

Says: Where and When Teens First Have Sex

Almost half (46%) of high school-aged teens in the United States have had sexual intercourse. Because of continued concern about teenage sexual activity and support for messages that encourage young people to delay sexual debut, where and when teens first have sex is a matter of interest to those who run programs for teens, to policymakers, and to parents. This “Science Says” research brief uses data from a recent national survey to examine the time and place teens first have sex and provides recommendations based on these findings.

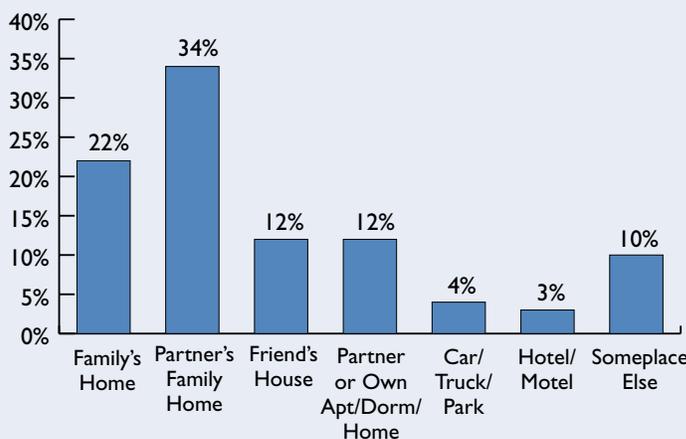
Location of First Sex

Two-thirds (68%) of 16 to 18-year-olds who reported a first sexual experience in 2000 said that they first had sexual intercourse in their family home, their partner’s family home, or a friend’s house (Figure 1).

- More than one in five (22%) sexually experienced 16 to 18 year-olds said they first had sexual intercourse in their family home; 34% reported that it occurred in their partner’s family home; and 12% said they first had sex in their friend’s home.
- Smaller numbers reported first having sex in their own or partner’s own home, apartment or dorm room (12%), in a car or truck (4%), in a hotel or motel (3%), in a park or outdoors (3%), or “someplace else” (10%).

Teens’ first sexual experience is most likely to occur in a male teen’s family home (see Figure 2 on next page).

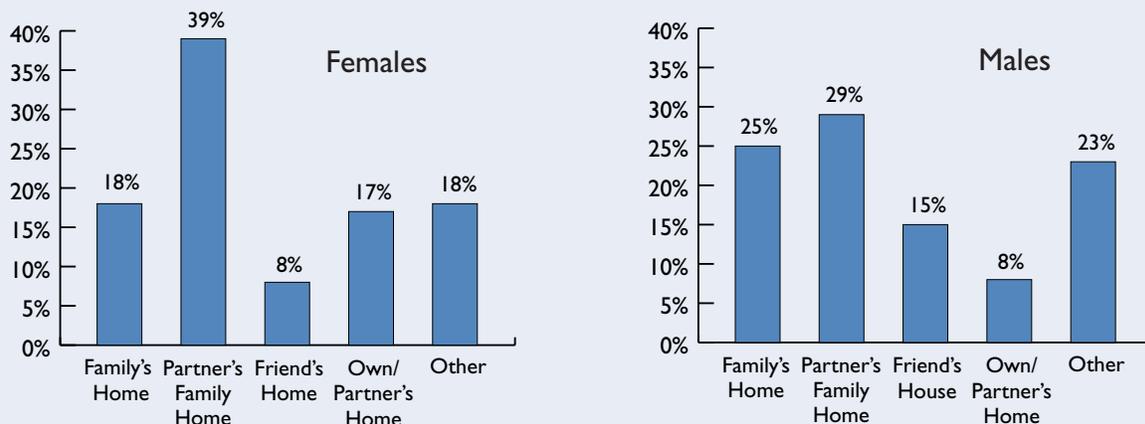
FIGURE 1: Where 16–18 Year Olds First Have Sex



Data: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), Waves 1-4. Child **TRENDS**

- One quarter of sexually experienced teen males first have sex at their family’s home, compared to 18% of sexually experienced teen females. Almost four in ten teen females (39%) first have sex in their partner’s family home compared to 29% of teen males.
- Teen males were also more likely than teen females to have first sex in a friend’s house (15% versus 8%).
- More than twice as many teen females as teen males had sex in their own or in a partner’s own

FIGURE 2: Where 16–18 Year Olds First Have Sex, By Gender



Data: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), Waves 1-4.



home, apartment or dorm (17% versus 8%). This difference is mostly due to first sexual experience in a partner's own home, which may reflect older partners, on average, among females.

