



## Looking at the Data: Abstinence-Relevant Findings from National Surveys

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### INTRODUCTION

Teen pregnancy and birth rates are at record low levels in the United States. An important part of this decline is an increase in the number of teens who choose to delay having sex. Several national datasets, including the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) and the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), are available to help us better understand teens' sexual behavior and to examine trends in such behavior over time. This e-Update presents data from these surveys, as well as from a national polling survey. Topics include prevalence of sexual initiation, teens' feelings about their first sexual experience, their reasons for not having sex, and messages teens and parents think teens should receive. Collectively, this information is meaningful for project staff because it can inform development or enhancement of abstinence education interventions—including addressing perceived social norms and empowering teens to more effectively negotiate with partners about delaying sex—and it can be used to assess teens in your community compared to teens nationwide and to educate parents and others about the need for information about abstinence.

### WHAT IS THE NSFG?

- The NSFG is a survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Health Statistics.
- Administered to men and women ages 15–44, the NSFG was first conducted in 1973 and has been administered seven times since then, most recently in 2006–2010. Trend data are available for teens for 1988, 1995, 2002, and 2006–2010.
- The survey is administered to teens ages 15–19, including those who are not in school, and provides detailed information on sexual activity and other related issues.
- More information about the NSFG is available at <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg.htm>.

### WHAT IS THE YRBS?

- The YRBS is a survey that is administered every 2 years to students in grades 9–12 in public schools throughout the United States.
- The YRBS was first conducted in 1991 and has been administered every 2 years since then, most recently in 2011.
- The survey methodology allows for comparisons at the national, state, territorial, tribal, and local level when these data are collected.
- The 2011 survey included questions related to sexual behavior.
- More information about the YRBS is available at <http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/yrbs/index.htm>.

## DATA ON TEENS' SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

The NSFG and YRBS include questions about whether teens have had sex, the age of their first sexual experience, teens' feelings about their first sexual experience, teens' reasons for delaying sexual initiation, and teens' attitudes about teen sexual activity.

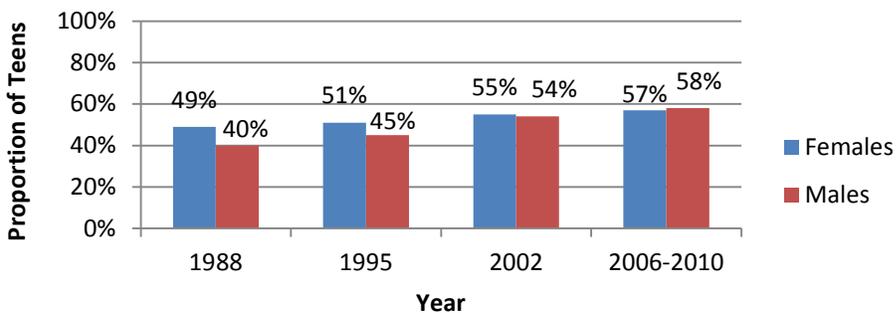
### Sexual Initiation

According to NSFG data from 2006–2010, the majority of teens ages 15–19 in the United States—57% of females and 58% of males—have never had sex.

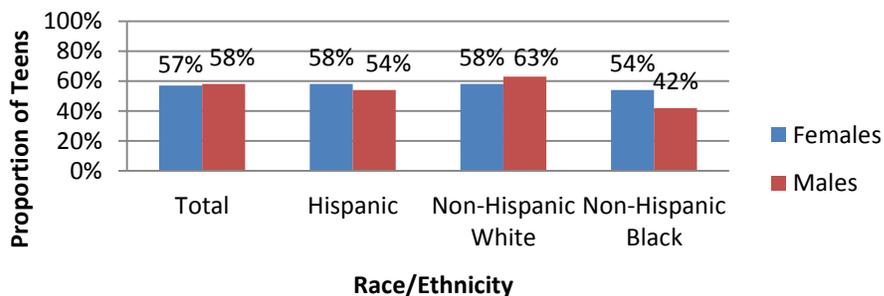
The proportion of teens in the United States who have never had sex increased between 1988 and 2006–2010, particularly among teen males (Chart 1). Discrepancies remain among teen males by race/ethnicity, while among teen females, the proportion who have ever had sex is similar across racial/ethnic groups (Chart 2). It is also important to note that there are differences in the proportion of teens who have ever had sex by age. In fact, fewer than one-third of teens age 15-17 had ever had sex (27% of females, 28% of males) compared to nearly two-thirds of older teens (63% of females, 64% of males).

