



# Options for All

APPLYING A REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE LENS TO SEXUAL  
HEALTH RESEARCH AND PROGRAMMING FOR BLACK  
YOUTH

Asari Offiong, PhD, MPH  
Senior Research Scientist, *Child Trends*





# Objectives

## EXAMINE.

Historical events related to sexual and reproductive health

## DEFINE.

Reproductive justice and how it can be amplified in research and programming for Black youth

## EXPLORE.

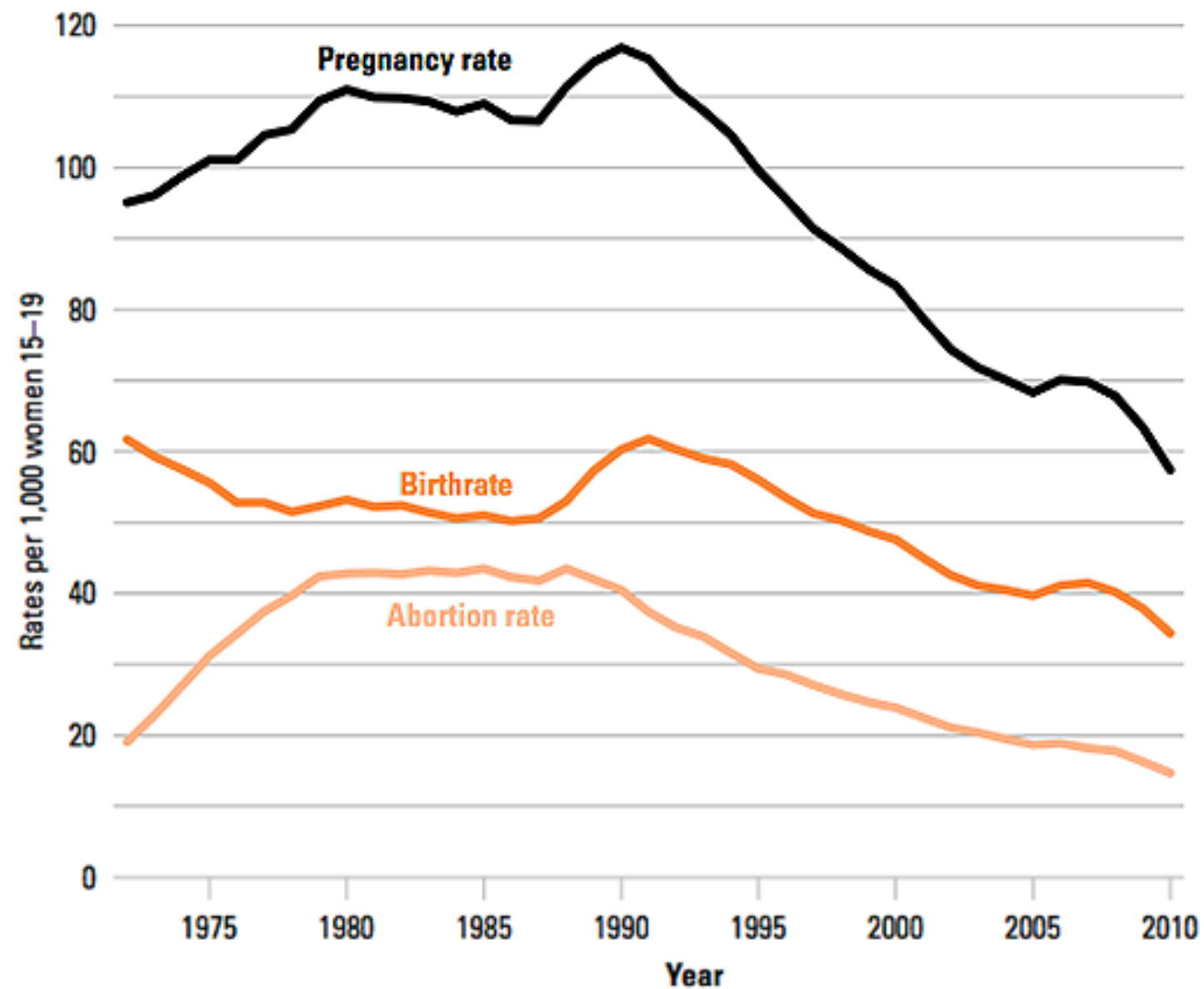
Black youths perspectives of their sexual and reproductive health, and identify how it can be amplified in research and programs





## HEADING DOWN

U.S. teen pregnancy, birth and abortion rates have reached historic lows.



Source: reference 1.

www.guttmacher.org

## Background

### The "good" news.

- Teen pregnancy rates have drastically declined since 1990s
- Due to comprehensive sex education, increased access to contraceptives, and delayed sex onset

13.5

per 1,000 15-19yo  
females

78%

decline since 1991

39

states + DC mandate  
sex education





### 2-3X HIGHER

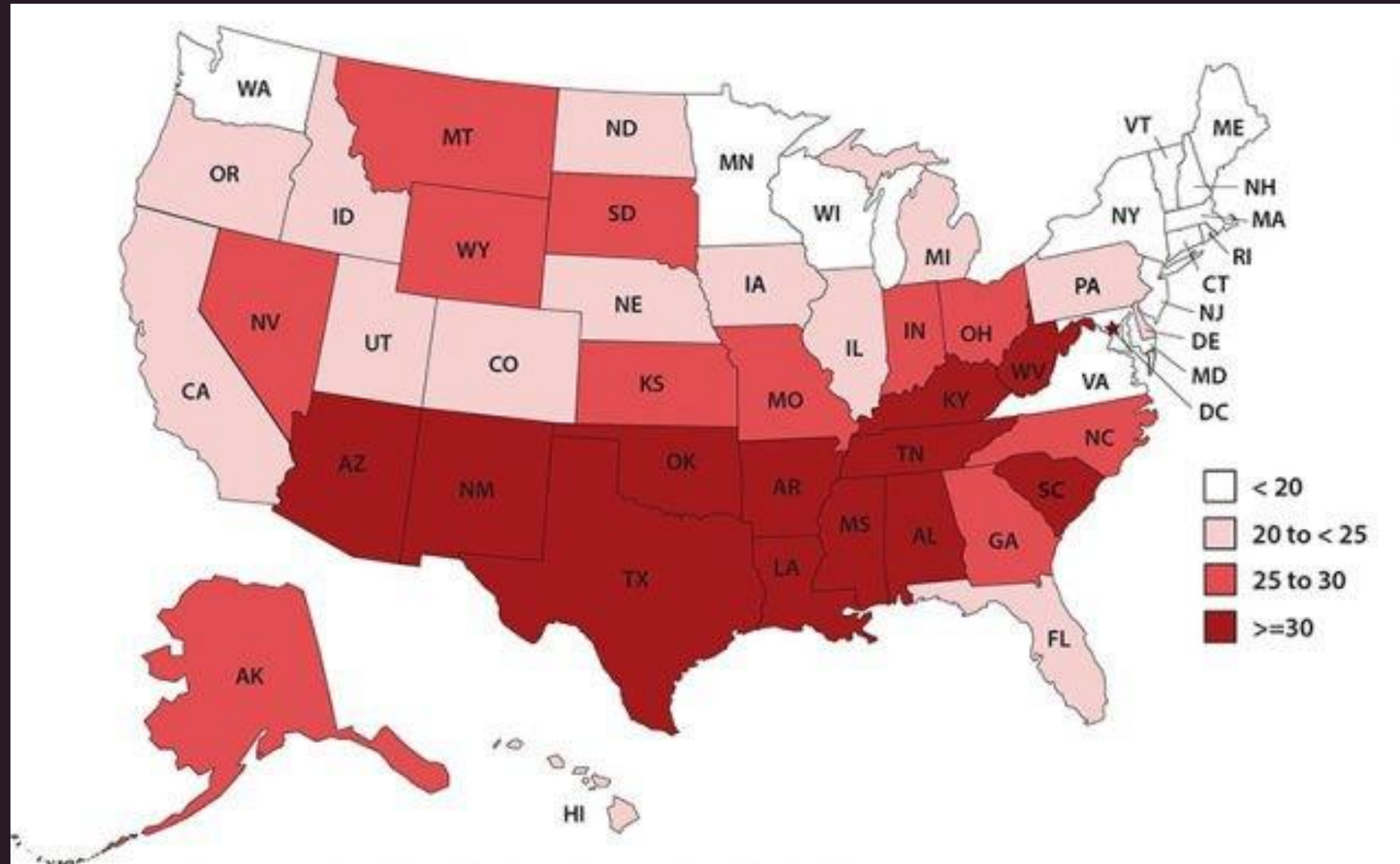
Teen pregnancy and birth rates among Black, Hispanic and Indigenous youth

