

Hispanic Teen Pregnancy and Birth Rates: Looking Behind the Numbers

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Overview Teen pregnancy and birth rates for U.S. teens have declined dramatically in recent years. Yet for Hispanic teens, reductions in teen pregnancy and childbearing have lagged behind that of U.S. teens overall. This is of special concern because Hispanics represent the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population.

From 1990 to 2000, the Hispanic population grew by more than 40 percent, increasing from 9 percent to 13 percent of the total population. Moreover, between 2000 and 2010, the Hispanic population is projected to grow by another 34 percent – almost four times faster than that of the total U.S. population.¹ The rapid growth in the Hispanic population is expected to be even more dramatic for teens in the next 20 years, with the size of the Hispanic teen population projected to increase by 50 percent by 2025, compared with a projected 6 percent increase in the size of the overall teen population.¹ While Hispanic teens now make up about 17 percent of the teen population, they are expected to comprise 24 percent in 2025.

Given the current and projected growth in the Hispanic teen population, combined with the relatively high rates of teen pregnancy and births within this population, Hispanic teens represent an important target group for pregnancy prevention programs. But very few pregnancy prevention programs have been designed specifically to address the needs of Hispanic teens. A broader understanding of the sexual, contraceptive, and relationship behaviors of Hispanic teens can help program providers and others address these needs more effectively.

This Research Brief provides that broader context. It presents data from several sources (see Box on page 2), combining findings from recently collected data with new analyses of data from the 1990s, to draw a picture of the reproductive behaviors and outcomes of Hispanic teens. These analyses reveal both troubling and encouraging trends. For example, birth and pregnancy rates among Hispanic teens have declined far less than rates among teens in other racial and ethnic groups, and Hispanic teens who are in sexual relationships often do not use contraception – or even talk about using it. Still, an increasing number of sexually active Hispanic teens are using condoms and long-lasting, injectable methods of contraception.

Not all teens are sexually active, of course. Indeed, it is important to recognize that many Hispanic teens choose not to have sex. The brief reports that among Hispanic teens who abstain from sex, concern of pregnancy was a stronger motivation for remaining virgins than religious or moral values.

PREGNANCIES AND BIRTHS

Hispanics have higher teen pregnancy and birth rates than the overall U.S. population. The Hispanic teen pregnancy rate in 2000 (the latest year for which data are available) was 137.9 pregnancies per 1,000 teen females aged 15 to 19, compared with 83.6 for the overall U.S. teen population (see Figure 1).² Hispanics had the highest teen birth rate in 2003, with 82.2 births per 1,000 teen females aged 15 to 19 (see Figure 1).³ In comparison, the birth rate

for teens of all backgrounds was 41.7, while the birth rate for non-Hispanic white teens was 27.5 and the birth rate for non-Hispanic black teens was 64.8.

■ The difference in birth rates in 2003 was more pronounced among younger teens. The birth rate for Hispanic teens aged 15 to 17 was more than twice as high as the birth rate for all teens aged 15 to 17 (49.7 versus 22.4), and the birth rate for older Hispanic

ABOUT THE RESEARCH SOURCES FOR THIS BRIEF

The pregnancy, birth, and abortion information presented in this brief originate from national-level data published by the Census Bureau, the National Center for Health Statistics, and the Alan Guttmacher Institute.^{1-3,5,8-11} The sex, contraception, and relationship information comes from four U.S. surveys: 1) 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), 2) Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), 3) the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), and 4) Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study (Fragile Families). NSFG is a nationally representative survey of males and females aged 15 to 44 in 2002. The NSFG data we present on teens aged 15 to 19 come from a report published by the National Center for Health Statistics.⁷ The YRBS survey is nationally representative of students in grades 9 through 12 in 2003, and we present YRBS data drawn from a report published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.¹⁶ Add Health is a nationally representative survey of adolescents who were in grades 7 through 12 in 1995 (Wave I), and the majority of these teens were interviewed again in 1996 (Wave II). The Fragile Families study provides a nationally representative sample of births outside of marriage in large U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000. The Add Health and Fragile Families information presented in this brief is based on original analyses conducted by Child Trends.

