

Briefly...

Unplanned Pregnancy Among 20-Somethings: The Full Story

Unplanned Pregnancy: An Overview

- Half of all pregnancies in the United States are unplanned. Of the 6.4 million pregnancies in the United States in 2001 (the most recent year for which we have adequate data), over three million were unplanned.*
- Three-quarters of unplanned pregnancies are to women 29 and younger. Of the 3 million unplanned pregnancies in 2001, over 2 million were to women 29 and younger.
- More than one-third of all unplanned pregnancies are to unmarried women in their 20s. In 2001, over 1 million of the 3 million unplanned pregnancies were to unmarried women in their 20s.

How common is unplanned pregnancy among unmarried women overall?

More than 7 in 10 pregnancies among unmarried women are unplanned. The proportion of all pregnancies among unmarried women that are unplanned is high regardless of age (Figure 1). As most people seem to understand, an overwhelming majority of the pregnancies to unmarried teens are unplanned. However, a large majority of pregnancies to unmarried women in their 20s also are unplanned—more than two-thirds in 2001. In other words, it's not just teens.

How common is unplanned pregnancy among unmarried women in their 20s?

The proportion of pregnancies that are unplanned among unmarried women in their 20s is high across all income levels. Two-thirds of pregnancies among unmarried 20-somethings in the lowest income brackets (<200% poverty) were unplanned. The proportion of pregnancies that were unplanned was greatest among unmarried 20-somethings in the highest income bracket—eight in ten pregnancies in this group were unplanned (Figure 2).

FIGURE 1. Among Unmarried Women Aged 15-44, Percent of All Pregnancies that are Unplanned, by Age Group, 2001

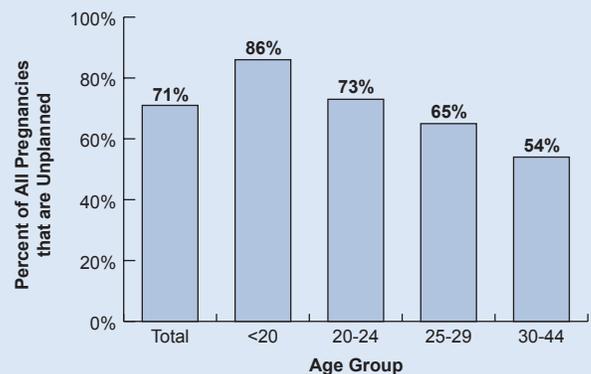
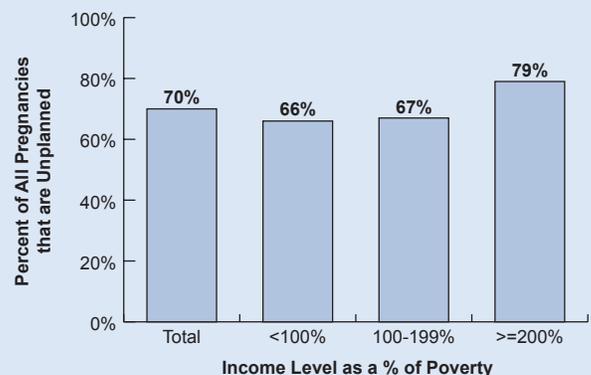


FIGURE 2. Among Unmarried Women Aged 20-29, Percent of All Pregnancies that are Unplanned, by Income Level, 2001



* Unplanned pregnancies (also known as "unintended") include those reported by women to be unwanted or mistimed. The primary source of information on unplanned pregnancy is the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), a periodic survey of women aged 15-44 conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics. Leisure time, or in-laws.

A large proportion of pregnancies are unplanned among unmarried women in their 20s at all levels of education. For example, among unmarried women in their 20s with at least some college, nearly eight in ten (77%) pregnancies were unplanned; among those with a high school diploma or equivalent, seven in ten (71%) were unplanned; and among those with less than a high school diploma, six in ten (60%) were unplanned (Figure 3).

Most pregnancies are unplanned among unmarried 20-somethings, regardless of race/ethnicity. Almost two-thirds of pregnancies among unmarried Hispanic women in their 20s were unplanned; among unmarried black women in their 20s, seven in ten pregnancies were unplanned; and among unmarried white women in their 20s, almost three-quarters of all pregnancies were unplanned (Figure 4).