*But...*

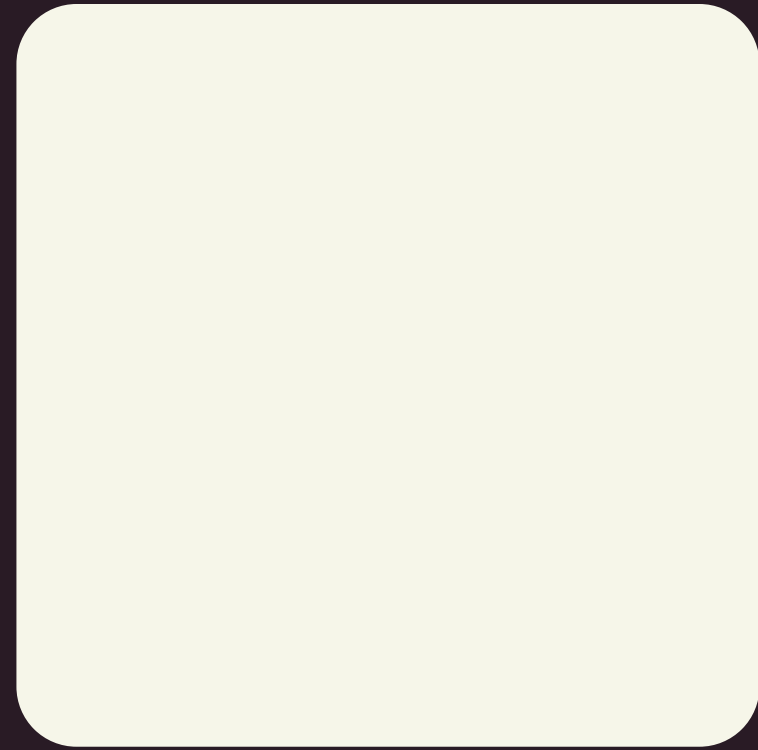
DISPARITIES CONTINUE TO PERSIST

### HIGHEST

In rural, southern region and urban areas with high minority populations





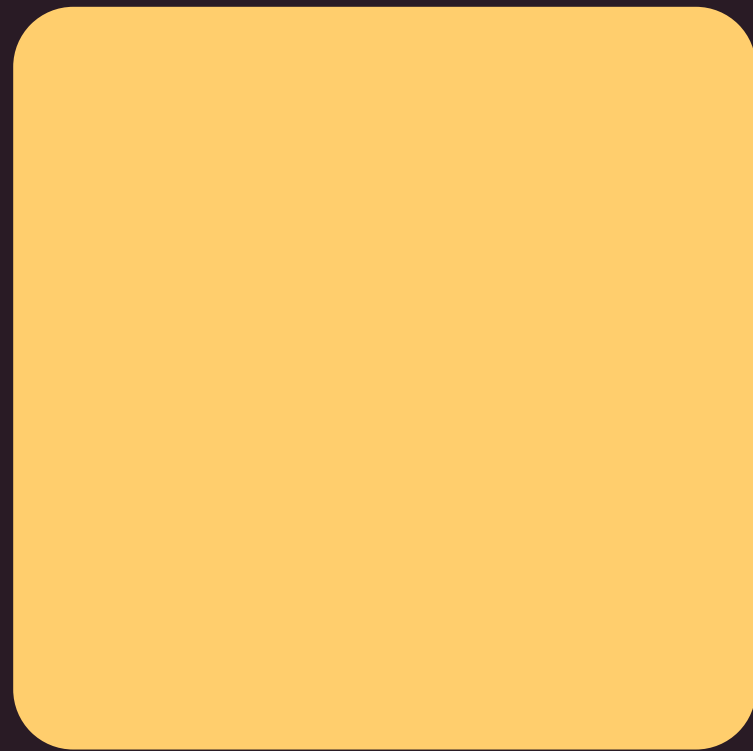


*But...*

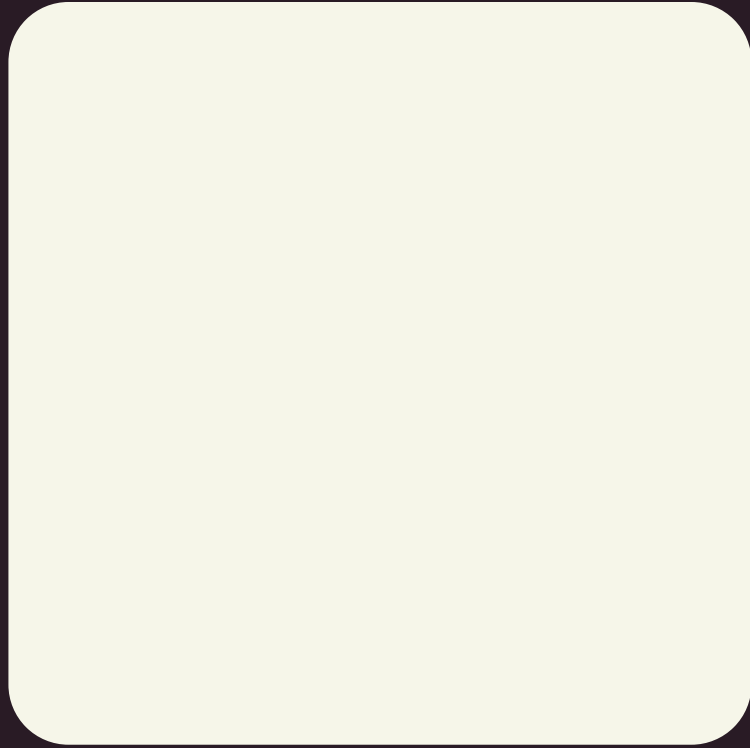
## DISPARITIES CONTINUE TO PERSIST

Black girls and women have:

- **lower** rates of access to and use of contraceptives
- **higher** rates of unintended pregnancies
- **higher** rates of preterm births and infant death
- **higher** rates of maternal mortality

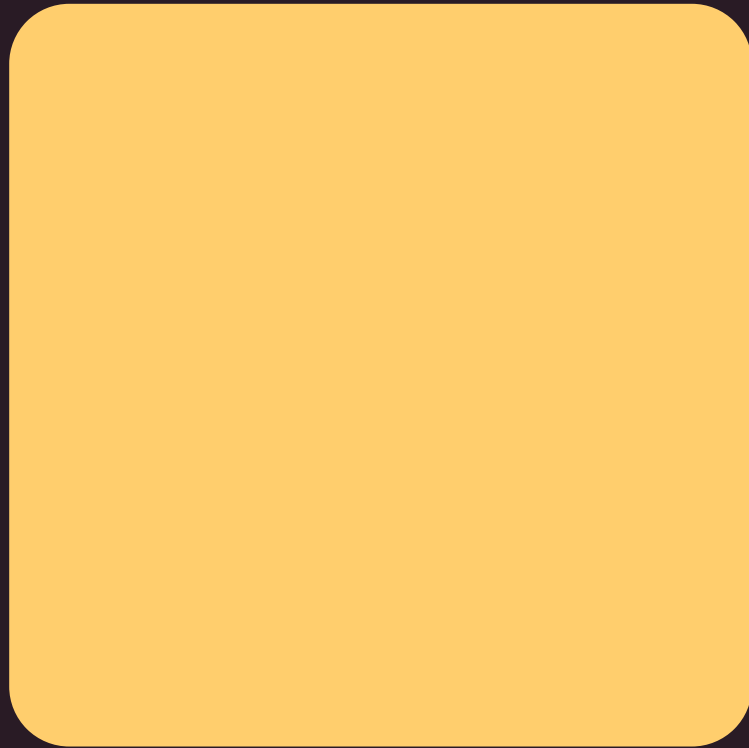






DISPARITIES CONTINUE TO PERSIST

*But why?*





# FRAMING MATTERS

*The girl who has an illegitimate child at the age of 16 suddenly has 90 percent of her life's script written for her. She will probably drop out of school; even if someone else in her family helps to take care of the baby, she will probably not be able to find a steady job that pays enough to provide for herself and her child; she may feel impelled to marry someone she might not otherwise have chosen. Her life choices are few, and most of them are bad.*





What words stick out to you?

Nobody has responded yet.

Hang tight! Responses are coming in.



# FRAMING MATTERS

The girl who has an **illegitimate** child at the age of 16 suddenly has 90 percent of her life's script written for her. She will probably **drop out of school**; even if someone else in her family helps to take care of the baby, she will probably **not be able to find a steady job** that pays enough to provide for herself and her child; she may feel impelled to marry someone she might not otherwise have chosen. **Her life choices are few, and most of them are bad.**



Let's go back in time...



- Early marriage and childbearing were common
- Family life education focused on the redemptive value of marriage.



- Term "teen pregnancy" grew in popularity
- Shifts in sex education, introduction of birth control pills



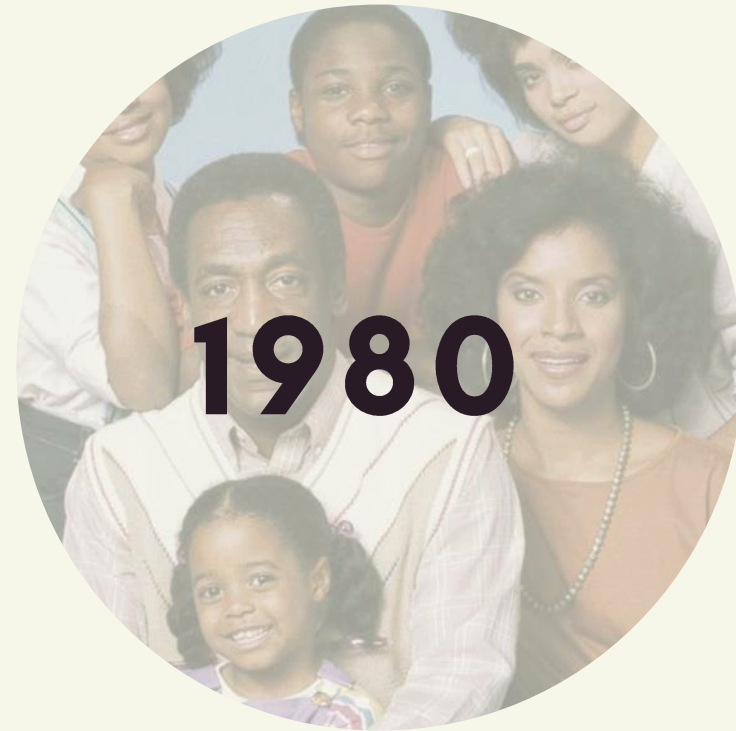
- Decline in early marriage
- Introduction of "welfare queens"

**PERVASIVE DISCRIMINATION**





Let's go back in time...



- Black and Brown communities report disproportionate rates of early nonmarital childbearing
- Teen pregnancy viewed as social problem and epidemic



- Welfare reform focused on preventing out of wedlock pregnancies



- Drastic decline in teen pregnancy, but disparities persist

..... **PERVASIVE DISCRIMINATION** .....





*Results of the current narrative*

*When I got pregnant, I was kicked out of the program. I wasn't allowed to participate because I represented the very thing they were trying to prevent. In other words, I was a lost cause.*





## *Why is this relevant?*

- Teen pregnancy has been stigmatized, particularly targeting youth of color
- Negative narrative has left young parents underserved
- Opportunity to take a youth-centered and reproductive justice lens approach to supporting young people

# Gaps in Research



## YOUTH PERSPECTIVE & VOICE



Most research does not deeply explore youth's perspectives, particularly adolescent males are missing in SRH



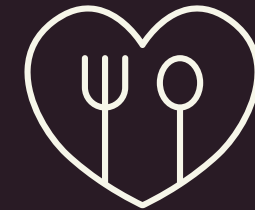
## AWARENESS OF SOCIAL CONTEXT



Most research fails to consider the social context in which youth make decisions about their sexual health



## YOUTH-CENTERED FOCUS



Exploring sexual and reproductive health from a strengths, youth-centered lens is lacking .



## REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE



Current research inadequately addresses all three reproductive justice rights for youth



# FRAMING MATTERS

- Youth-centered approach
- Reproductive Justice



# FRAMING MATTERS

Youth-centered approach  
**Reproductive Justice**

- the right to have a child under the conditions of one's choosing





# FRAMING MATTERS

Youth-centered approach  
**Reproductive Justice**

- the right to have a child under the conditions of one's choosing
- the right not to have a child using birth control, abortion, or abstinence



# FRAMING MATTERS

## Youth-centered approach **Reproductive Justice**

- the right to have a child under the conditions of one's choosing
- the right not to have a child using birth control, abortion, or abstinence
- the right to parent children in safe & healthy environments free from violence by individuals or the state







*Centering Reproductive Justice*  
IN RESEARCH

# Research Study



## AIM

To explore the factors that influence pregnancy intentions of adolescents in Baltimore, MD

## ANALYSIS

### Phenomenological approach

- Explored how the social context influences how adolescents conceptualize pregnancy intentions (phenomenon)

### Deductive and inductive thematic analysis

Applied qualitative techniques: memo writing, peer debriefing, constant comparisons



# Overarching Themes



## STATED PREGNANCY INTENTIONS

- Unwanted and misaligned
- Fatalism
- Planned and wanted



## SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES

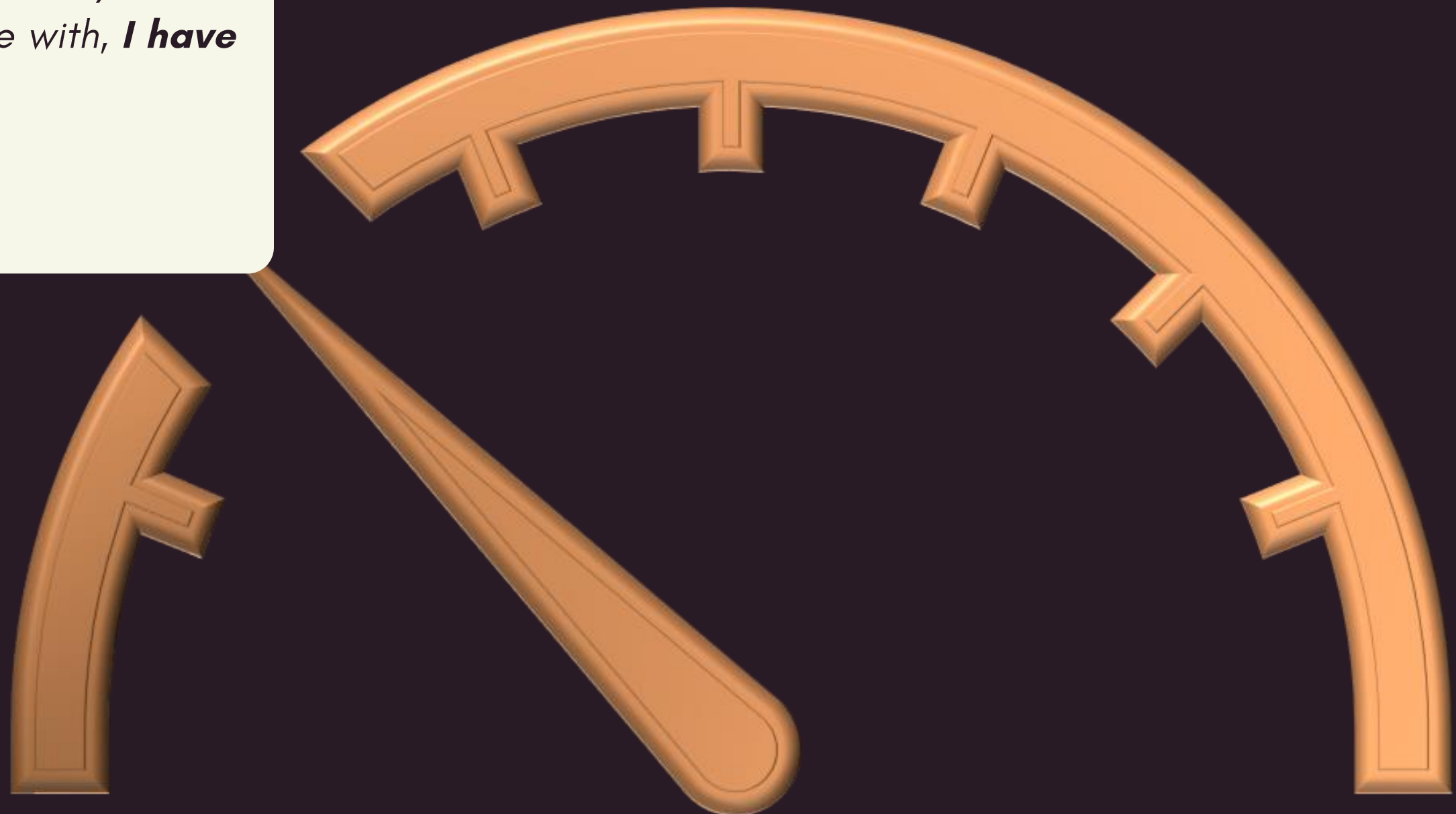
- Sex is a gendered responsibility
- Teen pregnancy is cyclical and common
- Teen pregnancy is not a completely negative experience
- Having a child fulfills emotional and relational voids
- Pregnancy should happen early, just not too early



*Unwanted and misaligned*

***I'm not even out of high school yet, so why would I set myself up like that? I'm not going to say failure because it's a new life form. Birth is a beautiful thing, but if your life gets messed up you have to live with, **I have a baby, I can't provide for it.*****

