

Simply Stated...

Shopping List: Milk, Bread & Condoms

An Assessment of Adolescents' Experience Purchasing Condoms

Over half of all South Carolina high school students have had sexual intercourse (53.4%) and over one-third (38.6%) of South Carolina high school students are currently sexually active (had sex in the last three months).¹ Only 60% of sexually active high school students in South Carolina **used a condom** the last time they had intercourse, putting them at risk for unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.² A sexually active young person who is not using contraception has a 90% **chance of becoming pregnant** within 12 months.³ From 2004 to 2007, teen pregnancy rates in South Carolina increased by 10%, from a rate of 33.1 to 36.5 (per 1,000 girls).⁴ Beyond the risk of unintended pregnancies, sexually active young people are **at risk for sexually transmitted infections and HIV**. South Carolina's youth under the age of 19 years old account for 38% of all Chlamydia cases in the state and 32% of all Gonorrhea cases in the state.⁵ **Abstaining** from all sexual behaviors is the **most reliable** way to protect against sexually transmitted infections, HIV and pregnancy.⁶ However, for sexually active young people, the correct and consistent use of latex condoms can be an effective method to prevent pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections and HIV. The South Carolina Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (SC Campaign) believes that sexually active young people should have **access to condoms and contraception**. However, it was not clear what the experience was like for young people to purchase condoms

in stores. The SC Campaign previously conducted research assessing the availability of contraception for young people on college campuses in South Carolina* and wanted to expand its understanding of other condom access points. Thus, a **“Secret Shopper”** project was conducted to explore adolescents' overall experience and potential barriers when purchasing condoms at various stores. The findings from this project would subsequently inform efforts to increase access to condoms and contraception.

METHODS

The Secret Shopper project assessed 92 stores in Sumter and Spartanburg counties. A diverse group of 19 young people ages 15-19 were recruited from various youth serving organizations to participate as “secret shoppers” (shoppers). Shoppers were required to complete a consent form and were compensated with a \$100 gift card.

Prior to shoppers entering the store, SC Campaign staff members gave shoppers instructions on how to assess each store (i.e., identify where condoms are located in the store, identify the cost of condoms available). SC Campaign staff members interviewed the shoppers after going to each store and recorded the shoppers' experience. The interview guide was based on an assessment previously conducted by Philliber Research Associates.¹ One month after the shopping day participants and SC Campaign staff were asked to complete a follow-up survey or interview, respectively, to gain feedback about their experience.

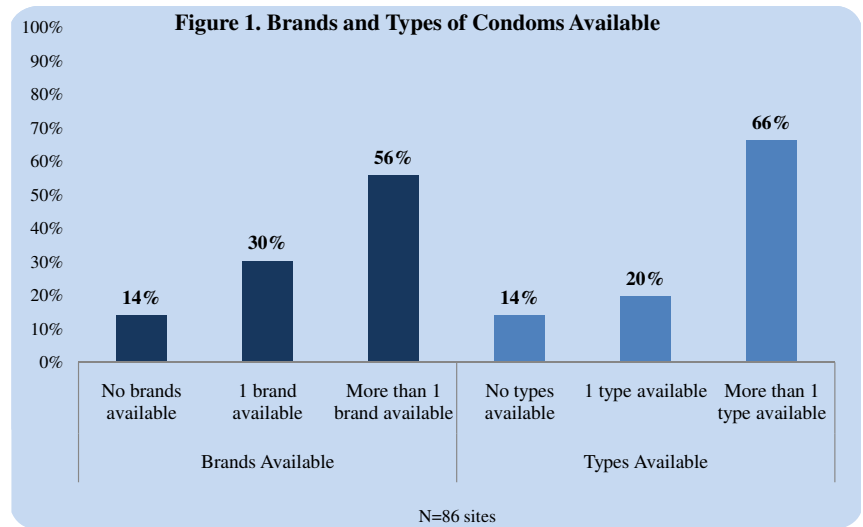
*Kershner, S. and Flynn, S. (2009). *Population Left Behind 2009: An Assessment of sexual health information and services provided by South Carolina colleges and universities*. Columbia, SC: SC Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. Available to download at www.teenpregnancysc.org/pdf/PopulationLeftBehind2009.pdf

¹The SC Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy gratefully acknowledges Philliber Research Associates for their support in the development and implementation of the Secret Shopper project.

