

# **Unintended First Pregnancies: The Experiences of Low-Income Latinas in El Paso, Texas**

**Kristine Hopkins & Deva Cats-Baril**

Population Research Center, University of Texas at Austin

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## **Introduction**

This study uses in-depth interviews to explore the contraceptive experiences of low-income Latinas and their experiences of unintended pregnancy. We focus on the contraceptive experiences of Mexican originating women because Hispanics high rates of unintended pregnancies (Henshaw 1998) in this group suggests that much more is to be learned to better design programs and policies that attend to Hispanic women's reproductive health needs. In order to better understand what drives high rates of unintended pregnancies among Hispanics, this study focuses on the contraceptive experiences of current pill users, given that pill use is Hispanics' number one method of reversible birth control.

The existing literature on Hispanic fertility and contraceptive practice is surprisingly thin, particularly given the size and growth of this population—12.5% of the US population and 25-42% of the populations of Arizona, California, New Mexico and Texas (Guzmán 2001)—and the size of the existing differentials between Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites. Hispanics have total fertility rates than whites (3.1 for Hispanics; 2.1 for Whites) and Mexican-American women, in particular, have the highest TFR (3.3) of all Hispanic subpopulations (MacDorman et al 2002). Findings from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) show that Hispanics have lower levels of contraceptive use than whites, and that the difference has persisted over time (Piccinino and Mosher 1998). While contraceptive use increased for all women between 1982 and 1995, Hispanic women's use rates are still lower than all other race-ethnic groups. Moreover, Hispanic women's pill use declined from 30% to 23% between 1982 and 1995. For whites, on the other hand, pill use increased from 26% to 29% during the same period.

Hispanic women have contraceptive failure rates nearly 50% higher than that of non-Hispanic whites (Fu et al. 1999) and they are 2.5 times more likely than whites to use oral contraceptive (OCs) inconsistently (Peterson et al. 1998). Moreover, Hispanic women who live alone or with nonfamily members were more likely to use the pill consistently whereas women whose interview was in Spanish, who had negative attitudes about women in the workplace, and two or more recent sex partners were more likely to use the pill inconsistently (Brown et al. 2003). Recent pill use initiation also increased the odds of inconsistent pill use. The authors speculate that primary use of Spanish language may be a marker for increased difficulties for these women to navigate the US health care system. Indeed, a recent study of Hispanic and white adolescent women (Solorio et al 2004) found that Hispanics were less likely to have access to health care but a higher proportion of Hispanic teens had used family planning services, which was due to the higher proportion of young Hispanic women who had ever been pregnant. A focus group study of young Hispanics in Chicago discovered that pregnancy provided young women an entry into the health care system and, for the first time, they received contraceptive information (Gilliam et al. 2004). Regarding continuation, a recent study (Kerns et al. 2003) found that 23% of predominantly Hispanic women attending an urban family planning clinic discontinued use within one month of use. Partners who were unaware of women's intentions to use the pill were significantly more likely to discontinue use. Taken together, these studies show that Hispanic women experience contraceptive use differently than other groups.

Using in-depth interviews, we explore Mexican origin women's descriptions of whether their first pregnancy was intended. We also analyze women's discussions about their contraceptive use before the first pregnancy, whether the pregnancy was intended, and what contraceptives, if any, they used after the first pregnancy ended.

## **Methods**

Thirty-five Mexican-American and Mexican-origin women living in El Paso, Texas were interviewed in-depth as part of a study exploring the oral contraceptive pill use practices among women who live on the U.S.-

Mexican border. The protocol was to interview each woman twice, about 1 year apart; 26 of the 35 (83%) completed the second interview. All participants signed informed consent forms. The first round interviews asked women about their contraceptive and childbearing experiences as well as their experiences with U.S. family planning clinics and/or with obtaining their pills in pharmacies in Mexico, future childbearing intentions, and social networks. The second round interviews explored women's experiences with the pill in the previous year, gathered more information about nonuse of contraception before the first pregnancy and more on social networks, and added a module about the ideal timing of childbearing and general questions about marriage.

