

Unplanned Pregnancy as it Relates to Women, Men, Children, and Society

Half of all pregnancies in America are unplanned—that is, half of all pregnancies are reported by women themselves to have been unplanned at the time they became pregnant. That’s roughly three million unplanned pregnancies each year out of a total of 6.4 million.^a More than three-quarters of all unplanned pregnancies occur to women younger than age 30, and 7 in 10 occur to women who are not married. Moreover, data suggest that even when a pregnancy is reported as planned by the mother, a large share of the fathers report it was unplanned.

The negative consequences of unplanned pregnancy are important. Children born following an unplanned pregnancy are significantly less likely to be raised in healthy two-parent families and significantly more likely to experience adverse health and developmental consequences. In addition, unplanned pregnancy lies behind the vast majority of abortions in the United States. Another way to think about the consequences of unplanned pregnancy is to consider the many benefits of *planned* pregnancy. The ability to plan pregnancies (typically through family planning) is directly linked to decreased poverty and increased educational and workforce opportunities for women, greater opportunities for preconception care and prenatal care, and more adequate spacing of pregnancies—all of which benefits women, their children, and families as well. Not surprisingly, 7 in 10 Americans support

the goal of reducing unplanned pregnancy and most cite the wellbeing of children as the primary reason. Support for family planning is also very strong.

This *Science Says* research brief provides a summary of unplanned pregnancy in the United States as reported by both women and men, along with details about the consequences associated with unplanned pregnancy and what the American public thinks about the issue.

Unplanned Pregnancy Overall

The National Campaign defines unplanned pregnancies as those pregnancies *reported by women themselves* to be unintended. Unintended pregnancy, in turn, includes pregnancies that are either mistimed or unwanted. *Mistimed pregnancies* are defined as pregnancies that the woman reports occurred sooner than desired. *Unwanted pregnancies* are defined as pregnancies that the woman reports were not wanted at the time of conception or at any time in the future. In general, pregnancies ending in abortion are classified as unintended.^b

- In 2001, approximately three million pregnancies were unplanned, including 1.3 million pregnancies that resulted in an abortion, 1.4 million that resulted in a live birth, and 426,000 that resulted in a miscarriage (Figure 1).¹

a The primary sources of information on unplanned pregnancy (also known as “unintended”) are the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), a periodic survey of women aged 15–44 conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics, survey data on abortions gathered by the Guttmacher Institute, and abortion surveillance data gathered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

b While a small number of women who plan their pregnancies make the difficult decision to terminate them due to serious maternal health risk, fetal abnormalities or other reasons, these abortions are also classified as unplanned for the purposes of these analyses.

FIGURE 1. Distribution of all Pregnancies in the U.S. by Intention and Outcome, 2001

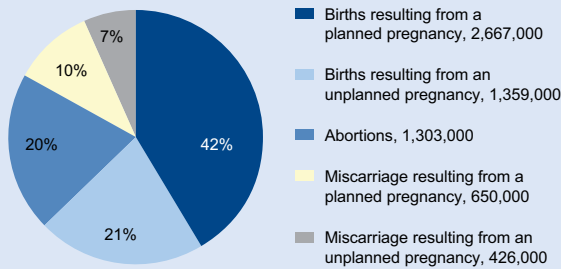
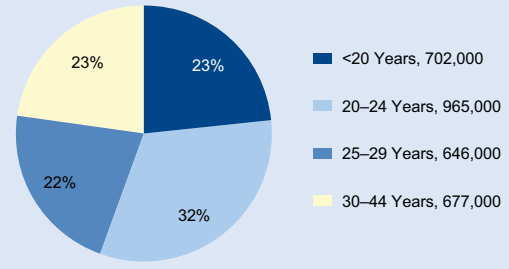


FIGURE 2. Distribution of Unplanned Pregnancies by Age Group, 2001



- More than three-quarters (77%) of all unplanned pregnancies—2.3 million—are to women age 29 and younger, and women age 20–29 alone account for 54% of all unplanned pregnancies (Figure 2).¹
- It is also the case that a majority of unplanned pregnancies occur to women who are unmarried. In fact, nearly half of all unplanned pregnancies (46%) occur to women who are unmarried and not cohabiting, and almost one-quarter (24%) occur to unmarried women who are cohabiting. Thus, a total of 70% of unplanned pregnancies occur to unmarried women—over 2 million each year.¹
- Little progress has been made toward reducing the overall rate of unplanned pregnancy. In fact, the rate of unplanned pregnancy remained the same between 1994 and 2001, holding steady at 51 pregnancies per 1,000 women age 15–44.¹

For more details on unplanned pregnancy among all women age 15–44, please refer to [Section A: Data, Charts, and Research Report](#) on our website.

