



Trends in Teen Sexual Behavior

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At least until the last few years, the proportion of teenagers who have had sex rose steadily, and they are more likely to use contraceptives than their earlier counterparts. Underlying this general trend has been an increase in sexual activity among young teens—ages 15 and under—as well as middle-class and white teenagers. Contraceptive use has risen also, probably because of the fear of AIDS and the increased sexual activity among white and middle-class teenagers. Because more teenagers were using contraceptives, the pregnancy rate per 1,000 sexually active teenagers actually declined during the 1980s, even as more teenagers were having sex. Nevertheless, contraceptive use is far from perfect, leading to high levels of abortion, sexually transmitted diseases, and nonmarital births. The challenge for school-based programs is to pursue two simultaneous goals: lower the level of sexual activity and raise the rate of contraceptive use among those who have sex.

When President Clinton appointed his first Surgeon General, the controversial and outspoken Joycelyn Elders, he signaled his intention to make an issue of teenage pregnancy and parenthood. Dr. Elders left Washington, but the issue has remained. The past year, for example, witnessed the creation of a multimillion dollar national campaign to reduce teenage pregnancy and welfare reform legislation that earmarked one-quarter billion dollars for abstinence education.

There is nothing new about teenage sex. In the past, however, it was largely confined to married teenagers, or those soon to be married, and thus was not considered a problem. But today, teenagers are much less likely than in the past to get married. In 1993, for example, the average age at first marriage for women was 24.5 years and 26.5 years for men.

The decline in teenage marriages, however, has not led to a corresponding drop in teenage sexual activity. During the 1970s and 1980s at least, more teenagers became sexually active, and they had sex more frequently, with more partners, and at younger ages. Newly-released data,

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however, indicate that there may have been a decline in teenage sexual activity. According to the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth, the proportion of sexually active females ages 15 to 19 fell 8% between 1988 and 1995 (Abma et al., 1997). The 1995 National Survey of Adolescent Males also found an 8% decline in sexual activity among teenage males since 1988 (Sonenstein & Ku, 1997). This is welcome news after the rate of sexual activity seemed to rise inexorably over the past two decades. The new data contained another positive finding: The proportion of sexually active teenagers using contraception rose dramatically.

These data may signal the start of a trend towards less sex and more contraceptive use among teenagers. Further analysis of the data, as well as additional studies, will be needed to draw a definitive conclusion. But even if these early suggestions of a turnaround in teenage sexual activity are valid, there is still much room for improvement. About half of male and female teenagers have had sex, including about 20% of 15-year-old females. And contraceptive use is far from perfect. As a result, each year there are about 1 million pregnancies resulting in approximately 400,000 abortions, 500,000 births, and 100,000 miscarriages. Of the births, over 70% are out of wedlock, putting those young mothers at risk of long-term welfare dependency. And about 3 million teenagers contract a sexually transmitted disease (STD) such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, and even AIDS.

Most people are unhappy about sexual activity among younger adolescents, but disagreement is more widespread about sexual activity among older teenagers. (We will not try to draw the age line.) Some believe that sex outside of marriage undermines traditional moral values or can be psychologically damaging to adolescents. Others are concerned that teenagers are relatively poor contraceptors.

Most agree that teenagers tend to be reckless in their behavior, and unprotected sex is just one of a host of risky behaviors in which they engage. But even for those who are always careful, accidents can happen and contraceptives can fail. Moreover, some teenagers are exploited or coerced into having sex and thus have little control over contraception.

Today, several major policy issues surround teenage sexual activity: (1) how can the level of such activity be reduced, especially among younger teenagers? and (2) how can sexually active teenagers be better contraceptors? To provide a context for considering these two questions, we present an overview of major trends.

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