

Says: **American Opinion on Teen Pregnancy and Related Issues 2007**



Understanding the content and direction of American opinion on teen pregnancy and related issues is important for two primary reasons. First, because attitudes and beliefs can affect behavior, opinion surveys greatly enhance our understanding of teen pregnancy and what to do about it. Second, surveys of public opinion are a critical supplement to the behavioral data collected regularly by the federal government through such projects as the National Survey of Family Growth and the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System.

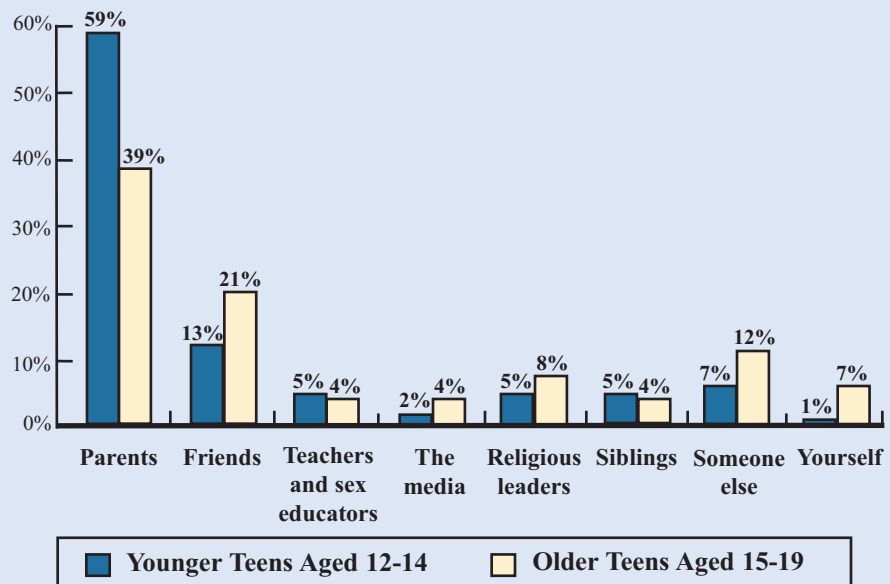
This *Science Says* brief summarizes some of the key findings from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy publication, *With One Voice 2007: America's Adults and Teens Sound Off About Teen Pregnancy* (available at www.teenpregnancy.org). The surveys on which this research brief is based were conducted by an independent research company in September and October 2006. The surveys were conducted by telephone with over 1,100 adults (aged 20 and older) and 1,000 teens (aged 12-19). All results are considered nationally representative. See the methodology section below for more information on how these surveys were conducted.

Parental Influence

Teens say that parents (47%) influence their decisions about sex more than friends (18%), religious leaders (7%), siblings (5%), teachers and sex educators (4%), or the media (3%). Six in ten teens (64%) say they share their parents' values about sex.

