

Characteristics of Young Adult Sexual Relationships: Diverse, Sometimes Violent, Often Loving

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Overview. *Young adulthood has become an increasingly distinct and extended stage of development, a period of transition between adolescence and adulthood when people explore many potential life directions.¹ The types of sexual relationships that young adults form and the choices that they make within these relationships can have a long-lasting impact on their lives. In recent years, these relationships have become increasingly diverse, in terms of the types of unions formed, partner age and racial/ethnic differences, and levels of love and commitment. Moreover, young adults' relatively high rates of nonmarital and unintended childbearing—combined with high rates of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) within this population—have attracted the attention of the research community, social service providers, policy makers, and the media. Most births to young adult parents (especially those between the ages of 20 and 24) occur outside of marriage, and the highest rates of unintended pregnancy and childbearing occur to women in their late teens and early twenties.^{6,11} Similarly, young adults are at greater risk for STDs than are people in other age groups.³ As of 2000, young adults made up one-half of the new STD cases.²² Further, some research has linked characteristics of relationships and partners to reproductive health and childbearing behaviors and decisions, including contraceptive use.⁸ Yet limited information exists on characteristics of young adult relationships and partners.*

This Research Brief seeks to fill this knowledge gap by focusing on these characteristics. To develop this brief, Child Trends analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). Results of our analyses indicate that young adult relationships are fairly diverse; that these relationships have both positive and negative dimensions; and that partner and relationship characteristics and patterns of contraceptive use vary considerably by relationship type, gender, and race/ethnicity.

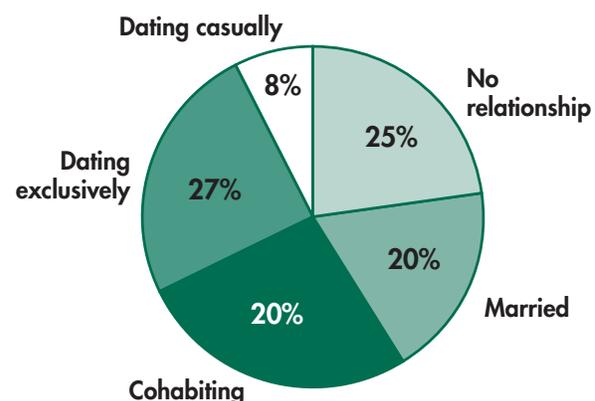
SNAPSHOT OF YOUNG ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

Young adults are involved in a variety of relationship types. Three-quarters of all young adults in the full study sample were in some type of romantic relationship. Twenty percent of these respondents were married, 20 percent were living with a partner (cohabiting), and 35 percent were in a dating relationship (27 percent were dating exclusively and 8 percent were dating casually). (See Figure 1.)

- Women were more likely than were men to report dating exclusively or being married, whereas men were more likely to report not being in a relationship.
- Blacks were most likely to report dating casually (14 percent), and Hispanics (24 percent) and whites (21 percent) were

Figure 1

Young Adult Relationship Status, Among 18-25 Year Olds



Source: Child Trends' Analyses of Add Health Wave III Data

ABOUT THE DATA SOURCE FOR THIS BRIEF

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) is a nationally representative survey of U.S. students who were in seventh through 12th grades in 1994-1995. It was designed to provide a broad understanding of the health and well-being of adolescents and their subsequent development by following respondents over time into young adulthood.¹² The third phase of the survey (Wave III), which interviewed participants in 2001-2002, collected information about unique areas of young adults' lives, including relationship and marital histories. Child Trends' initial study sample from Wave III included 14,322 young adults between the ages of 18 and 25. For analyses of young adults' current relationships, we further restricted the sample to 7,539 heterosexual young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 who were currently in sexual relationships. Women accounted for 49 percent of the sample of young adults in current sexual relationships. The sample's racial/ethnic breakdown was as follows: 68 percent non-Hispanic white; 16 percent non-Hispanic black; 12 percent Hispanic; and 4 percent Asian. All analyses were weighted to present population-level estimates, and all differences presented in this brief are significant ($p > .05$). We include results of our analyses for the full sample, as well as our analyses by gender, race/ethnicity, and relationship status.

most likely to be married. Whites, blacks, and Hispanics reported similar levels of cohabitation (20, 21, and 19 percent respectively) whereas Asians were less likely to do so (17 percent).

