

African-American Voices on Sexual Health

Summary Analysis of Surveys and Focus
Groups among African Americans

June 2013



Introduction

Over the years, much has been asserted about the attitudes of African Americans regarding abortion, contraception, lesbian and gay rights, and a range of other issues related to sexual health. Traditionally, national public opinion surveys, however, generally do not have large enough samples, especially of young adults, to reliably draw conclusions about the views of African Americans on these issues. The media and others, therefore, continue to put forward outdated and misconceived notions of African-Americans' attitudes, as well as assert that young adults are apathetic and unwilling to take action on issues which relate to sexual health.

To set the record straight and have reliable benchmark data, the Reproductive Justice Communications Group and Advocates for Youth each commissioned groundbreaking public opinion research. The Reproductive Justice Communications Group, consisting of Black Women for Wellness, the Black Women's Health Imperative, New Voices Pittsburgh, SisterLove Inc., SPARK Reproductive Justice Now and reproductive justice activists in partnership with Communications Consortium Media Center, commissioned a survey of 1,006 African-American adults (ages 18 and older) conducted by landline and cell phone in December 2012.

To delve deeper into the attitudes of young adults as well as assess their willingness to take action, Advocates for Youth commissioned a survey of Millennial African Americans (ages 18 to 29). A web-enabled, nationally-representative survey was conducted in March 2012, with 357 African Americans, followed by a series of focus groups.

Both projects were conducted by the research firm of Belden Russonello Strategies LLC. The surveys explore attitudes toward sexual health issues, including contraception, comprehensive sex education, and abortion. This memo provides the highlights from these two research projects.

Overview

Overwhelmingly, African Americans, both Millennials and adults overall, support comprehensive sex education, view access to birth control as fundamental health care, and support access to abortion care. Specifically:

- Strong majorities believe that contraception should be part of overall basic health care and available to those who need it and that teenagers should have access to contraception. African Americans dismiss misconceptions that young people are better off being denied sexual health information and services.
- Strong majorities also hold an expansive view of sex education that goes beyond pregnancy and disease prevention to include information about abstinence and contraception, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and healthy relationships.
- Most African Americans support legal abortion and believe it should be available from health care providers in their communities.

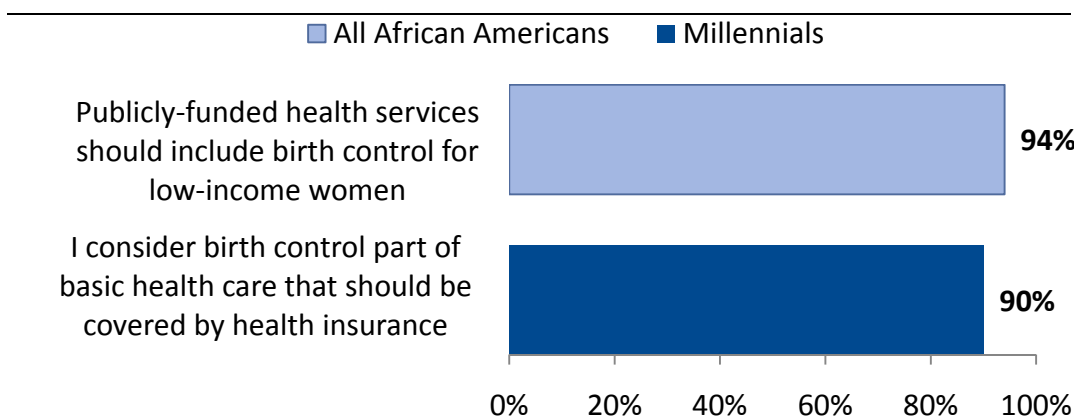
- Millennial African Americans strongly support sexual health and rights and have a strong interest in taking action to ensure the information and full range of sexual health services are available in their communities.

Key Findings

1. Contraception seen as basic health care

Large majorities of African Americans view contraception as part of women’s basic health care (86%) and over nine in ten (94%) agree that “publicly-funded health services should include birth control for low-income people who want it,” including 79% who agree strongly. Among Millennial African Americans, nine in ten (90%) agree that birth control is “part of basic health care and should be covered by insurance.”