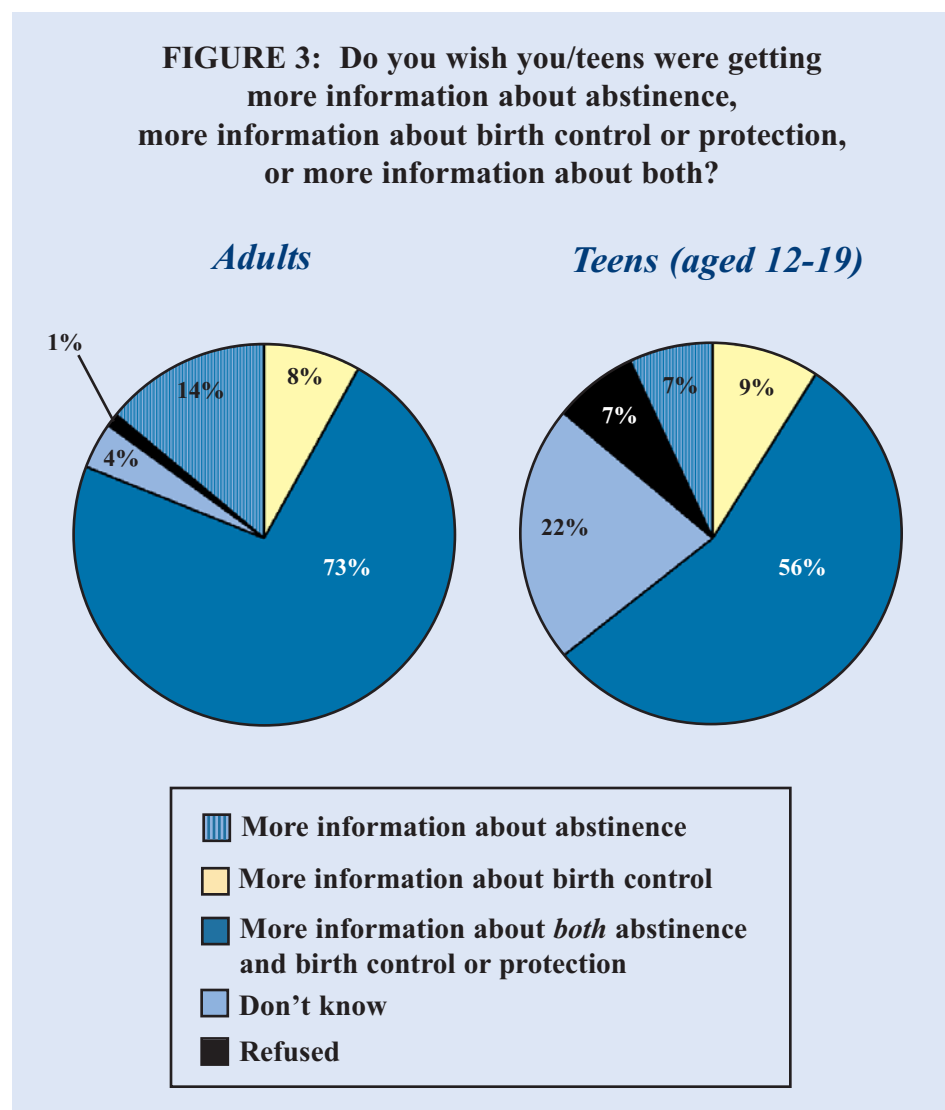
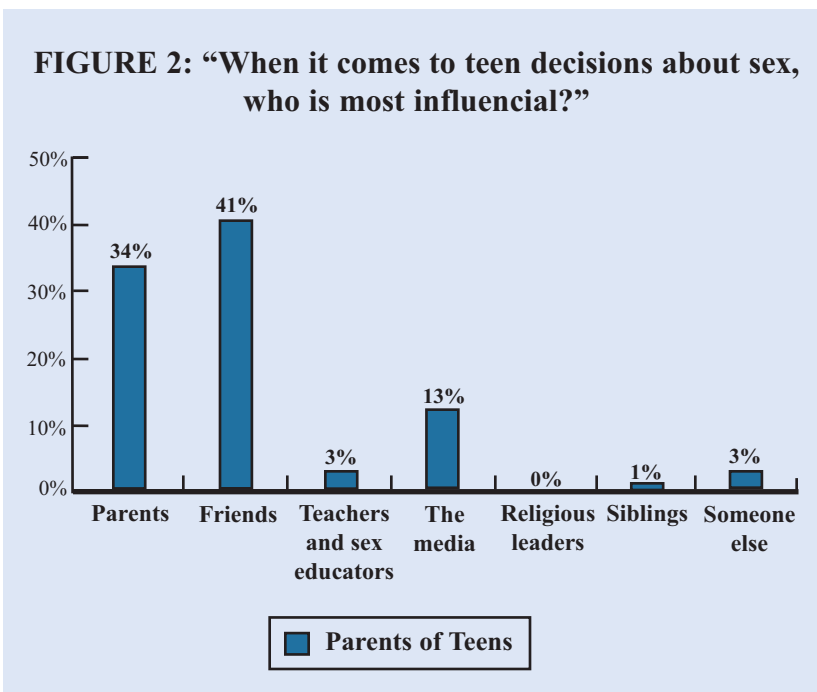
Parents of teens, however, underestimate their own influence (only 34% believe that parents most influence teens' decisions about sex), and overestimate the influence of such sources as friends (41%) and the media (13%).

FIGURE 1: When it comes to your decisions about sex, who is most influential? Is it...?



There is disagreement about just how often parents and teens are discussing sex. Seven in ten teens (71%) report that they have had a helpful conversation with their parents about delaying sex and avoiding teen pregnancy. But many more parents (89%) report that they have had a helpful conversation with their children on these topics.

When it comes to talking about sex, most parents of teens (88%) admit they often don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to start the conversation. Most teens (65%) and adults (61%) also believe that parents send one message about sex to their sons and a different message to their daughters.