Overall, 90 percent of young adults reported that they were heterosexual.^a The results presented throughout the remainder of this Research Brief describe young adults who identified themselves as strictly heterosexual, who were in a current relationship (including marriage), and who had had sex with their current partner.

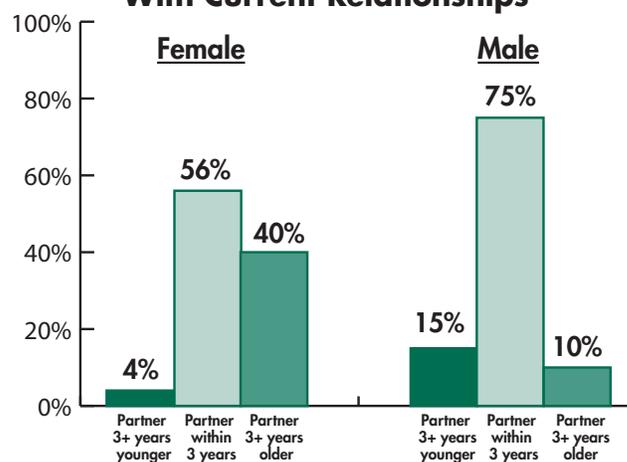
PARTNER CHARACTERISTICS

Young adult men and women show differences when it comes to partner age. On average, young adult relationships involve men and women of similar ages (within three years); however, young adult women were more likely than were young adult men to have an older partner.

- Three-quarters (75 percent) of men reported that their partner was within three years of their age, compared with 56 percent of women who were close in age to their partner. (See Figure 2.)
- Women were four times as likely as were men to have a partner who was three or more years older (40 percent versus 10 percent). (See Figure 2.)
- Men were more than three times as likely as were women to have a partner who was three or more years younger (15 percent versus 4 percent). (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2

Partner Age Differences by Gender, Among Young Adults With Current Relationships



Source: Child Trends' Analyses of Add Health Wave III Data

Married and cohabiting young adults are more likely to have older partners than are young adults in less committed relationships.

Analyses indicate that nearly 33 percent of married young adults and 31 percent of cohabiting young adults reported that their partner was three or more years older, compared with 21 percent of young adults who were dating (both casually and exclusively, results not shown).

- Young adults who were dating exclusively were somewhat more likely than were those who were married and cohabiting to have a partner who was within three years of their age (69

^aRespondents were asked to describe how they think about themselves. The response categories consisted of 100% heterosexual; mostly heterosexual, but somewhat attracted to people of your own sex; bisexual – that is, attracted to men and women equally; mostly homosexual, but somewhat attracted to people of the opposite sex; and 100% homosexual.

percent, compared with 62 percent and 60 percent, respectively).

One in five young adults is in an interracial relationship. Twenty percent of young adults across all relationship types reported that their partner was of a different race/ethnicity than their own. The proportion of young adults with a partner of a different race/ethnicity differed by young adults' own race/ethnicity and relationship status.

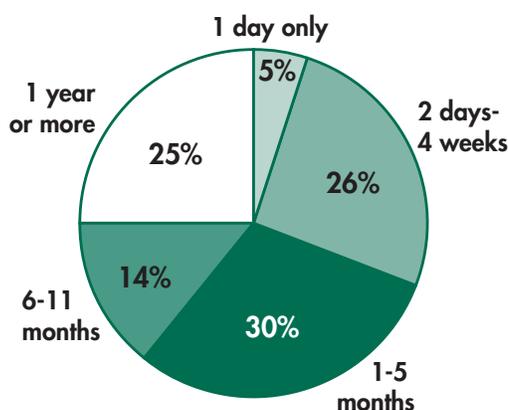
- Asians and Hispanics were more likely than were whites and blacks to be in interracial relationships (44 percent and 39 percent, compared with 13 percent and 16 percent, respectively). (See Figure 3.)
- Twenty-five percent of cohabiting young adults had a partner of a different race/ethnicity, compared with 14 percent of married young adults and 19 percent of young adults in exclusive dating relationships.
- Married young adults were less likely than were all other young adults to have a partner of a different race/ethnicity.

