

Key Findings From:

This Is My Reality: The Price of Sex

AN
INSIDE
LOOK AT
BLACK
URBAN
YOUTH
SEXUALITY
AND THE
ROLE OF
THE MEDIA

January 2004



INTRODUCTION

This document presents key findings from *This is My Reality—The Price of Sex: An Inside Look at Black Urban Youth Sexuality and the Role of the Media*, a powerful new report from MEE (Motivational Educational Entertainment Productions, Inc.), experts in understanding and communicating with urban and ethnic youth. The MEE report provides insights into the sexual attitudes and beliefs of Black urban youth aged 16–20, who live in households with less than \$25,000 in annual income. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy supports MEE's efforts to understand what low-income Black urban youth really think about issues related to sex and pregnancy, and applauds its candor and its commitment to understanding a segment of teens that is often overlooked, but that is at high risk for pregnancy. Any effort that can help support those teens at greater risk helps advance the National Campaign's goal to reduce teen pregnancy nationwide.

Funded by the The California Endowment and The Ford Foundation, the MEE report includes results from more than 40 teen and young adult focus groups in 10 cities; an extensive literature review; interviews with 10 experts on sexuality, the media and public health; and a media consumption and lifestyles survey of 2,000 African American teens. Research sites were Baltimore, Maryland; New York City, New York; Los Angeles/Long Beach and Oakland/Richmond, California; Chicago, Illinois; New Orleans, Louisiana; Detroit, Michigan; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Atlanta, Georgia. The report is accompanied by a documentary video featuring excerpts from the focus groups and expert interviews. To order the full report and video, please visit www.meeproductions.com.

Here, we highlight the focus group findings that are most closely related to the National Campaign's work, and we provide a larger context in which to connect and contrast what MEE has discovered about this particular group of teens with what we know about teens nation-

wide. This summary does not cover the quantitative findings of MEE's media survey, nor does it cover related issues such as HIV/STDs, the influence of hip-hop culture, or changes in the social fabric of African American communities, all of which are in the full report. The full report also provides specific action steps for parents, media leaders, healthcare and educational institutions, and policymakers—not just advice on what to say, but also on how to say it.

The qualitative research summarized here offers important insights into what the participants think about sex and its consequences, and the environment in which their views are shaped. Most of the teens in this study struggle with poverty, violence and other challenges. They report being viewed as dangerous or lacking in ambition by those outside their neighborhoods. Mainstream media and prevention campaigns often do not resonate with this group of teens, in part because these institutions and efforts lack insight into this audience. What is less widely known is how resilient these teens can be—much of their daily energy is focused on overcoming obstacles that many other teens never face.

Of course, this particular segment of the Black urban teen population does not represent all Black youth or all urban youth. Even so, by understanding the extreme challenges that low-income Black urban youth face, it also becomes clear that the teens studied by MEE ultimately also need what all teens need: connected, caring adults; trusting relationships with peers and parents; and an understanding of the emotional and physical consequences of sex, among other things. Moreover, many mainstream trends, including music and fashion, often begin in the inner city. And teens' views about sex may be surprisingly similar even when their life experiences are quite different. For these reasons, those of us who work with teens—from all backgrounds—need to better understand the views and experiences of low-income Black urban youth.

TEEN SEX, PREGNANCY AND BIRTHS

Here are some basic facts about teen sex, contraception, pregnancy and birth. They provide an overall framework within which the MEE findings can be placed.

Teen Sex and Contraception

- One in five teens has had sex by age 15.
- In 2001, 46 percent of high school students (grades 9–12) report ever having had sexual intercourse. Overall, male high school students (49 percent) were more likely than female students (43 percent) to have had sex.
- In 2001, Black high school students were more likely than Hispanic and White students to have ever had sex—61 percent of Black students (down from 71 percent in 1999), 48 percent of Hispanics (down from 54 percent in 1999), and 43 percent of Whites (down from 45 percent in 1999).
- Black teens are more likely than White or Hispanic youth to have had sexual intercourse, to begin sexual activity at an earlier age, and to have had more than four sexual partners.
- Among sexually active high school students, 58 percent report that they or their partner used a condom the last time they had sex, and 18 percent report that they or their partner used birth controls pills before the last time they had sex.
- Black teens are more likely than other adolescents to use condoms consistently and to have used condoms the last time they had sex.

