



UNDER PRESSURE:

**WHAT AFRICAN-AMERICAN TEENS
AREN'T TELLING YOU ABOUT SEX,
LOVE, AND RELATIONSHIPS**



INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, the United States has made remarkable progress in reducing teen pregnancy and childbearing—problems that were once thought to be inevitable and intractable. The teen *pregnancy* rate has plummeted 40%, the teen *birth* rate is down by one-third, and both rates declined among all racial and ethnic groups.

Progress has been especially dramatic among African-American teens. One incredible success story that remains largely untold is that among black teens, the pregnancy rate over the last two decades declined 44% and the teen birth rate declined an impressive 47%. Across all ethnic groups, the decline in teen pregnancy happened for two reasons: more teens delayed sex longer, and those who did have sex used contraception more often and more effectively.

Despite this extraordinary improvement, teen pregnancy remains far too common among all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, and among some young people, teen pregnancy remains disproportionately high. For example, although African-Americans have experienced the largest decline in teen pregnancy of any racial or ethnic group since the early 1990s, it is still the case that 50% of all African-American girls in the United States will get pregnant at least once before age 20. Teen pregnancy and parenthood are hard on teens and harder on their children: babies born to teens are more likely to have health and developmental problems, suffer abuse and neglect, and grow up poor. As the past two decades prove, reducing teen pregnancy is possible—and it is one of the most effective ways to improve the well-being of this generation and the next.

That's why The National Campaign and *ESSENCE* Magazine teamed up to conduct a nationally-representative survey of 1,500 African-American youth ages 13-21 to better understand their attitudes about relationships, sex, dating, parents, the media, and the overall context in which they make decisions about these issues (survey methodology and glossary can be found on page 12 and complete questionnaire and data summaries by age and gender can be downloaded for free at www.TheNationalCampaign.org/UnderPressure). We wanted to find out what black youth

think about how society views them, what their expectations are for themselves and their futures, and how these feelings and beliefs might affect their attitudes about romantic relationships, sex, and pregnancy. In one of the only surveys of its kind, our respondents gave candid answers about the kinds of pressure they are feeling, what they really want from their parents, and much more. While it is important to understand how much all young people have in common when it comes to these issues, it is also crucial that we listen to and provide added support to those who are more likely to experience teen pregnancy.

KEY FINDINGS

The Key Findings from this survey fall into six major areas:

- 1. Intentions don't match actions.** Despite being well-informed about the consequences of unprotected sex and a widely-held belief that sex is worth waiting for, black youth still take risks when it comes to sex: Nine out of 10 say they do not want to get pregnant or cause a pregnancy right now and yet almost half (45%) say they use birth control inconsistently. Nearly one in five (18%) say it doesn't matter whether you use contraception or not because when it's "your time" to get pregnant, you will. Perhaps this is why nearly half of the young women in our survey (47%) say they have had a pregnancy scare, and 16% of the young men say it is likely they will get someone pregnant during their teen years.
- 2. The pressure is on.** Black youth say they feel a lot of pressure to have sex, that the pressure comes from many sources, and that giving in to pressure often leads to risk and regret. Of those who have had sex, nearly half (45%) report that have been pressured to go further sexually than they wanted to, and nearly half (48%) say they have lied to get out of a sexual situation. Black youth feel *more* pressure to have sex from society (51%) and the media (48%) than they feel from their own partners (36%). When females who don't always use