Unplanned Pregnancy Among Unmarried Women Age 20–29

Among unmarried women, the rate of unplanned pregnancy is highest among women age 20–29. In addition, among unmarried women in this age group, the majority of all pregnancies are unplanned. This is true regardless of number of previous pregnancies, income level, education level, or race/ethnicity.

- In 2001, there were 1.6 million pregnancies to unmarried women aged 20–29 and 71% of these were unplanned.¹ That is, more than 1.1 million pregnancies to unmarried women age 20–29 were unplanned. Of these 1.1 million unplanned pregnancies, more than half (53%) end in abortion.¹

- Of the 1.1 million unplanned pregnancies to unmarried women age 20–29, nearly three-quarters (72%) were second or higher order pregnancies.¹ Put another way, more than 800,000 unmarried women age 20–29 who had an unplanned pregnancy in 2001 had already been pregnant at least once before.¹
- Regardless of income level or level of education attained, and regardless of whether the mother is a woman of color or not, well over half of all pregnancies among unmarried women in their twenties are unplanned (Figure 3).¹
- Overall, the rate of unplanned pregnancy was 97 per 1,000 unmarried women in their twenties in 2001.¹ This measure captures both the likelihood that a woman will get pregnant and the likelihood that the pregnancy will be unplanned.
- Large racial/ethnic disparities exist in rates of unplanned pregnancy among unmarried women age 20–29 (Figure 4). Just as overall pregnancy rates tend to be higher for non-Hispanic Black women and Hispanic women as compared to non-Hispanic White women, so do unplanned pregnancy rates. Unplanned pregnancy rates for non-Hispanic White women are lower than for non-Hispanic Black or Hispanic women, even though they account for nearly half of all unplanned pregnancies to unmarried women age 20–29—this is largely because non-Hispanic White women account for a large share of the population.¹ These rates have changed relatively little between 1994 and 2001.

For more detail on unplanned pregnancy among unmarried women age 20–29, please refer to [Section B: Data, Charts and Research Report](#) on our website.

FIGURE 3. Unmarried 20 Somethings: Percent of Pregnancies that are Unplanned by Income, Education and Race/Ethnicity

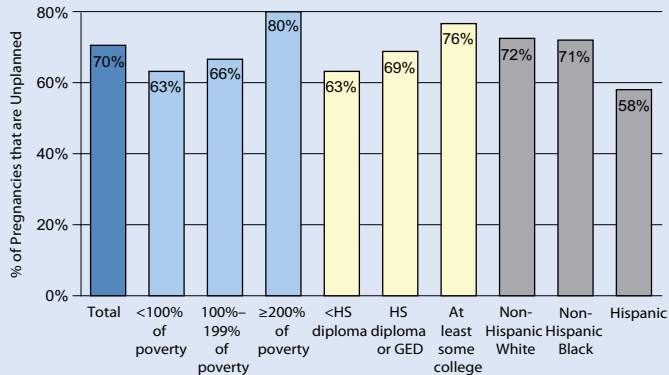
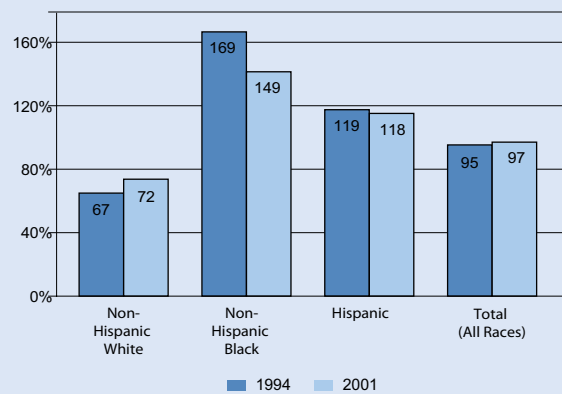


FIGURE 4. Unplanned Pregnancy Rate (per 1,000 Unmarried Women Aged 20–29) by Race/Ethnicity, 1994 and 2001



Unplanned Pregnancy as Reported by Both Mothers and Fathers^c

Although we lack data on the intentions of *both* the mother and father for all pregnancies overall, we do have this information for pregnancies that resulted in a birth. These data show that when the fathers' intentions are included, an even greater share of pregnancies appear to be unplanned than if only the mothers' intentions are considered. Furthermore, parents often disagree as to whether the pregnancy was planned.