Younger teens' first sexual experiences are more likely to occur in their partner's family home or their friend's home.

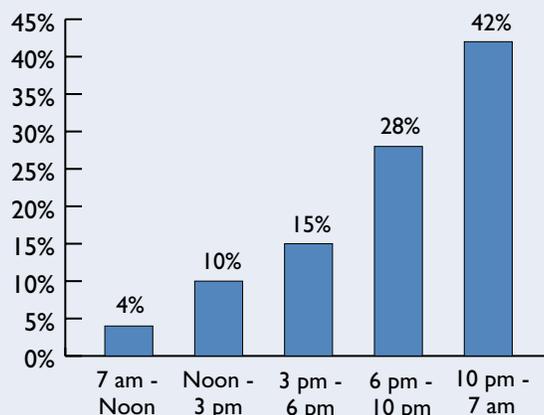
- Over half (52%) of sexually experienced 16-year-olds reported that their first sexual experience occurred in a partner's family home or a friend's house, compared to 47 percent of sexually experienced 17-year-olds and 38 percent of 18-year-olds who have had sex.

Timing of First Sex

Among teens who have had sex, more than two-thirds (70%) report they first had sexual intercourse in the evening or night (Figure 3).

- Most (42%) teens reported first having sexual intercourse between

FIGURE 3: When 16–18 Year Olds First Have Sex



Data: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), Waves 1-4.



10 pm and 7am, and another 28% first had sex between 6 pm and 10 pm. An additional 15% said their first sexual experience occurred in the late afternoon (3 pm to 6 pm), while 14% first had sex before 3 pm.

The time of day that teens first have sex varies by race/ethnicity (see Figure 4 on next page).

- Among sexually experienced teens, African-Americans were more likely to first have sex during the late afternoon or after-school hours of 3 pm to 6 pm (24%) than Hispanic (16%) and White teens (13%).
- Hispanic teens (23%) were more likely than African-American (12%) or White (14%) teens to

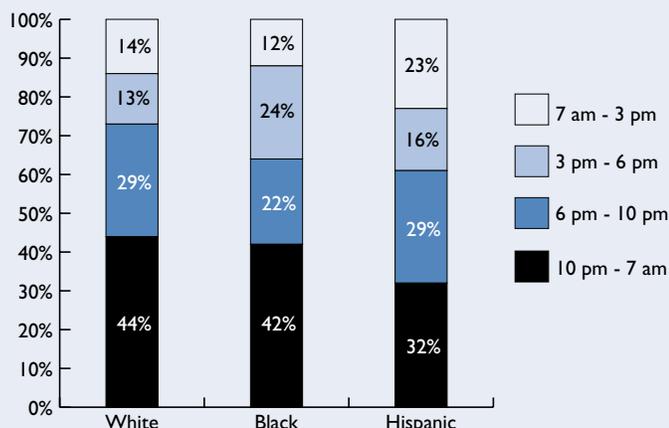
report that their first sexual experience occurred during typical school-day hours (before 3 pm).

- More than two out of five White and African-American teens and about one-third of Hispanic teens first had sex between 10 pm and 7 am.

What else is known about when teens first have sex?

- When examining which month teens first have sex, there does not appear to be much difference between school year months (September – April) and summer months (June – August). For example, 28% of the sample reported first having sex during the summer months of June – August (or about one-third of the sample during one-third of the calendar year). However, June is the month of the year with the highest proportion of teens reporting that they first had sex (13.7%).
- Moreover, there are no significant differences in the time of day that teens report first having sex (e.g., early morning, afternoon/school hours, evening or night) among those who first had sex during the school year compared with those who first had sex during the summer months.
- While the study used in this brief used a dataset that did not include questions on day of the week first sex occurred, several small-area datasets (not nationally-representative) have looked at this issue. A recent study conducted in an urban, African-American school district found that 82.6% of sexually experi-

