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Teens delaying sexual activity

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Teen sexual activity has dropped significantly since 1995 -- primarily, teens say, because it is against their religious or moral values, says a new federal study regarded by many as the "gold standard" for family statistics.

"There is much good news in these results," Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy G. Thompson said of the report released yesterday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS).

The report uses data from the long-awaited 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), a periodic national survey that provides bedrock data on American family life, marriage, divorce, adoption, cohabitation, family planning, fatherhood, infertility, pregnancy and birth.

The NCHS report showed that more teens are delaying sex until they are older.

The declines were especially dramatic among boys: Among males ages 15 to 17, the portion who never had sexual intercourse rose from 57 percent in 1995 to 69 percent in 2002.

The first sexual experience still typically occurs in the teen years; however, the portion of males who maintained their virginity at age 19 rose from 25 percent in 1995 to 36 percent in 2002.

Among girls ages 15 to 17, the number of virgins rose from 62 percent in 1995 to 70 percent in 2002. However, as the girls aged, about the same portion became sexually experienced -- less than a third were still virgins by age 19 in both surveys.

The most common reason for delaying sex was because it was "against [their] religion or moral values" -- 37.8 percent of girls and 31.4 percent of boys chose this answer. The 2002 survey also found that 13 percent of girls and almost 11 percent of boys had pledged to remain virgins until marriage.

Teen contraception use also rose. When teens started having sex, more of them -- 75 percent of girls and 82 percent of boys -- used contraceptives, especially condoms, according to the report.

In addition, of teens who had had sex in the past three months, 83 percent of girls and 91 percent of boys said they used contraceptives. This was higher than in 1995, when 71 percent of girls and 82 percent of boys said they used protection during sex.

Taken together, the new data show teens "are truly becoming more cautious -- that is, they're having less sex or they're using contraception a bit more," said Bill Albert, spokesman for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

"Both sides should claim victory," he said, referring to advocates of abstinence education and comprehensive sex education.

Sharon Camp, president and chief executive officer of the New York-based Alan Guttmacher Institute, praised the findings but noted that at least one-third of teens said they had received "no formal instruction" about contraception, and at least half hadn't talked about it with their parents.

"[T]oo many people of all ages still lack the information and services they need to protect themselves," she said.

The new survey updates 1995 and 1998 NSFG data and questions more than 12,000 people, including 2,271 teenagers. It is the first time men have been interviewed for the survey. The data is expected to shed light on the effects of 1990s social policies, such as welfare reform and campaigns for abstinence education, marriage education and responsible fatherhood.

The NSFG is not only a "gold mine" for information, it's "a gold standard for research," Mr. Albert said.

A second NCHS report using NSFG data, which also was released yesterday, showed contraceptive use has become "virtually universal" among American women of reproductive age. About 82 percent of women said they had used birth-control pills, and 90 percent said they had used a condom with a male partner.

The top five methods of birth control in the United States were oral contraceptives (11.6 million users), female sterilization (10.3 million women), male condoms (6.9 million users), male sterilization (3.5 million) and Depo-Provera injections (2 million users), according to the NCHS report.

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