All analyses in this brief compare Hispanic teens with the overall teen population in the U.S. – a group that includes Hispanics. Because we used published data for much of our information, comparisons with non-Hispanics only were typically not available. It is important to note that, in most cases, the contrasts we show would be amplified if Hispanics were removed from the comparison group.

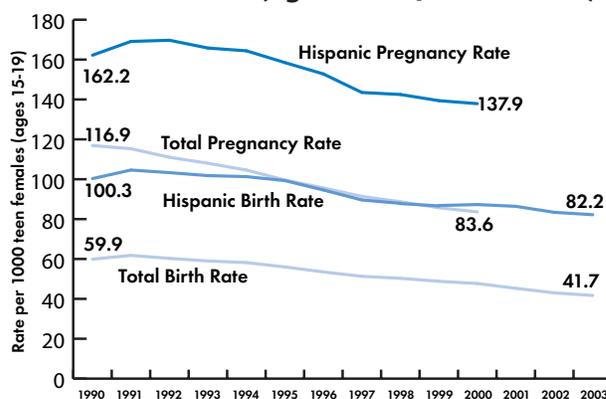
teens (aged 18 to 19) was more than 85 percent higher than the birth rate for all teens aged 18 to 19 (131.9 versus 70.8).³

- According to the latest data available, in 2002, almost one in four (23 percent) Hispanic teen mothers gave birth to more than one child while still in their teens.⁴ This is comparable to the percent of multiple teen births in the overall teen population (21 percent).

The decline in Hispanic teen pregnancy and birth rates has been slower than that of other racial and ethnic groups. Between 1990 and 2000, the *pregnancy* rate declined by 29 percent for all teens, but only declined by 15 percent for Hispanic teens.² The *birth* rate for all teens has declined by 33 percent since 1991 (the most recent peak in the teen birth rate), but the birth rate for Hispanic teens has declined by only 21 percent (see Figure 1).^{3,5}

- While the pregnancy rate for the overall teen population maintained a steady decline from 116.0 pregnancies per 1,000 teen females aged 15 to 19 in 1990 to 83.6 in 2000, the pregnancy rate for Hispanic teens actually *increased* slightly in the early 1990s (from 162.2 in 1990 to 169.7 in 1992), before beginning to decline. From 1992 to 1997, the Hispanic teen pregnancy rate decreased steadily; since then, the pace of decline has slowed.
- Non-Hispanic blacks have shown the greatest decline in birth rates, with a decrease of 45 percent from 1991 to 2003.

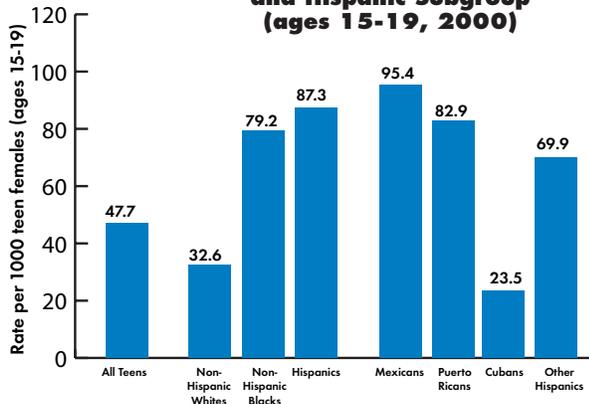
Figure 1 U.S. Teen Pregnancy and Birth Rates (ages 15-19, 1990-2003)



Source: Alan Guttmacher Institute (2004). *U.S. Teenage Pregnancy Statistics: Overall Trends, Trends by Race and Ethnicity, and State-by-State Information*; Hamilton et al. (2004). *Births: Preliminary Data for 2003*. National Vital Statistics Reports (vol. 53, no. 9); Martin et al. (2003). *Births: Final Data for 2002* National Vital Statistics Reports (vol 52, no. 10).