THE FACTS

- Since the early 1990's, the U.S. teen pregnancy rate declined 39%, and declines were across all racial and ethnic groups.¹
- Among black teens, the pregnancy rate over that same period declined 44%.²
- Since the early 1990's, the overall teen birth rate declined 33% and the teen birth rate among black girls declined a remarkable 47%.²
- As with all teens, the reduction in African-American teen births was due to a decline in teen pregnancy, not due to an increase in abortion. The abortion rate among African-American teens declined by 44% between 1990 and 2006.³
- Despite these dramatic declines, the U.S. still has the highest teen pregnancy and birth rates of any comparable Western nation.⁴
- 3 in 10 girls in the U.S. get pregnant as teens and 1 in 6 will be a teen mother.⁵
- 50% of black females get pregnant at least once by age 20.⁶
- Overall, 2 out of 3 teen pregnancies in the U.S. are to 18-19 year-olds.³
- In 2007, black high school students (67%) were more likely than Hispanic students (52%) and white students (44%) to report having ever had sex.⁷
- Black youth are more likely than other youth to use condoms when they have sex: 67% of black high school students reported using a condom the last time they had sex, compared to 60% of whites and 61% of Hispanic students.⁸
- In 2006, the black teen pregnancy rate was 126 per 1,000 teen girls ages 15-19 (dropped from 224 per 1,000 since 1990); as compared to 72 pregnancies per 1,000 girls overall; 44 per 1,000 for non-Hispanic white teenagers; and 127 per 1,000 for Hispanic teenagers.³

contraception explain why, nearly four in 10 (38%) say it's because their partner doesn't want them to. Not surprisingly, these various pressures often lead to regret: nearly two-thirds of girls (62%) say they wish they'd waited longer to have sex for the first time, and half (50%) of sexually active males say that at some point they have had sex and regretted it afterwards.

- 3. Media paints a negative picture.** Black youth report that they feel almost invisible in the media they consume and say that when they do see themselves, the images they see are insulting. In comparison to white characters on TV and in movies, black youth say that they are portrayed as less intelligent, more prone to failure, and less successful in relationships. Fewer than one in five (18%) say they often see themselves in the TV shows and movies they are watching, and seven in 10 say these TV shows and movies portray black youth as sexually aggressive. Nearly three out of four (72%) say their media sends the message that black girls' sex appeal is their most important quality.
- 4. Black youth feel self-confident and valued, even in the face of disrespect.** Despite feeling somewhat undervalued by society and negatively portrayed by the media, black youth are upbeat and believe in themselves. Even though nearly one-third (31%) say that "society expects me to fail," three out of four (75%) strongly agree they will succeed in life, and almost all (89%) say the adults in their lives have high expectations for them. While others emphasize their sex appeal, 83% say they would rather get straight A's in school than be thought of as "hot."
- 5. Young black males are often misunderstood.** In contrast to media stereotypes, black males report taking sex seriously, valuing relationships more than sex, and respecting those who aren't ready for sex. Most black males (66%) say that sex "is a big deal" and three out of four (73%) would rather be in a relationship with no sex than have sex with no relationship. The majority (64%) of young black males say that guys have more respect for girls who want to wait for sex.
- 6. Parents are the most powerful influence on sex and relationships, especially among the youngest teens.** This survey confirms that black youth echo what *all* youth have been saying for decades: parents are most influential—even more so than friends or media. Parental influence is strongest among the youngest teens: half (49%) of 13-15 year-olds say their parents' opinions matter most when they are deciding whether or not to have sex, but that drops to 17% among those ages 19-21. This survey and others make clear that young people most want to hear from their parents about relationships, in addition to learning more about sex and contraception. Nearly half (47%) ranked "how to have a good relationship" as the topic about which they most want to talk with their parents. Black youth believe in the power of parent/teen conversations: two-thirds (67%) say that if more teens were able to have open, honest conversations with their parents about sex, fewer teens would get pregnant—still, they say that these conversations are just as awkward (40%) as they are informative and helpful (40%). For those who are not talking with parents, 42% say it would be too awkward and 23% say they just don't know how to bring it up.



MORE DETAIL ON THE SURVEY RESULTS

1. Intentions don't match actions. Like all other young people, the overwhelming majority of black youth say they do not want a pregnancy right now, but many are still putting themselves at risk. They know a lot about the consequences of sex, but they are inconsistent about putting this knowledge into action. Overall, about half of the black youth in our survey have had a serious relationship and 40% have had sex.