*15-17yo Adolescent Male*

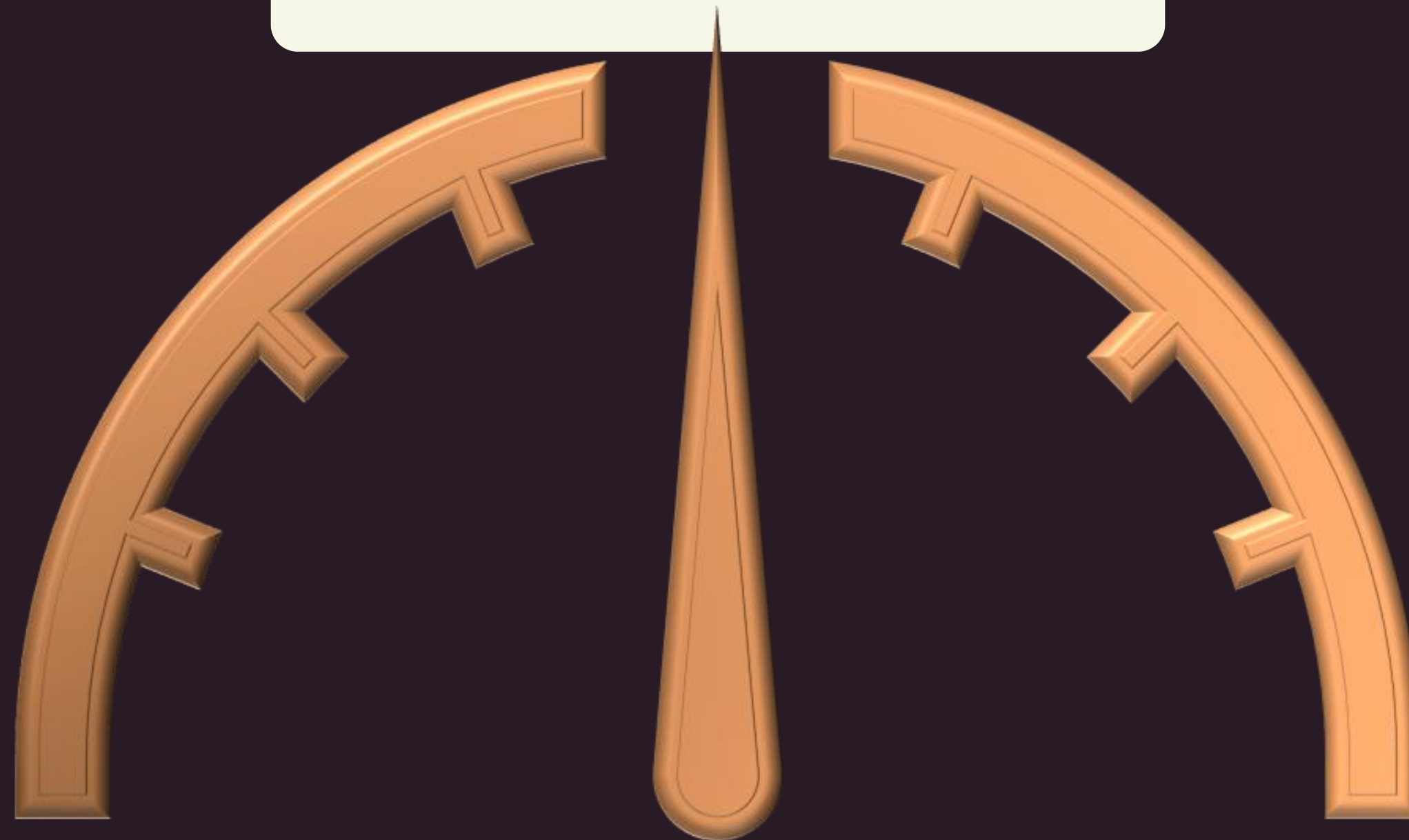




# *Fatalism*

***Because like now I'm planning on not having kids, but if it happens, it's just going to happen. It's not that I planned to have kids but I just slipped up. It happened.***

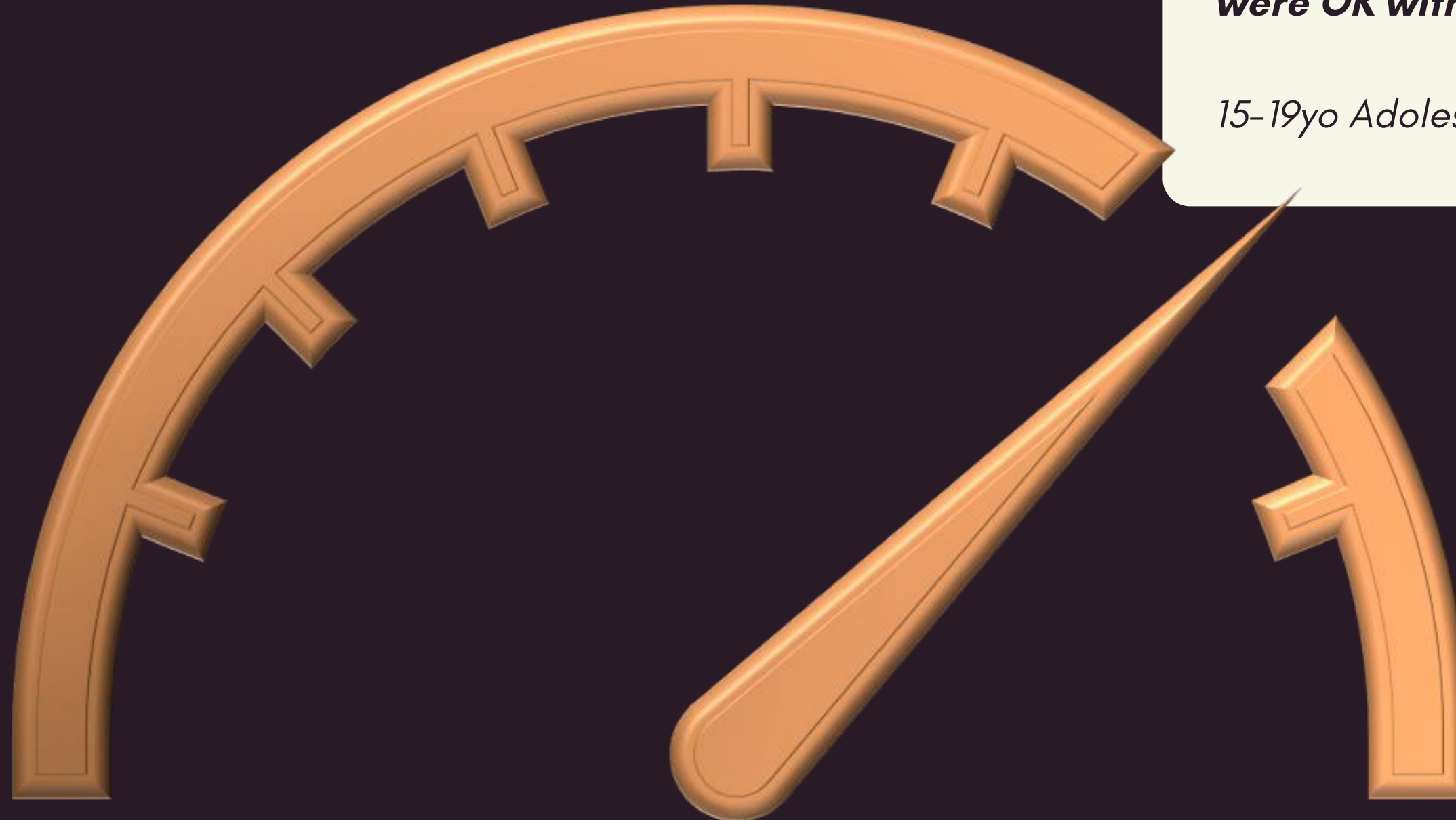
*15-17yo Adolescent Female*



*Planned and wanted*

We basically planned [name of son] with ...me and his father. **We discussed having him and then it happened. We were OK with it.**

*15-19yo Adolescent Parent*







## SEX IS A GENDERED RESPONSIBILITY

*A lot of us males don't take a lot of responsibility. It's like a responsibility thing. You got to take responsibility. You got to be a man. **If you're willing to lay down and have sex with a female, and then she get pregnant, and whatever happens, happens, take responsibility for it.** If you get her pregnant, that's your baby. Do what you gotta do.*

*18-19yo Adolescent Male*





## TEEN PREGNANCY IS CYCLICAL AND COMMON

*Because I guess if you see your mother like pregnant, having babies, that's what people grow up thinking, like, 'It's good to have babies.'*

*15-17yo Adolescent Male*





## TEEN PREGNANCY IS NOT A COMPLETELY NEGATIVE EXPERIENCE

***It changed me.** I used to always be outside, coming in the house late. [laughs] Talking back to whoever if I got something to say. I'm not going to lie. Sometimes I skip school, sometimes not all the time. **Once I had [name of son], it's like, "OK. I want to do better. I want him to do everything that I never had a chance to do."***