Hispanic teen birth rates differ dramatically by country of origin, with teens of Mexican origin having the highest rate and those of Cuban origin having the lowest rate. In 2000, the teen birth rate for all Hispanics was 87.3, while the teen birth rate for Mexicans was 95.4 (see Figure 2). With 82.9 births per 1,000 teen females aged 15 to 19, Puerto Ricans had the second highest teen birth rate among Hispanics. Cuban teens had a birth rate of 23.5, which was the lowest birth rate of any Hispanic subgroup and lower than the birth rate for non-Hispanic white teens (32.6). Hispanic teens from other places of origin (including Central and South America) had a birth rate of 69.9.⁵ These large differences highlight the variation among Hispanics – variation likely attributable to differences in socioeconomic status, immigration histories,

Figure 2 Teen Birth Rates by Race/Ethnicity and Hispanic Subgroup (ages 15-19, 2000)



Source: Martin et al. (2003). *Births: Final Data for 2002. National Vital Statistics Reports* (vol 52, no. 10).

and cultural traditions across the countries of origin.⁶

Almost one-quarter of Hispanic women will give birth before age 20. Compared with the entire population, Hispanic women are twice as likely to have a baby during their teen years. Before their twentieth birthday, an estimated 24 percent of Hispanic women will have given birth to at least one child, compared with 13 percent of U.S. women overall.⁷

Among pregnant teens, abortion is less prevalent for Hispanics than for the total population. In 2000, less than one-quarter (22 percent) of Hispanic teen pregnancies ended in abortion, compared with almost 3 in 10 (29 percent) pregnancies among all teens. The combination of higher pregnancy rates and a lower percentage of abortions accounts for the higher birth rates among Hispanic teens.²

In the past decade, births outside of marriage have increased substantially among Hispanic teen mothers. Between 1990 and 2002, Hispanics experienced a 25 percent increase in the proportion of teen births that occur to unmarried mothers, from 59 percent in 1990 to 74 percent in 2002. Among all teen mothers, the proportion of births outside of marriage increased 19 percent, from 67 percent in 1990 to 80 percent in 2002. Despite the larger increase for Hispanics, births outside of marriage remain less common among Hispanic teens than among all teens.^{5,8-10} One reason for this is that a larger, though small, proportion of Hispanic teens are married, compared with all teens (4 percent and 2 percent, respectively).¹¹ Among 18- to 19-year-olds, 8 percent of Hispanic teens and 4 percent of all teens are married.

Many unmarried teen mothers expect to marry their child's biological father within a year, but not many actually do.

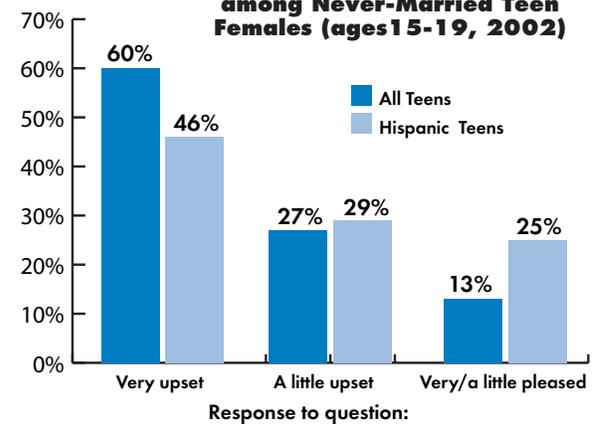
Compared with unmarried teens from all racial and ethnic groups, unmarried Hispanic teen mothers had higher marriage expectations and were more likely to marry their child's biological father, according to a national survey conducted in the late 1990s. Sixty-five percent of unmarried Hispanic teen mothers said that their chances of marrying the biological father of their child were "good" or "certain" at the time of their child's birth, compared with 56 percent of all unmarried teen mothers who believed this to be true. One year after giving birth, however, only 15 percent of unwed Hispanic teen mothers, and 8 percent of all unwed teen mothers, had actually married their child's father.¹²

Hispanic teens tend to look at the prospect of pregnancy more favorably than teens from other racial and ethnic groups. In 2002, only 46 percent of never-married Hispanic teen females said they would be "very upset" if they got pregnant, compared with 60 percent of all never-married teen females who held this view (see Figure 3). In fact, one-quarter of never-married Hispanic teen females aged 15 to 19 saw teen pregnancy as a positive event, with 15 percent reporting they would be "a little pleased" and 10 percent saying they would be "very pleased" to get pregnant. Among all never-married teen females, positive feelings toward teen pregnancy were less common, with only 13 percent saying they would be "a little pleased" or "very pleased" (8 percent and 5 percent, respectively).⁷