Abstinence and Contraception

The overwhelming majority of adults (93%) and teens (90%) think it is important for teens to be given a strong message that they should not have sex until they are at least out of high school. It is also the case that three-quarters of adults (73%) and a clear majority of teens (56%) believe young people should be getting information about abstinence and contraception, rather than either/or.

Teens and adults (18% and 16%, respectively) agree that the primary reason teens do not use contraception is fear of their parents finding out. Teen boys (69%) are also far more likely than teen girls (50%) to say the decision to use contraception is shared equally by both partners.

Attitudes and Beliefs

Six in ten sexually experienced teens (60%) say they wish they had waited longer to have sex, including 67% of those aged 12-14 and 57% of those aged 15-19. Almost equal proportions of teen boys (73%) and teen girls (78%) say that being a virgin is not embarrassing.

Gender Differences

Most teens (62%) and adults (75%) believe that teen boys often receive the message that they are “expected to have sex.” Teens (59%) and adults (74%) also believe that teen girls often receive the message that “attracting boys and looking sexy is one of the most important things they can do.”

Religion

Large majorities of adults (64%) and teens (76%) believe that religious leaders and educators should be doing more to help prevent teen pregnancy.

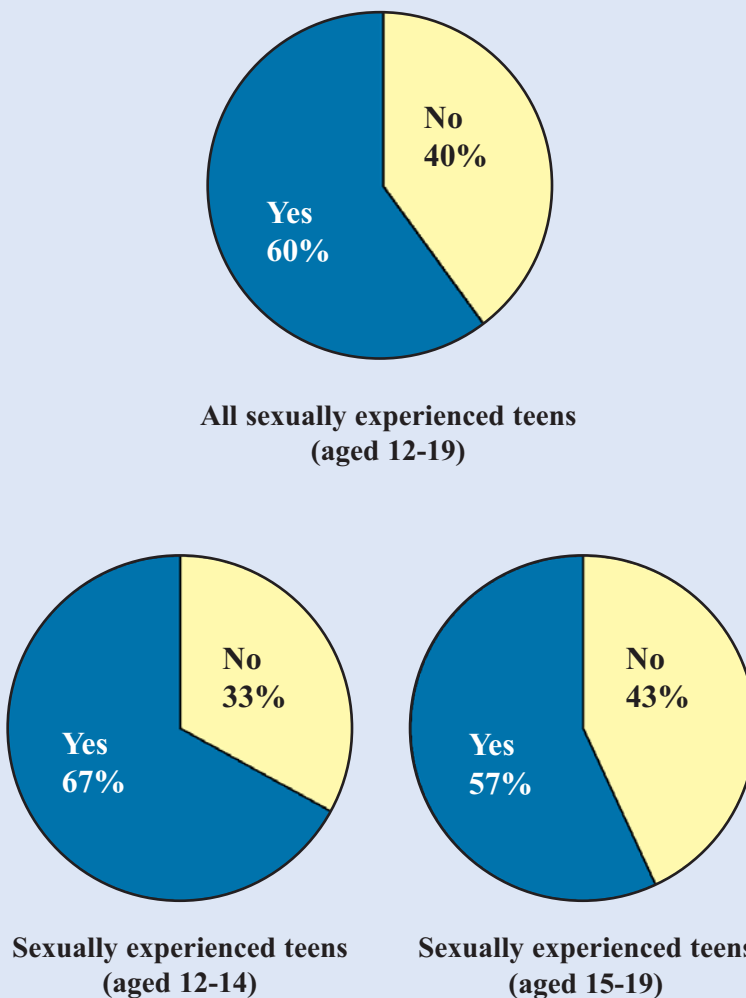
Social Norms

About half of teens (48%) say they have never thought about what their life would be like if they got/got someone pregnant as a teen. A significant minority of teens (29%) and adults (25%) go on to describe teen pregnancy and parenthood in their community as “no big deal.”

Media

Most teens (75%) agree that when a TV show or character deals with teen pregnancy, it makes them think more about the consequences of sex. Teens (76%) also wish the media showed more or talked more about the consequences of sex, including teen pregnancy.

FIGURE 4: If you have had sexual intercourse, do you wish you had waited longer?



Discussion

Parents

Taken together, the survey results provide a rather complex portrait of teens, parents, and their interactions about sex and related issues. On the one hand, teens continue to make clear that parents influence their decisions about sex more than friends, the media, or other sources; most teens say they share their parents’ values about sex; and seven in ten teens say they have had a helpful conversation with

their parents about delaying sex and avoiding teen pregnancy. On the other hand, parents of teens fail to grasp the depth of their influence over their teens on these issues. Moreover, when it comes to discussing sex and related issues with their children, most parents of teens overestimate the level of such conversations, admit that they send different messages to their sons and daughters, and make clear that they would talk to their children more often about these issues if they only knew what to say and how to say it.

