Pregnancy planning in general, and the use of birth control in particular, are directly linked to a wide array of benefits to women, men, children, and society, including fewer unplanned pregnancies and abortions, more educational and economic opportunities for young women, improved maternal and infant health, greater family wellbeing, and reduced public spending.

Given that the large majority of both men and women are sexually active (for example, more than three-quarters of young adults age 18 to 24 have had sex in the past 12 months1), birth control is central to realizing these benefits. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recognizes the development of modern contraception as one of the 10 greatest public health achievements of the 20th century.2 Nonetheless, the United States has long reported high levels of unplanned pregnancy and very uneven use of contraception. For example, even though most unmarried women in their 20s say they don’t want to get pregnant and despite the availability of many forms of birth control—including some that are highly effective—only half of those who are sexually active report using reliable contraception consistently.3 Unplanned pregnancy is nearly 100 percent preventable, yet…

- Roughly half of all pregnancies in the United States are reported by women to be unplanned—that is, a pregnancy that a woman herself said she was not intending or actively trying to achieve.4
- Among unmarried young women age 20 to 29, the percentage of pregnancies that they report as being unplanned is nearly 70%. This totaled roughly 1.3 million unplanned pregnancies in 2008 alone, and unplanned pregnancy among young adults has been trending up for the past few years, not down.5
- Nearly half (44%) of unplanned pregnancies among unmarried young women result in an abortion, leading to nearly 600,000 abortions each year.6
- In addition, unplanned pregnancy is responsible for more than half of all births to unmarried women in their twenties, or more than 500,000 births each year.5
- Women using birth control carefully and consistently account for only 5% of all unplanned pregnancies.6

Trends in Family Formation

Overwhelming evidence shows that children and families do best when both parents live together, and parents are more likely to live together if they are married when their child is born. However, over time this is becoming less and less the norm.

- Since 1970, the median age at which people first marry has increased steadily, from roughly 21 years of age to roughly 27.7
- Young adults are not delaying childbearing in similar fashion, and the median age at which women have their first child is now a full year earlier than the age at first marriage.
- Consequently, the percentage of births among 20– to 29-year-olds that are to unmarried parents has increased nearly seven-fold since 1970, from 7% to 48%.8
- Marital status at the time of birth translates into family stability over time. Among parents who were married when their child was born, 87% remain together five years later, compared to only 61% among parents who were cohabiting,7 while the vast majority of parents who were single (neither married nor cohabiting) when their child was born never move in together.9 These differences are significant even after controlling for other demographic factors. Because modern contraception can help young adults better time their entry into parenthood, it can also increase the odds that children are born into stable, two-parent households, which is one hallmark of overall family wellbeing. To be sure, the evidence is imperfect—we do not have randomized trials of women with and without access to contraception, or even recent examples of large comparison groups who have little or no access, especially here in the United States. Even so, the weight of the evidence shows that the timing of and circumstances surrounding entry into parenthood significantly improve family wellbeing—both directly through the impact on parent-child relations as well as indirectly through increasing the odds of residing in a two parent household.

Nearly half of unplanned pregnancies among unmarried women (age 20–29) result in an abortion—nearly 600,000 abortions each year.
Pregnancy Planning and Family Formation

Nationally representative data suggest that the proportion of births occurring to married parents (rather than to unmarried parents) would increase if young adults were more successful in aligning their entry into parenthood with their pregnancy intentions. Consider that:

- The vast majority (87%) of unmarried twenty-somethings say they do not want to become parents right now,\(^1\) and more than half (53%) of births among unmarried twenty-somethings are to women who said they were not seeking pregnancy.
- These births include 24% to women who said they did not want to get pregnant ever, and another 29% to women who said they got pregnant earlier than they wished—three years too early on average.\(^2\)
- Not only are these mothers reporting that they did not want a baby at that time (or, in some cases, ever), but many also report that they did not want a baby with that partner. In fact, of all unmarried women having a birth following an unplanned pregnancy, more than 40% say they did not want a baby with the father of their child.\(^3\)
- Delaying parenthood by even a few years might increase the odds that children would be born to married parents. In fact, a young adult is 20% more likely to be married when she has her first child compared to a peer three years younger, even after adjusting for differences in race, ethnicity, and education.\(^4\)

While there are only a few nationally representative studies examining the direct effect of pregnancy intention on parental unions, they generally conclude that parents are more likely to be together and stay together when births follow planned pregnancies.