SEX, RELATIONSHIPS, AND CONTRACEPTION

Almost one-half of Hispanic teens are sexually experienced and one-third are sexually active. In 2002, 47 percent of

Figure 3 Attitudes towards Pregnancy among Never-Married Teen Females (ages 15-19, 2002)



Source: Abma et al. (2004) *Teenagers in the United States: Sexual activity, contraceptive use, and childbearing, 2002. National Center for Health Statistics.*

never-married Hispanic teens reported that they were sexually experienced (had ever had sex), but only 34 percent said they were sexually active (had sex at least once in the previous three months). The percentages for all U.S. teens were comparable: 46 percent were sexually experienced and 33 percent were sexually active. Among Hispanics, a large gender gap exists in sexual experience. Slightly more than one-third (37 percent) of never-married Hispanic teen females were sexually experienced, while more than one-half (55 percent) of never-married Hispanic teen males had ever had sex (see Figure 4). The gender difference was smaller for recent sexual activity (29 percent for Hispanic females versus 38 percent for Hispanic males).⁷ Among all teens, there was no gender gap in sexual experience (46 percent for both females and males) and only a small difference in recent sexual activity (34 percent for females versus 31 percent for males).

Compared with the overall teen population, Hispanic teens tend to initiate sex slightly later in their relationships.

Among teens who have sex, on average, Hispanic teens in grades 7 through 12 in 1995-1996 were involved with their romantic partners for four months before they started having sex. For relationships among teens of all races and ethnicities, the average length of time between starting a relationship with a partner and having sex with that partner for the first time was three months.¹³

Sexually experienced Hispanic teens are slightly less likely than all teens to talk about contraception with their partners before having sex. Contraception is a very important issue for sexually active teens to dis-

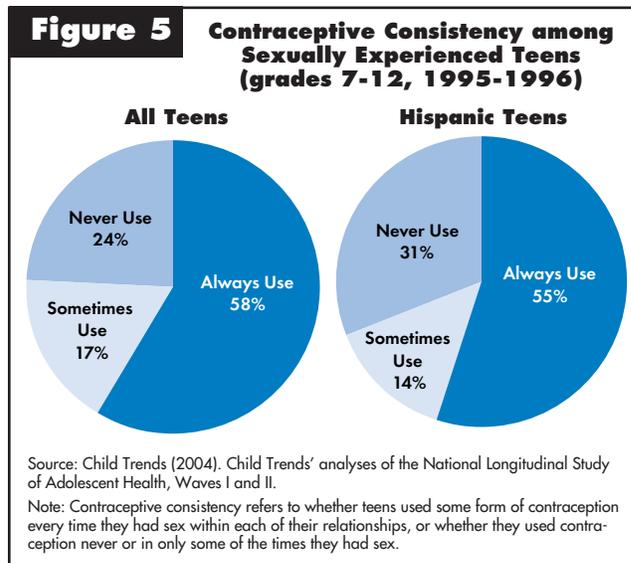
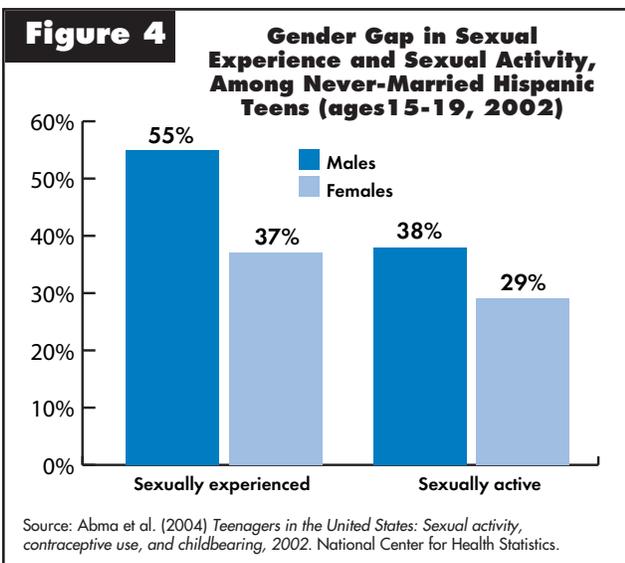
cuss with their partners before initiating sex, yet in 1995-1996, Hispanic teens in grades 7 through 12 reported that they had such discussions in less than one-half (46 percent) of their relationships.¹³ Across all sexual relationships among U.S. teens, conversations about contraception preceded sex more than one-half (52 percent) of the time. Previous research has shown that discussing contraception before sex improves the likelihood that teens will use contraception and use it consistently.^{14,15}