Teen Pregnancy and Births

- Despite impressive declines over the past decade, the U.S. still has the highest rates of teen pregnancy and births in the industrialized world. Teen pregnancy costs the United States at least \$7 billion annually.
- In the U.S., 35 percent of teens get pregnant at least once by age 20. There are nearly 900,000 teen pregnancies annually.
- Eight in ten teen pregnancies are unintended, and eight in ten are also to unmarried teens.
- Between 1990 and 1997, teen pregnancy rates for Black teens (aged 15–19) declined 23 percent. Teen pregnancy rates for Whites declined 26 percent. The rate for Hispanic teens aged 15–19 declined almost 5 percent during the same time period.
- Black teens currently have the highest rate of teen pregnancy among all major racial/ethnic groups and are more likely than other adolescents to have children outside of marriage. (Hispanic teens, however, have the highest teen birth rate.)
- The teen birth rate declined by 30 percent over the past decade to an historic low. Black teens had the sharpest drop in teen birth rates of any racial or ethnic group. Since 1991, the birth rate for Black teens has declined by more than 40 percent. For young Black teens (aged 15–17) the results were even more striking—the rate was cut in half between 1991 and 2002. During the same period, the teen birth rate for Whites declined 30 percent, and the rate for Hispanics declined 27 percent.

Sources: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *2001 Youth Risk Behavior Survey*; National Center for Health Statistics, *Births: Final Data for 2002*; “The Reproductive Health of African American Adolescents,” from the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, 2003.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM THIS IS MY REALITY: THE PRICE OF SEX

1. Black females do not feel—and often are not—valued by anyone.

“If a girl tells me she doesn’t want to have sex with me, that would make me like her, because she’s got respect for herself.”

—Teen boy, Chicago, IL

The young Black girls who participated in the MEE study say that they feel devalued and believe they have very little status in their communities. Males say they do not trust females, and girls also report that they often do not even trust each other. Many teen boys say that one reason they don’t have steady girlfriends is that they simply don’t trust girls to be faithful. Males, and even some females, regularly use derogatory sexual terms to describe women and girls. Some girls begin to internalize these views, which are prevalent in music videos and other popular culture.

Teens in these focus groups say that Black girls often face a no-win social situation. Girls who choose not to have sex can feel unpopular, but those who give in to sex are often seen as good only for a series of one-night stands. Some young males feel they need to be in total control of the females with whom they are in relationships—sometimes by way of violence. Girls say they don’t turn to each other for support, accusing each other of gossiping and “stealing” men. As a result, girls say they prefer to talk to their platonic male friends, who offer sympathy and advice in a non-sexual context.

2. Sex is seen as a transaction and happens in many kinds of relationships.

“There used to be a time when dating meant you were getting to know each other. Now what it means is that sometimes kids are having sex to get to know their partners.”

—MEE Expert Panelist Dr. Gail Wyatt

“...If she doesn’t have somebody providing for her [at home], she’s gonna find a way to get it, and that way is going to be through sex.”

—Teen boy, Chicago, IL

For many teens in this study, sex is a transaction. For example, many boys said that they keep at least one partner (a “shorty”) primarily for sex and another partner for their long-term, committed relationships (a “wifey”). Teens report that condoms are used less frequently in steady relationships, putting their “relationship” partner at great risk of pregnancy and disease. Willingness to have unprotected sex with a steady partner is often seen as proof of fidelity. Conversely, condoms are considered more important for casual sex. In a relationship that is defined only by sex—in which both partners are assumed to be sexually active with others—males tend to use condoms primarily to protect themselves against disease, with little concern for the safety of their casual sex partners.

Teens also note that girls are becoming more aggressive, initiating both relationships and sex. Some girls say that they are simply imitating the casual attitude toward sex and relationships exhibited by many teen boys. Many other girls say that they want to be in control of their sexual relationships to protect their feelings and their hearts—although they also admit that they are not as careful about protecting their bodies.