## **Results**

### Sample Characteristics

All 35 women in the sample identified as Hispanic, Mexican, or Mexican-American. At the time of the first interview, parity ranged from zero (2 subjects) to four children (2 subjects), with mean parity of 1.8. This paper reports on the 29 women who had been pregnant at the time of the first interview. These 29 women with a previous pregnancy ranged in age from 19 to 44 with an average age of 30.1 (compared to 28.7 for the entire sample). Eighteen of the 29 respondents (62%) are first generation immigrants from Mexico, nine (31%) are second generation immigrants and the remainder (2) are third generation immigrants. Their highest year of schooling completed ranged from six to sixteen years, with the majority (8, 28%) having completed high school. Another 38% of this sample had completed more than high school. According to U.S. Census Bureau statistics, approximately 71% of all El Pasoans over age 25 have completed high school. Therefore, this sample has about the same education level as the general population, given that seven of the 29 respondents are under age 25 and have potentially not completed their schooling. Receipt of public assistance shows that a large majority of the respondents (22, or 79%) are in households that received at least one form of public assistance (such as WIC, food stamps, Medicaid, Children's Health Insurance Program). Moreover, higher education level did not protect a woman in this sample from receiving public assistance: 15 of 22 (68%) with at least a high school degree received some form of public assistance compared to 3 of 6 (50%) of those who completed less than a high school education.

### Characteristics of Participants with Intended vs. Unintended First Pregnancies

Twenty-one of the 29 (72%) of the first pregnancies in this Mexican origin sample were unintended and all unintended pregnancies took place when women were age 23 or younger. Among women who were young teenagers aged 14 to 17 at the time of their first pregnancy, 10 of the 13 (77%) of the pregnancies were unintended. All 11 pregnancies to the women in this sample who were aged 18 to 23 when they became pregnant for the first time were unintended while all of the remaining five first pregnancies to women age 24 and older were intended. While age is correlated with pregnancy intendedness in this sample, current education levels between those who had an unintended first pregnancy and those who intended it are very similar (70% of those who have less than a high school education vs. 74% of those with completed high school or higher). There is also no statistically significant difference in the receipt of public assistance by pregnancy intendedness: 73% of women who received public assistance had an unintended pregnancy compared to 67% of those who did not receive public assistance. Finally, 11 of 18 (61%) first generation immigrants reported an unintended first pregnancy compared to 10 of 11 (91%) of second- and third-generation immigrants.

Regarding contraceptive use at the time of becoming pregnant for the first time, all 8 women whose pregnancies were intended were not using a method. Among the 21 women with an unintended pregnancy only 5 were using contraception (2 were using a modern method and 3 using a traditional method).

### How do Women Describe Their Pregnancy Intendedness?

Women's descriptions of whether their pregnancy was intended vary depending on the age of the woman at the time she became pregnant. In the previous section, we saw that older women (24 and older) when they became pregnant all had intended pregnancies. These women, as we'll see below, had a definite plan for getting pregnant. They were in stable unions and, if using contraception, consciously stopped it to become pregnant. Younger women at the time of their first pregnancy, on the other hand, were more likely to have an unintended pregnancy. They often invoked their young age as a reason that they were "scared" or "shocked" to discover that they were pregnant. While this was the majority opinion, there were still three women in this sample who were 17 or younger when they had an intended pregnancy, described below.

### *Intended Pregnancies – Adult Women*

“I wanted it [pregnancy], I stopped taking the pills to get pregnant.” – *Intended first pregnancy at age 31*

“[The pregnancy] was really planned and when I stopped using the pill I got pregnant and I was completely happy and satisfied.” – *Intended first pregnancy at age 25*

“I got married, and if you get married and the first thing is you get pregnant, you know. It was after the pregnancy that I used the pill, after I had my first baby.” – *Intended first pregnancy at age 24*

### *Intended Pregnancies – Teenagers*

These three participants were 17 years old when they became pregnant with their first child. The first two clearly wanted to get pregnant, and their age was not an impediment.

“Well I was happy [when I found out I was pregnant]. I wanted to have a baby at a very young age. I was really happy. ... I was going to be 17. I was very young. I left the house at 15.”<sup>1</sup>

“I was really happy when I found out that I was pregnant. In fact, I struggled for about five months to be able to get pregnant. ... Because [my husband and I] really wanted to get pregnant really fast, it’s just that like I told you was struggled a little, and we’d heard from other people that if you take the pill it would be more hard to get pregnant. And because of this we never used the pill until after our son was born...”

The following teenager was more ambivalent about the “intendedness” of her pregnancy, and was even using the pill for a time before she became pregnant. But her (common law) husband wanted a child so she stopped using the pill to become pregnant. Though the participant said that the pregnancy was planned, it is unclear if she would have had a child so young if her partner had also wanted to wait to have a child.

