

# CFRP POLICY BRIEF

## Sexual Health and Pregnancy Prevention among Community College Students: Gaps in Knowledge and Barriers to Health Care Access

Older teenagers who become pregnant while attending community college are at much higher risk of dropping out prior to graduation compared to their peers who do not experience unplanned pregnancies.<sup>1</sup> Research shows that 18 and 19-year-olds have the highest pregnancy rates among teenagers, putting youth who are in their first years of college at risk of dropping out due to unplanned pregnancy.<sup>2</sup> Older adolescent students in community college who do not receive comprehensive sex education may be uninformed about types of contraception and healthy reproductive behavior at this critical developmental stage. Preliminary findings from a survey of community college students in San Antonio suggest that there are considerable opportunities for increasing students' knowledge and promoting healthy sexual behaviors in this population. Comprehensive sex education for adolescents may provide a valuable opportunity to promote college completion through pregnancy prevention.

### The BAE-B-SAFE Project

To examine the relationship between sex education and sexual knowledge and behaviors among older teenagers, Healthy Futures of Texas (HFTX) partnered with the Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) at the University of Texas at Austin and several community colleges in San Antonio to examine students' sexual practices through the BAE-B-SAFE evaluation. As part of this project, HFTX delivered two evidence-based sex education curricula to participants (*SHARP* training for men and *Seventeen Days* training for women) with the goal of preventing unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections among community college students. Participants were asked to complete baseline surveys prior to receiving the educational curriculum, and follow-up surveys three months after participation, to identify knowledge gaps and resource barriers related to pregnancy prevention in this population.

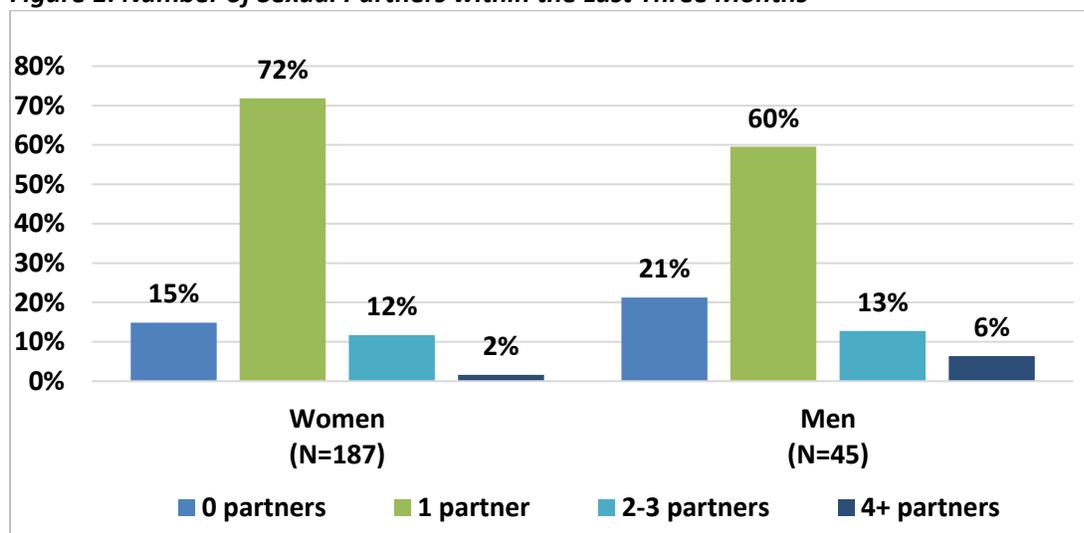
*Community college students who do not receive comprehensive sex education may be uninformed about types of contraception and healthy reproductive behavior at this critical developmental stage.*

A total of 360 students participated in the study, of whom 288 (80 percent) were female and more than 80 percent were Hispanic. Though longer term outcomes will take more time to assess after follow-up surveys are completed, preliminary findings from the baseline surveys (responses provided prior to receiving the sex education curriculum) are already yielding valuable information on the reproductive health needs and behaviors of community college students.

