

Quick Facts 2021: Sex Education in America

ARTICLE | Updated April 8, 2022

Keeping up with the latest data and trends regarding teen sexual behavior, sex education policy, and the benefits of sexual delay helps youth access the knowledge and skills they need to make healthy, informed decisions regarding sex, relationships, and future goals.

Teen Sexual Behavior

- Among 15–17-year-olds, 69% of boys and 72% of girls have never had sexual intercourse.¹
- Among 15–17-year-olds, 52.4 % of boys and 60.3% of girls have never had any sexual contact with the opposite sex, which includes sexual activities that are not limited to sexual intercourse.²
- Between 1991 and 2017 the percentage of high schoolers that never engaged in sexual intercourse increased by 34%.³
- In the past 29 years, the percent of high school females who are waiting for sex has increased 27%.⁴
- In the past 29 years, the percent of high school males who are waiting for sex has increased 43%.⁵
- The percent of black teens who have not had sex increased 212%, but the increase for black males was 319% between 1991 and 2019. This signifies the greatest improvement of any other group.⁶
- Since 1991, teen birth rates have declined 73%.⁷
- Eighty-nine percent of all teen births are to unmarried parents.⁸
- The most recent data reports that about 29% of pregnancies among 15–19-year-olds end in abortion, down from 46% in 1986.⁹

- Teen abortion rates are at their lowest point since abortion was legalized and have decreased by 89% since the peak rate in 1988.¹⁰
- The likelihood of using contraception increases the longer a teen delays sex, providing an additional reason to promote sexual delay.¹¹
- More sexually active high schoolers are using long-acting reversible contraception (LARC) but are failing to also use a condom to offer STD risk reduction.¹²
- Sexually active high school students were 12% more likely to use a condom in 2007 than in 2019.¹³
- Fifty-four percent of sexually active high school students used a condom during last intercourse, the only contraception that also reduces the risk of acquiring an STD.¹⁴

Youth and Sexually Transmitted Disease

- Although most sexually experienced teen women (78%) and (89%) of teen men have used some form of contraception,¹⁵ STDs continue to be at epidemic levels among youth.
- Young adults (age 15-24) contract about half of the 26 million new STDs each year, costing about \$4.16 billion in direct medical costs.¹⁶
- About 40% of sexually active teen girls (aged 14-19) have at least one STD.¹⁷
- Over half (55.4%) of all new STDs are found among youth, aged 15-24, although they only represent 1/4 of the sexually experienced population.¹⁸
- The five most common STDs among teen girls are (in order): HPV, chlamydia, trichomoniasis, herpes, and gonorrhea.¹⁹ Herpes and HPV can be easily transmitted even with the use of a condom because they can be spread by skin-to-skin contact.²⁰
- Young adults (15-24) account for more than half of all reported cases of chlamydia and gonorrhea.²¹
- Most STDs are present without any symptoms.²²

- The annual number of new infections is roughly equal among young men and young women, but women bear the burden of most of the negative consequences from STDs.²³
- Gonorrhea is considered an urgent threat because it is showing resistance to the last line of antibiotics usually used to treat it.²⁴
- Although the majority of teens are not sexually active, those who are face greater risk for contracting or transmitting an STD.

Teen Opinions About Sex

- Most adolescents support reserving sex for marriage, both in general and for themselves.²⁵
- About one half of 18- and 19-year-olds wish they had waited longer before becoming sexually active.²⁶
- More than 80% of older teens believe it is possible for a person to choose to stop having sex after having had sex in the past.²⁷
- Although culture is increasingly sexually explicit, the majority of teens are not having sex.²⁸
- More than 80% of 18- and 19-year-olds say they don't like the idea of casual sex.²⁹
- About 40% of teens say that their sex ed classes make them feel pressured to have sex. 32% say they feel pressure from their dating partner.³⁰

American's Opinion On Sex Education

- Most Americans want teens to avoid all the possible consequences of sex, not just teen pregnancy.³¹
- The majority of American parents, regardless of race or political party, support Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA) education with similar enthusiasm, endorsing all the major themes presented in an SRA education class.³²
- More than eight in 10 parents, but especially women and African Americans, support the dominant themes of SRA education.³³

- Nearly nine in 10 parents strongly support the way SRA programs share the medically accurate limitations of condoms for preventing pregnancy and disease.³⁴
- Most parents want their children to wait for marriage before having sex.³⁵
- Almost 3/4 of parents are opposed to premarital sex both in general and for their own adolescents.³⁶

Benefits of Sexual Delay

- Sexual delay and limiting the number of lifetime partners is important to decreasing the risk of pregnancy and STDs.³⁷
- If a male teen initiates sex by 14, he has an almost 75% likelihood of having six or more partners by the time he reaches 20 years of age. A teen girl has 58% likelihood of six or more sexual partners by age 20 if she initiates sex by age 14. That risk drops to 10% respectively if the teen waits until he or she is at least 17 years of age.³⁸ Sexual delay until marriage provides the optimal health outcomes, but even a shorter postponement greatly reduces the physical risks of sex.
- The most reliable way to avoid transmission of STDs is to abstain from oral, vaginal, and anal sex or to be in a long-term, mutually monogamous relationship with a partner known to be uninfected.³⁹
- Delaying sex appears to aid in the permanence of future marriage.⁴⁰
- Waiting to have children until marriage increases the likelihood of their flourishing.⁴¹
- Waiting to have children until marriage decreases the likelihood that both parent and child will live in poverty.⁴²

