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The Teenage Birth Control Dilemma and Public Opinion

Judith Blake

The rising rate of unwanted pregnancy among single teenagers in the United States is creating a dilemma for public policy. On the one hand, policy-makers are being urged to bypass normative concerns about premarital sexual behavior and, in a pragmatic fashion, to attempt to prevent unwanted pregnancy among single minors by making birth control information and services available to them. On the other hand, officials are admonished that, despite high rates of teenage illegitimacy, abortion, and premaritally conceived legitimate births, government assistance (or, in many states, even legal tolerance) regarding birth control services for unmarried minors is not morally defensible. The pragmatic and normative positions have recently been juxtaposed on the national scene. Viewing the situation in practical terms, the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future recommended a birth control policy to lessen un-

wanted pregnancies among unmarried minors (1). Expressing normative concerns, President Nixon voiced disapproval of the commission's recommendation (2).

In its report to the President and Congress, the commission considered, as one of a great variety of problems, that of unwanted, illegitimate pregnancy among minors. The commission explicitly stated that it was not addressing itself to the normative issues relating to premarital sexual behavior among teenagers, but rather was concerned with preventing the consequences of such behavior—teenage pregnancy. In its own words (1, p. 189):

The Commission is not addressing the moral questions involved in teenage sexual behavior. However, we are concerned with the complex issue of teenage pregnancy. Therefore, the Commission believes that young people must be given access to contraceptive information and services.

Toward the goal of reducing unwanted pregnancies and childbearing among the young, the Commission recommends that birth control information and services be made available to teenagers in appropriate facilities sensitive to their needs and concerns.

When the report was presented to the President, he made only two specific comments—both in disagreement. One comment concerned the recommendation on abortion, and the other referred to the recommendation on birth control services for teenagers. In singling out the latter recommendation for disapproval, Nixon was clearly not addressing himself to the pragmatic problem of preventing unwanted teenage pregnancy. Rather, his normative statement concerned the preservation and strengthening of family relationships. He said (2), “. . . I also want to make it clear that I do not support the unrestricted distribution of family planning services and devices to minors. Such measures would do nothing to preserve and strengthen close family relationships.”

With the spokesmen lined up openly on either side, one may well ask how the American public views the problem. Are adult Americans prepared to take the purely instrumental and practical point of view voiced by the population commission, accept the notion of the sexually active teenager, and set about protecting her from pregnancy? Or are their views closer to those of the Chief Executive? Have people changed their opinions over time? How much cleavage is there among us on this issue?

This article presents public views on the controversy. The data come primarily from questions I have inserted periodically between January 1969 and August 1972 in national surveys conducted by the Gallup Organization, Inc. The results reported here are part of a long-term project to collect and analyze (over closely spaced intervals) public

The author is professor in the Graduate School of Public Policy and research demographer at International Population and Urban Research, University of California, Berkeley 94720.

attitudes on a variety of population issues (3). The present questions were about the advisability of two policy options: birth control education in public high schools and health programs that would give birth control services free to teenage girls who requested them. The samples consist of white men and women of voting age.

Birth Control Education in Public High Schools

Between January 1969 and August 1972 the following question was asked on four national Gallup surveys: "Would you approve or disapprove of having nationwide programs of birth control education in public high schools?" It is evident from the responses to the four surveys (Table 1) that public support for such educational efforts in high schools has been relatively high among men over the entire time period. The earlier surveys show that approval was less among women, but, during the past 2 years, feminine assent has increased fairly substantially. By August 1972, 71 percent of each sex favored birth control education. Some of the differentials in opinion, however, are ironic in view of the politicalized nature of this issue. On the one hand, by 1972 Catholics, whom many politicians believe to be opposed to public birth control education, not only approved in high proportions, but did not differ significantly from non-Catholics in their assent to the policy (Table 1). On the other hand, the least approval has come from the less advantaged groups in the population, whose young people are probably most likely to be deprived of birth control information at home (Table 2). Among those respondents who are under age 45 (Table 2), however, those with less than a college education have shown a marked increase in approval over the period 1969 to 1972. Indeed, by August 1972, the differential by educational level, when compared to January 1969, had become a minor, rather than a major, cleavage.