Data from the 2011 YRBS also show that a majority (53%) of all high school students have never had sex. The proportion was similar among male (51%) and female students (54%) and decreased from 9<sup>th</sup> grade (67%) to 12<sup>th</sup> grade (37%). Between 1991 and 2011, the proportion of students who delayed sexual initiation increased slightly, most notably among black high school students (from 19% in 1991 to 40% in 2011, not shown).

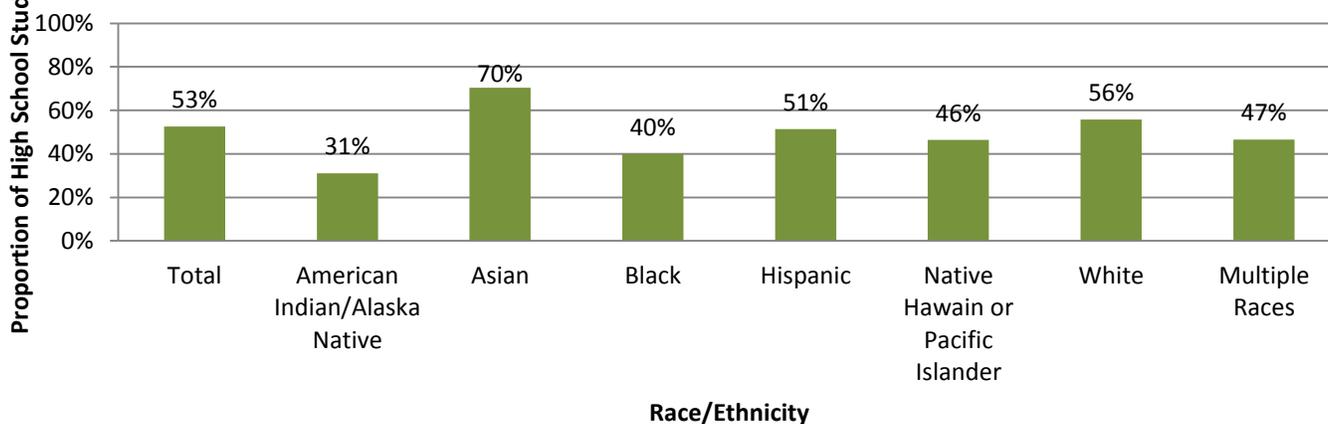
**Chart 1. Proportion of Teens Who Have Never Had Sex, by Gender, NSFG, 1988-2010**



**Chart 2. Proportion of Teens Who Have Never Had Sex, by Gender and Race/Ethnicity, NSFG, 2006-2010**



**Chart 3. Proportion of High School Students Who Have Never Had Sex, by Race/Ethnicity, YRBS, 2011**



Compared to peers from other racial/ethnic groups, Asian students have consistently been the most likely to have never had sex, and in 2011, American Indian/Alaska Native students were the least likely to have never had sex (Chart 3). In 2011, 6% of high school students reported that they had sex for the first time before age 13—a decrease from 10% in 1991. Male students were more likely than female students to report that they had sex for the first time before age 13 (9% compared to 3%, respectively). Black students (14%) were more likely than Hispanic (7%) and white students (4%) to report having had sex before age 13.