- One recent study found that parents are more than twice as likely to be married at the time of conception and only one-quarter as likely to be single if the pregnancy is planned rather than unplanned, net of other characteristics. In addition, married couples are half as likely to split up over the next two years—and cohabiting couples are more likely to get married—if their child was born following a planned pregnancy.\(^5\)

Consequently, fully 83% of children born following a planned pregnancy are living with two married parents at age two, compared to only 46% of children born following an unplanned pregnancy—again, after controlling for other background characteristics.

- Another study of cohabiting couples found that couples experiencing an unplanned birth are nearly twice as likely to split up as are couples experiencing a planned birth, net of other characteristics.\(^6\)

Even when both parents are together (either married or cohabiting), their relationship is not as strong if the birth of their child followed an unplanned pregnancy.

- Both mothers and fathers are significantly more likely to report relationship conflict nine months following the birth of their child if the pregnancy was unplanned rather than planned. Mothers are 50% more likely to report conflict and fathers are 24% more likely to report conflict, after controlling for other characteristics.
- Similarly, both mothers and fathers are significantly less likely to report being happy in their relationship if the birth followed an unplanned pregnancy, net of other factors. Both mothers and fathers are also significantly more likely to report depressive symptoms if the pregnancy was unplanned.
- In addition to these nationally representative findings, several smaller scale studies echo the conclusion that an unplanned pregnancy can decrease relationship quality among parents.\(^7\)

Family Formation and Family Wellbeing

To the extent that pregnancy intention has an impact on the likelihood that children reside in two-parent households, and in particular married parent households, there is extensive research showing that this in turn translates into improved wellbeing for children and families. Naturally, families can thrive or struggle under a variety of circumstances; however, on average children...
Parents report that, following an unplanned pregnancy, their relationship is not as strong, there is more conflict, and they are less happy.

Children born to married parents are at lower risk for many adverse outcomes. Although to some extent this reflects the fact that married parents are likely to come from more advantaged backgrounds compared to unmarried parents, extensive literature shows that the benefits of married parenthood persist even after controlling for a broad set of demographic and background characteristics, and that children in lower-income families benefit from having two married parents as well.¹⁹

- Children born to married parents are significantly less likely to experience health problems as infants and they have fewer cognitive, emotional, and behavioral problems when they are young.
- On average, they reach adulthood with significantly more education, subsequently earning more income and spending less time both out of school and out of work.
- Cohabitation among parents does not tend to serve as a substitute for marriage, and their children still experience more behavioral problems and lower school engagement on average compared to children whose parents are married.
- Furthermore, as their children age, cohabiting parents are also more likely to separate than married parents, widening the gap in child wellbeing.
- Numerous studies have documented that married parents have more disposable income and lower rates of poverty compared to single and nonresidential parents, due both to higher earnings and lower expenses. Furthermore, these benefits extend to disadvantaged parents as well, and persist even after controlling for other observed and unobserved differences. Cohabiting parents, while better off than single parents, typically do not fare as well as married parents.
- Married parents are more likely to be engaged with their children and have more effective parenting skills compared to single and cohabiting parents, net of other factors—for example, they tend to be more emotionally supportive, have more consistent rules, are less reliant on harsh discipline, provide more supervision, and have less conflict with their children.
- On average, children of married parents also witness less conflict between their parents, are exposed to fewer changes in the composition of their household, and experience less geographic instability, all of which in turn reduces their risk of being exposed to domestic violence and other harmful events and environments.