RELATIONSHIP CHARACTERISTICS

We examined the timing of couples' first sexual experience and the presence or absence of infidelity, violence, and love within their relationship. This information may provide insights into the types of behaviors these couples engage in that may contribute to the quality and stability of their relationships, as well as to their reproductive health behaviors.

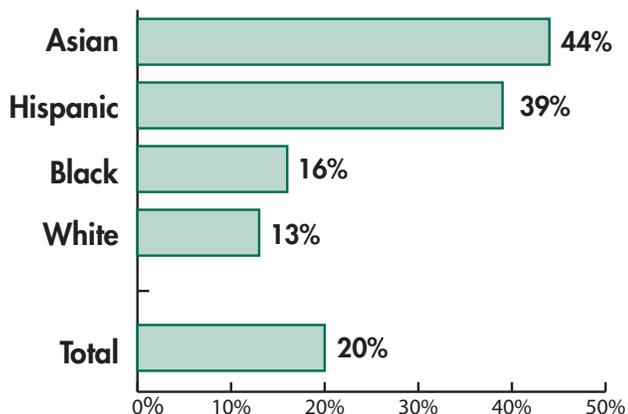
Almost one-third of young adults have sex within four weeks of knowing a partner. Specifically, thirty-one percent of young adults reported that they had engaged in sex with their partner within the first month of knowing him or her. Five percent knew their partner only one day prior to having sex. Thirty percent of young adults waited one to five months before having sex, and an additional 14 percent waited six to 11 months. One-quarter of young adults in current sexual relationships waited a full year or more. (See Figure 4.)

Figure 4
Length of Time Respondent Knew Current Partner Before Sex, Among Young Adults With Current Relationships



Source: Child Trends' Analyses of Add Health Wave III Data

Figure 3
Partner Race/Ethnicity Differences by Race/Ethnicity, Among Young Adults With Current Relationships



Source: Child Trends' Analyses of Add Health Wave III Data

- Among young adults in dating relationships, those who were dating casually were much more likely than those who were dating exclusively to engage in sex early in the relationship (40 percent versus 27 percent in the first month).
- Thirty percent of young adults who were now married reported that they had waited a year or more after knowing their partner before having sex, compared with 21 percent of young adults who were cohabiting and 24 percent who were dating (both exclusively and casually).
- Women were more likely than were men to wait a year or more before having sex for the first time with their partner (27 percent versus 22 percent). Approximately 36 percent of young adult men had sex with their partner within the first month of knowing that partner, compared with 27 percent of young adult women.

Young adults are more likely to perceive that a partner has been unfaithful than to report that they have been unfaithful

themselves, with important differences across relationship type and race/ethnicity. Approximately 14 percent of all young adults thought that their partner had had other sexual partners during their relationship, whereas less than 8 percent of respondents said that they themselves had had sex with someone other than their partner at some point during their current relationship.

- Young adults who were dating casually (28 percent) were more than twice as likely as were those who were married (13 percent), cohabiting (13 percent), or dating exclusively (11 percent) to report that their partner had had other sexual partners during the relationship. (See Figure 5.)
- Young adults who were dating casually were also more likely than were young adults in other types of relationships to report that *they* had had sex with someone other than their current partner during the relationship (18 percent versus 6 percent of young adults who were dating exclusively and 7 percent of young adults who were married or cohabiting). (See Figure 5.)
- Nearly 18 percent of black young adults thought that their partner had had another sexual partner, compared with 12 percent of Hispanic and 13 percent of white young adults. Black young adults were also more than twice as likely as were white, Hispanic, and Asian young adults to report that they themselves had had sex with someone other than their partner during the relationship (16 percent versus 6 percent for each, respectively).

