

### Science Says: Teens' Attitudes Toward Sexual Activity, 2002



*The National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) is the premier source of national information on teen sexual behavior, contraceptive use, and pregnancy. This Science Says issue brief uses the most recent round of the NSFG, collected in 2002, to examine teens' attitudes about sexual activity outside of marriage.*

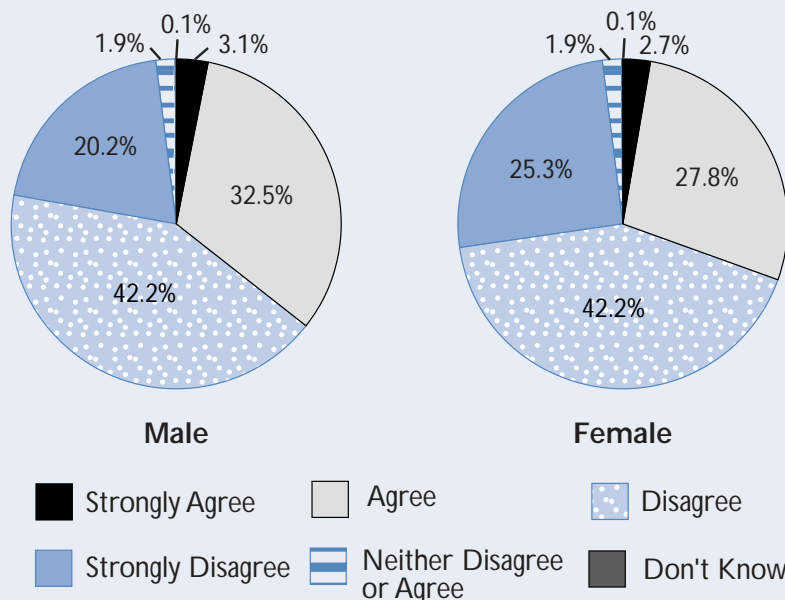
#### Highlights:

- The majority of teens disapprove of unmarried 16-year-olds having sex.
- Disapproval of teens having sex at an early age is widespread. Teens young and old—and of all racial/ethnic groups—generally do not think it is appropriate for unmarried 16-year-olds to have sex.
- Virgins are much more likely than those who are sexually experienced to disapprove of sexual activity among unmarried teens.
- As a general matter, teens are less likely to disapprove of unmarried 18-year-olds having sex.

disagreed with the statement, “It is all right for unmarried 16-year-olds to have sexual intercourse if they have strong affection for each other” (Figure 1).

**Younger and older teens have similar attitudes toward sex among unmarried 16-year-olds.** Disapproval of sexual activity among unmarried 16-year-olds was

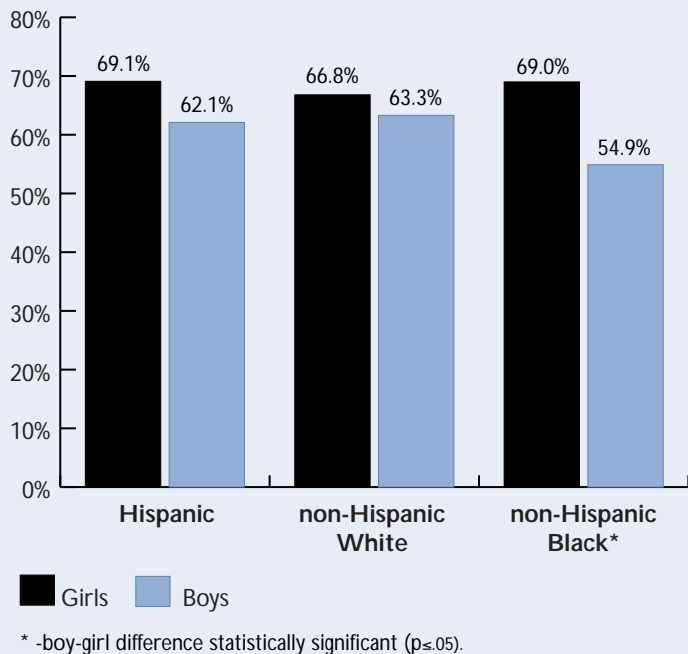
**FIGURE 1: Agreement with the statement, “It is all right for unmarried 16-year-olds to have sexual intercourse if they have strong affection for each other,” teens aged 15–19**



#### Most teens disapprove of sexual activity among unmarried 16-year-olds.

About two-thirds of boys (62.4%) and girls (67.5%) aged 15-19

**FIGURE 2: Percentage of Teens Aged 15–19 Who Disapprove of Sexual Activity Among Unmarried 16-Year-Olds, by Race/Ethnicity**

