



## ACTIVATE

# Understanding the Research on Condom Use: A Focus on Youth Involved with the Child Welfare or Juvenile Justice Systems or Experiencing Homelessness

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Activate aims to bridge the gap between research and practice in support of the Office of Population Affairs's mission to prevent teen pregnancy and promote adolescent health. Activate translates research into practice by creating resources for use by professionals who work in systems with youth involved with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems, youth experiencing homelessness, and youth who are disconnected from school and work. These groups can be referred to collectively as Activate's focal populations.<sup>a</sup>

This fact sheet presents findings from research on condom use among youth involved with the child welfare or justice systems or youth experiencing homelessness.<sup>b</sup> It is designed for youth-supporting professionals who want to better understand both the risk for and prevention of STIs among these populations. These professionals can use the information included in this fact sheet to write grant proposals, develop programs, or educate stakeholder groups, among other activities. The studies cited were identified as part of a 2020 review of the literature on pregnancy and STI prevention among Activate's focal populations.

## Condom Use Among Adolescents in the U.S.

Condoms can be used to protect against both pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). In 2019, one national study found that 54% of sexually active high school students reported using a condom the last time they had sexual intercourse.<sup>1</sup> The same study found that sexually active high school students were more likely to report using condoms than to report using any other form of contraception.<sup>c,1</sup> The low rates of condom use among students could reflect a lack of knowledge of, comfort with, or access to condoms. It could also reflect difficulty negotiating condom use or using condoms consistently while under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.

## Research on Condom Use Among Youth Involved with the Child Welfare or Juvenile Justice Systems or Youth Experiencing Homelessness

*Relatively few studies have examined the rate of condom use among youth involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems or youth experiencing homelessness, and it is difficult to draw conclusions from those studies.*

- For more information, please visit [www.ActivateCollective.org](http://www.ActivateCollective.org).
- When describing a particular study's findings, we use the language used by the researchers who reported the results. We acknowledge that this language is not always inclusive. However, using this language ensures that we do not misrepresent the research.
- Youth who only reported sexual activity with same-gender partners were excluded from the analysis of contraceptive methods.



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There are no national studies of condom use among youth involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems or youth experiencing homelessness. Instead, researchers have focused on better understanding factors related to condom use among those populations. This research is limited in two important ways. First, the studies generally involve young people whose characteristics and experiences may not reflect the characteristics and experiences of the larger population of youth who are homeless or involved with systems. Second, most studies do not compare rates of condom use among youth who are involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems or experiencing homelessness to rates of condom use among the broader adolescent population.

## Risk and Protective Factors Associated with Condom Use

*Much more is known about the risk and protective factors associated with condom use among youth experiencing homelessness than among youth involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems.*

Two studies have examined risk and protective factors associated with condom use among youth involved with either the child welfare or juvenile justice systems:

- A study of youth on probation found that more frequent marijuana use at baseline was associated with a greater reduction in condom use over the two-year study period. Additionally, youth who reported using marijuana the last time they had sexual intercourse were less likely to have used a condom than youth who did not report using marijuana.<sup>2</sup>
- A study of youth involved with the child welfare system found that recent illegal substance use and symptoms of depression were associated with less condom use.<sup>3</sup>

Multiple studies have examined a range of risk and protective factors associated with condom use among youth experiencing homelessness:

- Youth experiencing homelessness are more likely to use condoms if they have positive attitudes

about condoms, have talked with their partner about condom use, have spoken with a teacher or healthcare provider about safer sex, or have condom-using peers.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

- The rate of condom use is lower the longer youth have experienced homelessness. It is also lower among youth who are staying in public places or with strangers than among youth staying in shelters. This difference could reflect the fact that youth staying in shelters are less vulnerable to sexual exploitation and have less need to engage in survival sex.<sup>7,8</sup>

## Condom Use and Gender<sup>d</sup>

*Research suggests that gender differences in condom use do exist among youth involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems and youth experiencing homelessness.*

In a recent national study, 60% of sexually active male high school students reported that they had used a condom, but only 50% of sexually active female high school students reported that their male partner had used a condom the last time they had sexual intercourse. Similarly, 49% of sexually active male high school students reported that condoms were their primary method for pregnancy prevention, compared to 39% of sexually active female high school students.<sup>1</sup> Importantly, rates of condom use among sexually active high school students who identify as non-binary or transgender were not reported.

