

# The Washington Post

December 29, 2008



New research shows that, regardless of whether they wear purity rings or make other pledges that they will protect their virginity, more than half of U.S. teenagers become sexually active before they get married.

## Premarital Abstinence Pledges Ineffective, Study Finds

*Teenagers Who Make Such Promises Are Just as Likely to Have Sex, and Less Likely to Use Protection, the Data Indicate*

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Teenagers who pledge to remain virgins until marriage are just as likely to have premarital sex as those who do not promise abstinence and are significantly less likely to use condoms and other forms of birth control when they do, according to a study released today.

The new analysis of data from a large federal survey found that more than half of youths became sexually active before marriage regardless of whether they had taken a "virginity pledge," but that the percentage who took precautions against pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases was 10 points lower for pledgers than for non-pledgers.

"Taking a pledge doesn't seem to make any difference at all in any sexual behavior," said Janet E. Rosenbaum of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, whose report appears in the January issue of the journal *Pediatrics*. "But it does seem to make a difference in condom use and other forms of birth control that is quite striking."

The study is the latest in a series that have raised questions about programs that focus on encouraging abstinence until marriage, including those that specifically ask students to publicly declare their intention to remain virgins. The new analysis, however, goes beyond earlier analyses by focusing on teens who had similar values about sex and other issues before they took a virginity pledge.

"Previous studies would compare a mixture of apples and oranges," Rosenbaum said. "I tried to pull out the apples and compare only the apples to other apples."

The findings are reigniting the debate about the effectiveness of abstinence-focused sexual education just as Congress and the new Obama administration are about to reconsider the more than \$176 million in annual funding for such programs.

"This study again raises the issue of why the federal government is continuing to invest in abstinence-only programs," said Sarah Brown of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnan-

cy. "What have we gained if we only encourage young people to delay sex until they are older, but then when they do become sexually active — and most do well before marriage — they don't protect themselves or their partners?"

James Wagoner of the advocacy group Advocates for Youth agreed: "The Democratic Congress needs to get its head out of the sand and get real about sex education in America."

Proponents of such programs, however, dismissed the study as flawed and argued that programs that focus on abstinence go much further than simply asking youths to make a one-time promise to remain virgins.

"It is remarkable that an author who employs rigorous research methodology would then compromise those standards by making wild, ideologically tainted and inaccurate analysis regarding the content of abstinence education programs," said Valerie Huber of the National Abstinence Education Association.

Rosenbaum analyzed data collected by the federal government's National Longitudinal Study of Adoles-

cent Health, which gathered detailed information from a representative sample of about 11,000 students in grades seven through 12 in 1995, 1996 and 2001.

Although researchers have analyzed data from that survey before to examine abstinence education programs, the new study is the first to use a more stringent method to account for other factors that could influence the teens' behavior, such as their attitudes about sex before they took the pledge.

Rosenbaum focused on about 3,400 students who said they had not had sex or taken a virginity pledge in 1995. She compared 289 students who were 17 years old on average in 1996, when they took a virginity pledge, with 645 who did not take a pledge but were otherwise similar. She based that judgment on about 100 variables, including their attitudes and their parents' attitudes about sex and their perception of their friends' attitudes about sex and birth control.

"This study came about because somebody who decides to take a virginity pledge tends to be different from the average American teenager. The pledgers tend to be more

religious. They tend to be more conservative. They tend to be less positive about sex. There are some striking differences," Rosenbaum said. "So comparing pledgers to all non-pledgers doesn't make a lot of sense."

By 2001, Rosenbaum found, 82 percent of those who had taken a pledge had retracted their promises, and there was no significant difference in the proportion of students in both groups who had engaged in any type of sexual activity, including oral sex and vaginal intercourse, the age at which they first had sex, or the number of sexual partners. More than half of both groups had engaged in various types of sexual activity, had an average of about three sexual partners and had had sex for the first time by age 21 even if they were unmarried.

"It seems that pledgers aren't really internalizing the pledge," Rosenbaum said. "Participating in a program doesn't appear to be motivating them to change their behavior. It seems like abstinence has to come from an individual conviction rather than participating in a program."

Although there was no difference

in the rate of sexually transmitted diseases in the two groups, the percentage of students who reported condom use was about 10 points lower for those who had taken the pledge, and they were about six percentage points less likely to use any form of contraception. About 24 percent of those who had taken a pledge said they always used condoms, compared with about 34 percent of those who had not taken a pledge.

Rosenbaum attributed the difference to what youths learn about condoms in abstinence-focused programs.

"There's been a lot of work that has found that teenagers who take part in abstinence-only education have more negative views about condoms," she said. "They tend not to give accurate information about condoms and birth control."

But Huber disputed that charge. "Abstinence education programs provide accurate information on the level of protection offered through the typical use of condoms and contraception," she said. "Students understand that while condoms may reduce the risk of infection and/or pregnancy, they do not remove the risk."