

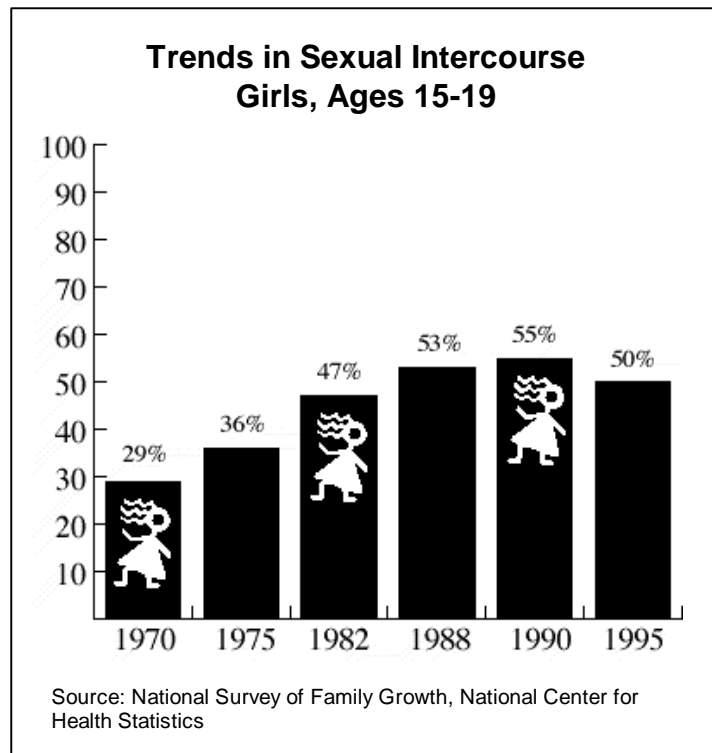
Sexual Activity and Youth

Sexual activity among youth can bring with it serious consequences. Because of its inherent risks, and its links with other unhealthy risk behaviors, IYD promotes a message of complete youth risk avoidance for sex. This message is consistent with IYD's comprehensive risk avoidance messages for all unhealthy behaviors, that also include alcohol, drugs, tobacco, and violence.

Prevalence of sexual activity among youth

Unfortunately, the long-term trends in sexual activity among youth until recently have not been promising – the rates of sexual activity have climbed steadily for over two decades, though the latest data gives us hope. About 20 percent more males and females are having sex today by the age of 18 than were in the early 1970s.¹ Very few young adolescents are sexually active, but as age increases so does the risk of engaging in sexual activity. About 10 percent of 12 year olds, 40 percent of 16 year olds, and about 80 percent of 19 year olds have had sex.²

However, despite these sobering statistics, the data must also be put into perspective in light of recent findings.* Although sexual activity among adolescents increased in the 1970s and 1980s. The trend in the 1990s is decreasing sexual activity according to the Centers for



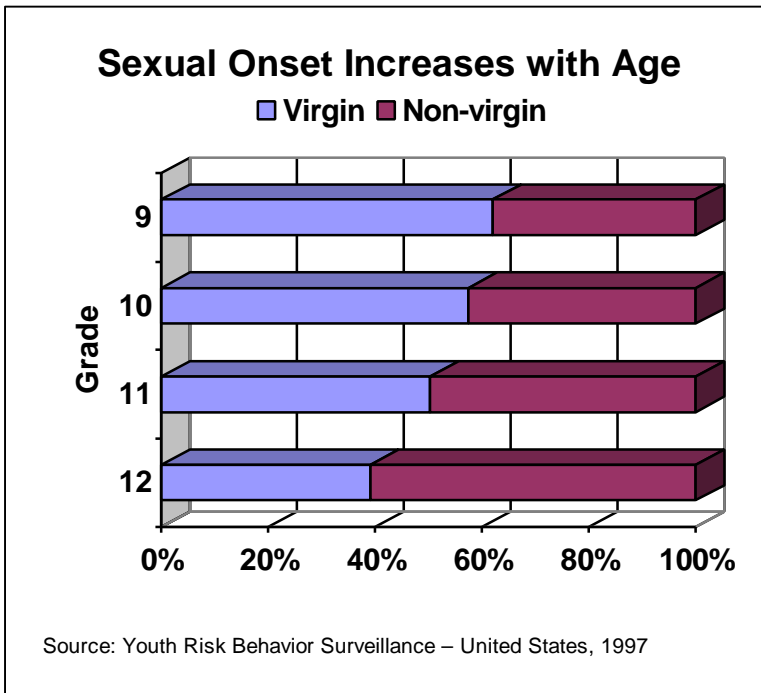
* Statistics from different sources may vary due to a multitude of factors, including differing methods of data collection; choices of age ranges and time periods; measurements of perception versus actual participation; reporting by rates or actual numbers; and definitions of participation. Through this overview of statistics, IYD hopes to provide the reader with a comprehensive picture of youth risk behaviors, recognizing that some specific statistics may seem to indicate inconsistent trends or levels of participation.

Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBS). Most recent data shows that in grades 9 through 12, the percentage of girls who have had sex dropped from 50.8 percent in 1990 to 47.7 percent in 1997. For boys, the figure dropped from 57.4 percent in 1991 to 48.8 percent in 1997.³ It is interesting to note that this decrease in sexual activity has been accompanied by a decrease in the teen birth rate.

Overall, about half of both boys and girls ages 15 to 19 have **not** had sex. The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (known as Add Health), a federally sponsored study of more than 90,000 teens, found 83 percent of junior high and 50.7 percent of high school students reported they had never had sex.⁴

First participation – trends and implications

Adolescents who initiate health-risk behaviors such as sexual intercourse and substance abuse at an early age frequently have poorer health later in life, lower educational attainment and less economic productivity than their peers. Early initiation of these behaviors is associated with longer periods of risk taking in later adolescence and early adulthood, and also may be a marker for risk taking in adulthood.⁵



While reports show overall youth participation in sexual activity to be decreasing, levels of early participation in sexual intercourse is vital to an understanding of youth and risk behavior.

The age difference between adolescent girls and their first sex partners is related to their own age at first sex; the younger a girl is when she has sex for the first time, the greater the average age difference between her and her partner. Additionally, the greater the age difference between an adolescent girl and her first sex partner, the more partners she is likely to have during her teen years. And the greater the age difference between an adolescent girl and her first sex partner, the less likely she is to use contraception and the more likely she is to give birth while a teen.

Non-voluntary first sex is particularly common among very young girls. Among girls who had sex before age 13, nearly a quarter (22 percent) reported that first sex was non-voluntary and an additional 49 percent categorized it as unwanted. These figures decline among those whose first sex occurred at later ages.⁶

According to the 1997 YRBS report, 7.2 percent of students nationwide had initiated sexual intercourse before age 13. That is the lowest percentage of youth initiating sex before age 13 in six years, based on YRBS data. It represents a decrease from 10.2 percent in 1991 to 9.0 percent in 1995. Overall, male students (9.4 percent) were significantly more likely than female students (4.5 percent) to have initiated early sex.⁷

Studies show that the number of lifetime sexual partners for both males and females is directly related the age of first intercourse. Young people who participate in first intercourse before age 14 are significantly more likely to have more lifetime sexual partners. Fifty-seven percent of girls who initiate sex before age 14 report six or more lifetime partners compared to 10 percent of girls who initiate sex at age 17 or older. Likewise, 74 percent of boys who initiate sex before age 14 report six or more lifetime partners compared to 10 percent of boys who initiate sex at age 17 or older.⁸ These statistics are especially troubling given data that shows those who have had a greater number of sexual partners are at greater risk of acquiring a sexually transmitted disease (STD) or HIV.⁹

The consequences of sexual activity

Teenage sexual activity brings with it serious consequences, including unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and emotional stress.

Adolescents are at a higher risk for acquiring STDs for several reasons: they are more likely to have multiple partners, to engage in intercourse without contraception, and to select partners at higher risk.¹⁰ Also, younger women are biologically more susceptible to infections than older women.¹¹ Every year three million teenagers, which is about one-fourth of teenagers who have had sex (at least once), acquire an STD.¹² In fact, HIV infection is the sixth leading cause of death among 15-24 year olds.¹³

Thirty years ago there were only two common and easily treated STDs. Today there are more than 20 prevalent STDs.¹⁴ A report by the Institute of Medicine referred to STDs as a “hidden epidemic” because of people’s reluctance to discuss them and because many are without symptoms. Some STDs affecting many in the general population include chlamydia (4 million cases), gonorrhea (800,000 cases), human papillomavirus (500,000-1 million cases), genital herpes (200,000-500,000 cases), AIDS (80,000 cases) and hepatitis B (53,000 cases).¹⁵