FIGURE 4: When 16–18 Year Olds First Have Sex, By Race/Ethnicity



Data: National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), Waves 1-4. Child TRENDS

enced youth reported that their most recent episode of sexual intercourse occurred at a time *other than* weekdays between 3 and 6 pm.¹ An earlier study asked teen girls who had been diagnosed with an STD to keep a diary of sexual activity, and found that over an average period of 10 weeks, sex was most likely to occur on Friday or Saturday, and least likely to occur on Sunday.²

What It All Means

This research has several possible implications for those working with young people, policymakers, and parents and other caring adults (teachers, coaches, faith leaders, etc.), including:

- **Parents and other caring adults.** Adolescents' first sexual experience may very well occur when parents are in the home. Consequently, the primary message to parents is: Whether young people

are at home, their partner's home, or the home of a friend, parents should be more aware of their activities. Parents should not be shy about making their presence known around the house. Parents should make sure that a responsible adult is present and paying attention when their children are at the home of a boyfriend/girlfriend or friend. Other research shows that the likelihood of first sexual experience increases with the number of hours teens spend unsupervised (Cohen et al., 2002). If parents or other responsible adults are not with teenagers, parents should encourage their children to take advantage of adult-supervised activities that constructively engage teens.

- **Parents should also note.** While parents clearly cannot determine their children's decisions about sex, the quality of their relationships with their children can make a real difference. Overall

closeness between parents and their children, shared activities, parental presence in the home and parental caring and concern are all associated with a reduced risk of early sex and teen pregnancy. (Blum & Rinhart 1998).

- **Program leaders.** Many have come to believe that teenage sexual activity primarily occurs in the unsupervised hours many teens have immediately after school. These data show that the after-school hours are not the time when most teens first *initiate* sexual activity. Still, the hours immediately after school are reason for concern. After-school programs may delay sexual activity by keeping teens engaged in programs during times when they may not otherwise be monitored. After-school and pregnancy prevention programs also have a role in helping teens make responsible decisions during non-program hours. In addition, there appears to be a need for supervised activities that occur after 6 pm. Programs that offer game nights, dances, or sports activities provide teens with a supervised evening activity that may help delay early sexual debut.

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 Campaign translates 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. This first Science Says brief is based on research conducted by Child Trends. The Authors of the research are Jennifer Manlove, Ph.D. and Elizabeth Terry-Humen, M.P.P., Child Trends.

For more information, please visit www.teenpregnancy.org

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About the National Campaign

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan initiative supported largely by private donations. The Campaign's mission is to improve the well-being of children, youth, and families by reducing teen pregnancy. Our goal is to reduce the rate of teen pregnancy by one-third between 1996 and 2005.

About Child Trends

Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization dedicated to improving the lives of children by conducting research and providing science-based information to improve the decisions, programs, and policies that affect children. Child Trends conducted the analysis used in this fact sheet.

Source information

All data taken from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), Waves

1-4 (except where noted). The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 cohort (NLSY97) is a nationally representative sample of 8,984 youth aged 12-16 born between 1980 and 1984, collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics on an annual basis since 1997 (Hering & McClain, 2001). Data are collected on a variety of issues that are applicable to adolescents and young adults, including information on their sexual histories. Currently there are four rounds of data available for public use (1997-2000). In Round 4 of this survey (2000), data were collected on the location and timing of adolescents' first sexual experience among teens who had a first sexual experience in the past year. The sample for these figures includes respondents who reported having had first sexual intercourse for the first time at the Round 4 questionnaire (when teens were aged 15 to 19). The sample is further restricted to include only those respondents who were between the ages of sixteen and eighteen years old in the Round 4 interview, had reported not ever having had sexual intercourse in the previous round (Round 3), and were not married to their first sexual partner. Our final sample consists of 664 respondents aged 16-18 in 2000.

1. Cohen, D.A., Farley, T.A., Taylor, S.N., Martin, D.H., & Schuster, M.A. (2002). When and where do youths have sex? The potential role of adult supervision. *Pediatrics*, 110(6). Online at <http://www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/110/6/e66>.

2. Fortenberry, J.D., Orr, D.P., Zimet, G.D., & Blythe, M.J. (1997). Weekly and seasonal variation in sexual behaviors among adolescent women with sexually transmitted diseases. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 20(6), 420-25.