What are the characteristics of unmarried women having an unplanned pregnancy?

More than half of unmarried women who have an unplanned pregnancy are in their 20s. In 2001, more than 2 million unmarried women had an unplanned pregnancy. This includes: 635,000 unmarried teens; 764,000 unmarried women in their early 20s (age 20-24); 367,000 unmarried women age 25-29; and 311,000 unmarried women over age 29 who had an unplanned pregnancy (Figure 5).

Taken together, unmarried women in their 20s had over 1.1 million unplanned pregnancies, accounting for 54 percent of unplanned pregnancies among all unmarried women. Again, unplanned pregnancy is not just a teen issue.

Over two-thirds of unmarried women having an unplanned pregnancy are not cohabiting. Only one-third of unmarried women who had an unplanned pregnancy were living with their partner when they got pregnant (Figure 6).

Among women having an unplanned pregnancy, cohabiting women and single, non-cohabiting women are more than twice as likely to have an abortion when compared to married women with an unplanned pregnancy. Research suggests that the effects of unplanned pregnancies on relationships and on children subsequently born are quite similar among cohabiting couples and unmarried non-cohabiting couples, but are very different for married couples (Figure 7). For example, close to half of all unplanned pregnancies among women who were cohabiting ended in abortion compared to less than one in five unplanned pregnancies among married women.

Additional results (not shown) indicate that about one-third of cohabiting women who reported having an unplanned pregnancy resulting in a birth ended that relationship within

FIGURE 3. Among Unmarried Women Aged 20-29, Percent of All Pregnancies that are Unplanned, by Educational Status, 2001

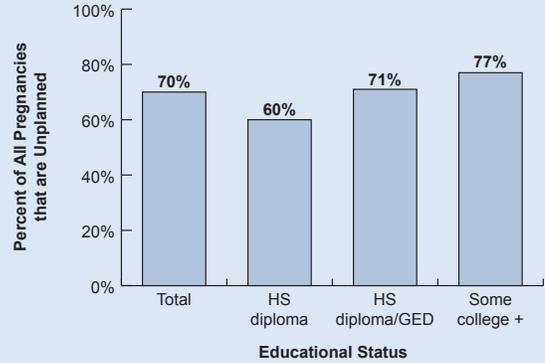


FIGURE 4. Among Unmarried Women Aged 20-29, Percent of All Pregnancies that are Unplanned, by Race/Ethnicity, 2001

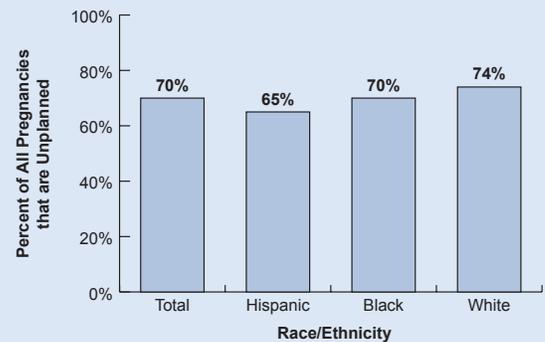
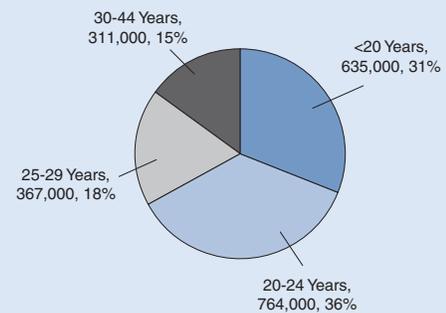


FIGURE 5. Distribution of Unmarried Women with an Unplanned Pregnancy, by Age Group, 2001



two years after the child's birth.¹ Among married women, only 7 percent ended the relationship within two years after the unplanned child's birth.

Unmarried women in their 20s who have an unplanned pregnancy are a diverse group with respect to income level, educational level, and race/ethnicity (Figures 8, 9, and 10). For example, approximately two-thirds of unmarried women ages 20-29 who experienced an unplanned pregnancy were above the federal poverty level, and more than one-third had an income at or above 200% of the federal poverty level. Most unmarried women who experienced an unplanned pregnancy have either graduated from high school or its equivalent, and four in ten have attended some college or more. Furthermore, close to half of all unmarried women who experienced an unplanned pregnancy are white, one in five are Hispanic, and about one-third are black.[†]

What is the risk that an unmarried woman will have an unplanned pregnancy?