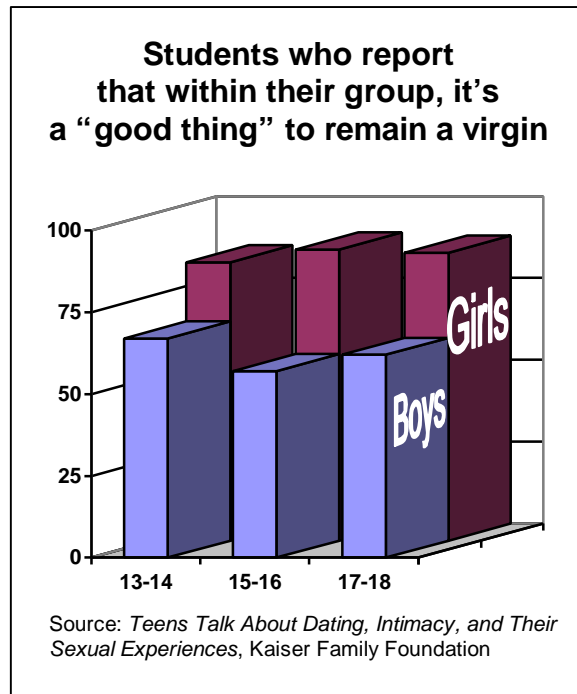
Another serious consequence of adolescent sexual activity is pregnancy. About one million teenage women become pregnant each year. Older teenagers who are poor or black are more likely to become pregnant than those who are young, white or have a higher income.¹⁶

The number of unintended teen pregnancies has been decreasing recently. The teen birthrate dropped from 62.1 births per 1,000 teens in 1991 to 56.9 births per 1,000 teens in 1995.¹⁷ However, the birthrate of those who were sexually experienced actually rose during the same time period, indicating that abstinence was the main contributor to the overall decrease.

While the physical consequences of early sexual involvement can pose serious risk, the emotional toll of sexual involvement cannot be overlooked. The Alan Guttmacher Institute writes, “Having sex can engender a sense of shame or guilt; push a couple apart; raise unrealistic expectations of further commitment and marriage; or be a form of abuse.”¹⁸

Youth perceptions about sex

A recent survey of youth by the Kaiser Foundation found that slightly less than half of teens think they have about the same amount of sexual experience as their peers. More than one third (35 percent) feel they don’t have as much sexual experience as their friends. The report stated: “The data show they have more experience on average, than what they think is typical for their group of friends. Yet, they feel they’re ‘behind.’ Until they actually have sexual intercourse, many teens feel less experienced than their friends. Teen girls, even after they’ve had intercourse, are as apt to feel less experienced as they are to feel more experienced than their friends.”¹⁹



Despite continuing education and efforts to inform adolescents of the health risks and consequences of sexual activity, many sexually active teens do not consider themselves to be at risk for STDs or pregnancy. In the *Who’s Who Among American High School Students* survey, almost half of sexually active teens believe their personal risk of contracting AIDS is zero, while 37 percent of sexually active teens believe their chances are low. Out of students who have had more than five sex partners, 55 percent believe their chances of acquiring HIV/AIDS is low. Almost half of those surveyed believe their or their partner’s risk of pregnancy is low while about 14 percent believe there is no risk at all.²⁰

Other research has revealed many of today’s teens support the decision to remain a virgin. Forty-four percent of teens (ages 13 to 18) say they have made a conscious decision to delay intercourse, and most (74 percent) say their peer group considers this decision to be a positive choice.²¹

Characteristics of sexually active youth

Various characteristics make adolescents more or less likely to engage in sexual activity during their teen years. The Add Health study reports that students are less likely to have an early onset of sexual intercourse if they appear “younger” than peers, are religious, make a pledge of sexual abstinence, or have a higher grade point average.²²

Younger males are more likely than younger females to engage in sexual activity. At age 13, just over 1 in 10 males and only 1 in 50 females are sexually experienced. However, by age 20, there is less discrepancy in the numbers and about 3 in 4 females and 4 out of 5 males are sexually experienced.²³ The onset of sexual activity increases with age, with males reporting earlier sexual activity. The proportion of teen males who report having sex is roughly equal to the number of sexually experienced females who are one year older.²⁴

African-Americans report earlier sexual activity than whites or Hispanics. By the age of 16.5 approximately half of black women have had sex, about one year earlier than the same percentage of white and Hispanic women report sexual onset. For African-American males, about half have had sex by age 15, almost two years sooner than their white and Hispanic male counterparts.

