

Why the Rise in Adolescent Fertility Rates in the Dominican Republic in the 1990s?

Background

Fertility levels in the Dominican Republic have fallen appreciably in the last 20 years. However, despite concern over high pregnancy/fertility rates and high levels of risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among adolescents, the fertility rate for 15–19-year-olds was the same in 1996 as it was in 1981, and it actually increased from 91 births per 1,000 women 15–19 years of age in 1989–1991 to 112 per 1,000 in 1994–1996. This study was undertaken to assess the factors responsible for the recent rise in adolescent fertility.

Data and Methods

Secondary analyses were undertaken of the last three Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) conducted in the Dominican Republic (1986, 1991/92, and 1996). Extensive use was made of the “calendar” data available in the 1992 and 1996 surveys that to date have been underused.

Findings

- Declines in age at first sexual experience, marriage/union, pregnancy, and birth among adolescent females during the 1991–1996 period were important contributing factors to the higher adolescent fertility rates observed. These declines reversed a medium-term trend toward increasing ages at initial sexual experience, marriage, pregnancy, and birth observed during the 1981–1991 period. It appears, though, that for many Dominican adolescents, sex is a sporadic activity.
- The proportion of 15–19-year-olds who had ever used a contraceptive method increased from 14 percent to 21 percent between the 1991/92 and 1996 surveys; the contraceptive prevalence rate for this age group jumped from 4 percent to a still low 10 percent. Nearly the entire increase among 15–19 year-olds was attributed to greater use of modern methods, of which oral contraceptives and condoms were the most widely used. In both surveys, the vast majority of adolescents received their contraceptive supplies from pharmacies.
- Although the trend among Dominican adolescents may be toward greater usage of contraception, and toward using more effective methods, they may not be using contraceptives any earlier. As mean age of first sexual encounter appears to be declining, this may be an ominous finding that merits close scrutiny in future surveys.
- The 12-month “all-method” discontinuation rate fell from 76 percent to 69 percent among 15–19-year-olds between 1991/92 and 1996. Despite this improvement,

discontinuation rates for condoms, the most effective contraceptive method against STIs, including HIV/AIDS, did not fall substantially, and the improvement in sustained use of oral contraceptives was modest in magnitude. Contraceptive discontinuation rates among Dominican adolescents remained quite high, thus reducing the impact of recent gains in contraceptive prevalence.

- The three most prevalent reasons given for contraceptive discontinuation were to: avoid side effects; other reasons (e.g., to avoid husband or partner disapproval, to find a more effective method); and to get pregnant. The proportion of respondents citing inconvenience or lack of access as the reasons for discontinuing the use of pills, condoms, and IUDs fell between 1991 and 1996. This decrease would seem to suggest an improvement in the provision of contraceptive services and supplies to adolescents.
- Inferences concerning the practice of abortion gleaned from the calendar data on pregnancy termination suggest a nontrivial level of induced abortion among adolescents in the Dominican Republic. The data also suggest that the incidence of induced abortion rose between 1991 and 1996. Without the apparently common use of abortion as a means of fertility control, it is likely that even higher recent fertility rates among adolescents would have been observed.
- Seventy percent of first births to adolescents in 1991 and 78 percent in 1996 were “wanted then” (as opposed to “wanted later” or “unwanted”). That finding suggests that considerable demand for early childbearing exists among adolescents in the Dominican Republic.

Implications

- Although signs of progress were apparent in the availability of family planning services to adolescents and young adults, considerable room exists for further improvement. In addition to increasing contraceptive use among adolescents, two priorities would seem to be: (1) reducing high contraceptive discontinuation rates; and (2) increasing condom use rates. High contraceptive discontinuation rates among adolescents have offset, to some extent, gains made in increasing contraceptive prevalence overall. In view of the threat posed by HIV/AIDS, increasing condom use among sexually active Dominican adolescents appears urgent.
- The challenges facing future adolescent programs in the Dominican Republic go beyond the provision of family planning and health services. Some of the adverse findings (for example, declining age at first sexual experience and marriage/union and continued high demand for children among adolescents) need to be addressed at the societal level in terms of changing social norms and attitudes toward early childbearing. More comprehensive approaches that address the developmental needs of adolescents and involve policy makers, communities, and parents as key players will likely be needed if impact is to be realized in this area.

Source: Magnani, R. J., S. M. Sosler and H. Gilman McCann. February *Trends in Reproductive Behavior among Adolescents and Young Adults in the Dominican Republic*. Washington, DC: FOCUS on Young Adults/Pathfinder International. 2000.

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