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Age at Migration, Family Instability, and Timing of Sexual Onset

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Abstract: This study builds on and extends previous research on nativity variations in adolescent health and risk behavior by addressing three questions: (1) whether and how generational status and age at migration are associated with timing of sexual onset among U.S. adolescents; (2) whether and how family instability mediates associations between nativity and sexual debut; and (3) whether and how these associations vary by gender. We find that first- and second-generation immigrant youth initiate sexual activity later than native youth. Foreign-born youth who migrate after the start of adolescence exhibit the latest sexual onset; boys' sexual behavior is particularly sensitive to age at migration. Parental union stability is protective for first- and second-generation youth, especially boys; however, instability in co-residence with parents accelerates sexual debut for foreign-born girls, and dilutes protections from parental marital stability. Use of a non-English language at home delays sexual onset for immigrant girls, but not boys.

Keywords: adolescent; sexual behavior; family instability; immigrant

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