Ensuring Availability of Birth Control



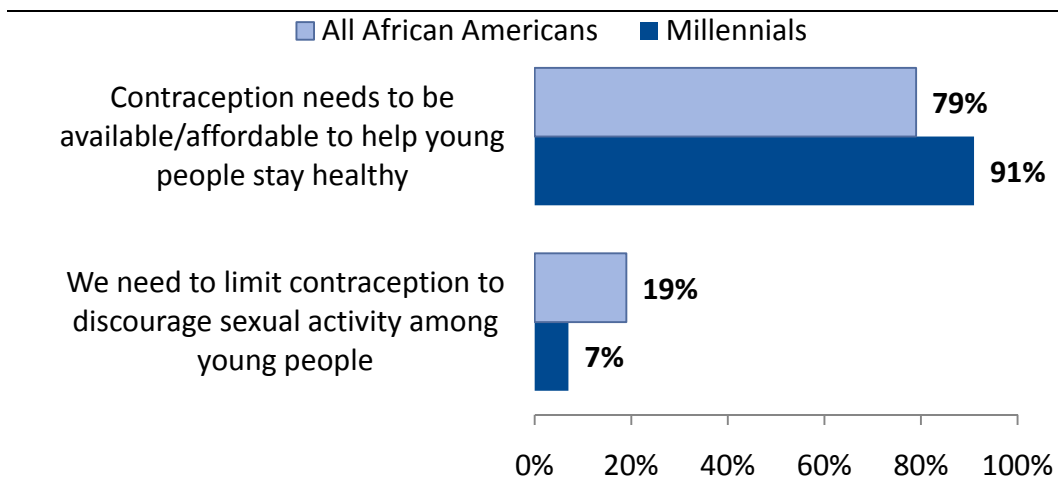
All African Americans: Q. Please tell me if you agree or disagree that publicly-funded health services should include birth control for low-income women?

Millennials: Q. Please tell me if you agree or disagree with each of the following statements, and whether you agree or disagree strongly or somewhat: I consider birth control part of basic health care that should be covered by health insurance

Seventy-nine percent of African Americans say “we need to have plenty of access to contraception, like condoms and birth control pills, to help teens and young people stay healthy and avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases,” while only 19% say “we need to limit access to things like condoms and birth control pills to discourage sexual activity among teens and young people.” Support for contraceptive access is also high among self-described conservatives (77%) along with those who attend religious services weekly or more (72%).

Millennial African Americans feel even more strongly with nine in ten (91%) believing that contraception needs to be available and affordable to help young people stay healthy.

Support for Contraception Availability Among Young People



All African Americans: Q. Which of these comes closer to your point of view: [ROTATE] We need to have plenty of access to contraception, like condoms and birth control pills, to help teens and young people stay healthy and to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases; OR We need to limit access to things like condoms and birth control pills to discourage sexual activity among teens and young people.

Millennials: Q. Which of these comes closer to your own point of view: Contraception, like condoms and birth control pills, needs to be available and affordable to help young people stay healthy OR We need to limit the availability of condoms and birth control pills to discourage sexual activity among young people.

Overwhelming majorities (88%) of African Americans are also likely to say that, when they have teenagers, they will take them to get birth control. Among African Americans overall, two-thirds (65%) say if they had teenage children, they would *definitely* “take them to get birth control if they needed it” and another 23% say they probably would. Sixty-five percent of those who identify as conservative and 59% who attend religious services weekly or more also say they would *definitely* take their own teenager to get birth control pills. Only 11% overall say they would not.

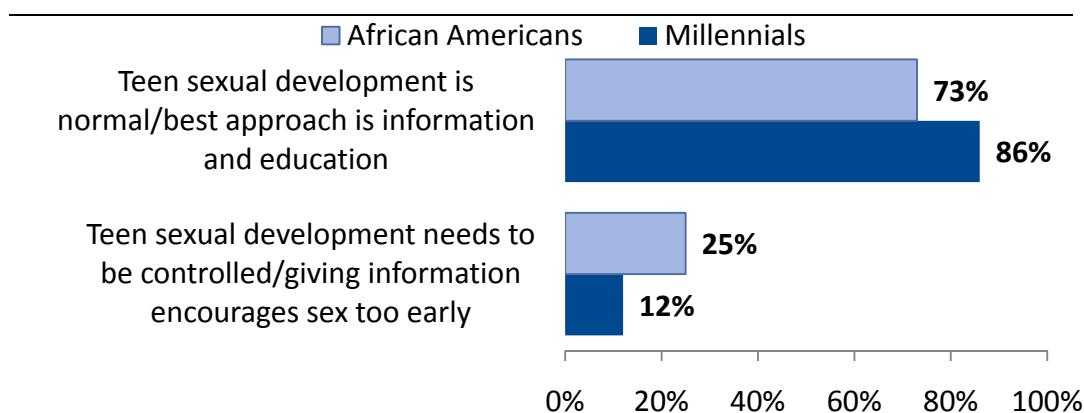
Among Millennials, over seven in ten would definitely (55%) or probably (17%) take their own teenagers to get birth control, while only one in ten would not (13%) or are not sure (12%).