Young adult relationships are characterized by relatively high levels of violence. Previous research has shown that rates of physical aggression in intimate relationships are highest among younger couples.^{17,20} Moreover, concerns about the prevalence of violence in young adult relationships have grown in recent years. These findings and concerns underscore the need to deepen understanding about the types of violence perpetrated in these relationships and the characteristics associated with it. This knowledge, in turn, may help to inform prevention and intervention efforts aimed at reducing relationship violence within young adult relationships and, ultimately, at improving partners' sexual decision-making power and reproductive health.

The Add Health survey provided information on different types of relationship violence, ranging from threatening/throwing/pushing/shoving to slapping/hitting/kicking to inflicting even more serious injury. Respondents reported whether they or their partner instigated these types of violence in the relationship. The Add Health survey also asked respondents to report whether they or their partner had ever insisted on having sex or had forced the other partner to do so when unwilling.

- Twenty-six percent of young adults reported that they experienced violence in their current relationship—either violence that they perpetrated or violence that their partner perpetrated.
- In terms of the type of violence experienced, 22 percent of young adults reported that they had experienced threats, throwing things, or pushing and shoving. Ten percent of respondents reported that they had experienced slapping and kicking, and 7 percent reported that either they or their partner had been injured. (See Figure 6.)
- When considering sexual insistence within young adult relationships, 8 percent of respondents reported that their partner insisted or made them have sex when they did not want to do so. Three percent reported that they had insisted on sex when their partner did not want to have sex. (See Figure 6.)

Although research finds that violence occurs in all types of relationships, it is less likely to be experienced in dating relationships than it is in cohabiting and married relationships. Thirty percent of married young adults and 32 percent of cohabiting young adults reported violence in their relationships, compared with 19 percent of young adults in exclusive dating relationships and

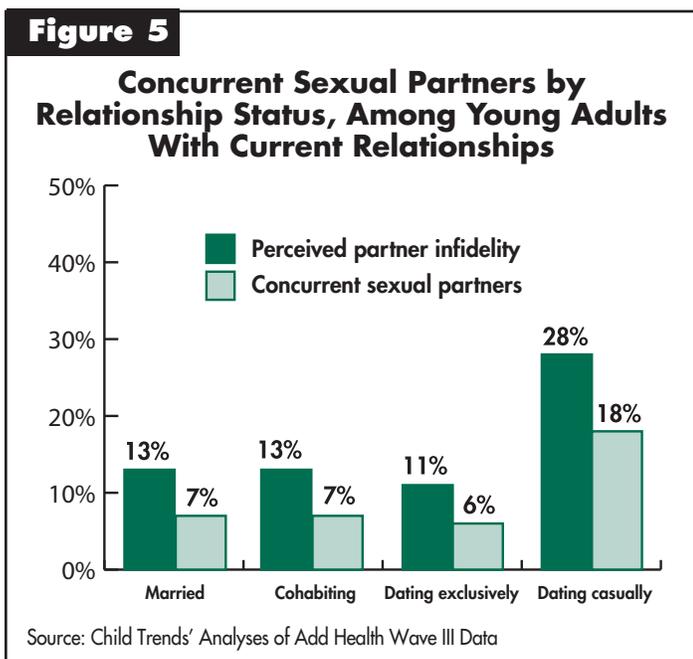
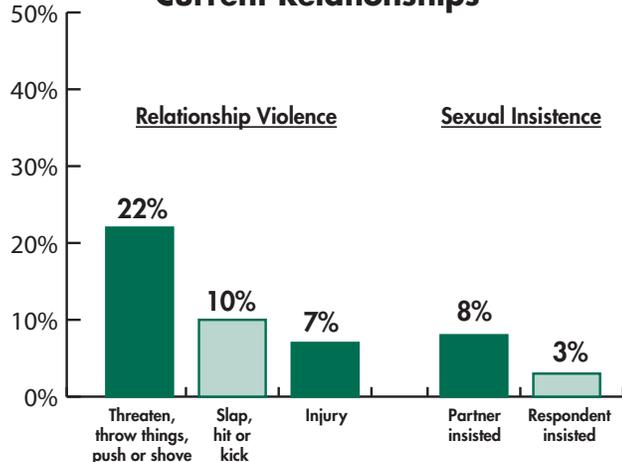


