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Questioning Abstinence Until Marriage

by Heather Boerner

With the national debate about abstinence-until-marriage programs raging on, Lawrence Finer, director of domestic research at the Guttmacher Institute, a nonprofit organization focused on sexual and reproductive health research, policy analysis, and public education, decided to investigate whether abstinence-only until marriage campaigns are a realistic policy goal, given statistics about the average age of first sex and the average age of first marriage. To find the answer, he looked at rates of premarital sex in the United States.

What he found was surprising to many: Not only had more than nine out of 10 people had premarital sex, but the rate of premarital sex has been consistent for more than 50 years. Finer's conclusion was that premarital sex is not only normal but nearly ubiquitous — and has been for decades.

plannedparenthood.org talked to Finer about his findings.

What do you think is the most important finding of this study?

I would say there's a pair of important findings. One is that almost all American males and females have had premarital sex; and second, it's been that way for quite some time. I think people [in the past] were probably not talking about it as much as they do today, but they were doing it.

We got a lot of response to the study, questioning the data. What's interesting is that these are government data. They come from the National Survey of Family Growth that was conducted in 1982, 1988, 1995 and 2002. A lot of people were writing in saying, "This can't possibly be representative; you didn't survey me. You must have missed rural people, you must have missed religious people." The truth is that a lot of time and money and energy went into making these surveys representative.

Did these findings surprise you?

We had a sense already that a high percentage of the current population was having premarital sex, because we know that the median age of first sex is the late teens or early 20s, and that the

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age at marriage is getting later and later. So based on those existing signposts, we suspected a high percentage of current young people had had premarital sex. But it was interesting — and a bit surprising — to find that an earlier cohort of people had also had premarital sex.

It's interesting because in a lot of western European countries, adolescent sex per se is not stigmatized. It's seen as part of human development, part of growing up. But unprotected sex is stigmatized. Here in the U.S., we put barriers in place to prevent people from getting information about sex and contraception. Here, there's a lot of heat and not quite enough light in terms of premarital sex — and that's probably literally true.

Did the study also include sexual activity aside from intercourse?

No, we looked only at vaginal intercourse. When we chose how to define sexual activity, we wanted to make the parameters conservative so the results would hold up more strongly to scrutiny.

But sure, if you add another form of sexual activity, you're going to find the rates of premarital sex go up even further.

Again, these data are based on surveys with women and men who are reporting their own behavior. If anything, people would probably be conservative about reporting that they had premarital sex. If that's the case, premarital sex may be even more ubiquitous.

Did your study look at sex among gay and lesbian people as well?

We did not specifically look at gay and lesbian people, although by the [comprehensive] nature of the survey, people of different sexual orientations would have been included. But we only looked at opposite-sex sexual behavior. Arguably, if you include people who had sex under a different definition of sex, premarital sex would be even more common.

What do you hope teenagers, who are the target of abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, will take from this study?

This survey wasn't aimed at encouraging people to have sex or not have sex, but to recognize reality. We aimed it at the general population to raise public awareness about the commonness of premarital sexual activity. We aren't just saying to policy makers that premarital sex is common, but we really wanted to increase the public consciousness on the issue.

What effect do you think this study could or should have on policymakers pushing for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs?

One of the purposes of the study was to look at the data in the context of an increasing emphasis on abstinence and increasing efforts, both governmental and in the private sector, to

encourage, promote, and increase abstinence-until-marriage. Our question was, "Is such a policy goal realistic? Is it realistic for abstinence until marriage to be normative behavior?" I think that when you look at our findings, and the ubiquity of the behavior, it would be a very challenging policy goal. Nothing's impossible, but it would be rather challenging.

We got a lot of commentary saying that with this survey we were encouraging people to have sex and were dismissing the value and effectiveness of abstinence-only education. In response, we've said, "There's no question that abstinence from sex is an effective way to prevent unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). But the reality seems to be that very few people do abstain. Most people don't even abstain through their teen years. Given that fact, we are not telling anyone to have sex or not to have sex. What we are doing is saying, since most people do have premarital sex, and sex is part of most people lives, it's important to give them the tools so that if and when they do decide to be sexually active, they can protect themselves from pregnancy and STDs.

I think it's also worthwhile to remind people that when you look at the published literature on the kinds of sex education that are effective, there's very little evidence that abstinence-only education can discourage people from having sex. Whereas, the research is clear that comprehensive sex education, which includes both abstinence education and safer sex education, has an impact not only on improving contraceptive use but also on delaying sexual activity. Those programs do both. That says a lot about their effectiveness.

We are calling this reality-check research. One of the goals was to put some reality check on these abstinence-only efforts. We also wanted to raise public awareness that premarital sex is common.

Heather Boerner is a freelance health writer based in San Francisco.

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