Among unmarried women, the rate of unplanned pregnancy is highest among 20-somethings. Not only do those in their 20s account for the highest number of unplanned pregnancies among unmarried women, they also have the highest rate of unplanned pregnancy among unmarried women (Figure 11). Moreover, the rate of unwanted[‡] pregnancy among unmarried women is highest among women in their 20s.

What about young men?

More than half of pregnancies reported by unmarried men in their 20s are unplanned. The limited data available on young men's pregnancy intentions suggest that young men are also struggling with pregnancy planning. It is also the case that young couples often don't agree on the planning status of a given pregnancy. Approximately seven in ten pregnancies which resulted in a live birth in the past five years among never-

FIGURE 6. Distribution of Unmarried Women with an Unplanned Pregnancy, by Cohabiting Status, 2001

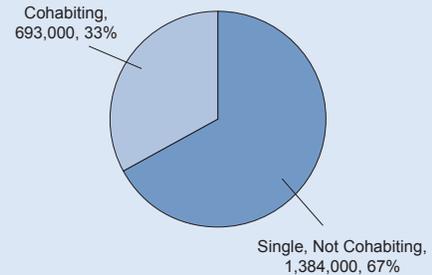


FIGURE 7. Distribution of Unplanned Pregnancies Among Women Aged 15-44, by Outcome and Marital/Cohabiting Status, 2001

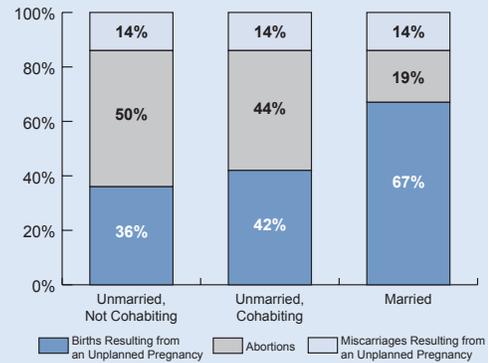
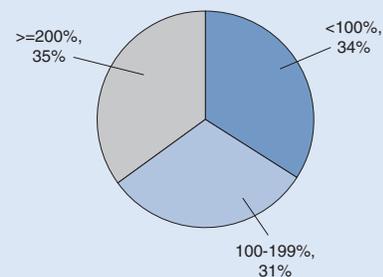


FIGURE 8. Distribution of Unmarried Women Aged 20-29 with an Unplanned Pregnancy, by Income as % of Poverty



[†] Please note that available data show that 58 percent of births which resulted from an unplanned pregnancy were second or higher, indicating that birth parity is an important consideration when exploring the characteristics of women having an unplanned pregnancy. However, data are not yet available on birth parity by pregnancy intention status. However, at this point tabulations of parity by intention status are available only for those pregnancies that resulted in a birth, rather than for all pregnancies.

[‡] The NSFG defines a pregnancy as unwanted if the respondent reports that she did not want to become pregnant now or ever in the future.

married young men aged 20-24 were unplanned (Figure 12).²

Furthermore, one in five women who had a birth at age 20-24 report that their pregnancy was unplanned by either the father or themselves, and less than half of all pregnancies were planned by both partners.³

What are the consequences associated with unplanned pregnancy?

Intuitively, a number of consequences go hand in hand with unplanned pregnancy.

- There is reduced opportunity to pursue pre-conception care as well as care in-between pregnancies.⁴
- Unplanned pregnancy also provides less opportunity for optimal child spacing.
- Moreover, unplanned pregnancy is at the root of the vast majority of abortions. Specifically, unplanned pregnancies among unmarried women in their 20s resulted in nearly 600,000 abortions in 2001, or half of all abortions nationwide.⁵

Parents whose children were born following an unplanned pregnancy face significantly more hurdles.

