nche.edu/mipcc.
- **Orientation:** Ann Topping, Dean of Students at Monroe Community College (Rochester, NY) and National Council on Student Development board member, has authored the *Making Smart Decisions to Improve Success in College and Life* curriculum (www.TheNationalCampaign.org/communitycolleges/makingsmartdecisions). The seminar can be integrated into an existing freshman seminar/orientation or used as a one-

credit course. It emphasizes making healthy decisions about sexual behavior so community college students can complete their education and achieve their goals.

- **Online:** *Student Sex Life* (www.studentsexlife.org) is a user-friendly portal that colleges can use to help their students make smart decisions about sex and relationships, which can in turn affect their educational success and completion. The site is a gateway to information about relationships and birth control—including offering help selecting a method as well as where to get it, the effects of alcohol on decision making, STIs, and more. The site was developed with input from community college staff, faculty, and students, and colleges can include this portal in their online orientations, websites, and courses.

The full report on the qualitative data presented here is forthcoming. For more information about The National Campaign's work with community colleges, visit www.TheNationalCampaign.org/communitycolleges. You can also sign up for the quarterly *Community Colleges Update* to stay current on the latest research and resources.

About The National Campaign

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization whose mission is to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and responsible policies in both the public and private sectors. For more information, please visit www.TheNationalCampaign.org.

NOTES

1. Kaye, K., Suellentrop, K., and Sloup, C. (2009). *The Fog Zone: How Misperceptions, Magical Thinking, and Ambivalence Put Young Adults at Risk for Unplanned Pregnancy*. Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.