Figure 6**Relationship Violence and Sexual Insistence, Among Young Adults With Current Relationships**

Source: Child Trends' Analyses of Add Health Wave III Data

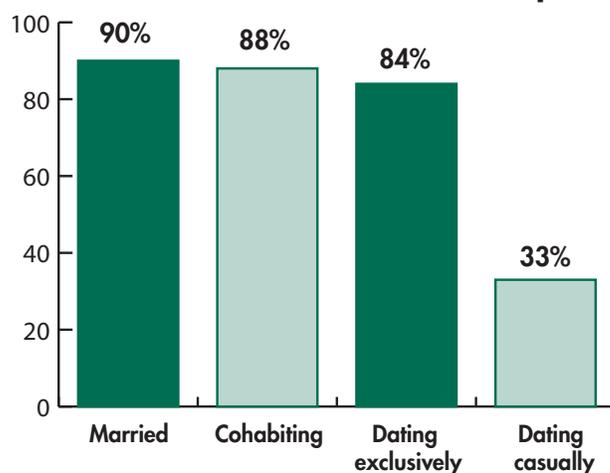
25 percent of young adults in casual dating relationships.

Reports of relationship violence and sexual insistence also differ by gender and race.

- More young adult women (29 percent) than young adult men (22 percent) reported any violence in their current relationships.^b A slightly greater proportion of women than of men also reported that their partner insisted on having sex when they did not want to (9 percent versus 6 percent).
- White young adults were less likely than were their black and Hispanic counterparts to report violence in their relationships (23 percent versus 33 percent and 32 percent, respectively). Fewer white respondents than black respondents reported that they had insisted that their partner have sex when they did not want to (3 percent versus 5 percent).

Young adult relationships also show positive dimensions. For example, the Add Health survey asked respondents how much love they had for their partner and how much love they thought their partner had for them. Most young adults reported that they have a lot of love for their partner and feel that their partner has a lot of love for them, although feelings of love in young adult relationships differ by the level of commitment in those relationships.

- Overall, married and cohabiting young adults and young adults in exclusive dating relationships reported high levels of love in their relationships (90 percent, 88 percent, and 84 percent, respectively). However, only 33 percent of young adults in casual dating relationships reported sharing a lot of love with their partner. (See Figure 7.)

Figure 7**Respondent and Partner Have A Lot of Love for Each Other by Relationship Status, Among Young Adults With Current Relationships**

Source: Child Trends' Analyses of Add Health Wave III Data

The proportion of young adults who report a lot of love in their relationship also differs by gender and race/ethnicity.

- Women (84 percent) were more likely than were men (79 percent) to report that they had a mutually loving relationship.
- White respondents were more likely than were black and Hispanic respondents to report a lot of love in their relationships, with black young adults being the least likely to report having a lot of love in their relationships (72 percent among black young adults versus 84 percent among white young adults, 85 percent among Asian young adults, and 79 percent among Hispanic young adults).

CONTRACEPTIVE USE IN YOUNG ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

The relationship characteristics described in the section above may influence young adults' choices

^bWomen were more likely to report that they were violent to their partner (23 percent) than were men (17 percent). Some research suggests that this may be due to culturally and gender specific definitions of abuse. For example, measures of slapping, pushing, and throwing objects may not be considered abusive by some men and women.^{10,21,24}

and decisions related to reproductive health and family formation behaviors. Understanding patterns of condom and contraceptive use within young adult relationships may provide insights that can lead to new or better ways to reduce high rates of STDs and unintended births among young adults.