Evidently, most Americans believe that young people should be informed about contraception and that using the high schools for this purpose is not objectionable. Does this tolerance of the provision of *information* extend to the provision of birth control *services* to teenagers? Apparently the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future believed that the pub-

Table 1. Percentage of white men and women in the United States, by religious affiliation and age, who, in four Gallup surveys taken between 1969 and 1972, would approve nationwide programs of birth control education in public high schools. (Parentheses indicate number of respondents.)

Religion and age	January 1969 (%)	October 1969 (%)	July 1970 (%)	August 1972 (%)
<i>Men</i>				
Religion				
Catholic	63	57	62	70
Non-Catholic	71	70	65	72
Age				
< 30	81	78	81	83
30-44	74	70	67	75
45+	62	59	57	63
Total approving	69	66	64	71
Total respondents	(682)	(726)	(680)	(663)
<i>Women</i>				
Religion				
Catholic	49	52	58	69
Non-Catholic	62	57	59	72
Age				
< 30	71	70	78	88
30-44	59	58	64	77
45+	53	48	47	58
Total approving	58	56	59	71
Total respondents	(701)	(718)	(713)	(682)
<i>Both sexes</i>				
Total approving	64	61	61	71
Total respondents	(1383)	(1444)	(1393)	(1345)

lic assent accorded birth control information would (or should) logically extend to the provision of services. The public, however, is less willing to extend its approval to providing services.

Making Birth Control Services Available to Teenage Girls

Immediately after being asked the question on birth control education in public high schools, respondents were asked, "What about health programs that gave birth control free to teenage girls who requested it? Would you ap-

prove or disapprove?" As may be seen from Table 3, by August 1972 slightly more than half the population replied favorably. Among men, approval increased 25 percent between January 1969 and August 1972. Among women, the increase in approval is quite remarkable—77 percent. Moreover, it is noteworthy that, among both men and women, virtually all of the change has occurred very recently—sometime between July 1970 and August 1972.

Regarding differences within the population (Table 3), by the summer of 1972 there was no significant difference between Catholics and non-Catholics in

Table 2. Percentage of white men and women in the United States, by educational level, who, in four Gallup surveys taken between 1969 and 1972, would approve nationwide programs of birth control education in public high schools. (Parentheses indicate number of respondents.)

Educational level	January 1969 (%)	October 1969 (%)	July 1970 (%)	August 1972 (%)
<i>Men (all ages)</i>				
Grade school	46	44	45	56
High school	70	64	67	72
College	85	82	75	77
<i>Women (all ages)</i>				
Grade school	44	44	32	58
High school	60	53	63	72
College	68	68	65	75
<i>Both sexes (all ages)</i>				
Total approving	64	61	61	71
Total respondents	(1383)	(1444)	(1393)	(1345)
<i>Both sexes (under 45)</i>				
Grade school	49	52	49	75
High school	65	63	71	79
College	85	79	77	85
Total approving	70	68	72	81
Total respondents	(652)	(723)	(658)	(688)

their responses on this issue. Throughout the time period, approval of providing birth control services to teenage girls has been highest among the youngest segments of the population. However, women in all age groups have greatly increased their approval between 1970 and 1972. The shift in attitude among men has been less marked than that among women, since men started at a higher level of approval in 1969. As with birth control education, one finds that among those groups where the young are most in need of free birth control services—the

less advantaged—approval of this policy, although increasing, is still low (Table 4). An educational differential exists in all of the surveys, even among respondents under age 45 (Table 4), but there has been a substantial increase in approval among the high school educated since the first survey in 1969.

Although assent has grown over time, there is considerably less approval of birth control services for teenage girls than of birth control education in high schools. In fact, the responses concerning services may even have been biased

in a positive direction because the question was asked after respondents had committed themselves concerning birth control education in high schools. Some respondents may have felt that they would appear contradictory to the interviewer if they responded positively to the education question and negatively to the services question. Moreover, the services question did not specify the birth control methods to be dispensed. It did not, therefore, direct the respondent to evaluate the advisability of giving teenage girls a particular contraceptive, such as an oral contraceptive. Counterbalancing these sources of positive bias is the fact that the question referred to girls alone. Many respondents may be more positive toward services for teenage boys (services that, for example, dispense condoms).

