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Disparities in Rates of Unintended Pregnancy in the United States, 1994 and 2001

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CONTEXT: Many pregnancies are unintended, particularly in certain population groups. Determining whether unintended pregnancy rates and disparities in rates between subgroups are changing may help policymakers target reproductive health services to those women most in need.

METHODS: To calculate rates of unintended pregnancy and related outcomes, data on pregnancy intendedness from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth were combined with birth, abortion and population data from federal, state and nongovernmental sources.

RESULTS: In 2001, 49% of pregnancies in the United States were unintended. The unintended pregnancy rate was 51 per 1,000 women aged 15–44, meaning that 5% of this group had an unintended pregnancy. This level was unchanged from 1994. The rate of unintended pregnancy in 2001 was substantially above average among women aged 18–24, unmarried (particularly cohabiting) women, low-income women, women who had not completed high school and minority women. Between 1994 and 2001, the rate of unintended pregnancy declined among adolescents, college graduates and the wealthiest women, but increased among poor and less educated women. The abortion rate and the proportion of unintended pregnancies ending in abortion among all women declined, while the unintended birth rate increased. Forty-eight percent of unintended conceptions in 2001 occurred during a month when contraceptives were used, compared with 51% in 1994.

CONCLUSIONS: More research is needed to determine the factors underlying the disparities in unintended pregnancy rates by income and other characteristics. The findings may reflect a need for increased and more effective contraceptive use, particularly among high-risk groups.

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