Although seven out of 10 say that a pregnancy right now would be a disaster and they aren't sure how they would manage if it happened, most confess to having unprotected sex and taking other risks:

- Of those who have ever had sex, 67% have done so at least once without protection, and 71% have had sex outside of a relationship.
- 45% use birth control inconsistently (32% say "sometimes," 13% say "never").
- 46% have had a pregnancy scare; 24% of female respondents say they have been pregnant at least once; 15% of guys say they have gotten someone pregnant.
- 32% of those who have ever had sex have done so with someone whom they consider to be a lot older than they are. Among 13-15 year-olds it's 39%.
- 1 in 3 who have had sex have done so while drunk and 1 in 4 have done so when the other person was drunk.
- 1 in 5 say it is likely they will have unprotected sex in the next three months and 16% of guys say it is likely they will get someone pregnant during their teen years.

For those who admit they do NOT use contraception every time they have sex, some of the reasons are to be expected; others are more surprising:

- More than half say sex feels better when they don't use condoms—the top reason males (54%) and females (52%) give for not using them.
- Nearly 4 in 10 (38%) females who have had unprotected sex say they have done so because their partner doesn't

want them to use contraception (22% of sexually active males say this; 30% of sexually active respondents overall).

- More than one-third (37%) say they were not planning on having sex so they weren't prepared.
- 1 in 3 says they were "just not thinking about it."
- 29% of females say the topic is too embarrassing to bring up with their partner.
- 29% of sexually active females also say that they don't worry about protection because they "haven't gotten pregnant so far."
- 23% say it is too embarrassing to buy condoms at the store.
- 18% say whether or not you use protection, when it's "your time" to get pregnant, you will.

Despite the fact that they take risks, black youth are generally knowledgeable about the consequences of sex. The vast majority of them are aware that:

- A girl can get pregnant the first time she has sex (89%) and a guy can get a girl pregnant the first time he has sex (89%).
- It is not okay to use a condom more than once (89%).
- The only way to completely and reliably prevent pregnancy is to not have sex (85%).
- Condoms have an expiration date (75%).
- Birth control pills are not effective if you miss two or three days (69%).

However, some myths that young people from all backgrounds believe also persist among black youth:

- 22% of young black men incorrectly believe that having sex standing up prevents pregnancy.
- 20% of black males mistakenly think that wearing two condoms at once is more effective at preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) than wearing only one.

Even though they are taking risks, black youth still say they take sex seriously, and that sex should happen within relationships: 72% believe sex is a "big deal," and 76% said having sex with someone when they didn't want to would be worse than losing someone because they didn't have sex. Seven in 10 (70%) say sex is okay once you're in a committed relationship vs. 13% who say it's okay on a first date.

2. The pressure is on. Black youth report that pressure to have sex comes from many different sources. Black youth say that media and friends put more pressure on them to have sex than their own girlfriends/boyfriends do:

- 51% say there is pressure from society to have sex (including 48% of 13-15 year-olds).
- 48% say they feel pressure from the media.
- 41% say their friends (54% of males, 29% of females) pressure them to have sex.
- 36% feel pressure from their boyfriend/girlfriend.
- Of those who have had sex, nearly half (48%) have lied to get out of a sexual situation.
- Of those who have had sex, nearly half (45%) have been pressured to go further sexually than they wanted to.
- Half (51%) says it's embarrassing to admit being a virgin (62% of males, 40% of females).
- 23% of females have had sex with someone because they were afraid they'd lose him otherwise.

The pressure isn't only to *have* sex:

- Nearly 1 in 5 girls who have ever had sex say they've been pressured by their partner not to use protection/birth control. Among the youngest teens (age 13-15), 22% say that's the case.

Giving in to the pressure often leads to regret:

- More than half (56%) of sexually active black youth say that on at least one occasion, they have had sex and regretted it afterwards (1 in 2 males, 6 in 10 females).
- 50% say they wish they'd waited longer before having sex for the first time (64% of females, 34% of males).