2. Teen sexual development – A normal part of growing up

Consistent with their overwhelming support for contraceptive access for young people, African Americans acknowledge young people’s sexual development as a normal part of growing up. A large majority believes that young people should be provided with education and information about sex and contraception to help make healthy decisions, and they reject the idea that censoring information is best.

Seven in ten (73%) African Americans overall and nearly nine in ten (86%) Millennials agree that “teen sexual development is a normal part of growing up and the best approach is to ensure that young people have all the information and education about sex and contraception that they need.” Only 25% of African Americans overall and 12% of Millennials believe that “teen sexual development needs to be closely controlled and giving young people information about things like condoms and birth control will only encourage them to have sex too early.”

Response to Teen Sexual Development

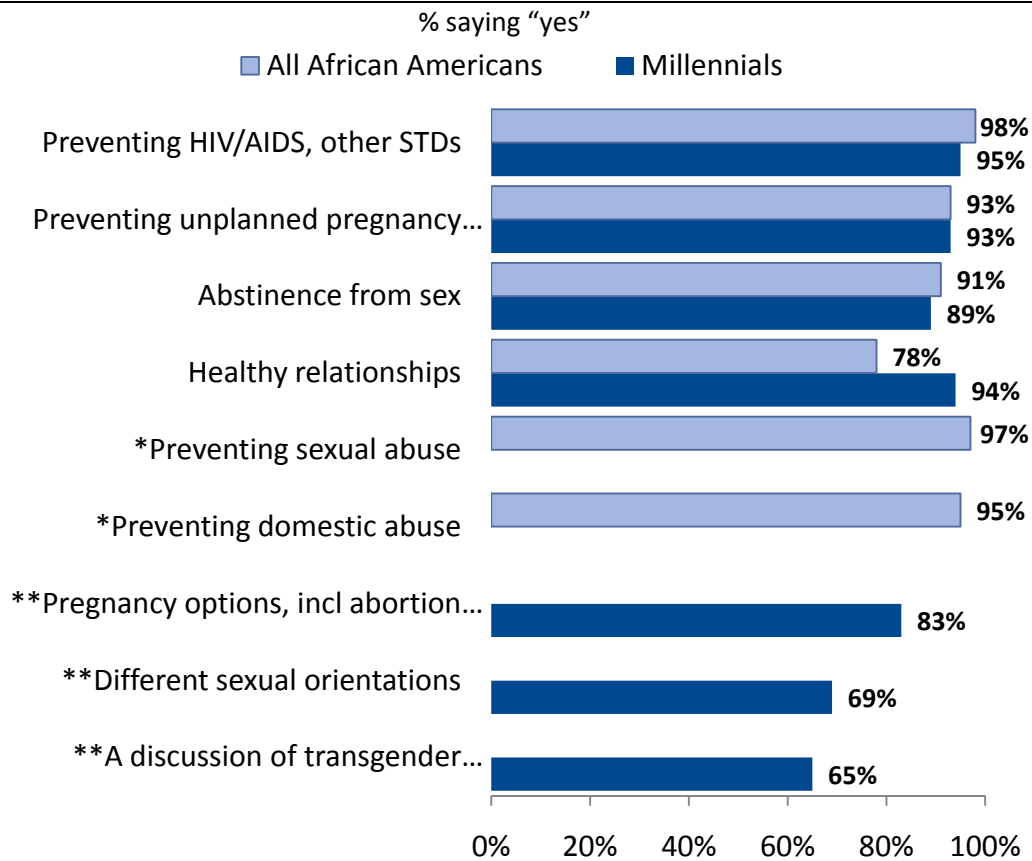


Q. Which comes closer to your own views: Teen sexual development is a normal part of growing up and the best approach is to ensure that young people have all the information and education about sex and contraception that they need; OR Teen sexual development needs to be closely controlled and giving young people information about things like condoms and birth control will only encourage them to have sex too early.

When asked to elaborate on the types of information and education young people should receive as they develop sexually, large majorities of African Americans support comprehensive sex education that covers a broad range of topics.

While slightly different questions were asked in the two surveys, African Americans overall, as well as Millennials support a wide-range of topics being taught in the schools – everything from how to prevent diseases to birth control, abstinence, domestic abuse prevention, and healthy relationships.