This possibility seems to be suggested by the answers to a question that the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc., commissioned on a Gallup survey in the summer of 1972: "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Professional birth control information, services, and counseling should be made available to unmarried teenagers who are sexually active?" Pomeroy and Landman report that, given the lack of specificity of sex, 73 percent of the respondents agreed with this statement (4). Unfortunately, however, the question not only did not specify which sex was under consideration, but it also placed the issue of "services" between "birth control information" and "counseling." It thus emphasized the latter and induced respondents to approve "services" if they did not wish to disapprove "information" and "counseling." Consequently, I believe it is unwise to conclude from the answers to this one question that approval of birth control services for teenagers—especially teenage girls—characterizes almost three-fourths of white Americans.

In addition, it should be remembered that the issue of making professional contraceptive services available to teenagers, although technically referring to both sexes, actually relates primarily to teenage girls. This is because so-called "female" contraceptive methods, such as oral contraceptives and IUD's (intrauterine devices), are the ones that require professional assistance, and, as the most effective methods, they are the ones most frequently recommended by professionals. Only casuistry would allow one to suggest that the actual tar-

Table 3. Percentage of white men and women in the United States, by religious affiliation and age, who, in four Gallup surveys taken between 1969 and 1972, would approve health programs giving birth control services free to teenage girls who requested them. (Parentheses indicate number of respondents.)

Religion and age	January 1969 (%)	October 1969 (%)	July 1970 (%)	August 1972 (%)
<i>Men</i>				
Religion				
Catholic	34	42	46	54
Non-Catholic	50	45	46	56
Age				
< 30	55	49	62	66
30-44	48	50	39	58
45+	42	39	43	48
Total approving	46	44	46	55
Total respondents	(682)	(726)	(680)	(663)
<i>Women</i>				
Religion				
Catholic	23	26	42	56
Non-Catholic	32	37	32	52
Age				
< 30	48	43	48	65
30-44	29	31	29	57
45+	24	32	33	45
Total approving	30	34	35	53
Total respondents	(701)	(718)	(713)	(682)
<i>Both sexes</i>				
Total approving	38	39	40	54
Total respondents	(1383)	(1444)	(1393)	(1345)

Table 4. Percentage of white men and women in the United States, by educational level, who, in four Gallup surveys taken between 1969 and 1972, would approve health programs giving birth control services free to teenage girls who requested them. (Parentheses indicate number of respondents.)

Educational level	January 1969 (%)	October 1969 (%)	July 1970 (%)	August 1972 (%)
<i>Men (all ages)</i>				
Grade school	30	30	41	42
High school	45	41	43	52
College	60	57	55	65
<i>Women (all ages)</i>				
Grade school	21	22	19	36
High school	30	32	36	55
College	39	46	46	57
<i>Both sexes (all ages)</i>				
Total approving	38	39	40	54
Total respondents	(1383)	(1444)	(1393)	(1345)
<i>Both sexes (under 45)</i>				
Grade school	33	23	20	39
High school	37	37	41	60
College	57	54	52	65
Total approving	43	42	43	61
Total respondents	(652)	(723)	(658)	(688)

gets of teenage birth control services are, or will be in the near future, teenage boys. It follows, therefore, that it is the public's attitude toward services for girls that is most relevant to the policy issue.

Do we have any clues to the sources of the differential attitudes in our population concerning teenage birth control? Certainly one lead is provided by the President's normative reaction to the commission's recommendation. Perhaps public reactions to this issue, like the attitudes of the President and the commission, are conditioned by the presence or absence of a priori moral concerns. It is not unreasonable to expect, for example, that public opinion about birth control services to teenage girls is related to public views concerning premarital sexual behavior.

Attitudes toward Sexual Permissiveness

In July 1969, a Gallup survey asked the following question: "There's a lot of discussion about the way morals and sex are changing in this country. Here's a question that is often discussed in women's magazines. What is your view on this—do you think it is wrong for a man and a woman to have sex relations before marriage, or not?" In August 1972, I inserted the same question in a Gallup survey. Table 5 shows that, although there has been an increase since 1969 in the proportions averring that premarital relations are "not wrong," less than one-third of white adult Americans regarded such relations as permissible. It should be noted that the question took no account of a possible double standard of permissiveness. It is possible that permissiveness toward premarital relations for men is greater, and for women less, than these results imply.