The youngest teens in particular *think* their peers are more sexually active than they really are. This over-estimation can add to the pressure to have sex. Other surveys show that teens say it would help them delay sex if they knew that fewer of their peers were sexually active than they'd assumed.

In our survey, 38% of black youth ages 13-15 *believe* that most of their friends have had sex. According to national data, 22% of black girls have had sex by age 15 and 29% of black males have had sex by age 15.

3. The media paint a negative picture. Research shows that minority youth (black, Hispanic, and Asian 8-18 year-olds) consume nearly 13 hours of media in a typical day—often using multiple types of media at once—which is an average of four and a half more hours of media per day than their white counterparts consume.⁹

Black youth report that the TV shows and movies they watch either portray them as unfaithful, promiscuous, or more likely to fail in life and relationships—or they don't portray them at all. Fewer than one in five (18%) say they often see themselves in the media they consume.

When asked to select words to describe how various groups are portrayed on TV or in the movies they watch, our survey respondents report a very negative picture.

Descriptor	Media Portrayals of Black Youth	Media Portrayals of White Youth
Smart	32%	84%
Expected to succeed in life	21%	88%
Expected to fail in life	79%	9%
"Players"	87%	32%
Sexually aggressive	73%	39%
Irresponsible in romantic relationships	74%	39%
Happy in romantic relationships	30%	71%
Loyal in relationships	24%	57%

Most also say that their media sends the message that a black girl's top asset is her sexuality and that it's acceptable for black guys to be unfaithful. Survey respondents agreed that in the media they consume:

- Black girls' sex appeal is their most important quality (72%).
- It is okay for black guys to cheat in relationships (64%).

- It is okay for black girls to have many sexual partners (54%).
- It is okay for black guys to have many sexual partners (74%).

Unlike their parents' generation, today's black youth are exposed to large amounts of graphic sexual content in the media, even if they are not seeking it out. Four in 10 (41%) have received an email or text with a nude or semi-nude photo of someone, and their chances of seeing pornography are about the same whether they are looking for it or not:

- 46% have seen pornography online when they were not looking for it. More than one-third of 13-15 year-olds (34%) have seen pornography online even when they weren't looking for it.
- 42% have looked for and watched pornography online.
- 42% have been shown pornography online by a friend.

In the midst of all this sexual media content, the vast majority (74%) of black youth say that they wish the movies and TV shows they watch would show more about the consequences of sex. This mirrors findings from other surveys of all youth.

4. Black youth feel self-confident and valued, even in the face of disrespect. Nearly all (92%) black youth say that they think white youth feel valued by society, while only 59% say the same about black youth. Despite this difference and the negative stereotypes they report seeing in the media, almost all black youth say they feel highly valued by the adults in their lives. Most are happy with and proud of themselves, and expect to succeed in life and work. Research shows that young people who have high aspirations and goals for the future are more likely to delay pregnancy and parenthood.

Black youth feel valued and respected by the people who are most important to them:

- 91% feel valued by their parents.
- 91% feel valued by their boyfriends or girlfriends.
- 89% feel valued by their friends.
- 82% feel valued by their teachers.

They are confident and have high expectations for themselves:

- 7 in 10 say they are happy with the person they are right now.
- 9 in 10 expect to be very successful in life (even among those whose parents do not have high expectations of them, 8 in 10 still say they expect success).
- 95% believe that they will have a successful career.

Their talents and intelligence contribute most to their self-confidence. When asked to rate the qualities that most make them feel good about themselves (respondents could choose more than one attribute):

- 94% say "how smart I am."
- 92% say "how well I do in school."
- 92% say "my talents."
- 77% say their ethnic background.

Still, many young black females experience disrespect:

- Less than half of black girls (39%) feel guys in their community treat girls with respect.
- One in three black girls (34%) think that the only thing guys want from them is sex.
- 1 in 4 black girls say they know someone who has been touched in a sexual way against their will while at school or work.