What High School Sex Education Programs Should Cover



*Questions asked only of All African Americans (18 and older)

**Questions asked only of Millennial African Americans

All African Americans Q. Please tell me if you think a sex education program in high schools should cover each of the following Q. Preventing HIV-AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases; Q. Preventing sexual abuse; Q. Preventing domestic abuse; Q. Preventing unintended pregnancy by using birth control, such as condoms, birth control pills, IUDs, Depo shots, etc.; Q. Abstinence from sex; Q. Healthy romantic relationships.

Millennial Q. Please indicate which of the following you think a sex education program in high schools should cover: c. Prevention of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases; e. Healthy relationships; b. How to prevent unplanned pregnancy using birth control, such as condoms, birth control pills, IUDs, Depo shots, etc.; a. Abstinence from sex; d. Pregnancy options including having a baby, adoption, and abortion; f. Different sexual orientations such as heterosexual, gay, lesbian and bisexual; g. A discussion of transgender individuals. That is, people who feel on the inside that their gender doesn't fit with their physical body. For example, a person who was born a girl but does not feel like a girl.

3. Preventing sexual abuse and domestic violence

The survey of African-American adults delved deeper into the issue of sexual assault. African-American adults not only support teaching young people about preventing sexual abuse and domestic violence, but a number report personal familiarity with one or more of these issues.

- Forty-five percent of African Americans say they or someone close to them has “experienced violence within an intimate relationship; and
- A third (33%) say that they or someone close to them has “experienced rape or sexual assault.”

4. Lesbian and gay rights

Given a great deal of discussion in the media around the views of Millennials on lesbian and gay rights, the survey of Millennial African Americans delved deeper into the attitudes of young African Americans on this topic. In addition to supporting discussions of different sexual orientation and transgender individuals in high school sex education classes:

- Over eight in ten African-American Millennials agree that “all people should have equal rights regardless of their sexual orientation” (84% of African Americans).
- Six in ten believe there should be legal recognition of same-sex couples’ relationships either marriage (43%) or civil unions (15%).

5. Support for access to abortion care

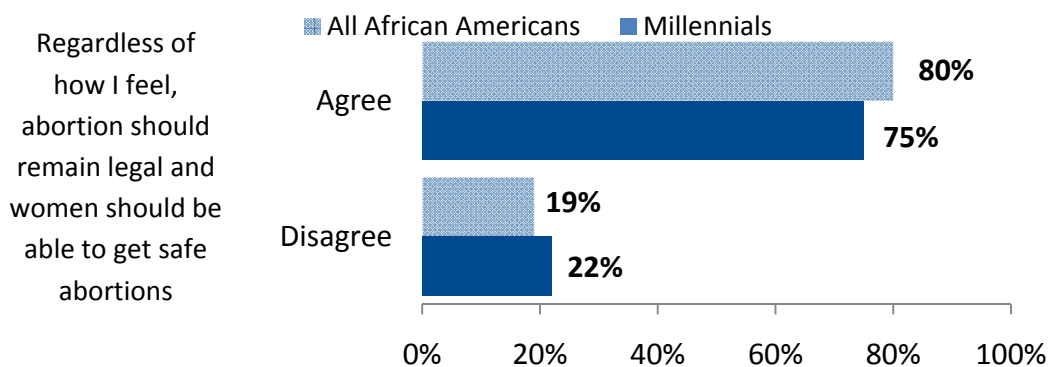
To obtain a complete picture of abortion attitudes among African Americans, the research projects posed several questions on the topic. First, respondents answered the traditional question on legality, followed by a question that asked them to set aside their own personal feelings on abortion and report whether they believe abortion should be legal. In both questions a majority of African Americans support access to abortion care with support rising when individuals put aside their own feelings on the issue.

- Eight in ten African Americans (79%) say abortion should be legal – in almost all cases (32%); most cases (19%); or in just a few cases (28%). Only 18% say abortion should never be legal.
- Similarly, among African Americans 18 to 29 years old, over seven in ten (71%) believe abortion should be legal – in almost all cases (27%); most cases (23%); or in just a few cases (21%). Only 13% say abortion should never be legal.

When asked to put aside their personal feelings, eight in ten (80%) African Americans and three-quarters (75%) of Millennial African Americans agree that “regardless of how I personally feel about abortion, I believe it should remain legal and women should be able to get safe abortions.” Agreement with this statement crosses political and religious lines, with 74% of

self-identified conservatives concurring as well as 88% of liberals. Three-quarters (76%) of African Americans who attend religious services weekly, along with 84% of those who attend less regularly, also agree.