A few studies have examined gender differences in condom use among youth involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems:

- One study found that females who had been in foster care at age 17 were more likely to report inconsistent condom use than young males.<sup>9</sup>
- In another study, Black females in foster care were more likely to be concerned about how they would be perceived if they obtained, carried, or used condoms than Black males in foster care. Black females in foster care also felt less empowered to use condoms than Black males in foster care and they reported challenges negotiating condom use with their often older male sexual partners.<sup>10</sup>

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d. None of the studies we reviewed specified whether they were asking about external (sometimes referred to as “male”) condoms, internal (sometimes referred to as “female”) condoms, or both. Nor was it always clear whether the studies were asking about condom use with both different-gender and same-gender partners.

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- A third study found that young men on probation were more likely to report intentions to use condoms and frequent condom use than young women. However, young women on probation reported more positive attitudes about using condoms than young men.<sup>11</sup>

Studies of gender differences in condom use among youth experiencing homelessness have produced inconsistent findings:

- Some studies have found lower rates of condom use among females than among males.<sup>4,12</sup> However, one study found no gender differences in condom use.<sup>13</sup>
- When studies have found gender differences in condom use among youth experiencing homelessness, those differences mirror the findings on gender differences in condom use among the broader adolescent population.<sup>1</sup> That is, young men are more likely to report using condoms than young women. This difference could reflect the challenges young women, particularly those engaging in survival sex, face negotiating condom use.

## Condom Use and Sexual Orientation

*Little is known about the relationship between condom use and sexual orientation among youth involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems or youth experiencing homelessness.*

The researchers who examined condom use among a national sample of high school students did not report rates of condom use separately for students who reported having same-gender partners, students who reported having different-gender partners, or students who reported having both different-gender and same-gender partners.<sup>1</sup>

- Researchers have generally not examined the relationship between condom use and sexual orientation among youth involved with systems or experiencing homelessness.
- One exception is a study of female youth involved with the juvenile justice system. It found that females who identified as lesbian, bisexual, or questioning were more likely to use condoms than

females who identified as heterosexual.<sup>14</sup> However, the sample was small, and the findings have not been replicated by other studies.

## Condom Use and Race or Ethnicity

*Few studies have examined whether condom use among youth involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems or youth experiencing homelessness varies by race or ethnicity or why racial or ethnic differences in condom use exist when they have been found.*

In a recent national study, 50% of sexually active Latinx high school students, 42% of sexually active white high school students, and 37% of sexually active Black high school students reported using condoms as their primary method for pregnancy prevention.<sup>1</sup> The study also found that 56% of sexually active Latinx high school students, 56% of sexually active white high school students, and 48% of sexually active Black high school students reported using a condom the last time they had sexual intercourse. The researchers noted that it is important to understand how structural barriers might be contributing to the low rates of condom use, particularly among high school students who are Black or Latinx.

Researchers who study condom use among youth involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems or youth experiencing homelessness have generally not reported rates of condom use separately for Black youth, Latinx youth, and white youth. When differences in racial or ethnic differences in condom use have been observed, they were incidental findings and not a focus of the research.<sup>3,15-17</sup> Consequently, little attention has been paid to exploring why differences exist when they have been found. Additionally, the findings from these studies have been inconsistent and based on data collected from young people whose characteristics and experiences may not reflect the characteristics and experiences of the larger population of youth who are experiencing homelessness or involved with systems. This lack makes it difficult to draw any conclusions from the research.

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## More Research on STI Rates Is Needed to Inform Practice

Research on condom use among youth involved with systems or youth experiencing homelessness is limited. No two studies have focused on the same set of risk and protective factors, making it difficult to know if any of the findings can be applied to the larger population of youth who are experiencing homeless or involved with systems. Additionally, more research is needed to understand why youth involved with systems or youth experiencing homelessness do or do not use condoms.

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