## IMPLICATIONS

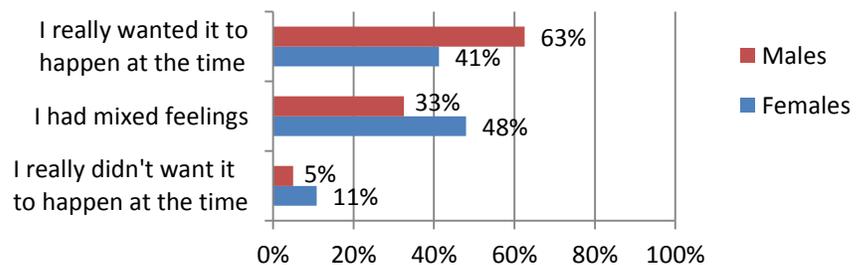
It is important for teens to know that many of their peers are abstaining from sex, especially among teens age 17 and younger. Facilitators can use these data to address misperceptions that teens might have about sexual activity among their peers and to dispel myths like “everybody’s doing it.” Program facilitators could consider contrasting teens’ perceptions of peer behavior to actual data about choices teens are making.

## Feelings about First Sexual Experience

According to the NSFG, almost half of young adult females (48%) and a third of young adult males (33%) reported that they had mixed feelings about their first sexual experience (Chart 4). Only 41% of females and 63% of males indicated that they really wanted it to happen the first time they had sex. There are also important variations in these data by age of first sexual experience:

- Females who had sex for the first time before age 15 (18%) were twice as likely as their peers who delayed (9%) to report that they did not really want it to happen at the time. (In 2006–2010, about 12% of females and 14% of males reported having had sex for the first time before age 15.)
- Similarly, 9% of males who had sex for the first time before age 15 indicated that they did not really want it to happen at the time compared to 4% of males who delayed sex until at least age 15.
- In addition, 17% of females who first had sex with a partner who was 3 or more years older reported that they did not really want it to happen at the time, compared to about 10% of females who had sex with a partner closer in age.

**Chart 4. Feelings About First Sexual Experience Among Adults Ages 18-24 Who First Had Sex Before Age 20, By Gender, NSFG, 2006-2010**