## Key Findings from BAE-B-SAFE Pre-Curriculum Surveys<sup>a</sup>

**Most students have had sex and are sexually active with only one partner.** Consistent with prior research on the sexual behaviors of high school seniors in Texas,<sup>3</sup> about two-thirds of older teenage students enrolled in community college (67 percent of females and 64 percent of males) who participated in the BAE-B-SAFE evaluation reported ever having had sexual intercourse. Among the students who reported ever having sex, about 80 percent said they had been sexually active in the previous three months. As shown in Figure 1, a large majority of sexually active students had only one sexual partner during that time frame; only 14 percent of women and 19 percent of men had two or more partners in the prior three months.

**Figure 1: Number of Sexual Partners within the Last Three Months**



Source: BAE-B-SAFE pre-curriculum survey data, Child and Family Research Partnership, 2017.

Notes: Among students who have ever had sexual intercourse.

**Students use contraception inconsistently and report condoms as the most commonly used contraceptive method.** The most effective approach to preventing both pregnancy and sexually-transmitted infections (STIs) is to combine hormonal birth control (or another long-acting contraceptive method) with condom use. Hormonal or other long-acting birth control is highly effective at pregnancy prevention but does not protect against STIs, whereas condoms protect

<sup>a</sup> Due to the program’s focus on pregnancy prevention, all reported findings are limited to responses of students who identified their sexual orientation as straight, bisexual, or undecided.

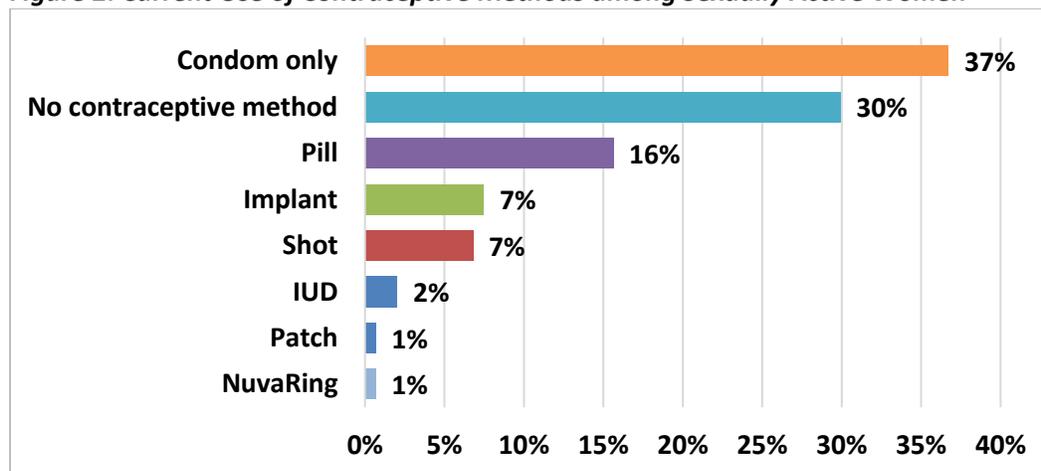
against STIs but are not as effective for pregnancy prevention.<sup>4</sup> Only 46 percent of sexually active women participating in the study, however, report using *any* form of contraception consistently. This means that just over half (54 percent) of the sexually active young women in this sample use contraceptives inconsistently or not at all, placing them at risk for unplanned pregnancy.

*Over half of the sexually active young women in the sample use contraceptives inconsistently or not at all, placing them at risk of unplanned pregnancy.*

Adding to this concern, the most commonly used contraceptive method among sexually active women is the condom, with 37 percent of women reporting condoms as their only method of birth control. The second most commonly used method of contraception is *no method at all*, with 30 percent of sexually active young women reporting no contraceptive use.

As Figure 2 illustrates, there are significantly fewer women who use hormonal or long-acting birth control compared to condoms or no contraception. Only about one-third (34 percent) of sexually active women report that they are currently using hormonal birth control of any type, and very few women report using long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs), such as hormonal implants or injections. Only two percent of women participating in the study report using an intra-uterine device (IUD).