Pregnancy planning also contributes directly to family wellbeing—that is, over and above its relationship to the formation of two-parent families and the gains in income and household stability this brings. This is reflected primarily in terms of increased emotional wellbeing among parents, stronger parenting, and improved parent-child relationships:

- The risk of postpartum depression among women is nearly cut in half when a birth follows a planned rather than unplanned pregnancy,²¹ and numerous studies indicate that pregnancy intentions remain a significant factor in explaining postpartum depression, even after controlling for numerous other background and demographic factors.²² One study found that while
the birth of a child resulting from a planned pregnancy is significantly associated with increased happiness and decreased depression, the birth of a child following an unintended pregnancy is not, net of other factors.21

• While less studied, research suggests that new fathers are similarly affected by births following unplanned pregnancies, experiencing higher levels of depression and lower levels of happiness, net of other factors, even among fathers who are living within the household.22

• These fathers also exhibit less parental warmth and involvement with their children as well as more conflicted relationships with the mothers of their children. This, in turn, translates into weaker parenting.

• Another study found that, even within the same family, children born following an unplanned pregnancy experience less cognitive and emotional support from their parents compared to siblings born following planned pregnancies.23

• It’s not surprising, then, that children born following planned pregnancies also experience better health and stronger childhood development. While results are somewhat mixed as to whether this is a direct result of pregnancy intention or other related factors, the most recent studies find that these benefits remain significant even after controlling for various background characteristics.24

• The benefits to children of being born following a planned pregnancy often continue into late adolescence and early adulthood, as reflected in terms of higher levels of self-esteem and stronger child-mother relationships.25

• Perhaps one of the strongest indicators of adverse child and family outcomes is domestic violence, and having an unwanted pregnancy has been found to directly increase the risk of intimate partner violence, both during pregnancy and after the child is born.26 Another study in the U.K. found that children born following unplanned pregnancies were roughly 50% more likely to be the subject of a child services investigation compared to children born following planned pregnancies, net of other factors.27

Low income mothers are disproportionately more likely to report that the birth of their child followed a pregnancy that they did not intend28—either they became pregnant earlier than they planned, or they did not want to become pregnant ever—and they often stand the most to gain from efforts that make contraception more available and affordable.

To better understand the benefits to families of making contraception more affordable, one study focused on a unique period of time when publicly funded family planning grants were first introduced (in the early 1970s), and were adopted in some counties earlier than others. This study found that low-income women living in areas with early adoption of public family planning grants were 16% to 20% more likely to use the pill compared to other low-income women, enabling them to use birth control on par with higher income women. By 1980, these family planning grants were associated with a 6% reduction in child poverty and a 15% reduction in the percent of families receiving public assistance. Furthermore, between 1973 and 1982 the proportion of low-income mothers who reported that the birth of their child followed an unplanned pregnancy fell by 16%, and the proportion saying the birth followed an unwanted pregnancy fell by more than half based on data from the CDC (measured among ever-married mothers).29

What It All Means

Bottom line: The capacity to plan and space pregnancies—which is typically achieved through the use of birth control—has significant and meaningful benefits for women, children, families, taxpayers, and more.30 Pregnancy planning increases the overall educational status of women and communities; it advances the health and wellbeing of children and families; it saves money; and it reduces abortion. As such, birth control deserves widespread support, expressed in a number of ways including minimal cost and access barriers, a prominent place in public health priorities and health care services, and broad political support.

But it is also true that for the most disadvantaged women and communities, the widespread use of birth control alone is not a panacea. For these women and communities, realizing the full benefit of pregnancy planning, spacing, and prevention also requires additional efforts to promote educational attainment, better schools, stronger families, economic opportunities, job

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readiness, and more. Put another way, birth control alone cannot solve crushing poverty, but it can open the door to increased opportunity.

Notes

1. Planned pregnancy (also known as unintended pregnancy) refers to a pregnancy that a woman herself reported was not intended at the time of conception. Unplanned pregnancy includes both mistimed pregnancies (that is, the woman reported she did not want to become pregnant at some point in the future) as well as unintended pregnancies (that is, the woman reported at time of conception that she did not want to become pregnant then or at any time in the future). Many studies summarized here report the effects of unplanned pregnancy overall, while some focus specifically on either unintended or mistimed pregnancies, as noted previously.

Sources