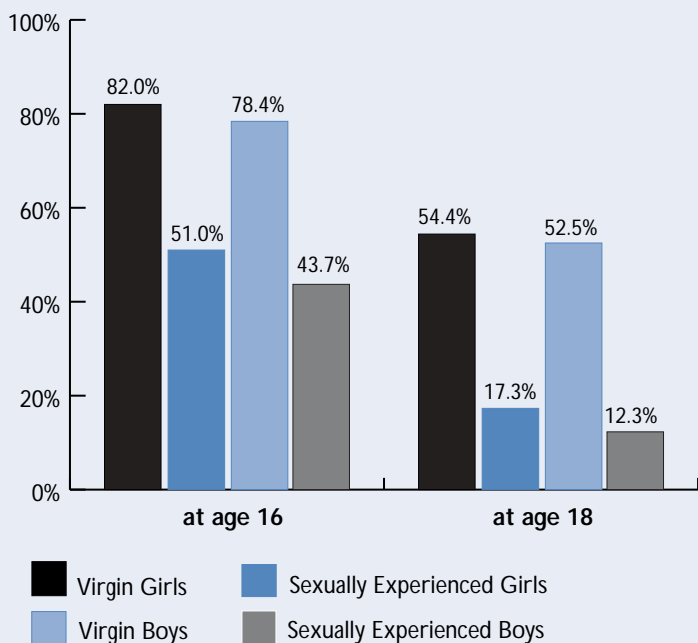


consistently high among both older and younger teens. For example, well over half of 15- to 17-year-old (59.0%) and 18- to 19-year-old boys (66.8%) disapproved of sex among unmarried 16-year-olds. Rates of disapproval among 15- to 17-year-old (66.2%) and 18- to 19-year-old girls (69.5%) were also quite similar.

**Teens of different racial/ethnic groups generally hold similar attitudes toward sex among unmarried 16-year-olds.**

Nearly seven in ten Hispanic (69.1%) and non-Hispanic Black (69.0%) girls and 66.8% of non-Hispanic White girls disapproved of unmarried 16-year-olds having sex. Levels of disapproval among teen boys were similar—62.1% of Hispanic, 54.9% of non-Hispanic Black, and 63.3% of non-Hispanic White teen boys disapproved of sex among unmarried 16-year-olds (Figure 2). (Differences between boys and girls were statistically significant<sup>1</sup> only among non-Hispanic Blacks.)

**FIGURE 3: Percentage of Teens Aged 15–19 Who Disapprove of Sexual Activity Among Unmarried Teens at a Given Age, Virgins vs. Sexually Experienced Teens**



**Virgins are more likely than sexually experienced teens<sup>2</sup> to disapprove of sex among young, unmarried teens.**

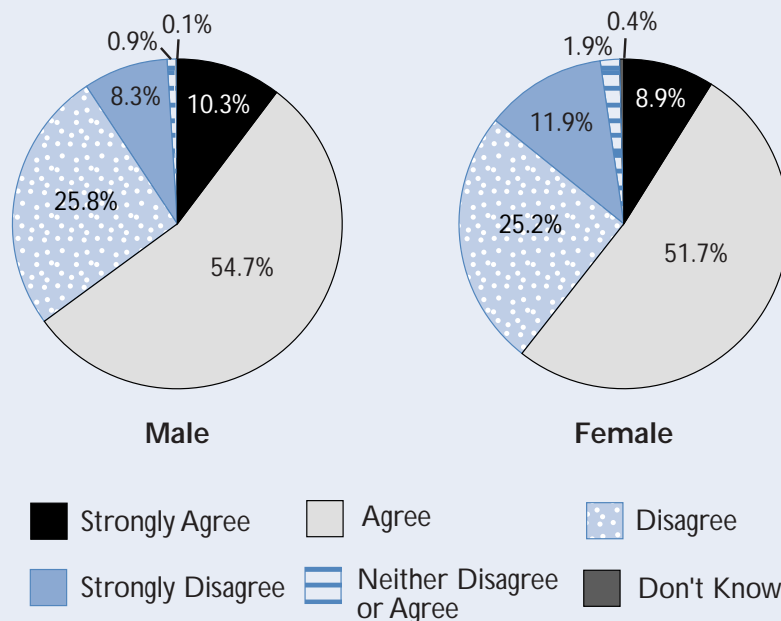
More specifically, among virgin boys aged 15-19, 78.4% disapproved of unmarried 16-year-olds having sex; by contrast, among sexually experienced boys aged 15-19, 43.7% disapproved. Among virgin girls aged 15-19, 82.0% disapproved of unmarried 16-year-olds having sex, compared to 51.0% of sexually experienced girls aged 15-19 (Figure 3.)

**Fewer teens disapprove of older adolescents having sex.** While nearly two-thirds of teens aged 15-19 do not approve of teens

16 and younger having sex, smaller percentages disapprove of unmarried 18-year-olds having sex. Still, over one third of teen boys (34.1%)

and girls (37.1%) disagreed with the statement, "It is all right for unmarried 18-year-olds to have sexual intercourse if they have strong affection for each other" (Figure 4).

