

## A Profile of Women's Health in the United States

To provide a clear and comprehensive roadmap to the increasingly large and complex range of women's health data available today, the Jacobs Institute and The Kaiser Family Foundation have prepared *The Women's Health Data Book*, third edition, a resource on women's health across the lifespan in the United States. Highlights about adolescents from the *Data Book* include:

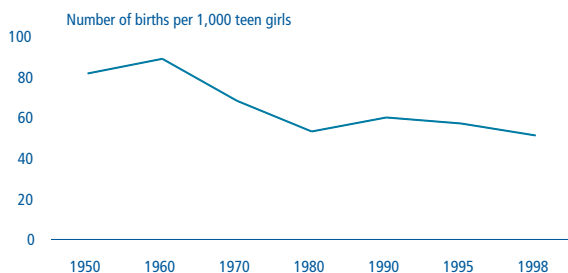
- There are over 9.6 million teen girls ages 15 to 19 in the United States today.<sup>1</sup> These young women share many of the same health concerns as other women, but are at higher risk for certain health conditions, diseases, and risky health behaviors.

### Reproductive Health

- An estimated half of teen girls and boys ages 15 to 19 have had sex.<sup>2</sup> Yet only 29.8% of teen girls ages 15 to 19 reported using any method of contraception in 1995.<sup>3</sup> This rate was significantly lower than for any other age group of women. 13% of all teen girls use the pill, 10.9% condoms, 2.9% injectables, 0.8% implants, less than 1% diaphragms, and under 2% use other methods.<sup>4</sup>
- Pregnancy rates among 15 to 17 year olds have dropped significantly in recent years, from 80.3 pregnancies/1,000 women in 1990 to 67.8/1,000 in 1996.<sup>5</sup>
- Teen birth rates have also fallen over the last decade. Since 1990, birth rates among teens ages 15 to 19 have fallen from 59.9 births/1,000 teens to 51.1 births/1,000 teens in 1998 (Figure 1).

Figure 1

### U.S. birth rates for teenagers aged 15–19 years, 1950–1998



Source: Ventura SJ, Curtin SC, Mathews TJ. Variations in teenage birth rates, 1991–98: national and state trends. *Natl Vital Stat Rep* 2000; 48(6).

- Induced abortion rates have decreased over the last decade among young women. Teen girls ages 15 to 17 have lower

rates (19.0/1,000) than those ages 18 and 19 (44.9/1,000).<sup>6</sup> Abortion rates are currently highest for women in their early 20s (50.7/1,000).

### Infections

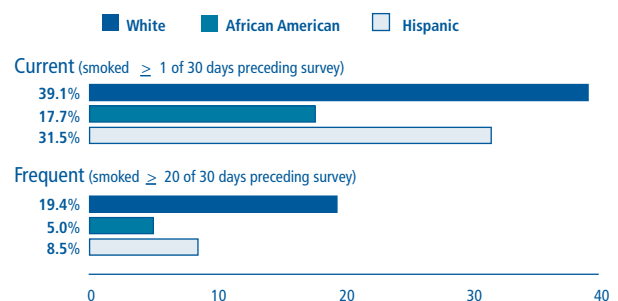
- Young women are at highest risk for contracting sexually transmitted diseases because they are more likely than older women to have multiple sex partners, to have high-risk partners, and to engage in unprotected intercourse. Differences in their bodies, particularly in the reproductive tract tissues, may also make them more susceptible to infections like HIV.<sup>7</sup>
- Young women are at greatest risk for chlamydia, the most prevalent sexually transmitted disease in the U.S.<sup>8</sup>

### Health Behaviors

- Women are beginning to smoke at younger ages.<sup>9</sup> Most smokers begin tobacco use between the 6th and 9th grades.<sup>10</sup> By 12th grade, approximately 75% of adolescent girls have tried cigarettes.<sup>11</sup>
- White adolescent girls are more likely to smoke than Hispanic and African American teens (Figure 2).

Figure 2

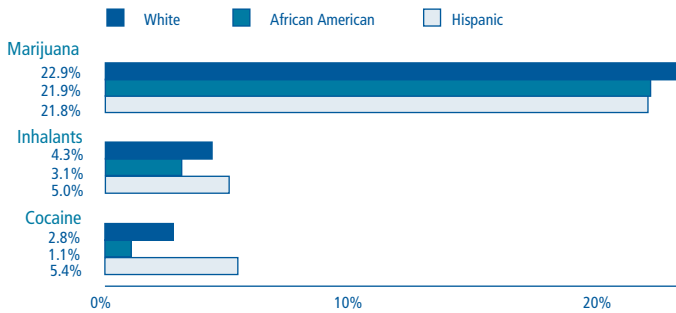
### Cigarette smoking among adolescent female students in grades 9–12 by race/ethnicity, 1999



Source: Kann L, Kinchen S, Williams B, Ross J, Lowry R, Grunbaum JA, et al. Youth risk behavior surveillance—United States, 1999. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2000;49(SS05):1-96.