Adolescents in families with lower incomes (below \$20,000) have sex four to six months earlier than those from higher income families.²⁵ Teens living in the South and in rural areas, and those whose parents receive welfare, are more likely to have sexual experience. Adolescents who perceive they will die young or who feel attracted to someone of the same sex have a

higher risk of early (heterosexual) sexual intercourse. Other factors that place a teen at greater risk of sexual activity include working at a paid job more than 20 hours per week, having low grades, and appearing “older” than their peers.²⁶

The impact of parents and family on sexual activity in youth

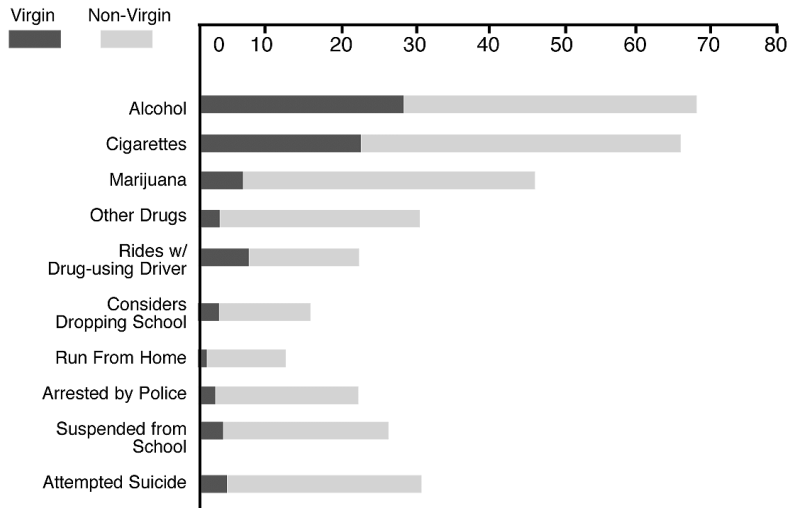
A positive family relationship cannot be underestimated as a primary factor that protects adolescents from engaging in sexual behavior. The Add Health study found the more connected teenagers felt to their

parents and family, the less likely they were to participate in early sexual activity. Youth who perceived that their parents disapproved of adolescent sex and adolescent contraceptive use were more likely to delay sexual debut. Also, parents can positively influence

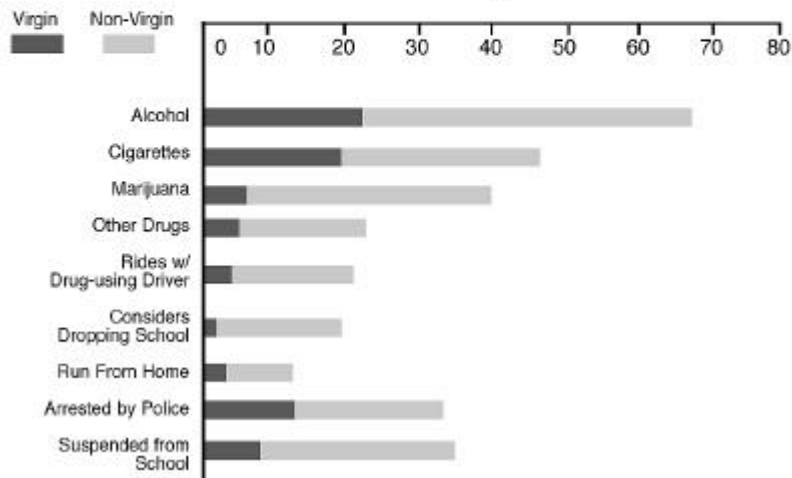
Protective factors for early sexual onset	Risk factors for early sexual onset
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived parent disapproval of adolescent sex • Parent/family connectedness • Religious identity • Pledge of virginity • High grade point average • Appears “younger than most” peers • School connectedness • Parochial school attendance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived risk of untimely death • Paid work more than 20 hours per week • Appears “older than most” peers • Same sex attraction • Recent family suicide attempts/completions
<p>Source: The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health</p>	



Behavior Risks & Association with Virginity / Nonvirginity in Females ages 12 - 16