Most young adults are using some form of contraception, although less than one-half of married, cohabiting, and exclusively dating young adults used condoms the last time that they had sex. Two-thirds of young adults (68 percent) reported using some method of contraception the last time that they had sex, including 34 percent who used condoms.

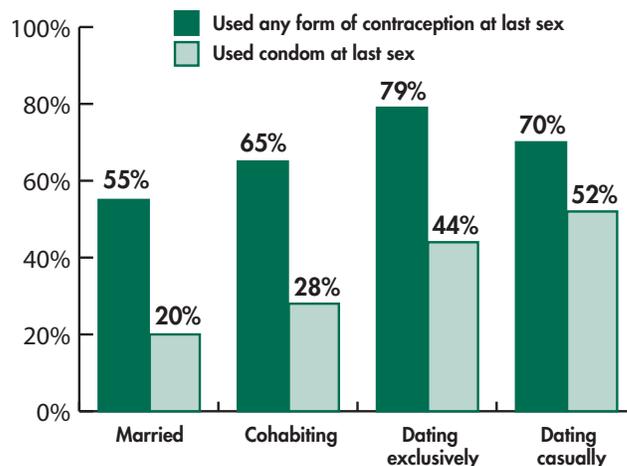
- Married young adults were the least likely to use any form of contraception (55 percent) and young adults in exclusive dating relationships were the most likely to use contraception (79 percent). (See Figure 8.)
- Slightly more than one-half (52 percent) of young adults in casual dating relationships reported using a condom at the last sexual experience. This proportion was higher than the proportion of condom use among young adults in any other types of relationships (44 percent among young adults in exclusive dating relationships, 28 percent among cohabiting young adults, and 20 percent among married young adults). (See Figure 8.)

Patterns of condom and contraceptive use among young adults differ by gender and race/ethnicity. Accordingly, young adult men were more likely than were young adult women to report that a condom was used at the last sexual experience, and white young adults were the most likely to report using contraception overall, but the least likely to report using condoms.

- Thirty-eight percent of young adult men reported using a condom the last time that they had sex with their partner, compared with 32 percent of female young adults reporting that a condom was used.
- Seventy-one percent of white young adults reported the use of any form of contraception the last time that they had sex, compared with 62 percent of black young adults and 60 percent of Hispanic young adults. However, only 31 percent of white young adults reported using a condom as their contraceptive method of choice, compared with 48 percent of black respondents, 37 percent of Hispanic respondents, and 42 percent of Asian respondents.

Figure 8

Contraceptive Use at Last Sex by Relationship Status, Among Young Adults With Current Relationships



Source: Child Trends' Analyses of Add Health Wave III Data

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This *Research Brief* has examined characteristics of young adult relationships and partners, some of which indicate that these relationships are positive and healthy, and others indicating more negative dimensions that raise concerns. To explore these issues, we drew on national survey data. Four major themes have emerged from our analyses of these data:

- **Young adults are in diverse types of relationships.** Four in ten young adults aged 18 to 25 in our study sample were married or cohabiting, one-third were dating exclusively or casually, and 25 percent of young adults were not in any relationship. Although most young adults had partners within three years of their own age, 40 percent of young adult women had an older partner and 15 percent of young adult men had a younger partner. While most adult relationships include an age gap of about two years, age differences between partners provide additional information about the context in which fertility and relationship decisions are made. Research finds lower condom use and less contraceptive use and consistency when women have older sexual partners, which may be due, in part, to unequal power dynamics in these relationships.^{5,7}

Approximately 20 percent of young adults in our study sample had a partner who was of a different race/ethnicity. This proportion was even higher among Asians and Hispanics, and

among young adults in cohabiting relationships. Recent research suggests that there may be growing dissimilarities and diversity among young adult couples, including increases in interracial relationships.¹⁵ At the same time, some evidence suggests that young adults are more likely to date or live with a partner of a different racial or ethnic background than their own than to marry that person.⁹ The reason for this pattern may be that cohabitation and dating tend to be more short term, which may make it easier for people to avoid any social pressures associated with interracial relationships, especially marriages.⁹