Sexually experienced Hispanic teens are less likely to use contraception than teens in the overall U.S. population.

In 1995-1996, Hispanic teens in grades 7 through 12 reported they used no contraceptive method at all in 31 percent of their sexual relationships, while among teens of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, contraception was not used at all in 24 percent of sexual relationships (see Figure 5). Hispanic teens were similar to the overall teen population in their sporadic use of contraception, with 14 percent and 17 percent, respectively, using contraception only occasionally. More than one-half of Hispanic teens (55 percent) and all teens (58 percent) used contraception consistently, that is, they relied on some form of contraception every time they had sex within each of their sexual relationships.¹³

Among Hispanic teens, use of some contraceptive methods has increased, while use of others has not.

Despite a dramatic increase in condom use between 1991 and 2003, 43 percent of Hispanic teens still did not use a condom during their most recent sexual experience. In addition, use of birth control pills by Hispanic teen females is relatively uncommon. However, Hispanic teens are more likely to use



an injectable method of birth control than other U.S. teens; this method is used by one-quarter of Hispanic teen females.

- For Hispanic high school teens, condom use during the most recent sexual experience has increased significantly in the past decade, from 37 percent in 1991 to 57 percent in 2003 (see Figure 6). However, condom use remained somewhat less prevalent among Hispanic high school teens than among high school teens overall (57 percent versus 63 percent, respectively).¹⁶
- At the same time, the gender gap in reported use of condoms during Hispanic high school teens' most recent sexual experience has decreased since 1991. In 1991, only 27 percent of sexually active Hispanic high school females reported that their partners used condoms, compared with 47 percent of Hispanic high school males who reported using condoms. By 2003, however, the reported prevalence of condom use during high schoolers' most recent sexual experience increased by 93 percent for females (from 27 percent to 52 percent) and by 34 percent for males (from 47 percent to 63 percent).¹⁶
- Hispanic teen females are substantially less likely than teen females in the overall population to use birth control pills. In 2003, 12 percent of Hispanic high school females reported using birth control pills during their most recent sexual experience, compared with 21 percent of high school females overall.¹⁶
- Use of injectable contraceptive methods (such as Depo Provera) among all teen