- While just under a third (29%) of total births result from a pregnancy that the mother reported was unplanned (7% + 22%), this rises to over half (53%) if one includes pregnancies that the father or the mother reported as unplanned (24% + 7% + 22%) (Figure 5).²
- The percent of births that followed an unplanned pregnancy as reported by the mother or the father increases to 72% among cohabiting couples and to 87% among unmarried non-cohabiting couples (Figure 5).²

For more details on unplanned pregnancy as reported by both mothers and fathers, please refer to [Section D: Data, Charts and Research Report](#) on our website.

The Consequences

Unplanned pregnancy is associated with negative consequences for mothers, children, and families. Some of these consequences include:

- A reduced opportunity for women to pursue pre-conception care as well as care between pregnancies.³ Women experiencing an unplanned pregnancy are significantly less likely than women who have a planned pregnancy to obtain early prenatal care.^{4,5} In fact, compared to women who planned their pregnancies, women who have an unplanned pregnancy are up to 2.5 times more likely to begin prenatal care after the first trimester. This effect remains even after controlling for the influences of other factors associated with both planning status and the initiation of prenatal care, although the effect is diminished.⁶
- Infants born as the result of an unplanned pregnancy are at increased risk of both low birth weight and preterm birth.^{4,7–9} They are also significantly less likely to be breastfed than are babies born to women who fully intended their pregnancies. These differences exist even after controlling for background characteristics.¹⁰
- Pregnancy planning has a significant influence on several developmental measures among young children. For example, children who are born as the result of an unplanned pregnancy exhibit higher levels of fearfulness and lower levels of positive affect by age two (net of controls). When these children enter preschool, they score lower on tests of verbal development (net of controls).⁶
- Similarly, at the age of two, children born as the result of unplanned pregnancy have significantly lower cognitive test scores when compared to children born as the result of a planned pregnancy.⁶

^cThese results are based on Child Trends analyses of data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey—Birth Cohort (ECLS-B). These data are unique in that they show both mothers' and fathers' intentions for each child. Results pertain only to those pregnancies that resulted in a birth and for which both mothers' and fathers' intentions were reported. Note that percentages are rounded.

FIGURE 5. Agreement on Pregnancy Intentions Between Parents by Relationship Status at Birth

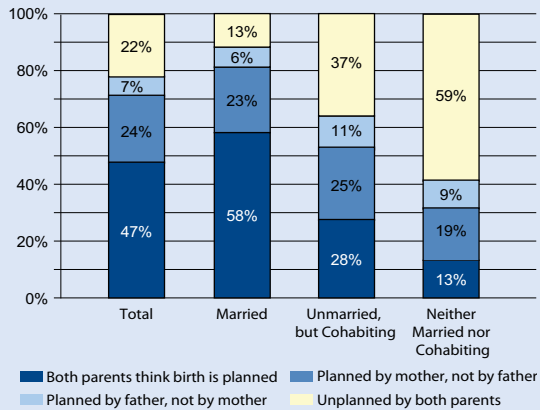
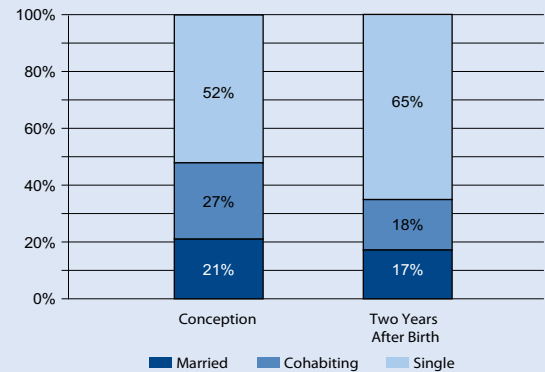


FIGURE 6. Relationship Status at Conception and Two Years after Birth Among Fathers who had an Unplanned Pregnancy and Birth



- Unplanned pregnancy is also at the root of the vast majority of abortions. There were 1.3 million abortions in 2001, of which 600,000 were due to unplanned pregnancies specifically among unmarried women in their 20s.¹¹

Parents of children born following an unplanned pregnancy face significantly more hurdles than parents of children born following a planned pregnancy.

