

## Science Says: Teens' Attitudes Toward Nonmarital Childbearing, 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 childbearing outside of marriage.*

### Highlight:

- Older teens, sexually experienced teens, and teen mothers are more likely than younger teens and virgins to believe that it is okay for an unmarried woman to have a child.

**Teen girls are more likely than teen boys to believe that it is okay for an unmarried female to have a child.**

Girls aged 15-19 were significantly more likely than boys the same age to agree with the statement "It is okay for an unmarried female to have a child" (64.8% vs. 49.9%, Figure 1).

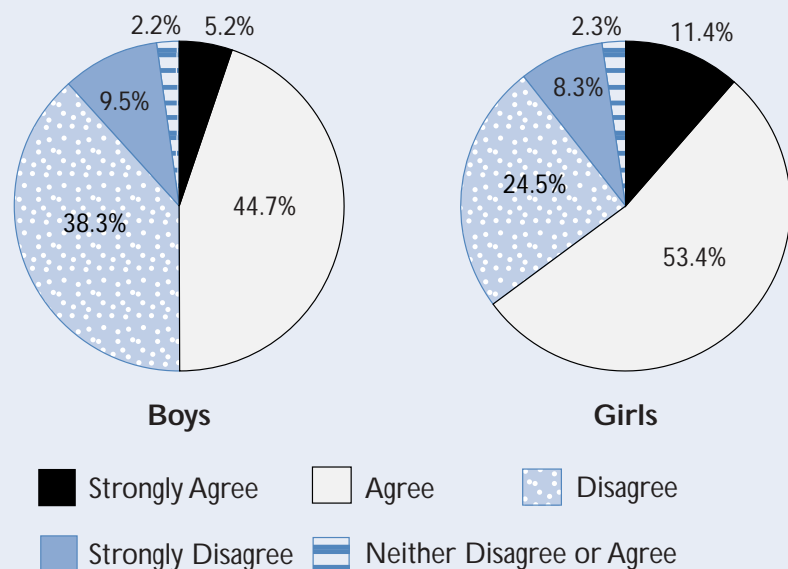
**Sexually experienced teens<sup>1</sup> are more likely than other teens to approve of nonmarital childbearing.**

Teen attitudes on nonmarital childbearing varied by sexual experience. Teens who were sexually experienced were much more likely

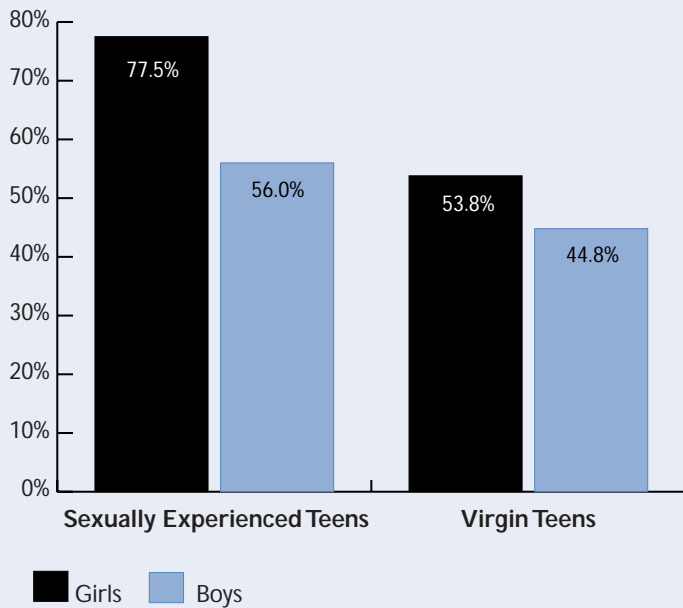
than virgins to approve of nonmarital childbearing. Over half of sexually experienced boys (56.0%) agreed that it is okay for an unmarried female to have a child, com-

pared with 44.8% of virgin boys. And, over three fourths of sexually experienced teen girls (77.5%) agreed with the statement, versus only 53.8% of virgin girls. Note

**FIGURE 1: Agreement with the statement, "It is okay for an unmarried female to have a child," Teens 15-19**



**FIGURE 2: Percent of Teens Aged 15–19 Who Approve of Nonmarital Childbearing**



that girls (both virgins and sexually experienced girls) were more likely than boys to approve of nonmarital childbearing although this gender difference was particularly pronounced among sexually experienced teens (77.5% of sexually experienced teen girls and 56% of sexually experienced teens boys believe nonmarital childbearing is okay, Figure 2).