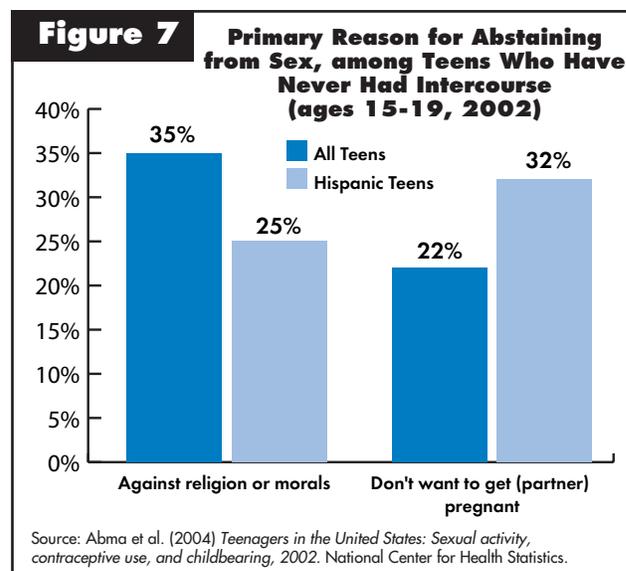
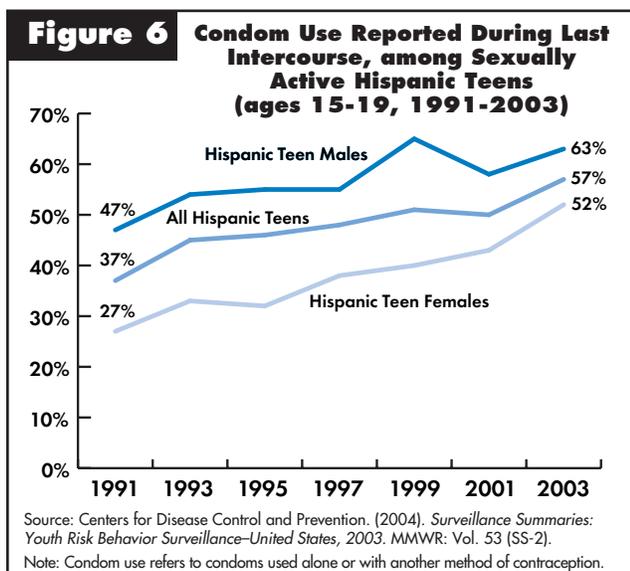
females aged 15 to 19 doubled between 1995 (10 percent) and 2002 (21 percent). In 2002, almost one-quarter (24 percent) of sexually experienced Hispanic teen females aged 15 to 19 had *ever* used an injectable method of birth control. This number reflects a slightly higher prevalence of injectable methods among Hispanic teen females than among teens of all backgrounds (21 percent).⁷

For Hispanic teens who have never had sex, fear of pregnancy is the primary reason. The number one reason Hispanic teens who had never had sex give for remaining virgins is that they did not want to get themselves or their partners pregnant. In 2002, this was true for 32 percent of virgin Hispanic teens surveyed (see Figure 7). An additional 25 percent of Hispanic teens cited religious or moral values as their primary reason for maintaining their virginity. Among all teens who had never had sex, the main reason for not having sex was that it is against their religious or moral values (35 percent), followed by fear of pregnancy (22 percent).⁷

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Compared with the overall teen population, Hispanic teens have higher pregnancy and birth rates and have been experiencing slower declines in these rates over the past decade. Current estimates indicate that almost one-quarter of Hispanics will give birth before age 20.

Contraceptive use among Hispanic teens is relatively low: About one in three never use contraception in their sexual relationships. Almost one-half of sexually active teens do not use a



SOCIAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF HISPANICS IN THE U.S.

The higher rates of pregnancy and childbearing found among Hispanic teens, compared with those of the overall U.S. teen population, may reflect, in part, differences in sociodemographic and cultural background. Compared with non-Hispanic whites, Hispanics tend to have lower educational attainment and lower income levels, and such disadvantaged backgrounds are known to be associated with a higher risk of teen pregnancy and childbearing.²⁵ Slightly more than one-half (57 percent) of Hispanics aged 25 and older in 2002 had graduated from high school and only 11 percent had a bachelor's degree, compared with 89 percent and 29 percent, respectively, for non-Hispanic whites.²⁶ And, more than one-quarter (27 percent) of Hispanics had not even completed ninth grade; only 4 percent of non-Hispanic whites had this low level of education. With respect to economic status, Hispanics are disproportionately represented among the poor. Twenty-one percent of Hispanics were living in poverty in 2002, compared with 8 percent of non-Hispanic whites. Among children, although Hispanics represented only 18 percent of all children in the U.S., they accounted for almost one-third (30 percent) of all children living in poverty.²⁶ Also, in 2002, 40 percent of Hispanics in the U.S. were foreign-born.²⁶ Thus, the higher rates of pregnancy and childbearing among Hispanic teens in the U.S. may reflect preexisting disadvantages and cultural differences.

condom, putting them at risk for sexually transmitted infections. In fact, less than one-half even discuss contraception with their partners before having sex. Although *virgin* Hispanic teens cite fear of pregnancy as their primary motivation for remaining abstinent, the tendency among *all* Hispanic teens to hold less negative views of teen pregnancy than teens in the overall population may be one factor contributing to Hispanic teens' high pregnancy and birth risks; if some sexually active teens do not feel a strong aversion to becoming pregnant, they likely will not be as careful to avoid it.