The prevalence of relationships between young girls and adult men is also noted. Older guys are viewed as more independent—financially and socially—and, consequently, have more to offer. It also noted that the unequal balance of power between older men and younger girls often means that these young girls may feel less able to say “no” to sex (or anything else) or to ask her partner to use protection. Many teen girls feel that sex is expected in a relationship with an older guy, and worry that “if I don’t sleep with him, someone else will.”

3. Trust and communication are rare.

“Usually people don’t talk about sex before having sex.”

—Teen girl, Los Angeles, CA

The transactional nature of sex engenders little trust between partners. Especially when partners meet and have sex within a short period of time, their relationships do not lend themselves to effective communication about sex, responsibility, or consequences. Teens in this study say they rarely talk to their sexual partners about feelings, expectations or reproductive health issues, including contraceptive use.

When it comes to relationships, the young people in this study desire what other teens desire: love and trust. However, they say they feel surrounded by infidelity and that they try to build protective walls around themselves to prepare for what they view as inevitable: a cheating partner. Boys and girls distrust each other equally and feel that either one is likely to be unfaithful. Even when it comes to friendships, the teens in this study find it hard to trust others or to earn someone’s trust—unless they have known each other since childhood. Newcomers are considered “associates,” not friends, and are not likely to break through the barriers they’ve built to protect against disappointment and hurt feelings.

Girls in this study report that they have little support from the adults in their lives, and that they must get what they want however they can, because they cannot be certain that anyone else will look out for them. This is one reason they often save their most personal thoughts for a platonic friend of the opposite sex, rather than for the person with whom they are sexually intimate. Cross-gender, platonic friendships allow teens to gain insights into what the opposite sex is thinking, and provide opportunities to share more personal feelings without as much risk.

4. Parents can help, but they often don’t.

“Parents should not be afraid to talk about sex. The more kids know, the less curious they are.”

—Teen boy, New Orleans, LA

Many teens in this study say that adults are contributing to the problem of early, casual sex and pregnancy. Some parents try to be as “young” as their children, and engage in risky sexual behavior themselves. Some parents give teens tacit or overt approval for having sex, getting pregnant, or becoming a parent at an early age. Others are reluctant to discuss sex and related issues with their children. For example, teens report that their parents often become angry when questions arise about sex, worried that talking to their children about these issues will either encourage experimentation with sex, or may lead their kids to make the same mistakes that they did. Teens in the focus groups also note a double standard when parents talk to their sons versus their daughters about sex and pregnancy. Girls feel that the message to them is: responsibility means delaying sex or using protection; for boys, responsibility means supporting the mother and child after the baby arrives.

Teens in this study agree with teens nationwide: their parents are their most preferred source of information about sex, love and values, but in reality, they get their information elsewhere. They believe that if parents talked to them honestly about sex, it would not make them have more sex; rather, it would encourage more cautious attitudes and behaviors. They want to hear more about abstinence and contraception, and why they should choose either one. They want to hear more about the emotional aspects of sex and relationships, and they want an ongoing discussion, not a single, one-sided conversation or lecture. Parents of the teens in this study—like parents of teens from many backgrounds—are not giving

Most teens (88 percent) believe it would be easier for teens to postpone sexual activity and avoid teen pregnancy if they were able to have more open, honest conversations about these topics with their parents.

—National Campaign poll

When asked whom they respect most, survey participants choose their parents or guardians by a wide margin over any other individuals in their lives.

—MEE Survey

Nearly four in five (76 percent) survey participants believe they will be married some day, though that day was described as a far-off possibility, if at all.

—MEE Survey

their children the guidance they need about sex and relationships. They report feeling uncomfortable, uninformed and just plain awkward.

5. Becoming a teen parent seems more realistic than abstaining from sex, getting married, or having a successful future.

“I see no future for myself—so I have to get what I can now.”

—Teen focus group participant

“We are culpable as a society when we will allow a 13-year-old to feel her only vision is having a child. We have failed, not the 13-year-old.”