“I didn’t tell [my husband] that I was using the pill...because he wanted babies and I didn’t. ... He didn’t want me to use the pill. So I used [the pill] for a few months and then I got pregnant.”

### *Unintended Pregnancies*

Not surprisingly, women with unintended pregnancies talk about their shock, fear, and dismay about discovering their pregnancy.

[I felt] confused, depressed. I was 14.... I wanted to cry. Well, I did cry. ... I was just worried what my ma was gonna think. That was what I was worried about.

“[I was] scared. [My boyfriend] felt also scared ‘cause we were so young. We were sixteen, barely going into high school, so he, we were, we were scared. ...We were scared about the whole situation.” – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 19*

“I was shocked. I couldn’t believe it. I was in denial. (Laughs) ...At that time I was in foster care so it was unbelievable, it wasn’t a really great experience as you can see.” – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 16*

“I was kind of shocked...[and my partner] was scared.” – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 18*

“I was scared because I was still kind of young—well I was like 20, 19, 20. I was scared and confused. I really didn’t know what to do.” – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 20*

Moreover, some women expressed how the intended pregnancy was coming at a very bad time because of the relationship she was in or because it did not fit into her educational plans.

“Well I wasn’t in a good relationship so I didn’t really want to have the baby. That was the first thing I thought and that’s just because of the relationship I was in. So no I didn’t want to. I didn’t want it.” – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 21*

I wasn’t married and I was going to college. That’s why I felt so scared, because my parents didn’t approve it. – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 20*

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<sup>1</sup> Age of participant not reported if it is included in the quote or described in the text.

Well, I was living with my partner at the time but I wasn't thinking of having kids. I was studying at the university and I didn't want to have kids at that time. – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 18, translated from Spanish*

### Contraceptive Attitudes and Behaviors at the Time of the First Unintended Pregnancy

We asked women about their contraceptive behaviors at the time of their unintended pregnancy. As noted above, the majority of women with unintended pregnancies were not using a method when they became pregnant. Three themes emerged in women's descriptions of their attitudes about contraception and their contraceptive behavior at the time they got pregnant: (1) they weren't using anything because they suffered barriers of some kind, such as lack of maturity or information or fear of medical procedures; (2) they weren't using anything because they underestimated their risk of pregnancy; and (3) they were using a method but not consistently.

#### *(1) Not using contraception because of barriers*

Well actually, I really wasn't [thinking about contraceptives before I got pregnant for the first time] – I didn't have any type of education on it so I was not really thinking about. I never thought I was going to get pregnant so I wasn't worried about it. ...I guess I didn't know how risky it is having sex without taking care of yourself, so the risk of getting pregnant and stuff. ...I knew about pills and stuff like that but you always think it's not going to happen to you so you don't look for any additional information. [Q: *You didn't use any condoms or withdrawal or anything like that?*] Withdraw, yea. [Q: *Okay and did that end up working for you?*] No, obviously not (laughs)."  
– *Unintended first pregnancy at age 21*

I didn't know nothing [about birth control]. My mom never told me about nothing. So, I didn't know anything. –  
*Unintended first pregnancy at age 14*

Yeah. Yeah, we just [stopped using the condom], I guess, I don't know. (Laughs) I don't know. Playing dumb I guess. And we were in the little stage that, nah, nothing can happen to me. (Laughs) – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 16*

No, [I wasn't worried about getting pregnant] because I didn't know. That is, I had no idea. Since I don't have brothers or sisters...and we were so young.  
– *Unintended first pregnancy at age 20, translated from Spanish*

[Q: *You said that you didn't plan on getting pregnant. Did you think about using contraception before?*] No, because you have to go to a doctor and I knew that they would make me have a Pap test before I could start it and I didn't want to. – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 18, translated from Spanish*

#### *(2) Not using contraception because she underestimates the risk of pregnancy*

No. No, [I didn't have any worries about pregnancy] ... Because I went like that a year and a half without it, so I didn't. I just started to get confident that I wouldn't get pregnant. – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 18*

[Q: *How long did you go without using them before you got pregnant?*] About three years. [Q: *Were you worried about getting pregnant?*] You know what, it didn't even pass through my mind because I wouldn't get pregnant (laughs) so I never thought that it could happen or something (laughs). – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 22*