Type of site. Of the 92 sites assessed, almost half (44%) of the stores were categorized as “gasoline stations”, 24% were categorized as “grocery stores” and 17% were categorized as “drug stores.” The remaining 15% were categorized as “other” such as megastores (WalMart) or dollar stores.

Brands and Types of Condoms Available.

Shoppers reported that 14% of stores did not have any condoms in stock. About one-third (30%) of stores had only one brand of condom available and 20% of stores had only one type of condom available. However, the majority of stores had more than one brand of condom available (56%) and more than one type of condom available (66%), see figure 1.



Visibility of Condoms.

Shoppers reported that almost two-thirds of the sites (63%) displayed condoms in a way that was easy to find and over half of the stores (56%) displayed condoms on an open shelf. Of the sites where condoms were difficult to find, the reason most reported was that condoms were located behind the counter or someplace where the shoppers had to ask for assistance to obtain condoms. Almost half of the stores (42%) displayed condoms behind the counter and were not available for purchase without asking for help.

Experience Asking for Assistance: Shoppers asked for assistance at over half (n=54, 59%) of the sites. In these sites, SC Campaign staffers asked the shopper to describe why they chose the particular person to ask for assistance. A total of 70 reasons were given as to why shoppers asked for assistance (shoppers were able to select more than one response when asked this question). Figure 2 shows that most of the responses indicated that the shopper requested assistance based on the sales associate’s availability. Relatively few shoppers chose the sales associate to approach based on personal characteristics (i.e. gender and age).



In the sites (n = 54) where shoppers asked for help, the shoppers were subsequently asked to rate their overall experience asking for help. Most of the experiences with sales associates (77%) were rated as “sort of comfortable” or “very comfortable” by shoppers, while only 23% of experiences with sales associates were rated “sort of uncomfortable” or “very uncomfortable” by shoppers.

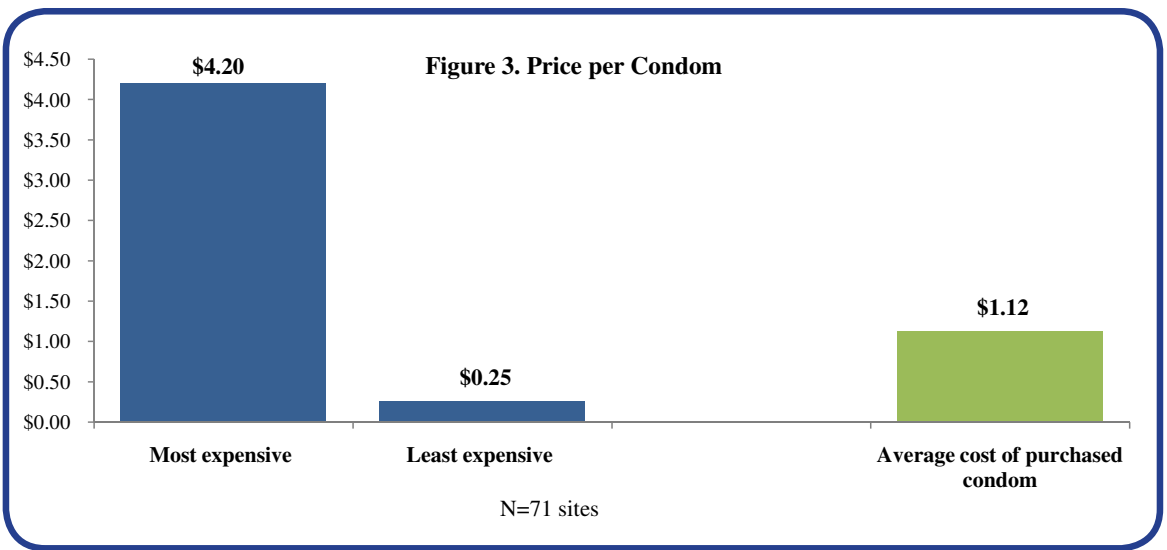
The results of the Secret Shopper project did not identify any common themes regarding comfort of young people when purchasing condoms. In fact, shoppers expressed contradictory views regarding what made them feel comfortable in the stores. One shopper felt uncomfortable