*15-19yo Adolescent Parent*





## HAVING A CHILD FULFILLS EMOTIONAL AND RELATIONAL VOIDS

*There's different type of situations that people go through. I know this girl. She ain't never had no type of love in her life, like her parents. Now both her parents ain't in her life. **She's been through a lot in her life. She wanted to have a baby so she can have that love, that unconditional love, somebody that would never leave her.** That's why she wanted to have a child early.*

*15-17yo Adolescent Female*





## PREGNANCY SHOULD HAPPEN EARLY, JUST NOT TOO EARLY

*I'm planning on having a baby but I want to have a baby when I'm 21. I want to have it when I'm young so I won't be too old when the baby grow up. I might be in my death stages. I want to have it young so I can spend time with... my child.*

*15-17yo Adolescent Male*

*Participant 1: I want to have kids when I'm around 23. Yeah, because nobody wants to be 27 and running behind a one year old.*

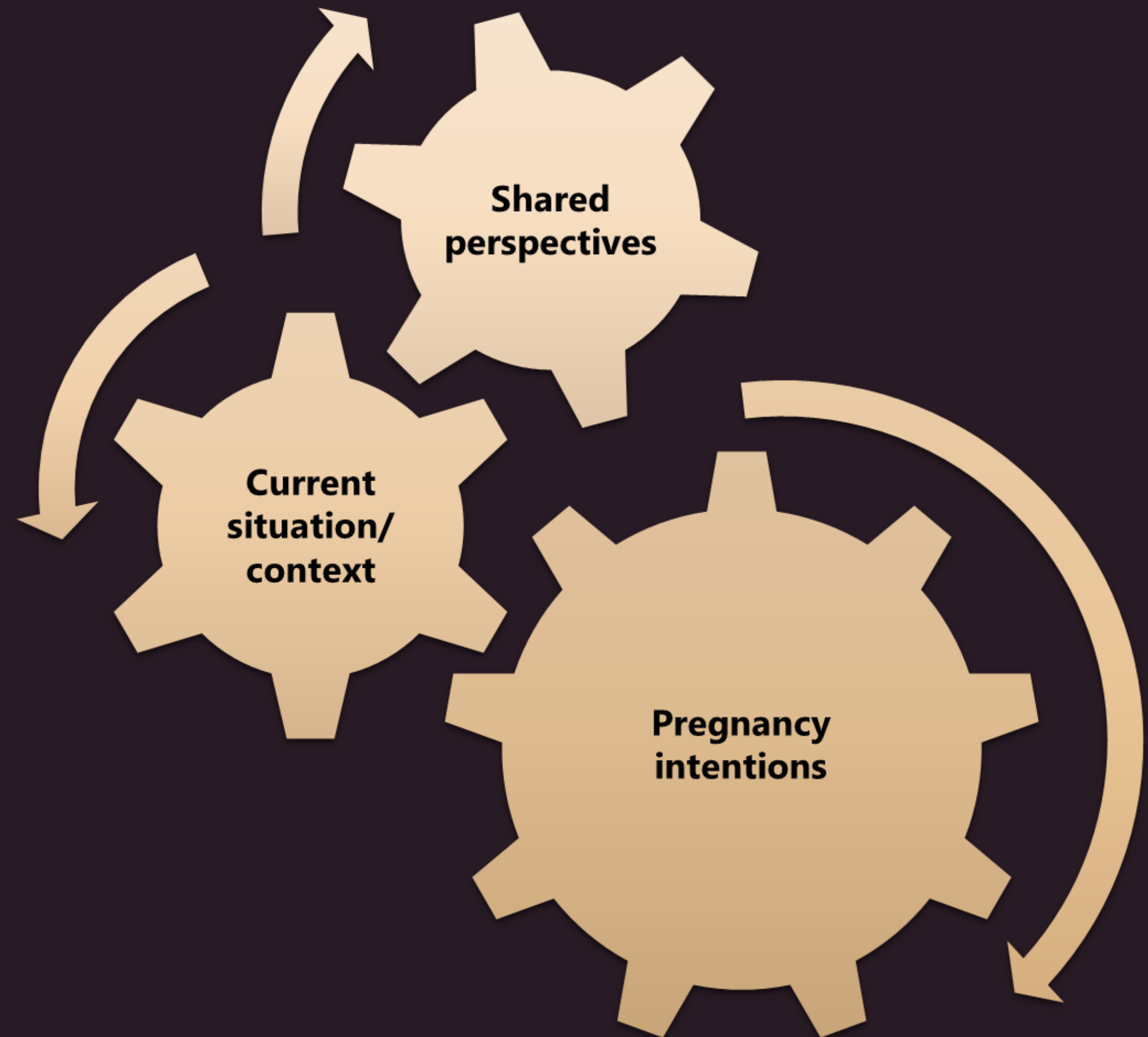
*Participant 2: I don't want to be no old mom.*

*18-19yo Adolescent Females*



## *Key Takeaways*

Interplay between shared social perspectives and situational contexts informed their pregnancy intentions, and reproductive health decisions