- More than half (57 percent) of births following an unplanned pregnancy are to unmarried women.¹ The issues to children being born to single versus married families have been well documented and include a greater likelihood of poverty, father absence, school and health problems, and child neglect.⁶
- Over half of unmarried women having an unplanned pregnancy and birth were not in any committed relationship when their child was conceived. Among couples in a cohabiting relationship who had an unplanned pregnancy resulting in a birth, one-third split up within two years of the child's birth.¹
- 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.¹
- Unplanned pregnancy places both mothers and fathers at greater risk of educational hardship and failure to achieve education and career goals.⁶
- Women who experience an unplanned pregnancy may also be at increased risk of domestic violence compared to women who have an intended pregnancy.^{6,7} While it is difficult to as-

FIGURE 9. Distribution of Unmarried Women Aged 20-29 with an Unplanned Pregnancy, by Educational Attainment

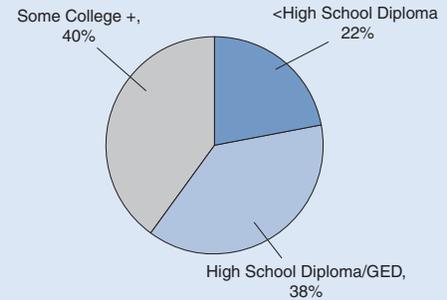


FIGURE 10. Distribution of Unmarried Women Aged 20-29 with an Unplanned Pregnancy, by Race/Ethnicity

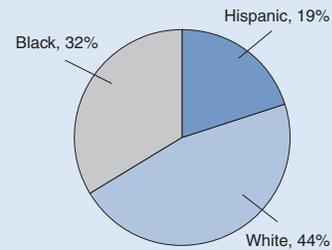


FIGURE 11. Rate of Unplanned and Unwanted Pregnancies Among Unmarried Women, by Age Group, 2001

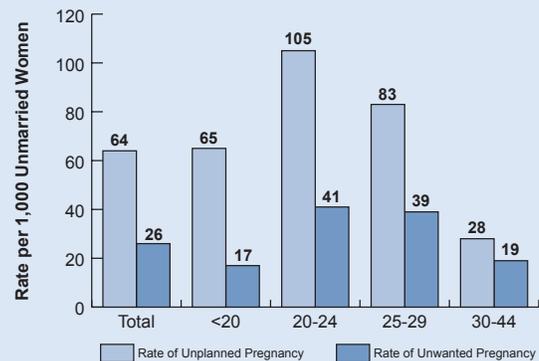
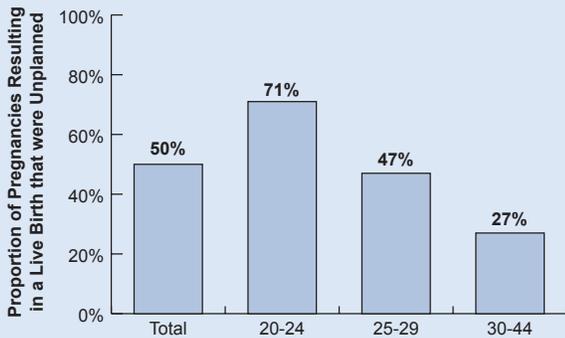


FIGURE 12. Proportion of Unplanned Pregnancies Resulting in a Live Birth in the Past Five Years Among Never-Married Men, by Age Group, 2001



ness which event led to which, having an unplanned pregnancy is an important marker for experiencing physical abuse. The risk of domestic violence associated with having an unplanned pregnancy is particularly high for women 20 and older who have had 12 or more years of education.⁷

Children born following an unplanned pregnancy are at risk on a number of measures of health and development.

- Recent analyses suggest an association between childbearing resulting from unplanned pregnancies and low birthweight (a major predictor of infant mortality)—an association that persists after controlling for numerous background characteristics. The effect of a pregnancy’s “wantedness” seems to be through its influence on maternal behavior.⁸ For example, 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 prenatal care initiation.⁶
- Babies born to women as the result of an unplanned pregnancy are 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.⁹

- Even after controlling for background factors, pregnancy planning status remains a significant influence on several developmental outcomes 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 2. When these children enter preschool, they score lower on tests of verbal development.⁶
- Similarly, children born as the result of an unwanted pregnancy have decreased cognitive test scores even after controlling for other background factors.¹⁰

Sources

Unless otherwise noted, all numbers on unplanned and unwanted pregnancy presented in this report are unpublished tabulations from the Guttmacher Institute. More information on the methodology and unintended pregnancy more generally is available in *Finer and Henshaw (2006). Disparities in Rates of Unintended Pregnancy in the United States, 1994 and 2001, Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health, 38(2):90-96.*

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