

## **Iowa Takes the Initiative to Reduce Unintended Pregnancy**

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Many Americans may be unaware that right-wing activists have launched a new offensive in the culture wars, targeting large numbers of people not accustomed to finding themselves in the crosshairs of such attacks—the millions of American couples, including married ones, who use birth control.

National and regional anti-contraception activists have declared June 7 to be “Protest the Pill Day.” This date is highly symbolic. It was on June 7, 1965, that the U.S. Supreme Court first recognized the right of married people to use birth control, a right it extended a few years later to unmarried people as well. And it is this basic right, which virtually all Americans today take for granted, that anti-contraception activists find objectionable. They have designed an entire campaign to promote their opposition to modern birth control methods, including a web site full of misleading and outright false information denigrating the safety and effectiveness of the pill.

Back in the real world, however, Americans understand the value and benefits of birth control and overwhelmingly support and use it: Ninety-eight percent of sexually active Americans have used contraception at some point in their lives, and 89% of American women at risk of unintended pregnancy are currently using birth control.

Individuals are, of course, free to renounce contraception as part of their personal belief system. But imposing this ideology on others makes for terrible public health policy. Using any form of birth control dramatically reduces the chance of having an unintended pregnancy. That’s why birth control users have disproportionately few unintended pregnancies—and, by extension, abortions. Of almost 43 million U.S. women at risk of unintended pregnancy, the 11% *not* using contraceptives account for almost half of all abortions. Less use of contraceptives, as the anti-birth control extremists advocate, would lead to dramatic increases in unintended pregnancies, and many more abortions.

Rather than criticizing birth control, we should instead focus on doing more to help women and their partners prevent unintended pregnancy. And that’s where Iowa has been a trailblazer of late. In January of this year, the Iowa Initiative to Reduce Unintended Pregnancies was launched to educate young women and men about contraception and make it easier for them to obtain family planning counseling and services.

Iowa is a good place to start such an initiative. A 2006 Guttmacher Institute analysis ranked the Hawkeye State 48th among the 50 states and the District of Columbia in how well it met the existing need for subsidized contraceptive services and supplies. (Iowa ranked 36th overall when other factors, such as laws and policies, were taken into account.) There’s clearly room for improvement, and the Iowa Initiative demonstrates a strong commitment to doing better.

Reducing Iowa's rate of unintended pregnancy is not only a worthy goal in and of itself, it would also help reduce the number of abortions in the state. Iowa's abortion rate increased 8% between 2000 and 2005, while the national rate fell 9%. That made Iowa one of only a dozen states that saw an increase in the number of abortions (although it should be noted that Iowa's abortion rate continues to be well below the national average).

The Iowa Initiative embodies the type of smart, evidence-based approach that we should be promoting nationwide, given the still-high rates of unintended pregnancy and abortion in the United States. Providing information on the full range of birth control options, making methods easily available to women and couples, and subsidizing them for those with low incomes through Medicaid and the federal Title X family planning program, are some of the most obvious, effective and compassionate public health policies available to us today.

So enough with the retrogressive idea of a contraception-free society. We have a moral obligation to give all women and men the know-how and means to avoid pregnancies they themselves do not want. And no matter where one stands on the abortion issue, it's clear that the commonsense approach of improving contraceptive services and counseling can help us achieve this goal. Providing access to birth control allows Americans to make responsible decisions about when to become parents, a much better approach than allowing anti-contraception zealots to make the decision for them.

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