5. Young black males are often misunderstood. Despite reporting that the media offer mainly negative sexual stereotypes of them, black males say that they do take sex seriously and in fact, they are more likely than females are to feel pressure from friends to have sex:

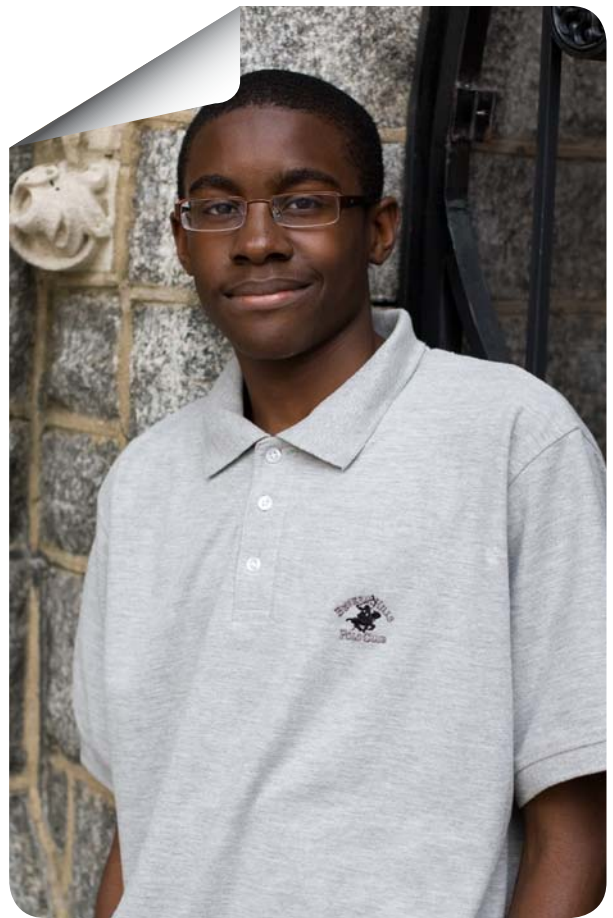
- More than half (54%) of guys feel pressure from their friends to have sex, whereas 29% of girls say their friends pressure them to have sex.
- 1 in 3 (32%) guys agree that “other guys pressure me to have sex with girls to prove that I’m cool.”

Most black males value relationships over sex and think that sex should lead to commitment:

- 73% of guys say they would rather have a relationship with no sex than sex with no relationship.
- 77% of guys would rather lose their virginity with someone they love than lose it as soon as possible.
- 75% of guys are completely comfortable saying no to sex even if their partner really wants to.
- 64% say guys have more respect for girls who want to wait for sex, and 7 in 10 guys agree that girls have more respect for guys who want to wait to have sex.
- 87% of guys say they have the right to change their minds about having sex, even if it means stopping the action in the heat of the moment.
- 50% of guys agree that if a couple has sex, the girl has a right to expect a committed relationship (44% of females agreed).

Sex plays a big part in how young black males feel they are perceived, but it won’t necessarily keep them in relationships:

- Contrary to what many young women believe, 8 in 10 (79%) guys agree that “having sex with someone won’t make me stay in a relationship I don’t want to be in.”
- 41% of males who have had sex say that girls think that all they want from them is sex. Overall, 3 in 10 (29%) guys feel that way.
- Nearly 1 in 5 (19%) guys say “other people make me feel like sex is the only thing I have to offer anyone.”



6. Parents are the most powerful influence on sex and relationships, especially among the youngest teens.

Black youth, like all youth, say that when they are making decisions about sex, their parents’ opinions matter most. Our survey respondents want more candid conversations with their parents about sex, love, and relationships, and they are more receptive to these conversations the younger they are, particularly before they start having sex.

Decades of research show that strong parent-teen communication about sex correlates with teens delaying sexual activity. About half (46%) of our survey respondents are already talking with their parents about sex and birth control.

