

Study: Sexual Activity is Rare Among Young Adolescents

In spite of public perception, sexual activity is exceedingly rare among the youngest adolescents, ages 10 to 12, a new report shows. Among older teens, however, sexual activity remains common.

The notion that the youngest adolescents – ages 10 to 12 – are more sexually active today than in the past is greatly exaggerated, says a new report in the April issue of *Pediatrics*, released online Monday.

It finds that among both boys and girls, only 0.6% of 10-year-olds, 1.1% of 11-year-olds and 2.4% of 12-year-olds, have had sex, and the incidence of pregnancy among girls age 12 or younger “is minuscule.”

The study also finds that sex among very young adolescents is frequently involuntary; 62% of girls who had sex by age 10 say their first encounter was coerced. Coercion was also cited by 50% of those who had sex by age 11 and 23% who had sex by age 12.

“When you look at some polling data of the general public, there are chunks of Americans who believe most (young teens) are having sex,” says lead author Lawrence Finer, director of domestic research for the Guttmacher Institute, a non-profit that studies reproductive and sexual health. “But it was never the case ... and these are long-term patterns,” he says. At no time in the past 50 years did more than 10% of girls have sex by their 14th birthday, he adds.

Although the number of teens who have sex at the very youngest ages is small, the finding that it is very often coerced points to an additional public health concern that health care providers should be aware of, Finer says.

Other studies have also found that younger teens are not as sexually active as popular opinion sometimes suggests. But “there’s more detail here in this new study, with numbers going back to age 10, and (the data) is much more recent, which is important,” says Bill Albert, chief program officer

of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. He was not involved in the study.

The analysis uses newly available public data on sexual initiation (defined as vaginal intercourse), contraceptive use and pregnancy among adolescents ages 10-19 from the 2006–2010 National Survey of Family Growth, conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics, and other sources.

It shows that by middle adolescence, sexual activity is more common among teens but only for a minority (5.4% of 13-year-olds; 11% of 14-year-olds; 20% of 15-year-olds; 33% of 16-year-olds). Although more than half of older teens (ages 17 to 19) have had sex, 25% of both males and females have not had sex by age 20.

The report also finds that contraceptive use is common among sexually active teens. Usage rates at the time of the first sexual encounter among girls as young as 15 (80%) are similar to those for 17- to 18-year-olds (85%). However, adolescents who started having sex at 14 or younger were less likely to use contraceptives the first time and took longer to begin using them.

Overall, the report points to “a trend going in the right direction,” Finer says. Teens are waiting longer to have sex, using contraceptives more frequently when they start having sex, and being less likely to become pregnant than their peers of past decades, he says.

Continuing to give teenagers “the information they need and the services they need to protect themselves, if and when they become sexually active, that obviously is a very important public health goal,” he adds.