because the sales person was close to the shopper’s age, although another shopper felt comfortable because the sales person was close to their age. The majority of shoppers who indicated feeling uncomfortable with the sales person reported that their perception of being judged was a factor in their level of comfort.

ⁱⁱDue to different experiences at each site, all questions were not answered by every shopper. For example, if a shopper did not purchase condoms at a site, there were no data available on the purchasing experience of that shopper. Therefore, some figures may not be representative of the entire sample since not all participants answered every question.

Price per Condom.

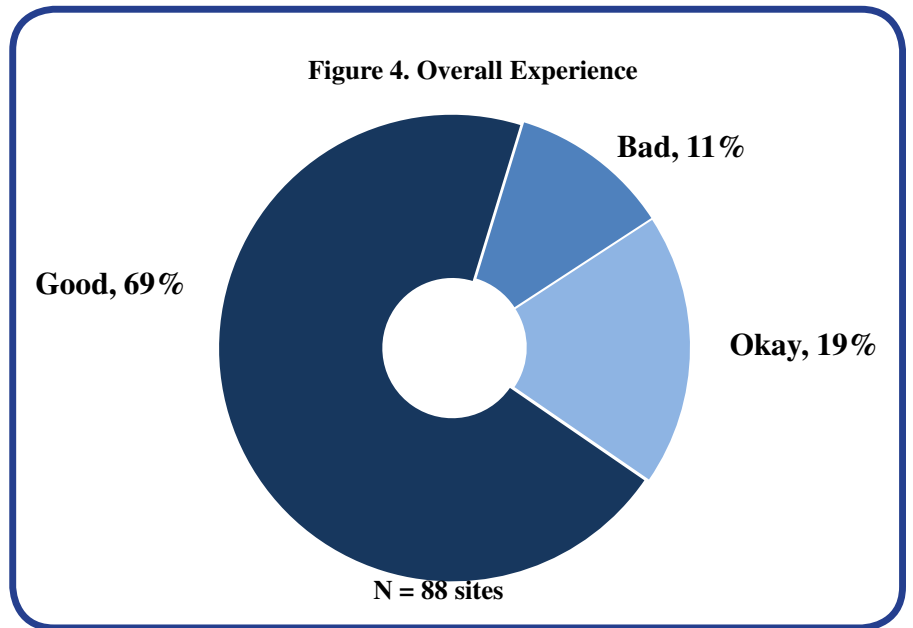
Shoppers were asked to recall the least expensive condoms and the most expensive condoms available at each site. The price per pack was divided by the amount in the pack and the price per condom was determined. Shoppers were instructed to purchase the least expensive package of condoms, and the average price of the condom purchased by a shopper was \$1.12 per condom (see figure 3). The most expensive condom available was a non-latex condom selling for \$4.20 per condom and the least expensive condom available cost \$0.25 per condom.



Overall Experience. Shoppers who purchased condoms were asked to describe the experience. Sales persons in three sites did not allow shoppers to purchase condoms because the salesperson thought that the shopper was “too young.” Some stores (14%) did not have condoms in stock and thus the shoppers were unable to purchase condoms. Shoppers purchased condoms in over three-quarters (77%) of stores.