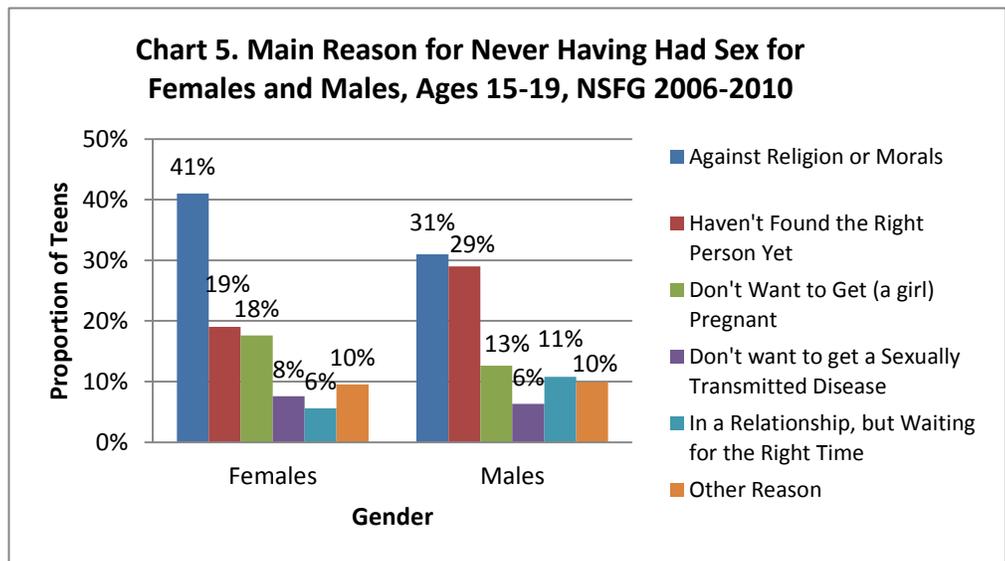


## IMPLICATIONS

Because many teens may have mixed emotions about having sex, or may not want to have sex for the first time when their partner does, abstinence education projects should find ways to encourage teens to determine for themselves when they are ready to have sex and provide them with skills to increase their ability to negotiate with their partners. This might be particularly true among young women in the program who are more likely to report mixed emotions about having sex or not wanting to have sex the first time it happened. Sharing these data with teens may be a first step. Project staff could work with both males and females to conceptualize sexual freedom (that everyone has the right to say no and make decisions for themselves in all circumstances) and to address sexual coercion and voluntary consent.

## Reasons for Delay

According to the NSFG, the most frequent reason teens reported for not having sex is that it is against their religion or morals (Chart 5). Other reasons included that they have not found the right person yet (reported by 29% of males) and that they want to avoid pregnancy (reported by 18% of females). Among both males and females, non-Hispanic white teens were more likely than their Hispanic or non-Hispanic black peers to report that they were delaying sex for religious or moral reasons. Hispanic and non-Hispanic black females teens (22%) were more likely than their non-Hispanic white peers (14%) to report that they have not had sex because they do not want to get pregnant.



### IMPLICATIONS

Educational programs and curricula may need to focus on reasons for delaying sex that resonate with teens they serve. Effective messages may address teens' values as well as healthy relationships including partner characteristics. Pregnancy prevention may be a salient inhibitor of sexual initiation for some but not all teens. Projects might also focus on a variety of perceived benefits of waiting to have sex and perceived severity of consequences of sexual activity.

## Messages and Attitudes about Delaying Sex

Polling data from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy in 2012 indicate that both teens and parents are supportive of messages for teens to delay sex. In fact, 87% of teens and 93% of parents report that it is very important that teens are given a strong message that they should not have sex until they are at least out of high school. In addition, nearly 9 in 10 teens reported that it would be much easier for them to delay sexual activity and avoid teen pregnancy if they were able to have more open, honest conversations about these topics with their parents. According to the NSFG, among teens ages 15–19, the overwhelming majority (71% of girls and 60% of boys) disagree with the statement, "It is alright for unmarried 16-year-olds to have sexual intercourse if they have strong affection for each other."

### IMPLICATIONS

Programs can help teens by encouraging parents to set expectations about sexual activity and to talk with teens about delaying sexual initiation. Parents need to know that teens would welcome these messages and conversations. Presenting parents with specific data can help address misperceptions and make clear the need for education, services, and their involvement. Programs might also encourage teens to talk to their parents about sex and the role values might play in delaying sex.

## WAYS TO USE THESE DATA IN YOUR COMMUNITY

All data presented in this e-Update are publicly available and can be accessed online along with supplemental reports, fact sheets, and tools that can help make the data accessible to different target audiences and easy to use. Both NSFG and YRBS data can also be downloaded directly from their respective Websites for additional statistical analyses. Furthermore, the questionnaires are available for download if you want to use the survey questions in your own work. The following are a few ideas for how you could use these data in your work:

- **Use these data to gauge how the youth in your community or project are doing.** You can compare the data that you have collected in your needs assessment or evaluation to the NSFG and YRBS data to identify areas of risk or success. YRBS data are available at the state level and may be particularly useful for these comparisons. You can also use the survey questions asked in the NSFG and YRBS in your own local evaluation instruments.
- **These data can help you make the case for your project.** Whether applying for funding, reporting on progress of your project, or educating influential people in your community about your efforts, it might be helpful to refer to data on abstinence and related topics as a way to demonstrate the need for your work or that your project is contributing to overall changes in youth behavior in your community and state.
- **Supplement these data with other sources of information about risky sexual behavior among youth.** Resources such as vital statistics data, local and/or state health department data, and data from national organizations can help paint a complete picture of youth in your state and their behavior related to delaying sexual activity.

## REFERENCES AND RESOURCES

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