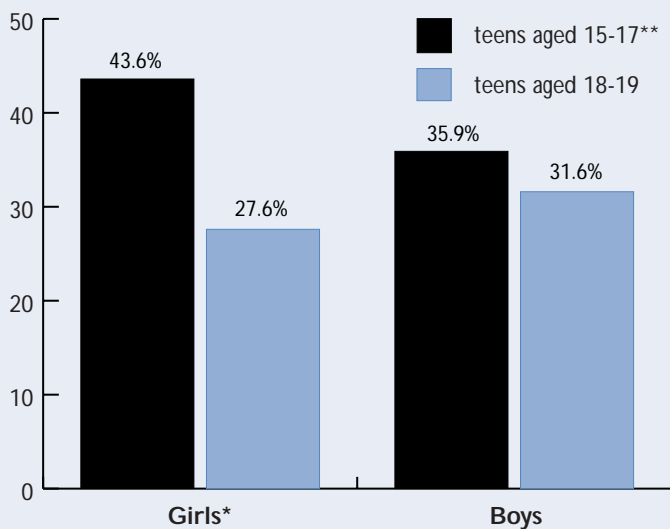
**FIGURE 4: Agreement with the statement, "It is all right for unmarried 18-year-olds to have sexual intercourse if they have strong affection for each other," teens 15-19**



When asked if they disapproved of sex among unmarried 18-year-olds, younger teen girls (43.6%) were more likely to disapprove than older teen girls (27.6%), and were also more likely to disapprove than teen boys of the same age (35.9%). The proportion of older teen boys who disapproved of sex among unmarried 18-year-olds (31.6%) was similar to the rate of disapproval among younger teen boys, and same-aged teen girls (Figure 5).

Among teen boys, 29.7% of Hispanics, 34.8% of non-Hispanic Whites, and 29.6% of non-Hispanic Blacks disapproved of sex among unmarried 18-year-olds. Higher percentages of teen girls—38.5% of Hispanics, 36.8% of non-Hispanic Whites, and 35.1% of non-Hispanic Blacks—disapproved of sex among unmarried 18-year-olds (although differences between boys and girls were not statistically significant).

**FIGURE 5: Percentage of Teens Aged 15-19 Who Disapprove of Sexual Activity Among Unmarried 18-Year-Olds, by Age**



\* - difference by age for girls statistically significant ( $p \leq .05$ ).  
 \*\* -boy-girl difference for younger teens statistically significant ( $p \leq .05$ ).

**As with sex among younger, unmarried teens, virgins are much more likely than sexually experienced teens to disapprove of sex among unmarried 18-year-olds.**

When asked if it is okay for unmarried 18-year-olds to have sex, 52.5% of virgin boys and 54.4% of virgin girls said they disapproved, compared to only 12.3% of sexually experienced teen boys and 17.4% of sexually experienced teen girls (Figure 3). (Readers should note that differences between males and females were close to being "statisti-

cally significant”— $p=.06$  in both cases—for both the question about 16-year-olds and the question about 18-year-olds.)

## Discussion

This analysis of the NSFG data suggests that messages encouraging young adolescents to delay sexual activity are in line with the beliefs of the majority of teens—as noted above, about two-thirds of teens aged 15-19 disapprove of young teens having sex. The research presented here also suggests that attitudes about sex line up closely with behavior. That is, teens who have not had sex are far more likely to disapprove of sex among unmarried teens than those teens who are sexually experienced.

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### Author Information

This research brief was written by National Campaign staff members Christine Flanigan, Renee Huffman, and Julia Smith.

### About the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization supported largely by private donations. The National Campaign's mission is to improve the well-being of children,

youth, and families by reducing teen pregnancy. The National Campaign celebrates its 10th anniversary in 2005. When we began in 1996, we set a goal of a one-third reduction in the teen pregnancy rate in ten years. Ten years later, it seems almost certain that the nation will reach this goal. Building on this great success, the National Campaign's new challenge to the nation for the next decade will be to reduce the teen pregnancy rate by *another* one-third.

### Funding Information

This research brief was prepared with support from the Office of Populations Affairs (OPA), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of OPA.

### Data Sources

All statistics for 2002 were generated with data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), a periodic national survey on fertility-related issues conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). NSFG data sets on CD-ROM are available free of charge from NCHS: visit [www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg.htm), call (301) 458-4222, or e-mail [nsfg@cdc.gov](mailto:nsfg@cdc.gov) for more information.

### Notes

1 For those unfamiliar with the term “statistical significance,” this refers to

the results of statistical testing to measure whether observed differences between groups (boys versus girls, older versus younger teens, etc.) are true difference in attitudes/behavior, or are due to the particular teens included in the survey, which is meant to be representative of the U.S. teen population. For the purposes of these analyses, the threshold for statistical significance is 0.05. That is, results are considered significant if the “p value” (or probability of the difference being just a random occurrence) is equal to or less than 5%.

- 2 For boys, being “sexually experienced” is defined as having been married, having cohabited with a female, or having answered yes to the following question: “have you ever had sexual intercourse with a female (sometimes this is called making love, having sex, or going all the way)?” For girls, being “sexually experienced” is defined as having been married, having cohabited with a male, having been pregnant, or having answered yes to the following question: “at any time in your life, have you ever had sexual intercourse with a man, that is, made love, had sex, or gone all the way?” “Virgins” are those who have never married, never cohabited, never been pregnant (girls only) and answered no to the question regarding having had sexual intercourse.