

# Adolescent Sexual Behavior. I: Demographics

In the United States, 45.6 percent of high school students<sup>1</sup> and 79.5 percent of college students ages 18-24<sup>2</sup> have had sex, and the median age at first marriage is 28.6 for men and 26.6 for women.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it is critically important for adults to address adolescent sexuality realistically and to recognize that a young person's decision whether to have sexual intercourse may be influenced by many factors, including socioeconomic status, ethnicity, family structure, educational aspirations, age, and life experiences.

## Sexual Behavior Differs by Race/Ethnicity, Gender, Partner Preference, and Urban/Rural Residence.

- In the most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey, students in ninth and 10<sup>th</sup> grades were significantly less likely to report having had sexual intercourse than those in 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades (34.4, 40.8, 51.9, and 60.5 percent, respectively). Male students (48.5 percent) were significantly more likely than female students (42.9 percent) to report having had sexual intercourse.<sup>1</sup>
- Among male high school students, 68.8 percent of African Americans, 53.0 percent of Latinos, and 45.1 percent of whites reported having had sexual intercourse. Among female high school students, 53.4 percent of African Americans, 44.0 percent of Latinos, and 41.3 percent of whites reported having had sexual intercourse. Overall, African American students were significantly more likely than Latino or white students to have had sex (60.8, 48.4, and 43.2 percent respectively).<sup>1</sup>
- Data analysis of four youth risk behavior surveys showed that Asian American and Pacific Islander students were significantly less likely than members of other ethnic groups to have had sexual intercourse or to report four or more sexual partners.<sup>4</sup>
- Nationwide, 6.6 percent of students reported initiating sexual intercourse before age 13. In every ethnic subgroup, males were significantly more likely than females to initiate sexual intercourse before age 13.<sup>1</sup>
- In a study of teenage women, those who identified as bisexual or lesbian were about as likely to have had sexual intercourse as were their heterosexual peers.<sup>5</sup>
- In a nationally representative survey of American adults, about nine percent of men said they had had sex with another man since puberty. Forty percent of these men said they had that experience before age 18 and not since.<sup>6</sup>
- Rural and urban youth differed in sexual experience. For example, nearly 33 percent of high school students in mostly rural Illinois reported ever having sexual intercourse compared to 58.1 percent of students in Chicago.<sup>1</sup>

## Adolescent Sexual Relationships Vary.

- Among males ages 15 to 19 in 1995, 55 percent reported ever engaging in vaginal intercourse; 53 percent, being masturbated by a female; 49 percent, receiving oral sex; 39 percent, giving oral sex; and 11 percent, ever engaging in anal sex.<sup>7</sup>
- In a survey of California women ages 18 to 29, 21.7 percent reported having had anal intercourse.<sup>8</sup>
- Among sexually experienced high school youth, 14.2 percent reported four or more lifetime sexual partners.<sup>1</sup> In another nationally representative survey, 11 percent of sexually experienced youth ages 17 to 18 reported seven or more lifetime sexual partners.<sup>9</sup> In a third study of young people, 31.1 percent of sexually experienced females and 45.0 percent of sexually experienced males reported six or more sexual partners by age 21.<sup>10</sup>
- African American males and males living in urban areas were somewhat more likely than were those of

other racial/ethnic groups or residents of non-urban areas to have had two or more sexual partners. When controlling for race/ethnicity, urban males were significantly more likely than suburban males to have had multiple sexual partners.<sup>10</sup>

- In a study of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth ages 14 to 21 in New York City, 23 percent of males reported ever having at least one high-risk sexual encounter. Among females, 21 percent reported at least one high-risk sexual encounter. (High-risk was identified as having sex with someone who had a sexually transmitted infection, was HIV-infected, or used injection drugs.)<sup>11</sup>
- In one study, 19 percent of urban, middle school students who reported having a boyfriend or girlfriend two years or more older also reported having initiated sexual intercourse, compared with one percent who never had a boyfriend or girlfriend and six percent whose boyfriend or girlfriend was their same age. Eight percent of sixth graders reported having a boyfriend or girlfriend who was two years or more older, and two-thirds of them reported having had sex in the relationship.<sup>12</sup>
- In one study of college undergraduates, researchers found that 36.9 percent of students felt that abstinence included oral contact with another person's genitals, and 24.3 percent felt it included anal intercourse.<sup>13</sup>

## Teen Sex Is Sporadic and Sometimes Unwanted.

- Middle school students who had boyfriends or girlfriends two years or more older also reported more unwanted sexual advances than those without a boyfriend or girlfriend or those with a same age boyfriend or girlfriend.<sup>12</sup>
- In a study of young women ages 12 to 18, those who were younger than 15 at first sex were likely to say their reason for initiating intercourse was a partner pressuring them, friends' having sexual intercourse, curiosity, or wanting to feel grown up. Women who were 17 or older at first sexual intercourse were more likely to say their reason was being in love or physically attracted to their partner.<sup>14</sup>
- In a study of students ages 12 through 16, seven percent had been forced against their will to do something sexual with an adult; 17 percent, with a teenager. Nineteen percent felt pressure from their friends to have sexual intercourse. Six percent said that they had sexually coerced someone else with words or actions. Males were significantly more likely to report sexually coercing someone than females (10 versus two percent, respectively). African Americans were more likely to have been sexually coerced than whites (26 versus seven percent, respectively).<sup>15</sup>
- In another study, lesbian and bisexual adolescent women were significantly more likely than their heterosexual and questioning peers to have been sexually abused (22 versus 15 and 13 percent, respectively).<sup>5</sup>
- When asked why they had sexual intercourse for the first time, 13 percent of young men ages 13 to 18 cited pressure from their friends and eight percent of women the same age cited pressure from a partner. At the same time, 47 percent of teens who had experienced sexual intimacy said they had done something sexual or felt pressure to do something they weren't ready to do. Teenage women were more likely than teenage men to have had these experiences (55 versus 40 percent).<sup>9</sup>

## References

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