- Over half of teen girls in grades 9 through 12 (57.1%) report getting vigorous exercise regularly.<sup>12</sup> White non-Hispanic girls were more likely to report this level of physical activity (59.7%) than either Hispanic (49.5%) or black, non-Hispanic teens (47.2%).
- Over eight in ten teen girls ages 12 to 19 (86.6%) do not obtain recommended levels of calcium in their diets.<sup>13</sup> Nearly three-quarters of teen girls also fall short of consuming recommended amounts of iron.
- Among teenagers who drink alcohol before age 15, over two in five will become alcohol dependent in their lifetimes compared to less than one in five of those who start drinking at age 20 or later.<sup>14</sup> About 32.7% of teen girls ages 12 to 17 have consumed alcohol during the past year; 18.7% have used it in the past month.<sup>15</sup>
- 20.5% of girls ages 12 to 17 report that they have ever used an illicit drug; 16.0% report using an illicit drug in the past year and 9.5% report using in the past month.<sup>16</sup> Differences in use are evident by race/ethnicity (Figure 3).

Figure 3  
Current use of illicit drugs among adolescent girls in grades 9 to 12 by drug type and race/ethnicity, 1999

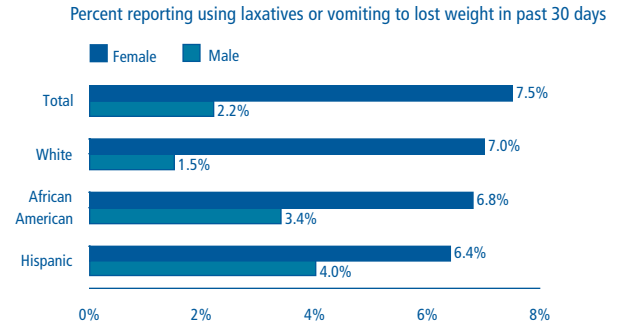


Current use defined as use on at least once in past 30 days. Inhalants include sniffing glue, breathing contents of aerosol spray cans, or inhaling paint or sprays to become intoxicated.  
Source: Kann L, Kinchen S, Williams B, Ross J, Lowry R, Grunbaum JA, et al. Youth risk behavior surveillance, United States, 1999. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2000; 49 (SS05): 1–96.

## Mental Health

- Teen girls are significantly more likely to report symptoms of depression than boys. 35.7% of girls in grades 9 through 12 reported feeling hopeless or sad almost every day for at least two weeks in a row, compared to 21.0% of teen boys.<sup>17</sup>
- Adolescent girls in grades 9 through 12 are more likely to report seriously considering suicide than teen boys (24.9% vs. 13.7%).<sup>18</sup> One in ten adolescent girls in high school reports actually attempting suicide.<sup>19</sup>
- Eating disorders, including eating disturbances and excessive concern about body shape and body weight, are an issue for many young women. Teen girls are three times as likely as boys to report taking laxatives or vomiting to lose weight (Figure 4).

Figure 4  
U.S. adolescents in grades 9 to 12 who reported using risky methods to lose weight, 1999



Source: Kann L, Kinchen S, Williams B, Ross J, Lowry R, Grunbaum JA, et al. Youth risk behavior surveillance, United States, 1999. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2000; 49 (SS05): 1–96.

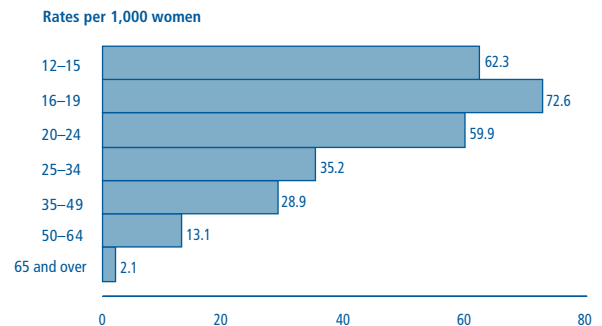
## Chronic Conditions

- Younger women generally have fewer chronic health problems than older women.
- Although cancer is rare among young women, it is the 3rd leading cause of death for women ages 15 to 24 (following accidents and homicide).<sup>20</sup>

## Violence Against Women

- Most rapes and sexual assaults are committed against children and adolescents. The highest incidence of rape occurs among older adolescents.<sup>21</sup>
- Among women, teen girls are at highest risk of being victims of violent crime (Figure 5).

Figure 5  
Violence victimization rates of women by age, 1998



Note: These rates include verbal threats of rape and sexual assault, and do not include homicide.  
Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Criminal victimization in the United States, 1998 statistical tables. 2000 May 25.

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