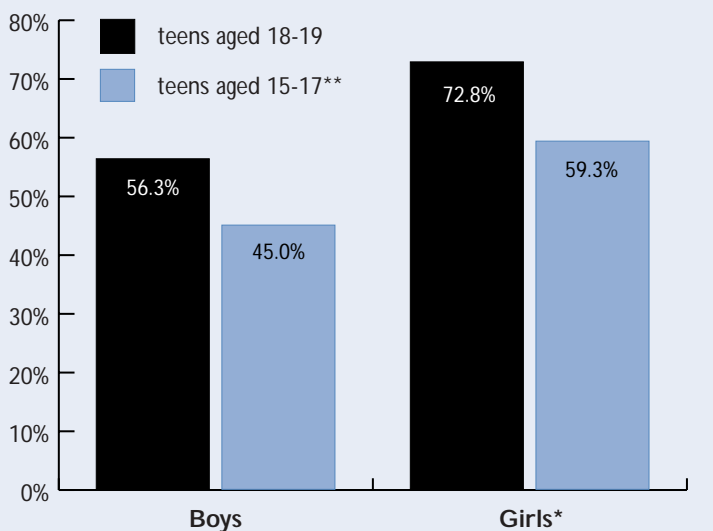
**Teen mothers, in particular, are more likely than other teens to approve of nonmarital childbearing.**

Teen mothers (86.5%) were more likely than teen girls who have not given birth (63.0%) to agree that it is okay for an unmarried female to have a child. (Too few teen fathers were surveyed in the NSFG to be able to generate reliable statistics for this group.)

**Older teens are more likely than younger teens to approve of nonmarital childbearing.**

Approval of nonmarital childbearing was higher among teens aged 18-19 than among teens aged 15-17, but the differences were considered statistically significant<sup>2</sup> only among girls. Almost three-fourths of 18- to 19-year-old girls (72.8%) approved of nonmarital childbearing, compared to only 59.3% of 15- to 17-year-old girls. Among boys, 56.3% of older teens approved of nonmarital childbearing, compared to 45.0% of younger teens. Girls were significantly more likely than boys to approve of nonmarital childbearing among both younger and older teens (Figure 3).

**FIGURE 3: Approval of Nonmarital Childbearing by Gender and Age**



\* - difference between younger and older teens statistically significant ( $p \leq .05$ ).

## Levels of approval for non-marital childbearing do not differ much by race/ethnicity.

Among teen girls, 59.4% of Hispanics, 67.0% of non-Hispanic Whites, and 65.3% of non-Hispanic Blacks approved of non-marital childbearing. Among teen boys, 44.0% of Hispanics, 50.7% of non-Hispanic Whites, and 51.1% of non-Hispanic Blacks approved of nonmarital childbearing. Male-female differences were considered statistically significant for non-Hispanic Whites and Blacks, and close to being significant for Hispanics ( $p=.06$ ).

## Discussion

These data indicate that an appreciable proportion of teens—usually well over half—believe that having children outside of marriage is okay. Interestingly, girls are more likely than boys to approve of non-marital childbearing. This may reflect girls' greater acceptance and/or anticipation of a parental role, compared with boys.

Equally interesting, although not surprising, is the high level of approval of out-of-wedlock childbearing among teen mothers. Given that the overwhelming majority of teens who give birth are not married and given the instinct all of us have for seeing positive value in our own life paths, it would be more surprising if large percentages of teen mothers disapproved of having children outside of marriage.

## 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

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## 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 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.
- 2 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%.