Even so, few parents recognize their immense power, which may make it especially hard for them in the uphill battle to discourage teen pregnancy and parenthood. In contrast to what they discuss at home, friends send a different message:

Considered Acceptable	By Family	By Friends
Sex during the teen years	28%	68%
Teen pregnancy	12%	30%
Teen parenthood	12%	32%
Having a baby outside of marriage	31%	48%

Parents need to know that they wield more influence than friends do: nearly one-third (31%) of black youth say their parents are most influential when it comes to decisions about sex (as compared to 27% who say their partners’ opinions are most important or 5% who look to their friends first). This sentiment is strongest among younger teens and decreases as they age. Nearly half (47%) of 13-15 year-olds say their parents’ opinion matters most, while only 17% of 19-21 year-olds say so.

Similarly, when asked about their preferred source of information about sex, parents (46%) are the top answer for young teens ages 13-15, although not so for young adults ages 19-21 (15%). Parents are also ranked as the most accurate source of information about sex and birth control (29%), except among those who have had sex. Sexually active teens rank health care providers above parents as the most accurate source of information (35%). Even though only 4% say their friends are the most accurate source of information about sex and birth control, more than one in three black youth have in fact gone to their friends for information about these topics.

As with all youth, black youth say parents are their relationship role models—which makes them credible sources on the subject—but that, too, decreases with age: 62% of 13-15 year-olds say their parents are their role models for healthy relationships, but among 19-21 year-olds the number goes down to 36%. Grandparents are considered relationship role models by 27% of black youth, but one in four (24%) say they have no real life relationship role models at all.

Black youth believe in the protective power of parent-teen communication and say that if teens were able to have more open and honest conversations at home:

- 67% think fewer teens would get pregnant (76% of females, 57% of males).
- 66% think teens would wait longer to have sex (74% of females, 59% of males).

- 66% say more teens would use protection when having sex.
- 62% say more teens would be truthful about what's really going on in their sex lives (70% of females, 54% of males).
- 42% say teens would have fewer sexual partners.

So what keeps young people from talking to their parents about these issues? Survey respondents who say they have NOT talked with their parents about sex and birth control explain (more than one answer was acceptable):

- 42% say it would be too awkward.
- 30% say they don't want parents asking too many questions.
- 23% don't know how to bring it up.
- 21% say they already know everything they need to know.
- 17% say they don't want their parents to be disappointed in them.
- 17% say they don't want their parents to know they've already had sex.
- 15% don't want their parents to tell them not to have sex.



Is there a double standard when parents talk to daughters and sons? While two-thirds (66%) say that parents are equally likely to encourage both their sons and daughters to use protection when they have sex, and half (49%) say parents are equally likely to encourage both sons and daughters to delay sex until after high school, some still feel that males and females get different messages:

- 42% say parents are more likely to tell daughters than sons that sex is NOT okay.
- 37% say parents are more likely to tell their sons than daughters that sex IS okay.
- 36% say parents are more likely to teach their daughters rather than their sons that it's important to prevent pregnancy during the teen years.

Those who have already had sex say they wish they had discussed some important ideas before they'd had sex for the first time.

- That it's okay to wait until they older to have sex (31% overall, 36% females, 26% males). Among those 16-18 years old, nearly 1 in 4 (38%) wish they'd known this.
- That they have much more to offer someone than just sex (30% overall, 39% females, 20% males). Among those 13-15 years old, 36% wish they'd known this before they had sex.
- That sex won't make someone stay with them (29% overall, 34% female, 25% males).
- That they can always say "no" to sex, even if they've said "yes" before (27% overall, 38% females, 14% males).