Abstinence and Contraception

Providing young people with a strong message that they should delay having sex until they are at least out of high school continues to garner near unanimous support among adults and teens. This overwhelming support for encouraging young people to delay sex should not be misinterpreted as overwhelming support for providing young people only with messages about abstinence. The clear majority of Americans believe that young people need more information about both abstinence *and* contraception rather than either/or.

Gender Differences

If six in ten teens continue to believe that girls often receive the message that looking sexy and attracting boys is one of the most important things they can do while boys get the message that they are expected to have sex, it is clear that we as a nation have a lot more work to do on behalf of teens.

Religion

At least two conclusions can be drawn from the survey findings on religion. First, it is clear that most young people make decisions about sex based not

just on what is safe but also on what they believe is right. Second, there is a real opportunity for religious leaders and faith communities to do more to help young people on this front—based on the strong support of adults and teens.

Social Norms

Significant minorities of teens (29%) and adults (25%) believe that teen pregnancy is “no big deal in my community.” This may simply reflect that there are not a lot of teen pregnancies in certain communities. It may also reflect a queasiness among adults about “imposing” one’s values on another; a culture that has become increasingly tolerant of unwed pregnancy and childbearing; or it may reflect a concern that taking a strong stand against teen pregnancy and childbearing will offend those teens who are already pregnant or parenting or might somehow stigmatize the children of teen mothers. Whatever the reason, if adults and teens do not view teen pregnancy as clearly undesirable, we should not be surprised by continued high rates of adolescent pregnancy and childbearing in the United States.

Religion

It comes as no surprise that teens lead media-saturated lives. Young people spend an average of 6.5 hours a day—over 44.5 hours a week—with media (see *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year Olds* at www.kff.org). Nor does it stretch the limits of credulity to believe that all this media time—what teens are watching, reading, and listening to—may influence their sexual attitudes and behavior. But what may be surprising is that three-quarters of teens overall (including 81% of girls and 71% of boys) and adults want the media to give more attention to the consequences of sex. Moreover, two thirds of teens overall (82% of girls and 68% of boys) and adults say that TV shows and characters make them think about the consequences of sex. Clearly, these findings suggest that the media can be a powerful educational tool for teens and can help parents begin discussions with their children about sexual behavior, values, relationships, and related issues.

Methodology

Data presented in this research brief are drawn from two national surveys—one with teens and one with adults. Both surveys were conducted by International Communications Research (ICR), an independent research company (www.icrsurvey.com). The adult survey was conducted via telephone by ICR and results are weighted to provide nationally representative estimate of the adult population, aged 20 and older. Field work for this survey was conducted between September 29 and October 6, 2006. Telephone interviews were conducted by ICR with 1,162 adults aged 20 and older. The adults survey was done as part of a national, twice-weekly telephone omnibus survey using a fully-replicated, stratified, single-state random digit dialed (RDD) sample of households with telephones. Sample telephone numbers were computer-generated. The margin of error for this survey is +/- 2.87%. The teen survey was also conducted via telephone by ICR and is weighted to provide a nationally representative estimate of young people aged 12-19. Field work for this survey was conducted between September 29 and October 15, 2006. Telephone interviews were conducted by ICR with 1,037 young people aged 12-19. The sample for this survey was drawn using two different methods. The first sample source used was RDD. The second sample source used was a database of households with teenagers. All questions were conducted using the Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system. The CATI system ensures that all questions are rotated and that when answer options are presented, they are also rotated. This rotating eliminates “question position” bias.

About Putting What Works To Work

Putting What Works to Work (PWWTW) is a project of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy funded, in part, by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Through PWWTW, the National Campaign is translating research on teen pregnancy prevention and related issues into user-friendly materials for practitioners, policymakers, and advocates. As part of this initiative, the Science Says series summarizes recent research in short, easy-to-understand briefs.

About the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization supported largely by private foundations and donations. The National Campaign's mission is to improve the well-being of children, youth, and families by reducing teen pregnancy. The National Campaign's goal is to reduce the teen pregnancy rate by one-third between 2006 and 2015.

Author Information

Bill Albert is the Deputy Director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy and the author of *With One Voice 2007*, the publication upon which this research brief is based. This brief was designed by staff member Melissa Spindler-Virgin.

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