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A Sweeping Survey of Americans' Sexual Behavior

By David Brown

Among the findings of a sweeping federal government survey of American sexual behavior is one that may surprise those bewailing a permissive and eros-soaked popular culture: More than one-quarter of people interviewed in their late teens and early 20s had never had sex.

And the number was growing.

The latest round of the quaintly named National Survey of Family Growth found that among 15-to-24-year-olds, 29 percent of females and 27 percent of males reported no sexual contact with another person ever - up from the 22 percent of both sexes when the survey was last conducted in 2002.

“The public’s general perception is that when it comes to young people and sex, the news is bad and likely to get worse,” said Bill Albert, chief program officer of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, an advocacy organization in Washington.

The seventh and latest round of the survey, first done in 1973, provides a corrective to that view.

“Many, many young people have been very receptive to the message of delaying sexual activity,” Albert said. “There’s no doubt about it.” He added that the nearly 40 percent reduction in teen pregnancy since the 1990s - which experts attribute to both increased condom use and increased abstinence - represents “extraordinary progress on a social issue that many once considered intractable.”

The uptick in abstinence is one of many revealing facts arising from structured interviews with a random sample of 13,495 Americans, ages 15 to 44, that were done from 2006 to 2008. The findings provide evidence for almost every theory and supposition about the nation’s secret sex life.

The survey results, released Thursday, suggest that oral sex may be a gateway to vaginal sex but that for some teens it is a stopping point. Most adults are monogamous. About 4 in 10 adults have had anal sex. Women are more likely

than men to have same-sex liaisons. Or at least are more comfortable talking about them.

Conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services, the survey provides basic information for public health policymakers concerned with such issues as sexually transmitted disease. There is no single fact that it is trying to ferret out or message that its 49 pages of text and tables seek to deliver.

But Anjani Chandra, the demographer who is the lead author of the report, said that “for some people, it may be news that these behaviors exist at all in the general population.”

When first run, the survey queried only married and formerly married women. Single women and then men were later included, as were more detailed questions about sexual practices.

Parts of the survey are now so explicit that even though the interviewer and subject are face to face, some questions are asked and answered using a computer screen so that the answers are completely private.

“We know from previous work that you get better reporting when you use” computer-assisted interviewing, said John Santelli, a pediatrician and epidemiologist at Columbia University who has researched sexual behavior in teens. “I think this kind of data is pretty reliable.”

Among the more sensitive subjects is teenage oral sex.

The latest results provide support for the idea that some teens limit their sexual activity to oral sex either to preserve their virginity or because they view such encounters as safe. Public health officials say that the latter is a misconception and that some sexually transmitted infections, such as herpes and human papillomavirus, can be transmitted by oral-genital contact.

Among 15-to-17-year-olds, 7 percent of females and 10 percent of males report having oral sex but no vaginal

sex. That fraction, however, declines rapidly among older respondents. In the 20-to-24 age group, only 3 percent of females and 4 percent of males report oral-sex-only activity.

In the 25-to-44 age group, however, 98 percent of females and 97 percent of males report having had vaginal intercourse, with about 90 percent having oral sex as well. Slightly more than one-third (36 percent) of women and 44 percent of men report having had anal sex.

Across the entire age span surveyed - 15 through 44 - 13 percent of women reported some "same-sex sexual behavior" in their lifetime, compared with 5 percent of men. For women, the fraction was up slightly from 2002, and for men, it was down slightly.

Many more men (21 percent) than women (8 percent) report having at least 15 sex partners in their lifetimes. Hispanic women were less likely to report same-sex activity (6 percent) than black (11 percent) or white (15 percent) women.

There were small effects related to education. For example, 9 percent of women with bachelor's degrees or higher reported same-sex encounters, compared with 15 percent of women who had not graduated from high school. On the other hand, 6 percent of male college graduates reported such encounters, compared with 3 percent of men who had not finished high school.

The survey also asked about sexual identity and orientation.

Among 18-to-44-year-olds who described themselves as heterosexual, 9 percent of women and 3 percent of men reported having same-sex encounters. On the other hand, 15 percent of women and 12 percent of men who described themselves as homosexual or bisexual had never had a same-sex experience.

Not enough people were interviewed to provide state-by-state findings. But there are other population categories - urban vs. suburban vs. rural residence, religious affiliation, living arrangement - that can be specifically studied. Thursday's report is just the first and most basic cut.

"The data will be set free, and I'm sure any number of researchers will pounce on it and do all sorts of interesting analyses," Chandra said.