**Figure 2: Current Use of Contraceptive Methods among Sexually Active Women**



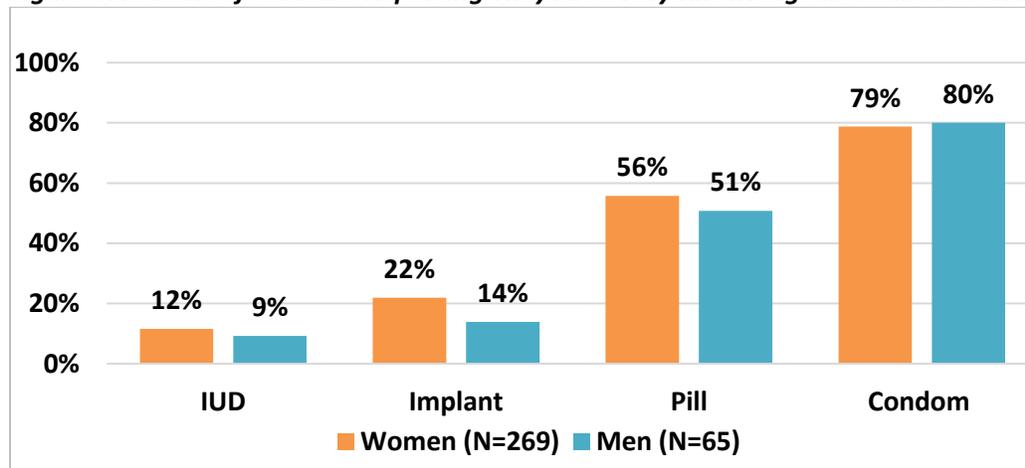
Source: BAE-B-SAFE pre-curriculum survey data, Child and Family Research Partnership, 2017.

Notes: Among women who are currently sexually active. (N=147). 39% of women using a hormonal method of birth control also report using condoms. Percentages may sum to greater than 100% due to rounding.

**Students lack information about contraceptive options and have concerns about LARCs.** Female and male study participants report feeling knowledgeable about different types of contraception at similar rates, as shown in Figure 3 (below). Students feel most knowledgeable about condoms, which aligns with the finding that condoms are the most commonly used method among those who are sexually active. In contrast, students feel least knowledgeable about long-acting

reversible contraceptives. Only 12 percent of women report feeling very knowledgeable about IUDs, and only 22 percent report being very knowledgeable about hormonal implants. Though 56 percent of women reported feeling very knowledgeable about the pill, only 16 percent of sexually active women reported actually using it (see Figure 2).

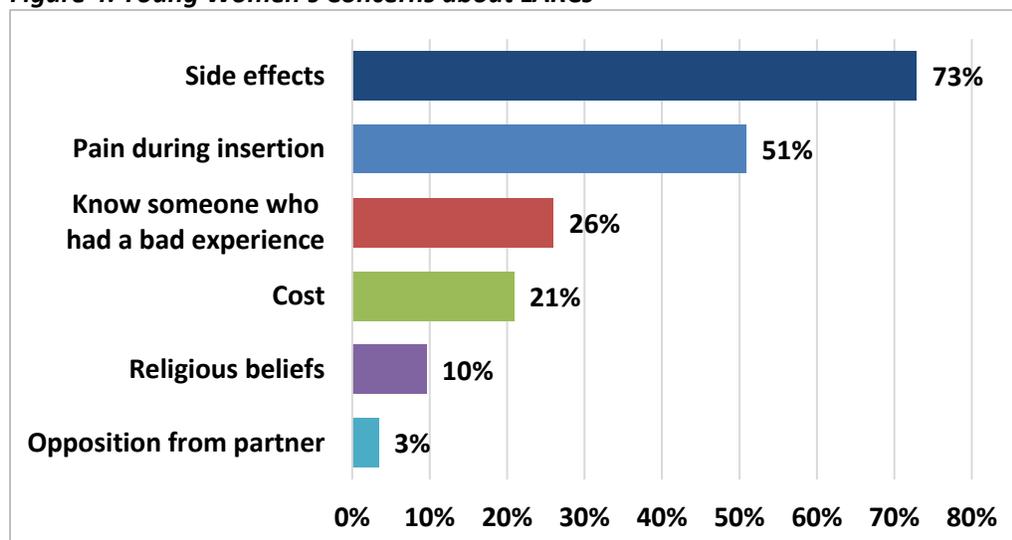
**Figure 3: Percent of Students Reporting They Are “Very Knowledgeable” about Contraceptive Methods**



Source: BAE-B-SAFE pre-curriculum survey data, Child and Family Research Partnership, 2017.