- Over half of unmarried women having an unplanned pregnancy and birth were not in *any* formal union (either cohabiting or married) when their child was conceived. Two years after their child was born, the proportion outside of any formal union is even higher—65%, with only about a sixth married and less than a fifth cohabiting (Figure 6).⁶
- Children born following an unplanned pregnancy are significantly more likely to have mothers and fathers who suffer from depression, relationship conflict, and poor relationship quality compared to children born following a planned pregnancy, controlling for background factors.⁶
- Unplanned pregnancy places both mothers and fathers at greater risk of educational hardship and failure to achieve education and career goals (net of controls).⁴

Research has also documented important benefits to planning a pregnancy typically through the effective use of family planning.

- The increased use of family planning is associated with decreased poverty. Although much of this research has been

focused on family planning use in developing countries, it is important to recognize that family planning allows for better timing and spacing of births, both of which have been shown to reduce poverty, which obviously benefits women, children, and families.¹²

- The availability of family planning has also increased educational and economic opportunities for women. For example, since the advent of modern contraception (especially the birth control pill) and more accessible family planning services generally (through the Title X program, Medicaid, and several other systems of care), women have constituted a growing proportion of those in professional and engineering schools, both of which were once male-dominated fields. Being able to plan, space, and prevent pregnancies has allowed women to increase their presence in the work force, which has in turn helped spur economic advancement—advances that also benefit their children and families.¹³

In addition, the CDC recently referred to the development of modern contraception and family planning as one of the 10 greatest public health achievements of the 20th century, noting in particular its contribution to reduced maternal mortality, women’s educational achievement, child health and well being and overall economic prosperity.¹⁴

For more details on the consequences of unplanned pregnancy and family turmoil please refer to [Science Says #34 Family Turmoil](#) and [The Consequences of Unintended Childbearing](#).

What the American Public Believes

While polling data commissioned by The National Campaign suggest that Americans underestimate the extent of the unplanned pregnancy problem among young adults, the vast majority of Americans believe that reducing unplanned pregnancy is important.

- Over three-quarters (77%) of Americans incorrectly assume that teens have the highest number of unplanned pregnancies.¹⁵
- Only 1 in 5 (19%) Americans know that women in their 20s have the largest number of unplanned pregnancies.¹⁵
- Nearly 7 in 10 (69%) Americans favor the goal of reducing unplanned pregnancies in the U.S.¹⁵
- Americans most often cite the well-being of children as the main reason to support reducing unplanned pregnancies.¹⁵
- Ninety-eight percent of sexually active women have used some form of family planning and 88% of voters support women's access to contraception. In fact, a recent poll found that 72% of Republicans and Independents favor legislation that would make it easier for people at all income levels to obtain contraception.¹⁶

What it All Means

Over half of all pregnancies and 70% of pregnancies to unmarried women age 20–29 are unplanned. This research brief provides an overview of how pervasive unplanned pregnancy is in the United States and highlights some of the consequences for children and families that are associated with unplanned pregnancy, as well as the benefits of the ability to plan and prevent pregnancy as well. Reducing unplanned pregnancies in the United States, particularly among unmarried women age 20–29, is critically important for improving child and family well-being and is a goal supported and favored by most Americans.

As is the case in efforts to reduce teen pregnancy, there is not one magical solution for reducing unplanned pregnancy, and action is undoubtedly needed at the national, state, community, and family levels, starting with parents and partners. The National Campaign seeks to reduce teen and unplanned pregnancy by working in many areas in order to:

- strengthen a culture of *personal responsibility* regarding relationships, sex, getting pregnant, and bringing children into the world;

- support *responsible policies* that will increase the use of contraception; and
- provide *more education* to teens, parents, and young adults.

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About The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization supported largely by private donations. The National Campaign's 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.

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