—MEE Expert Panelist Dr. Henry Foster

Most of the young people in this study report that they are growing up in environments where sex is commonplace, marriage is rare, and teen parenthood is prevalent. Nearly a third of the youth who participated in this study are already parents; many more report that their friends have babies. They agree that teen parenthood carries little stigma—in fact, it can confer immediate “adult” status. Many of the teens in this study do not see promising futures for themselves, which is one reason that instant gratification often guides their decisions about sex. For those with little faith in their future prospects, having a child at an early age is viewed as a positive step. For these teens, there is little clear value in delaying childbearing.

The young people in this study also say that they have seen few successful relationships or marriages. For them, marriage—or an ongoing, committed relationship—is not considered attainable any time soon, if ever. The attitude for some youth is that there is no point to marriage because “everybody cheats.” When marriage does not seem realistic, then delaying sex until marriage is essentially irrelevant. In addition, teens in this study believe that “everybody’s doing it,” a view that they say is reinforced by media portrayals of sex as normal and common

among people in their age group. Importantly, these teens do say they want to hear more about abstinence—especially if abstinence messages are communicated in ways that acknowledge the context in which these teens are making decisions about sex. For example, assuring them that “you can say no to sex, even if you’ve said yes before” may resonate better than simply telling them to stay abstinent until marriage.

6. Health care services and sex education classes are failing these teens.

“They [health clinics] tell your business. Everybody in the neighborhood knows by the time you get home.”

—Teen focus group participant, Oakland, CA

Teens in this study are reluctant to take advantage of the health services available to them. While many low-income urban youth lack health insurance and adequate access to services, some form of health insurance or free health care covers the majority of the teens in this study. However, even when health services are available, the teens in this study report significant barriers that kept them from taking advantage of these services. Many say that the health care facilities were not “youth-friendly,” and that they had been personally “disrespected” and “shamed” during visits to clinics, hospitals and other health care sites. These incidents discouraged them from seeking additional services.

Although most schools offer health or sex education classes, teens in this study say that the classes do not provide relevant information and that many teens are already sexually active by the time they are required to take these classes. Teens also say they want their sex education classes to do a better job of explaining the complexities, emotional impact and full range of the consequences of sex. They feel they are not getting adequate information at school or at home, and are relying on their peers (who have as little good information as they do).

7. Everybody thinks everybody's "doing it," and many regret it.

"I thought [having sex] would keep him with me, but after—he was gone."

—Teen girl, Chicago, IL

A dangerous perception shared by teens in this study—and teens nationwide, too—is that "everybody is doing it." This belief can be harmful because a teen who believes that his or her friends are sexually active is more likely to initiate sex, and is less likely to do so if he or she believes that peers are not sexually active. Though many of the youth in this study were sexually active, those who were virgins had little inclination to discuss that fact, and few of their peers knew about it.

Teen male virgins have a tougher time fitting in with their peers than do teen female virgins, according to the young people in this study. Male virgins say that when their peers knew that they had not had sex, they teased them and tried to entice them into having sex. Several teens admit that they had their first sexual encounter in their early teens, due mostly to peer pressure. Some boys acknowledged having sex so that they would feel like a part of the group. This, in turn, causes many younger boys to lie about having sex. Teens in this study report that some of the younger teens who were doing the pressuring, as well as those who were bragging about how many people they had slept with, were in fact the ones who were not having sex at all—they were just lying about it.

Boys show significant respect—though often unspoken—for girls who resist pressure to have sex and remain virgins. Despite this, teen girls say that they feel pressure from boys to have sex, particularly if they are virgins, and that they succumb in order to keep their boyfriends. In some cases, females also pressure males into having sex.

Just as with teens nationwide, many sexually active youth in this study say they wish they had waited longer to have sex. They wish they had known when they were younger that sex itself was not necessarily what they had imagined it to be, and that being in a sexual relationship is more complicated than they had understood. This sense of regret was most pronounced among girls who were very young when they became sexually active.

8. There is no deep understanding that sex has consequences.

"Even the shampoo commercials have sex in them—and shampoo has nothing to do with sex."