Black youth want their parents to talk to them about love and relationships more than anything else. What teens want to talk about openly with their parents (more than one answer was acceptable):

- 47% say how to have a good relationship—this tops the list from ages 13 through 21.
- 37% say how to know I'm in love (even among 19-21 year-olds, 30% still say they want to know more about this from their parents).
- 32% say determining the right time to have sex (among 13-15 year-olds, 45% want to know more about this).
- 26% say how to prevent STIs.
- 24% say how to choose the right birth control/protection.
- 23% say how to prevent pregnancy.
- 23% say how to say no to sex (35% among 13-15 year-olds).
- 23% say how to keep a good reputation.
- That they have much more to offer someone than sex (30% overall, 39% females, 20% males).
- That sex won't make someone stay with them (29% overall, 34% female, 25% males).

What else do young people want to hear from their parents about? These are their biggest worries when it comes to sex:

- 66% say STIs.
- 60% say pregnancy.
- 38% say "I won't know what I'm doing."
- 33% worry most that their parents will find out they're having sex (51% of 13-15 year-olds worry about this).
- 28% fear their feelings will get hurt.
- 24% are concerned about ruining their reputation.

FINAL THOUGHT

There is much hope in the survey findings presented here. Black youth believe in themselves and their futures, and they want what all young people want: to be valued, to succeed in life, to have their parents guide them through relationships with open, honest conversations, and to finish their education before starting a family. This survey also points out areas where black youth need and deserve extra support from the adults in their lives. A significant minority of young black Americans are still going it alone: one in five say they have not talked to parents about birth control because they know all they need to know about it; one in five say they have NO relationship role models; and three in 10 say they don't rely on anyone's opinion but their own when it comes to decisions about sex.

With half of all black girls in America getting pregnant as teens, and with negative stereotypes in the media and pressure from peers and pop culture, black youth—particularly those in middle school (ages 13-15)—are counting on their parents to cut through the awkwardness and connect with them early on, before they are actually having sex. Teens need and want their parents to help them understand what steps they need to take in order to make their high aspirations a reality.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

TRU—the leading youth research and insight firm in the U.S.—was commissioned to conduct quantitative research among a nationally-representative sample of 13- to 21-year-old African-American females and males. TRU customized and fielded a 15-minute online survey from March 18, 2011 through April 12, 2011. A total of 1,500 teen and young adult African-American females and males completed the survey, resulting in a margin of error of ± 2.5 percentage points (at the 95% confidence level).

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

In the survey report, *contraception = birth control or protection*.

- **“Talking” to someone:** A romantic interest in someone, but no formal commitment or physical relationship.
- **Casual dating:** A physical and emotional relationship, may or may not include sex, but not exclusive or committed.
- **Hook-up/ Hooking-up:** A “no-strings-attached,” “no expectations,” intimate physical encounter, which may or may not include sex.
- **Making out:** May include heavy kissing and light touching, but no stimulation or giving / receiving oral sex.
- **Everything but sex:** May include intimately touching, stimulating, or giving / receiving oral sex.
- **Having sex:** Vaginal intercourse.
- **Birth control/ Protection:** Anything used to prevent pregnancy; common examples may include a condom, the pill, the patch, vaginal ring, diaphragm, spermicide, etc. (Pulling out or withdrawal does not count as protection.)

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Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc.

Susanne Daniels

Producer

Amanda Deaver

Partner
Prism Public Affairs

Mark Edwards

Executive Director
OpportunityNation

Maria Echaveste

Senior Fellow
Center for American Progress

Daisy Expósito-Ulla

Chairman and CEO
d'expósito & partners

Ira Fishman

Chief Operating Officer
NFL Players Association

William Galston, Ph.D.

Senior Fellow, Governance Studies
The Brookings Institution

Ron Haskins, Ph.D.

Senior Fellow, Economic Studies
Co-Director, Center for Children and Families
The Brookings Institution
Senior Consultant, The Annie E. Casey Foundation

Nancy L. Johnson

Senior Public Policy Advisor
Federal Public Policy and Healthcare Group
Baker, Donelson, Bearman, Caldwell & Berkowitz, PC

Judith E. Jones

Clinical Professor Emerita
Mailman School of Public Health
Columbia University

Ivan Juzang

Founder and President
MEE Productions, Inc.