Despite these findings, the picture is not all negative. Our research identifies several encouraging trends in Hispanic teens' reproductive lives, including some positive news about contraceptive use. The birth rate among Hispanic teens *is* falling, and the use of both condoms and injectable contraceptive methods by Hispanic teens has increased by more than 50 percent in the past decade. Sexually experienced Hispanic teens are slightly more likely to use long-lasting, injectable methods of contraception than teens in the overall U.S. population. And Hispanic teens who become sexually experienced tend to delay initiating sex within their relationships for a slightly longer time period than do teens in the overall population.

The finding that Hispanic teens are less likely to have a birth outside of marriage than teens in the overall population could be viewed through both a positive and a negative lens. It implies that Hispanic teen mothers are more likely to be married than the average teen mother, which is advantageous because children born to married parents tend to have better outcomes throughout life than do children born to unmarried mothers.¹⁷ Still, regardless of

whether the births are within or outside marriage, children born to teen parents are generally at a disadvantage.¹⁸

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The high risks being experienced by the Hispanic teen population warrant attention because teen pregnancy and childbearing can have negative consequences for both teen mothers and their children. Young mothers are less likely to ever marry, while those who do marry as teens face a greater risk of unstable unions than those who postpone marriage until they are older.^{19,20} Teenage mothers also tend to have lower educational attainment, lower income, and a greater chance of needing public assistance than older mothers.^{21,22} Compared with children born to older mothers, those born to teenage mothers are more likely to face disadvantages throughout life, including lower educational attainment, a greater risk of poverty and of growing up with a single parent, and an increased likelihood of engaging in problem behaviors and in early sexual activity.^{17,18,23,24} However, given that teen marriage may be more culturally acceptable in some Hispanic communities, we need to examine the development of children born to Hispanic teen mothers to see if their outcomes differ relative to children born to teen mothers of other racial and ethnic backgrounds.

In light of the high risk of teen pregnancy and childbearing among Hispanics, and the typically adverse consequences of such behaviors, it is important to identify strategies that may help Hispanic teens avoid early pregnancy and parenthood. Our research suggests the following approaches may be effective:

- **Develop programs targeted to Hispanic teens.** Very few pregnancy prevention programs are designed specifically for Hispanic teens and their families. Setting up Spanish-language programs, as well as programs that are sensitive to Hispanics' cultural attitudes, customs, and beliefs, their varied countries of origin, their level of acculturation, and the role of family and community in their lives, should help providers present information in a way that is more relevant and meaningful to the teens.
- **Continue to encourage teens to abstain from sex.** Once teens are in a romantic relationship, present ways other than sexual activity for them to express their romantic feelings.
- **Work to change attitudes toward teen pregnancy.** One in four Hispanic teen females views pregnancy in a positive light and, thus, may not take steps to avoid it. Educating them about the disadvantages of teen pregnancy for themselves and their children, as well as providing teens with opportunities for educational and career advancement as alternatives to early childbearing, could encourage them to delay childbearing until they are older.
- **Emphasize the importance of contraception.** Teach teens that, if they decide to have sex, they must use contraception consistently for it to be effective. Also, encourage the use of long-lasting methods of contraception, such as injectables or the contraceptive patch, for pregnancy prevention, and stress the value of condoms for preventing both pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.
- **Design programs to support those teens who *do* bear children at a young age, especially those who have multiple teen births.** Given the high rates of childbearing, many Hispanics will become pregnant and give birth during their teenage years and, therefore, will need resources to ensure the best possible outcomes for their children. Comprehensive programs that assist families and that guide teens toward postponing subsequent childbearing and toward finding adequate prenatal care, assistance in continuing their education, child care, and parenting classes would be especially helpful.

CONCLUSION

The information in this *Research Brief* has focused on the birth, pregnancy, contraceptive, and relationship behaviors of Hispanic teens because they represent an important risk group. Broadening our knowledge of the reproductive and relationship behaviors of Hispanic teens will help parents and program providers understand why these teens are more likely to have children at a young age and will pinpoint specific areas on which to focus in designing programs to improve Hispanic teens' relationship behaviors and reproductive health choices.

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