Abortion Should Remain Legal, Regardless of Personal Feelings



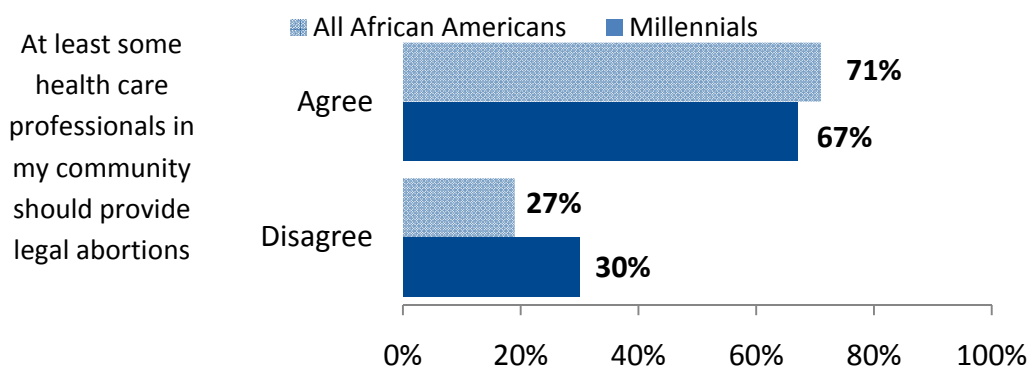
Please tell me if you agree or disagree with each of the following statements, and whether you agree or disagree strongly or somewhat. Q. Regardless of how I personally feel about abortion, I believe it should remain legal and women should be able to get safe abortions

6. Ensuring availability of abortion

Large majorities of African Americans also believe abortion should be made available through health insurance and from health care providers in their communities.

- Seventy-six percent of African Americans agree that “health insurance should cover abortion to ensure that when a woman needs to end her pregnancy she will be able to seek a licensed, quality health care provider,” including 60% who strongly agree.
- Seventy-one percent say “at least some health care professionals in my community should provide legal abortions,” including 46% who strongly agree. Among Millennial African Americans, two-thirds (67%) agree and three in ten (31%) agree strongly.

Abortion in Care Available in My Community



Please tell me if you agree or disagree with each of the following statements, and whether you agree or disagree strongly or somewhat. Q. At least some health care professionals in my community should provide legal abortions

7. Women's real life decisions

Health and autonomy are key values when African Americans think about their own lives and about abortion. Millennial African Americans, in particular, express the value of autonomy as feeling good about who they are; making their own decisions about their bodies and relationships; and making their own way in the world.

Large majorities agree that decisions about abortion should be left up to the women involved.

- Almost nine in ten African Americans (89%) agree, "We cannot know all the personal and medical reasons behind every decision to have an abortion. Every person's case is different and very private and personal, so we should leave decisions about abortion up to the individual woman," including 76% who agree strongly.
- Eighty-five percent agree, "When it comes to abortion, we should trust women to make the important personal decisions that are best for themselves and their families."
- Seven in ten (70%) Millennial African Americans agree that "since we cannot know each woman's individual circumstances, abortion should remain legal and women should be able to make this difficult decision with their doctors and keep government out of it."

8. Engaging Millennials

Counter to the conceptions about the lack of interest and apathy among Millennials, African-American Millennials express high levels of interest in personally getting involved in the range of sexual health issues.

- Over seven in ten (75%) say they are interested in improving young people's access to sexual health services such as contraception and testing for HIV and other sexually

transmitted diseases. Another seven in ten are personally interested in reducing the number of unplanned pregnancies (69%) and reducing the impact of HIV and AIDS in their community (73%).

- Millennials express strong support for improving sex education and interest in becoming involved on this issue in their communities. Overall, seven in ten (72%) say they are interested in personally getting involved in “promoting sex education programs in [their] communities that are honest and accurate.”
- Six in ten (59%) African-American Millennials report that they are interested in personally getting involved to “make sure safe abortion is available and accessible” in their community. In particular, African-American young men are among the most likely to say they would take action to ensure abortion is available in their communities (65% interested). A majority of African-American women also express interest in taking action (53% interested).

Millennial African Americans’ strong support of sexual health and rights combined with their interest in engaging on these issues offers the promise of moving beyond the denial and unfounded controversies that have hampered approaches to sexual health and rights in communities across the country.

###

For more information about the research, please contact:

Kate Stewart
Executive Vice President for Public Affairs
Advocates for Youth
Kate@AdvocatesforYouth.org
202-419-3420

Marcela Howell
Policy and Communications Consultant
Reproductive Justice Communications Group
Communications Consortium Media Center
mhowell@ccmc.org
202-326-8700