As might perhaps be expected, men were more permissive than women at both times, but even among men only 37 percent (in August 1972) claimed that premarital relations are not wrong. At both times, the difference between Catholics and non-Catholics was either insignificant or surprisingly small, but there was a pronounced difference by age. In August 1972, 65 percent of the men under age 30 were permissive toward premarital relations, as contrasted with 21 percent of men aged 45 and over. Among women, 42 percent under age 30, but only 12 percent of those aged 45 and over, judged such relations to be "not wrong." Table 6,

tabulating the educational differences for those under age 45, shows that the college educated, and particularly college-educated men, were the most tol-

erant of premarital relations. The gap between college-educated men and women narrowed somewhat over the time period, but, in August 1972, only

Table 5. Percentage of white men and women in the United States, by religious affiliation and age, who, in four Gallup surveys taken in 1969 and 1972, believe that premarital relations are not wrong and who approve birth control services for teenage girls. The questions on premarital sexual relations were asked in July 1969 and August 1972. The questions on birth control for teenage girls were asked in October 1969 and August 1972. The August 1972 data are from separate surveys taken in 1 month. The questions on premarital sexual relations and birth control for teenage girls were not asked on the same surveys in order to avoid having the responses affected by juxtaposing the two issues in a short interview. (Parentheses indicate number of respondents.)

Religion and age	1969		1972	
	Premarital sex not wrong (%)	Approve birth control services for teenage girls (%)	Premarital sex not wrong (%)	Approve birth control services for teenage girls (%)
<i>Men</i>				
Religion				
Catholic	19	42	36	54
Non-Catholic	25	45	38	56
Age				
< 30	48	49	65	66
30-44	26	50	45	58
45+	12	39	21	48
Total	23	44	37	55
Total respondents	(653)	(726)	(708)	(663)
<i>Women</i>				
Religion				
Catholic	13	26	22	56
Non-Catholic	15	37	24	52
Age				
< 30	27	43	42	65
30-44	13	31	29	57
45+	10	32	12	45
Total	14	34	23	53
Total respondents	(680)	(718)	(724)	(682)
<i>Both sexes</i>				
Total	19	39	30	54
Total respondents	(1333)	(1444)	(1432)	(1345)

Table 6. Percentage of white men and women under age 45 in the United States, by educational level, who, in four Gallup surveys taken in 1969 and 1972, believe that premarital relations are not wrong and who approve birth control services for teenage girls. The questions on premarital sexual relations were asked in July 1969 and August 1972. The questions on birth control for teenage girls were asked in October 1969 and August 1972. The August 1972 data are from separate surveys taken in 1 month. The questions on premarital sexual relations and birth control for teenage girls were not asked on the same surveys in order to avoid having the responses affected by juxtaposing the two issues in a short interview. (Parentheses indicate number of respondents.)

Educational level	1969		1972	
	Premarital sex not wrong (%)	Approve birth control services for teenage girls (%)	Premarital sex not wrong (%)	Approve birth control services for teenage girls (%)
<i>Men</i>				
Grade school	20	23	*	*
High school	29	48	51	60
College	50	56	65	66
Total	36	50	56	62
Total respondents	(303)	(354)	(328)	(331)
<i>Women</i>				
Grade school	14	23	*	*
High school	15	30	28	61
College	32	51	50	64
Total	19	35	35	61
Total respondents	(348)	(369)	(366)	(357)
<i>Both sexes</i>				
Total	27	42	45	61
Total respondents	(651)	(723)	(694)	(688)

* Insufficient cases for analysis.

50 percent of college-educated women, as contrasted with 65 percent of college-educated men, believed premarital relations to be permissible.

Comparison of the relationship between attitudes toward premarital sexual behavior and approval of birth control services for teenage girls is hampered by the fact that the questions were not asked on the same surveys. However, in 1969 and 1972, the questions were asked in the same year (in 1972 they were both asked in August). Hence, it is possible to see how the proportions covary among some major subgroups (Tables 5 and 6).