—Teen girl, Baltimore, MD

"A lot of young people see the sexual scenes and say, 'I would like to try that,' but they didn't see any form of protection being used."

—Teen girl, Baltimore, MD

Despite the fact that over 60 percent of the teens who participated in the MEE study had been sexually active in the last three months, most feel that pregnancy, STD's or other possible consequences of sex couldn't happen to them. As with most teens, the teens in this study want to hear more about the emotional consequences of sex, not just the physical ones. Most youth in the study agree that the media "sugar coats" sex and shows sex without real consequences. Importantly, some youth even interpret risky sexual behavior as normal because when they see such behavior in the media, the risks are downplayed or are not evident at all. Focus group participants feel that images of and messages about sex are pervasive in their music, videos and other media, but that these portrayals lack any sense that sex could have serious implications for their bodies, their feelings, or their relationships.

Stressing abstinence to teens while also providing information about contraception is not viewed as a "mixed message" by the majority of adults and teens nationwide.

—National Campaign poll

Sexually experienced teens regret having sex when they did—67 percent said they wish they had waited longer before having sexual intercourse.

—National Campaign poll

Nearly 9 in 10 teens wish the media showed more or talked more about the consequences of sex, including teen pregnancy.

—National Campaign poll

CONCLUSIONS, TIPS AND RESOURCES

The segment of teens that participated in the MEE study is at particularly high risk for teen pregnancy and other possible consequences of sex. Although these teens face specific challenges and hardships that many other teens do not, this report shows clearly that low-income Black urban youth have much in common with all teens, and they ultimately need what all teens need.

- They need their parents and adult caregivers now more than ever: to pay attention to them, to guide them, and to be clear about views and values about sex and pregnancy. Whether they feel too uninformed or uncomfortable, parents of the teens in this study (similar to parents nationwide) are not giving teens the guidance they need about sex and relationships, despite how influential they are.
- Sexually active teens, particularly those who start young, wish they had waited longer.
- Sexually active teens often do not talk about or use contraception.
- Teens overestimate how many of their peers are sexually active, and say that remaining abstinent would be easier if more teens were open about delaying sex.

- Teens say that hearing more about the emotional and physical consequences of sex—in the media as well as in an educational setting—would help them protect themselves.

For prevention efforts aimed at low-income Black urban youth, some additional important insights emerge:

- Efforts to reduce teen pregnancy may fail if community values and norms are not supportive, or if prevention programs do not understand what those values and norms are. If sex is viewed as a transaction and teen pregnancy is not viewed as a problem, why assume that solving it would be a priority?
- There is real value in providing “counter-messages” and “recovery messages” that acknowledge the negative influences in these teens’ lives, but that also offer realistic and hopeful solutions that seem attainable. These teens need to be assured that even if they have done something risky in the past, they can still protect themselves in the future.

RESOURCES FOR PARENTS, TEENS, MEDIA AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

- To order the full report, “This is My Reality: The Price of Sex”: Call 1-877-MEE-PROD or visit www.meeproductions.com
- For facts, tips and resources on preventing teen pregnancy (for parents, teens and practitioners): www.teenpregnancy.org
- Sign up for the National Campaign’s electronic newsletter: www.teenpregnancy.org/informed
- Sign up for the MEE-Zine online newsletter: www.meeproductions.com/maillinglist.cfm



THE NATIONAL CAMPAIGN TO PREVENT TEEN PREGNANCY

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy is a non-partisan, non-profit organization whose goal is to reduce the teen pregnancy rate by one-third between 1996–2005.

1776 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Suite 200
Washington, DC 20036
Phone: 202-478-8500
Fax: 202-478-8588
www.teenpregnancy.org

MEE[®]
MOTIVATIONAL. EDUCATIONAL. ENTERTAINMENT

MEE Productions is an internationally recognized communications firm that develops research-based, market-driven solutions for issues facing urban and low-income populations living in at-risk environments.

340 N 12th Street, Suite 503
Philadelphia, PA 19107
Phone: 215-829-4920
Fax: 215-829-4903
www.meeproductions.com