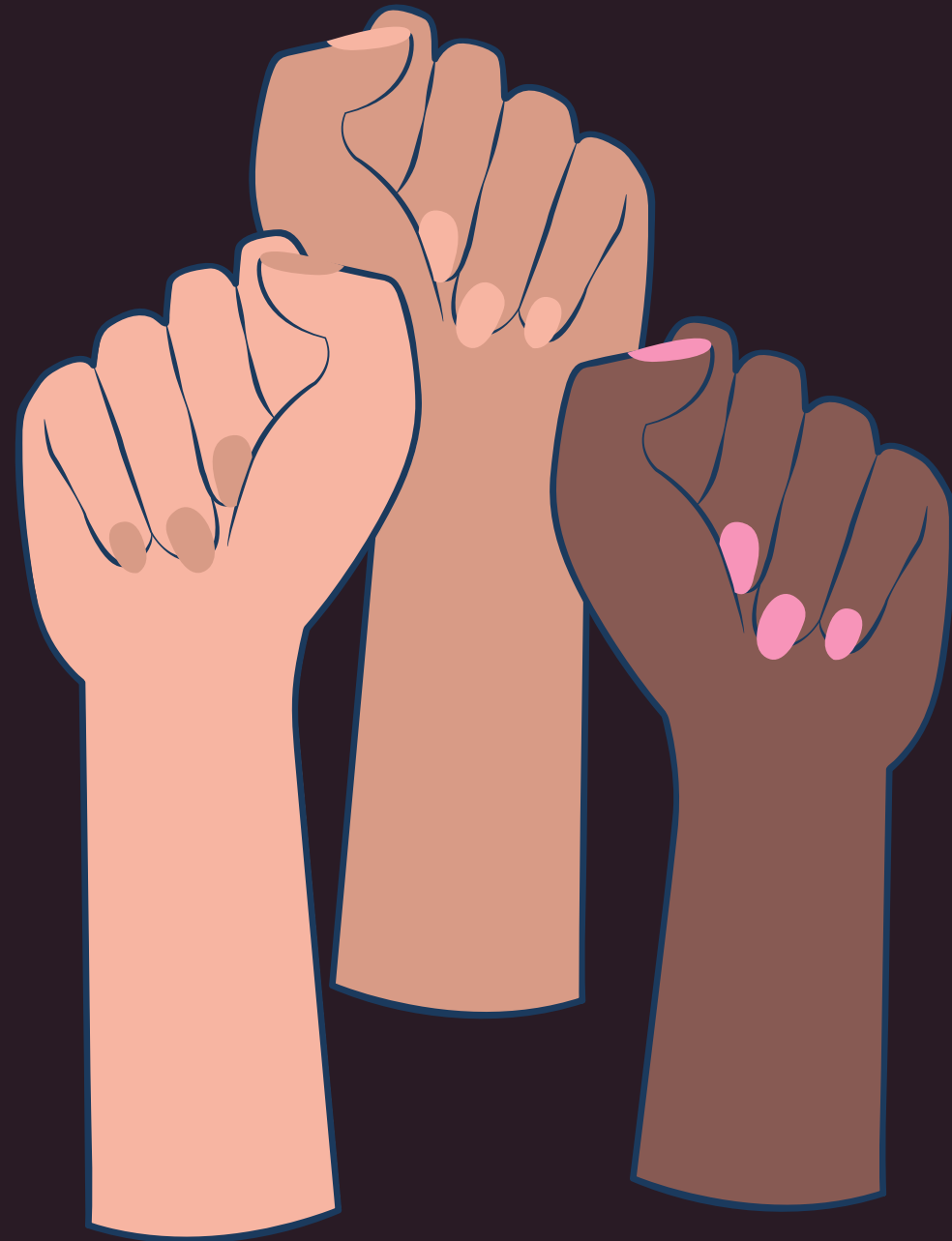




*Centering Reproductive Justice*  
IN PRACTICE



## *Strategies to advance racial equity*



### **HONOR YOUTHS' SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH CHOICES AND DESIRES**

Work to increase the number of supportive adults who believe in young parents and feel confident in young parents' abilities to make choices for themselves and their children.





## *Strategies to advance racial equity*



### **PRIORITIZE SYSTEMIC REFORM OVER EFFORTS SOLELY ON INDIVIDUALS**

Challenge providers, larger systems, and policies to reflect on their roles in ensuring that services are supportive for young people and expand programming and care to address systems-level issues.



## *Strategies to advance racial equity*



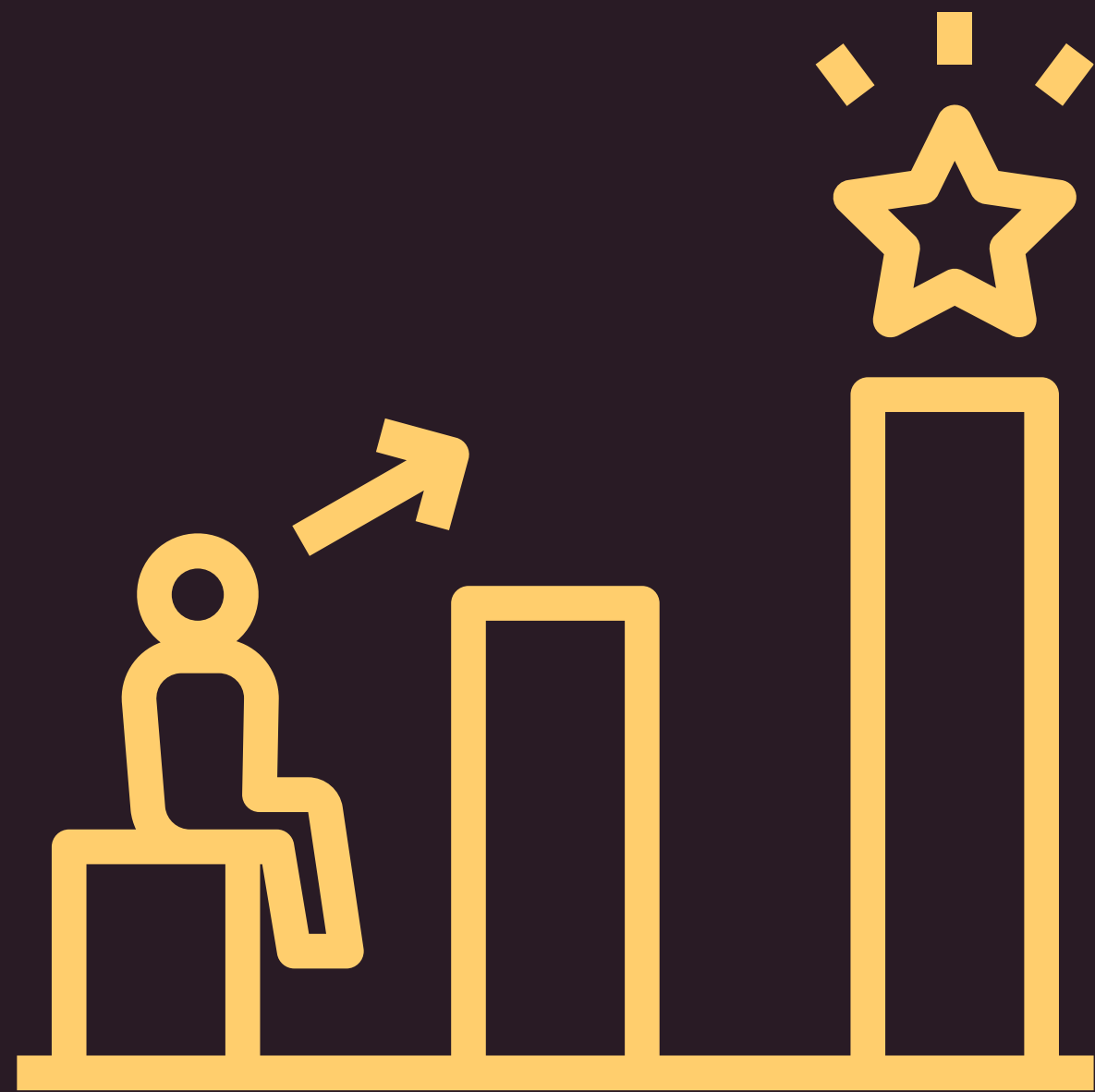
### **VALUE AND SUPPORT EXPECTANT AND PARENTING YOUTH**

Focus resources on creating appropriate and accessible systems for young parents and their children—not just on preventing pregnancies.





## Strategies to advance racial equity



### **UPLIFT YOUTHS' STRENGTHS TO ACHIEVE THEIR DESIRED GOALS**

Make space for youth to drive discussions about their sexual and reproductive health and goals and use their strengths as a guide.



## *Strategies to advance racial equity*



### **CONSIDER HOW YOUTHS' MULTIPLE IDENTITIES SHAPE THEIR SEXUAL HEALTH EXPERIENCES**

Consider how race, age, geography, disability, poverty, religion, and sexual and gender identity intersect in a young person's life—and how these factors impact their well-being—to more fully address the young person's needs.





## *Strategies to advance racial equity*



### **USE ACCURATE LANGUAGE TO HOLD RACIST SYSTEMS AND POLICIES ACCOUNTABLE**

Create guidance and a culture on reframing the way we discuss causes and outcomes of adolescent pregnancy and parenting.