Behavior Risks & Association with Virginity / Nonvirginity in Males ages 12 - 16



Source: Pediatrics, Vol. 87, No. 2

the sexual behavior choices of their children by being home at key points of the day, conveying high expectations for school, and instilling in their children a sense of belonging and self worth.²⁷

Communication between parents and children is vitally important. “Clearly sexual promiscuity and high risk behavior can be reduced significantly if parents talk to their children about sex,” said Paul Krouse, publisher of *Who’s Who Among American High School Students*. Of students whose parents forbid them to have sex, most (88 percent) have never had sexual intercourse. In comparison, of those students who said their parents don’t care if they have sex, more than half (52 percent) have engaged in sex.²⁸

Parents who clearly communicate to their child the importance of delaying sex can help reduce the risk that their child will engage in sexual activity. Adolescents who perceive their parents’ disapproving attitude towards early sex will be more likely to wait, thereby protecting against risks of STDs and pregnancy.

Sexual activity and its link to other risk behaviors

Sexual activity has been found to be an indicator of a larger lifestyle pattern of unhealthy risk behaviors, including using tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drugs, and being involved in violence.

A study of youth ages 12 to 16 published in *Pediatrics*, found nonvirginal boys were four times more likely to smoke and six times more likely to have ever used alcohol than boys who were virgins. Nonvirginal girls faced the same risks: compared to virginal girls they were seven times more likely to smoke and 10 times more likely to use marijuana.²⁹

The researchers stated, “Our data confirm that drug use, sexual activity, and other troublesome activities and feelings are common even among the youngest students. It has been increasingly recognized that these behaviors are interrelated.” The report called sexual activity a “significant associate of other health-endangering behaviors,” and it found the older the adolescent the more likely sexual activity would be linked with alcohol or marijuana use. Sexual activity can be an indicator of substance abuse. Adolescents who have three or more sexual partners in one year, are more likely to engage in illicit drug use.³⁰ The Alan Guttmacher Institute, in its report, *Sex and America’s Teenagers*, stated that young teenagers who use alcohol, tobacco and marijuana on a regular basis are more likely to be having sex.³¹

Nationwide, among students who are currently sexually active, one-fourth reported they had used alcohol or drugs at last sexual intercourse.³² Other research shows the misuse of alcohol often results in an earlier onset of sexual activity.³³ In fact, one survey of teens (ages 13 to 18) found 17 percent of those who had an intimate one-on-one encounter with someone of the opposite sex admitted doing something sexual under the influence of drugs or alcohol that they would not have done if they had not been under that influence. Among older girls (ages 17 to 18) who had had intimate encounters, 32 percent said drugs or alcohol had influenced their decision to do something sexual.³⁴

A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) study about cigarette smoking, based on the data from the 1992 National Health Interview Survey of Youth Risk Behavior (NHIS-YRBS), found a relationship between smoking and sexual activity. Those who were current smokers or former smokers were significantly more likely to have engaged in sexual intercourse than youth who had never used cigarettes. Sexual activity was reported by 80 percent of current smokers and 80.4 percent of former smokers compared to sexual experience being reported by a minority (41.4 percent) of those who had never smoked.³⁵

Significant evidence exists revealing that adolescents who have violent lives are likely to also be involved in sex and substance abuse. A study published in *The Journal of Adolescent Health* reported that eight percent of all students were considered fighters (those who had been in a fight in the last 30 days). However, those eight percent of students accounted for 25 percent of those who had sex with multiple partners.³⁶

The IYD approach

IYD promotes a comprehensive risk avoidance approach in regard to youth involvement in sexual activity. The only 100 percent, risk-free decision, and therefore the healthiest decision, is for youth to delay sexual activity – preferably until marriage. IYD stresses the benefits of sex in a committed, faithful relationship – especially given the research that has shown that those who are the most sexually satisfied are in a marriage where both partners are faithful.³⁷

In contrast to IYD's risk avoidance message, many other sexuality messages focus on risk reduction, by encouraging the use of condoms to reduce unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. While condoms may protect against some risks, they do not provide totally effective protection against STDs or pregnancy – and they do nothing to protect the emotional well-being of a young person.³⁸ IYD's sexual message is consistent with all others who want young people to abstain from drinking, drug use, smoking and violence.

For that reason, IYD promotes the best message for today's youth: to lead a healthy and happy life, young people should completely avoid early sexual activity.

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Research and editorial assistance provided by Sarah Kinder.

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