Shoppers indicated that the overall experience was “good” at two-thirds of the stores (69%) and the experience was “okay” at 11% of the stores. Only 19% of experiences were rated “bad” by shoppers, see figure 4.

The overall experience of shoppers was examined by various demographic and site characteristics. There were no statistically significant differences based on the type of store, gender of the shopper or age of the shopper. However, there was a significant difference ($p < .05$) in how stores were rated based on the race of the shopper. African American shoppers rated 76% of the stores as “good” compared to 50% of White shoppers and 68% of multi-racial shoppers.



OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

Gas stations, grocery stores and convenience stores can reach a broad population of young people. Some stores are open 24 hours a day and sell condoms at little cost. To link the supply of condoms (retail stores) with demand for condoms (sexually active young people), youth serving organizations should promote these stores as access points. The findings from this project do not suggest that retail stores should take the place of medical services. Young people should continue to use medical providers for annual screenings, STD/HIV testing and other services. Promoting retail stores as access points for condoms should be one strategy - of many - to increase the availability of sexual health resources for sexually active youth.

The SC Campaign has developed the following recommendations to increase condom access for sexually active youth:

Recommendations for Stores

1. Make sure condoms are easily visible - displayed on an open shelf, in an aisle or in front of the counter
2. Develop signs and print materials that identify where the condoms are located
3. Clearly display the cost of condoms on each box or shelf
4. Sell multiple types of condoms at multiple price points and stock different packs of condoms (e.g., single condom, 3 pack, 6 pack, etc)
5. Combine educational materials with condom purchases, such as information about lubrication with condom use or testing for sexually transmitted infections
6. Provide local family planning clinic information to young people purchasing condoms
7. Educate sales persons on the benefits of condom use among sexually active young people
8. Correct any misconceptions about legal issues regarding the sale of condoms to young people (i.e., an age limit to purchasing condoms)
9. Encourage sales persons to be helpful with young people who purchase condoms
10. Work with local organizations to market store as an access point for condoms

Recommendations for Youth Serving Organizations

1. Promote retail stores as an access point to purchase condoms for sexually active youth: talk with young people about positive experience of the Secret Shopper project, discuss common myths and facts about condom access (i.e., there is no legal age to purchase condoms, anyone can purchase condoms)
2. Conduct a Secret Shopper project in your community
3. When implementing a science-based program that uses a condom purchasing activity, include that lesson if possible
4. Educate other organizations about condom access so that they can provide free condoms (such as barber shops, nail salons and other places that young people frequently visit)

NOTEWORTHY

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ABOUT THE SC CAMPAIGN

Now in its 16th year, the SC Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy works state-wide to prevent adolescent pregnancy in South Carolina through education, technical assistance, public awareness, advocacy and research. The Campaign is the only organization in the state, working in all 46 counties, to reduce teen pregnancy.

¹Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBS) 2009 Fact Sheet on Sexual Behaviors, Department of Education, retrieved April 7, 2010 from <http://www.cdc.gov/yrbss>

²Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBS) 2009 Fact Sheet on Sexual Behaviors, Department of Education, retrieved April 7, 2010 from <http://www.cdc.gov/yrbss>

³Guttmacher Institute, In Brief Facts on American Teens' Sexual and Reproductive Health, retrieved November 5, 2010 from <http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/FB-ATSRH.pdf>

⁴Data provided by the Division of Biostatistics, Public Health Statistics and Information Services, SC DHEC

⁵STD/HIV Division Surveillance Report. December 31, 2008, retrieved April 7, 2010 from http://www.scdhec.gov/health/disease/stds/docs/HIVSTD_SurvRpt_Dec2008.pdf

⁶Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Condoms and STDs: Fact Sheet for Public Health Personnel, retrieved November 8, 2010 from <http://www.cdc.gov/condomeffectiveness/latex.htm>