## *Implications for Practice & Policy*

- Continue to explore and recognize the role of racism, systemic oppression and the social determinants of health on Black youths' access to sexual and reproductive health services
- Expand messaging and menu of options to support full spectrum of reproductive health decision-making
- Weave in shared social perspectives around reproductive health in education and clinical care – honoring that Black youth have a range of needs





*Let's Connect!*

**Asari Offiong, PhD, MPH**  
aoffiong@childtrends.org

[www.childtrends.org](http://www.childtrends.org)  
[www.asarioffiong.com](http://www.asarioffiong.com)



# References



- Aiken, A. R., Borrero, S., Callegari, L. S., & Dehlendorf, C. (2016). Rethinking the pregnancy planning paradigm: Unintended conceptions or unrepresentative concepts? *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health, 48*(3), 147-151.
- Anastas, J. W. (2017). What's the story? Views of pregnant teens in qualitative research. *Journal of Women and Social Work 32*(2), 133-170.
- Barcelos, C. A. (2013). Producing (potentially) pregnant teen bodies: biopower and adolescent pregnancy in the USA. *Critical Public Health, 24*(4), 476-488.
- Bonell, C. (2004). Why is teenage pregnancy conceptualized as a social problem? A review of quantitative research from the USA and UK. *Cult Health Sex, 6*(3), 255-272.
- Boonstra, H. (2002). Teen pregnancy: Trends and lessons learned. New York: Alan Guttmacher Institute. <https://www.guttmacher.org/gpr/2002/02/teen-pregnancy-trends-and-lessons-learned>
- Cocca, C. E. (2002). From "welfare queen" to "exploited teen": Welfare dependency, statutory rape, and moral panic. *NWSA Journal, 56*-79
- Furstenberg, F. F. (2007). The History of Teenage Childbearing as a Social Problem. In *Destinies of the Disadvantaged: The Politics of Teen Childbearing* (pp. 1–23). Russell Sage Foundation.
- Furstenberg, F. (2016). Reconsidering teenage pregnancy and parenthood. *Societies, 6*(4).
- Geronimus, A. T. (2003). Damned if you do: culture, identity, privilege, and teenage childbearing in the United States. *Social Science and Medicine, 57*(5), 881-893.
- Guttmacher Institute. (2019). *Unintended pregnancy in the United States*. Retrieved from New York, NY.
- Hamilton, B. E., Rossen, L. M., & Branum, A. M. (2016). Teen birth rates for urban and rural areas in the United States, 2007-2015. *NCHS Data Brief*(264), 1-8.
- Irvine, J. M. (2008). Transient feelings: Sex panics and the politics of emotions *Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, 14*(1), 1-40.
- Kelly, D. M. (1996). Stigma stories: Four discourses about teen mothers, welfare, and poverty. *Youth & Society, 27*(4), 421-449.
- Kirchengast, S. (2016). Teenage pregnancies: A worldwide social and medical problem. *An Analysis of Contemporary Social Welfare Issues, 13*.
- Koffman, O. (2012). Children having children? Religion, psychology and the birth of the teenage pregnancy problem. *History of the Human Sciences, 25*(1), 119-134.
- Kost, K., Maddow-Zimet, I., & Arpaia, A. (2017). *Pregnancies, births and abortions among adolescents and young women in the United States, 2013: National and state trends by age, race and ethnicity*. Retrieved from New York, NY.
- Kost, K., & Zolna, M. (2019). Challenging unintended pregnancy as an indicator of reproductive autonomy: a response. *Contraception, 100*(1), 5-9.
- Lewin, A., Mitchell, S. J., Hodgkinson, S., Gilmore, J., & Beers, L. S. (2014). Pregnancy intentions among expectant adolescent couples. *J Pediatr Adolesc Gynecol, 27*(3), 172-176.
- Lohan, M., Cruise, S., O'Halloran, P., Alderdice, F., & Hyde, A. (2010). Adolescent men's attitudes in relation to pregnancy and pregnancy outcomes: A systematic review of the literature from 1980-2009. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 47*(4), 327-345.
- Luker, K. (1996). Dubious conceptions: The controversy over teen pregnancy. *American Prospect, 5*, 73-83.



# References



- Martin, J. A., Hamilton, B. E., Osterman, M. J. K., Driscoll, A. K., & Drake, P. (2018). *Births: Final data for 2017* (1551-8922 (Print)). Retrieved from Hyattsville, MD
- Martinez, G. M., & Abma, J. C. (2015). Sexual activity, contraceptive use, and childbearing of teenagers aged 15-19 in the United States. *NCHS Data Brief*(209), 1-8.
- Mumford, S. L., Sapra, K. J., King, R. B., Louis, J. F., & Buck Louis, G. M. (2016). Pregnancy intentions-a complex construct and call for new measures. *Fertil Steril*, 106(6), 1453-1462.
- Offiong, A., Powell, TW., Dangerfield, DT, Gemmill, A., & Marcell, AV. (2022). A Latent Class Analysis: Identifying Pregnancy Intention Classes Among U.S. Adolescents. *The Journal of adolescent health : official publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine*, 71(4), 466-473.
- Offiong A, Powell TW, Gemmill A, Marcell AV. (2021). "I can try and plan, but still get pregnant": The complexity of pregnancy intentions and reproductive health decision-making for adolescents. *Journal of Adolescence*, 90: 1-10.
- Ries, A., & Sonenstein, F. (2006). What works for boys: A re-examination of coeducational school curricula. In W. Marsiglio, A. Ries, F. Sonenstein, K. Troccoli, & W. Whitehead (Eds.), *It's a guy thing: Boys, young men, and teen pregnancy prevention* (pp. 101-138). Washington D.C.: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.
- Rocca, C. H., Doherty, I., Padian, N. S., Hubbard, A. E., & Minnis, A. M. (2010). Pregnancy intentions and teenage pregnancy among Latinas: A mediation analysis. *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 42(3), 186-196. doi:10.1363/4218610.
- Ross, L. J. (2017). Reproductive justice as intersectional feminist activism. *Souls*, 19(3), 286-314.
- Santelli, J. S., Lindberg, L. D., Orr, M. G., Finer, L. B., & Speizer, I. (2009). Toward a multidimensional measure of pregnancy intentions: evidence from the United States. *Studies in Family Planning*, 40(2), 87-100.
- Santelli, J., Rochat, R., Hatfield-Timajchy, K., Gilbert, B. C., Curtis, K., Cabral, R., . . . Schieve, L. (2003). The measurement and meaning of unintended pregnancy. *Perspectives of Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 35(2), 94-101.
- Secor-Turner, M., Sieving, R., & Garwick, A. (2011). Social messages, social context, and sexual health: Voices of urban African American youth. *American Journal of Health Behavior*, 35(2), 162-174.
- Teitelman, A. M., Bohinski, J. M., & Boente, A. (2009). The social context of sexual health and sexual risk for urban adolescent girls in the United States. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 30(7), 460-469.
- Williamson, L. M., Buston, K., & Sweeting, H. (2009). Young women's perceptions of pregnancy risk and use of emergency contraception: Findings from a qualitative study. *Contraception*, 79(4), 310-315.