"Yes, I thought [about using contraceptives] but later because I never thought that I'd get pregnant so fast." –  
*Unintended first pregnancy at age 16, translated from Spanish*

#### *(3) Using contraceptives but experienced a failure due to spotty use*

"Yes, it was in that month that I forgot [to take my pill]. It was during exams and I forgot and I took it two days later and that was when I came up positive [pregnant]." – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 18, translated from Spanish*

[Q: *Was it a birth control failure or --?.*] "No. ... It was me. I just stopped taking it. Because I didn't think that I was going to have any sex. I mean [my boyfriend] was over there in Dallas, but it must have been when he came back because I still ended up pregnant...I think that by the time I realized that I should have been put back on [the pill] it was too late (laughs)." – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 20*

"I was taking [the pill] and then I stopped taking it. ...I just forgot to go take it and I guess I was careless about it." –  
*Unintended first pregnancy at age 16*

### Contraception Use Following Pregnancy

For many women, their unintended pregnancies served as their first encounter with contraceptives, especially hormonal methods. One woman said that after her unintended pregnancy the nurse, "introduced me to the pill...she initiated it to me and she explained it to me, how everything works and how I should take it" (unintended first pregnancy at age 17). Other examples of unintended pregnancies leading to first knowledge of contraceptives include:

"Well the doctors ask you what kind of method you're going to go into...he's the one that told me about the pill." – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 22*

"I did the termination and then you know how you go for a checkup and then everything was okay so then I made the appointment with family planning and family planning was where I got into birth control... Well, they talked to me about all the different kinds and the methods, how to use them, the guides and about testing and it was very different when I was actually there, that there is a confidential policy and that your parents don't need to know and that's when I became more aware of contraception." – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 16*

"Yes, I learned from the nurses there and also the doctors. They told me like the bad, and good, all the things." – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 16*

"I first got those [the pill] on my free check-up and then I started taking those like four months afterwards when I got my first period." – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 18*

### Reasons for Starting/Being on Contraceptives

When asked why they chose to be on contraception right after their births, women with intended pregnancies and women with unintended pregnancies spoke differently about their reasons. The women with an intended pregnancy use language like "to focus on the child" or responded that the contraception they chose was better than the alternative methods. The women that intended the birth expressed their decisions for method-type rationally and confidently:

"I started with the injection because I was breastfeeding, I was told that it was more likely that I would forget [the pill], so they told me it was better if I had the injection...so that I would not have to remember the pill, but I could attend to my baby." – *Intended first pregnancy at age 25, translated from the Spanish*

"Yes, I said, yes, the method that I wanted is the one that's the safest: the pill" – *Intended first pregnancy at age 31, translated from the Spanish*

"After I stopped breastfeeding my daughter, I started to take care of myself again [take the pill]." – *Intended first pregnancy at age 26, translated from the Spanish*

Conversely, women with unintended pregnancies were very focused on not getting pregnant again. The unintended pregnancy, and the threat of having another one, became part of their consciousness around birth control behavior. Responses such as these were gathered from women with unintended births when asked why they were using their method:

"I just thought, 'I don't want to get pregnant again.'" – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 20*

"It was that I wanted to take care of myself, it was that I wanted the following method that I wanted to use so not have babies." – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 20*

"I didn't want to get pregnant." (Laughs) – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 14*

"We really weren't prepared to have, you know, our first child so we were gonna be more careful about having any more in the future." – *Unintended first pregnancy at age 14*

### Conclusion

This study shows how a group of Mexican origin women, who are current pill users, talk about their experiences with their first pregnancy. Nearly three-quarters of the first pregnancies in this small sample were unintended; women became pregnant for the most part while not using any contraception. All of the unintended pregnancies were to young women, though three young women (age 17) had an intended

pregnancy. Many women reported barriers to using contraception, like lack of information, fear of being found out by parents, or fear of medical procedures. Contraceptive use increased after the first pregnancy, showing, like Gilliam et al. (2004), that childbirth gains women access to medical services and information and breaks down other barriers such as fears of discovery by loved ones to be having sex and/or using contraception. This sample is drawn from current pill users, which may bias the sample in favor of contraceptive use post-delivery. Moreover, it is a small sample and is therefore only suggestive of the experiences of women. Finally, because this sample is exclusively Mexican origin, it is unclear whether the experiences noted here are unique to Latinas or would also be representative of the experiences of other low-income non-Latina groups.

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