Jody Greenstone Miller

President and CEO
The Business Talent Group

Reverend Father Michael D. Place, STD

Senior Vice President
Social Mission & Ministerial Development
Resurrection Health Care

Sara Rosenbaum

Hirsh Professor and Chair,
Department of Health Policy
School of Public Health and Health Services
The George Washington University Medical Center

Bruce Rosenblum

President
Warner Bros. Television Group

Victoria P. Sant

President
The Summit Foundation

Matthew Stagner, Ph.D.

Executive Director
Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

Mary C. Tydings

Managing Director
Russell Reynolds Associates

Stephen A. Weiswasser

Partner
Covington & Burling

Gail R. Wilensky, Ph.D.

Senior Fellow
Project HOPE

Kimberlydawn Wisdom, M.D.

Senior Vice President
Community Health & Equity
and Chief Wellness Officer
Henry Ford Health System

Judy Woodruff

Senior Correspondent
PBS News Hour

TRUSTEES EMERITI

Charlotte Beers

former Under Secretary for Public
Diplomacy and Public Affairs
U.S. Department of State
former Chairman and CEO, Ogilvy & Mather

Carol Mendez Cassell, Ph.D.

Senior Scientist
Allied Health Center, School of Medicine,
Prevention Research Center
University of New Mexico

Thomas S. Chappell

Senior Manager
Goodman & Company, LLP.

Annette P. Cumming

Executive Director and Vice President
The Cumming Foundation

Frankie Sue Del Papa

former Attorney General
State of Nevada

David R. Gergen

Editor-at-Large
U.S. News & World Report

Whoopi Goldberg

Actress

Stephen Goldsmith

Deputy Mayor for Operations
New York City

Katharine Graham (1917-2001)

Chairman
Washington Post Company

David A. Hamburg, M.D.

President Emeritus
Carnegie Corporation of New York
Visiting Scholar, Weill Medical College
Cornell University

Irving B. Harris (1910-2004)

Chairman
The Harris Foundation

Barbara Huberman

Director of Education
Advocates for Youth

Alexine Clement Jackson

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Leslie Kantor

National Director, Education Initiatives
Planned Parenthood Federation of America

Nancy Kassebaum-Baker

former U.S. Senator

Douglas Kirby, Ph.D.

Senior Research Scientist
ETR Associates

C. Everett Koop, M.D.

former U.S. Surgeon General

John D. Macomber

Principal
JDM Investment Group

Sister Mary Rose McGeady

former President and CEO
Covenant House

Judy McGrath

Chairman and CEO
MTV Networks

Brent C. Miller, Ph.D.

Vice President for Research
Utah State University

Kristin Moore, Ph.D.

Senior Scholar and Program Area Director
Child Trends, Inc.

John E. Pepper

CEO
National Underground Railroad Freedom Center

Hugh Price

Visiting Professor, Public and International Affairs
Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University

Diane Rowland, Sc.D.

Executive Director
Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured

Warren B. Rudman

Senior Counsel
Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison
former U.S. Senator

Stephen W. Sanger

former Chairman of the Board
General Mills, Inc.

Kurt L. Schmoke

Dean
Howard University School of Law
former Mayor of Baltimore

Sara Seims, Ph.D.

Senior Advisor on Reproductive Health Strategy
The David and Lucille Packard Foundation

Isabel Stewart

former Executive Director
Girls Inc.

Roland C. Warren

President
National Fatherhood Initiative

Vincent Weber

Partner
Clark & Weinstock
former U.S. Congressman

Andrew Young

Chairman
GoodWorks International
former Ambassador to the U.N.



The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy seeks 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.

If we are successful, child and family well-being will improve. There will be less poverty, more opportunities for young men and women to complete their education or achieve other life goals, fewer abortions, and a stronger nation. For more information, please visit www.TheNationalCampaign.org.

TheNationalCampaign.org **StayTeen.org** **Bedsider.org** **Twitter: @TheNC**