The relationships of young adults also show diversity in terms of the length of time that they knew their current partners before having sex with them, with durations ranging from one day (5 percent of young adults) to one year or more (25 percent of young adults). Almost a full third (31 percent) of young adults in sexual relationships had sex with their current partner within one month of knowing them. Some research finds that knowing a sexual partner for a shorter period of time before having sex may result in less communication between partners and less birth control planning within the relationship, resulting in a lower likelihood of using contraception.¹⁸

- **The majority of young adults are in mutually loving relationships.** The finding that the vast majority of young adults who are married, cohabiting, and in exclusive dating relationships reported that they and their partner had a lot of love for each other supports prior research showing that most young adults view love, commitment, and fidelity as very important elements for a successful relationship.¹⁹ Further, more than 90 percent of young adults in our study sample who were married, cohabiting, and in exclusive dating relationships reported that they and their current partners were faithful to each other. The apparent racial/ethnic differences in reported feelings of love and fidelity may be due to the fact that a significantly greater proportion of black young adults were in casual dating relationships, where levels of commitment may be low and having concurrent sexual partners may not be viewed as infidelity.
- **However, some young adult relationships have negative dimensions, including physical violence and sexual insistence.** One-quarter of young adults in our study

sample reported that they had experienced violence in their relationships (perpetrated by either the respondent or his or her partner) and 8 percent reported that their partner had insisted that they have sex when they did not want to do so. Further, 3 percent of respondents admitted to insisting that their partner have sex when she (or he) did not want to do so. These findings suggest that relationship violence and sexual insistence in young adult relationships may be reciprocal, as indicated by previous research.^{13,23} This reciprocity underscores the importance of working with both partners to understand conflict within relationships and when and how it may escalate into violence.²³ The finding that violence is less likely to be experienced in dating relationships than it is in cohabiting or married relationships has been found in other studies,^{2,16} which suggest that it is due, in part, to the residential nature and longer duration of cohabiting and married relationships, resulting in greater exposure to the risk of violence. Some studies also suggest that violence increases in relationships as they become more serious and when feelings of love are stronger.²

- **A large proportion of young adults used some form of contraception the last time that they had sex with their partner, but a substantial proportion of young adult couples remain at risk for STDs due to lower levels of condom use.** Rates of condom use and contraceptive use were highest among young adults in our study sample who were in less committed relationships (e.g., dating exclusively and dating casually). However, nearly one-half of young adults who were in casual dating relationships remain at risk for acquiring an STD because they did not use condoms, and nearly one-third of all young adults were not using any form of contraception to protect against STDs or pregnancy. Young adults who are not using condoms, and report infidelity in their relationships, may be at an even greater risk for acquiring an STD and having or fathering a baby.

These findings demonstrate the need for programs aimed at reducing rates of STD transmission and unintended pregnancies by improving contraceptive knowledge, access, and use among young adults. However, most existing pregnancy and STD prevention efforts have focused on the middle school and high school years, and very few evaluated pregnancy prevention programs target young adults.¹⁴

Further, although some married and cohabiting couples may be deliberately planning to have a baby, approximately one-quarter of births to married women and about one-half of births to cohabiting women are unintended,⁴ suggesting that many married and cohabiting young adults may still be in need of greater pregnancy prevention services and education.

CONCLUSION

Relationships and partners have important influences on reproductive health behaviors during young adulthood, a period marked by high rates of nonmarital and unintended pregnancy but one often neglected by programs and practitioners.⁶ The findings presented in this *Research Brief* help to identify many important factors about the nature and quality of young adult relationships that may have long-term consequences for young adults and their partners. Our intent in undertaking this work was to develop knowledge that can be used to inform programs aimed at reducing STDs and unintended pregnancies among young adults, as well as efforts to reduce intimate partner violence and improve couple-level power dynamics and sexual decision making. Reducing the number of unplanned births, lowering the rate of STDs, and building more loving, equitable male-female relationships will benefit young adults as well as the families that these young adults have or will form.

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