Implants and IUDs are the most effective forms of birth control,<sup>5</sup> but before participating in adolescent sexual health education curricula, 88 percent of female students said they were unlikely to use an IUD or an implant in the future. Among women who reported being unlikely to use a LARC, the most commonly reported concerns were side effects (73 percent) and pain during insertion (51 percent), as shown in Figure 4.

**Figure 4: Young Women’s Concerns about LARCs**



Source: BAE-B-SAFE pre-curriculum survey data, Child and Family Research Partnership, 2017.

Notes: Among women who report being “unlikely” to use a LARC. (N=177)

Concerns about IUDs were also echoed in the open-ended responses among female participants. Some respondents expressed both lack of knowledge and concerns about this method, such as one young woman who stated, “I don’t know anything about it or any side effects” and another who reported, “I’m not sure what it is exactly. So I would want to know what it’s for and how it affects my body.” One woman expressed apprehension related to IUDs, saying she was unlikely to use one because of “stronger, [more] painful periods and fear of the procedure.”

*One in three participants reports facing barriers to accessing health care, including reproductive care for women.*

**Health care access is a barrier to reproductive health.** In addition to ensuring that older teenagers have access to accurate information about sexual health, it is also essential to recognize barriers to accessing general and reproductive health care among community college students. Among participants in the BAE-B-SAFE evaluation, a third of students report facing barriers to accessing health care, including reproductive care for women. More than two-thirds (69 percent) of female respondents have not seen a reproductive health care specialist in the past two years, including more than half (55 percent) of the women who report being sexually active. When asked

about specific barriers to health care access, students cited not knowing where to go, a lack of insurance coverage, and the cost of medical care.

## Conclusions and Next Steps

The BAE-B-SAFE project aims to evaluate whether comprehensive sex education among older teens enrolled in community college increases knowledge and use of contraceptive methods to prevent unplanned pregnancies and school dropout. The interim findings provide insight into community college students’ knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors with regard to sexual and reproductive health.

For the next phase of the evaluation, CFRP will analyze the survey responses of participants *after* completing an evidence-based comprehensive sex education curriculum to determine what knowledge was gained and how increased knowledge may be connected to positive reproductive health behaviors, such as consistent use of effective contraception. These preliminary findings suggest that there are considerable opportunities for increasing students’ knowledge and promoting healthy sexual behaviors in this population.

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*The Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) is an independent, nonpartisan research group at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin, specializing in issues related to young children, teens, and their parents. We engage in rigorous research and evaluation work aimed at strengthening families and enhancing public policy.*

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- <sup>1</sup> National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. (2015). *Unplanned pregnancy among college students and strategies to address it*. Washington, DC: Author.
  - <sup>2</sup> National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. (2012). *Preventing teen pregnancy through outreach and engagement*. Washington, DC: Author.
  - <sup>3</sup> Texas Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). (2013). *Texas Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Risk factor: Sexual behavior – had sexual intercourse*. Austin, TX: Texas Department of State Health Services.
  - <sup>4</sup> Pazol, K. Kramer, M. R., & Hogue, C. J. (2010). Condoms for dual protection: Patterns of use with highly effective contraceptive methods. *Public Health Reports*, 125(2), 208-217.
  - <sup>5</sup> Centers for Disease Control (CDC). (n.d.) *Effectiveness of family planning methods*. Retrieved from [https://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/unintendedpregnancy/pdf/contraceptive\\_methods\\_508.pdf](https://www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/unintendedpregnancy/pdf/contraceptive_methods_508.pdf)