First, it is clear that, at both times, permissiveness toward premarital relations was less than approval of birth control services for teenage girls among all subgroups shown in the tables except among men under age 30 (Table 5) and college-educated men under age 45 in 1972 (Table 6). It would thus appear that, in spite of their moral reservations about teenage sexual behavior, a share of respondents in all subgroups were willing to be pragmatic about the problem and attempt to protect teenagers from unwanted pregnancy. Indeed, the disparity between moral reservations concerning premarital sexual behavior and approval of teenage birth control is very striking among some subgroups. For example, in 1972, women in each age group approved birth control services in approximately the same proportions as men, but women were considerably less tolerant of premarital relations. Among women aged 30 through 44, the percentage approving services was double that permitting premarital relations, and among those aged 45 and over it was four times that permitting premarital sex. Also, among older men in 1972, twice as many approved services as permitted premarital relations.

On the other hand, it also appears that moral reservations about premarital relations exert a downward pressure on the proportions willing to make birth control services available to teenage girls. With few exceptions, in each year the percentages approving services varied positively with the percentages averring that premarital relations are "not wrong," and, over time, an increase in permissiveness is associated, in most subgroups, with an increase in willingness to make birth control services available to teenage girls. In fact, in most subgroups, permissiveness increased proportionately faster over time than willingness to approve services, with the result that the disparity

between the two percentages was generally less in 1972 than in 1969. In effect, the increase in approval of birth control services seems more to reflect a rise in permissiveness than a rise in pragmatism. A notable exception is women aged 45 and over, among whom there was no significant increase in the proportion who were permissive, but an increase from 32 to 45 percent in approval of birth control services.

Conclusion

As recently as August 1972, white Americans preponderantly favored birth control education, but were more reticent about providing birth control services to teenage girls. This conclusion emerges from the answers to questions about birth control education in public high schools and the provision of birth control services to teenage girls asked on four Gallup surveys between January 1969 and August 1972. In the most recent surveys, only about half the respondents would approve health programs that gave birth control services free to teenage girls who requested them, whereas in August 1972, 71 percent approved birth control education in high schools.

Although the differences between Catholics and non-Catholics were unimportant, it is noteworthy that approval of both birth control education and services to teenagers was closely related to the age of the respondent. Regarding birth control education, in 1972, 83 percent of men and 88 percent of women under age 30 favored programs in public high schools, but only 63 percent of men and 53 percent of women aged 45 and over approved. With respect to services for teenage girls, 66 and 65 percent of young men and women, respectively, approved, but only 48 percent of men and 45 percent of women aged 45 and over were similarly positive.

Since it has seemed logical that public opinion concerning birth control services for teenage girls would bear some relation to public sentiment about premarital sexual relations, I have presented data from two surveys (one taken in 1969 and the other in 1972) on attitudes toward premarital sexual behavior. These surveys show quite clearly that most white Americans, even as recently as August 1972, were not permissive regarding premarital relations for teenagers. Indeed, in 1972, less than one-third of white adults claimed that such relations are "not wrong."

However, responses to this issue varied greatly with age, and, at all ages there was, with few exceptions, a sizable difference between the sexes as well.

Although the surveys indicate that approval of birth control services for teenage girls varies among subgroups with permissiveness toward premarital relations, it is also evident that, in all but a few subgroups, approval of services is greater than permissiveness. In some subgroups the disparity is very great indeed. For example, in 1972, among older men, the percentage approving services was more than double the percentage permitting premarital relations; among older women, the percentage favoring services was almost four times that permitting premarital relations. At every age in 1972, the proportions of women approving services were almost identical to those of men, but women at every age were far less permissive toward premarital relations than men at every age.

Among white Americans, disapproval of premarital relations has probably delayed widespread popular support for teenage birth control services. Yet, among those groups that are proportionately least permissive toward premarital relations, there is a disproportionate willingness to make services available to teenage girls. The public has thus not allowed its normative feelings to color in all cases its views about protecting teenage girls from unwanted pregnancy. We may expect that future changes in popular approval of birth control services for teenage girls will be affected not only by changes in attitudes toward premarital relations, but also by changes in the degree to which the public is willing to take a purely pragmatic view of the teenage birth control issue. The survey results presented in this paper suggest that both kinds of change are currently going on among different sectors of the population.

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