Sexual Risk Avoidance Education is Effective

- Twenty-five research studies of SRA programs show significant behavioral changes in improving teen outcomes.⁴³
- An additional 43 studies from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) showed early-stage positive attitudinal impacts that tend to predict decreased sexual initiation rates.⁴⁴

- Compared to their peers, students in SRA education programs are more likely to delay sexual initiation; if sexually active, more likely to discontinue or decrease their sexual activity; and no less likely to use a condom if they initiate sex.⁴⁵

Sex Education Policy

- Thirty states require sex education in the schools.⁴⁶
- Thirty-nine states require HIV/AIDS prevention education in the schools.⁴⁷
- Twenty-five states require parental notification prior to sex education classes for their children.⁴⁸
- Thirty-six states permit parents to opt out of sex education classes for their children.⁴⁹
- Five states require parents to opt in to sex education classes for their children.⁵⁰
- Thirty-nine states require sex education to include information about SRA and 20 states also require information about contraception.⁵¹ What this education looks like at the local level may vary dramatically.
- Thirty-seven states and DC require provision of information on preventing, recognizing and responding to teen dating violence and sexual violence.⁵²
- Nineteen states and DC require the inclusion of information on the negative outcomes of teen sex and pregnancy.⁵³
- Thirty-five states and DC require provision of information about skills for healthy romantic and sexual relationships.⁵⁴

References

¹ National Center for Health Statistics. (2015, Nov) Key statistics from the National Survey of Family Growth—T Listing. National Survey of Family Growth. National Health Statistics Reports 2011–2015. Retrieved on February 16, 2018, at http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/key_statistics/t.htm#teenagers

Abma JC, Martinez GM. Sexual activity and contraceptive use among teenagers in the United States, 2011–2015. National health statistics reports; no 104. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2017.

² National Center for Health Statistics. (2011). Sexual behavior, sexual attraction, and sexual identity in the United States: Data from the 2006–2008 National Survey of Family Growth. National Health Statistics Reports. 36 :17, 18

³ CDC (2020). High School YRBS: 2019. Retrieved August 26, 2020, at <https://yrbs-explorer.services.cdc.gov/#/>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid. Two decades ago nearly nine in 10 black male teens had sex and now the number is slightly less than five in 10. While still too high, the improvement translates into more options and opportunities for these teens.

⁷ Hamilton BE, Rossen L, Lu L, Chong Y. U.S. and state trends on teen births, 1990–2019. National Center for Health Statistics. 2021. Designed by L Lu, BE Hamilton, L Rossen, A Lipphardt, JM Keralis, and Y Chong: National Center for Health Statistics. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data-visualization/teen-births/>

Martin JA, Hamilton BE, Osterman MJK, Driscoll AK. Births: Final Data for 2019. National Vital Statistics Reports; vol 70 no 2. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2021. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.15620/cdc:100472>.

⁸ Child Trends (2016, Nov). Teen Births. Page 2. Retrieved May 2021 at <https://www.childtrends.org/indicators/teen-births>

Martin JA, Hamilton BE, Osterman MJK, Driscoll AK. Births: Final Data for 2019. National Vital Statistics Reports; vol 70 no 2. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2021. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.15620/cdc:100472>.

⁹ Kost K, Maddow-Zimet I and Arpaia A, Pregnancies, Births and Abortions Among Adolescents and Young Women in the United States, 2013: National and State Trends by Age, Race and Ethnicity, New York: Guttmacher Institute, 2017, <https://www.guttmacher.org/report/us-adolescent-pregnancy-trends-2013>.

¹⁰ Maddow-Zimet, I. (2021, April 14). Pregnancies, Births and Abortions in the United States, 1973 to 2017: National and State Trends by Age. Guttmacher Institute. Accessed on July 13, 2021, at <https://www.guttmacher.org/report/pregnancies-births-abortions-in-united-states-1973-2017>

¹¹ Martinez GM, Abma JC. Sexual activity and contraceptive use among teenagers aged 15–19 in the United States, 2015–2017. NCHS Data Brief, no 366. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db366.htm>

¹² CDC (2020). High School YRBS: 2019. Retrieved August 26, 2020, at <https://yrbs-explorer.services.cdc.gov/#/>

¹³ Ibid. 61.5% of sexually active high school students used a condom during last intercourse in 2007 and only 54.3% did so in 2019.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Martinez GM, Abma JC. Sexual activity and contraceptive use among teenagers aged 15–19 in the United States, 2015–2017. NCHS Data Brief, no 366. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db366.htm>

¹⁶ CDC (2021) Sexually Transmitted Infections Prevalence, Incidence, and Cost Estimates in the United States. Accessed at <https://www.cdc.gov/std/statistics/prevalence-2020-at-a-glance.htm>

National Overview – Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance, 2019. (2021, April 13). National Overview – Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance, 2019. <https://www.cdc.gov/std/statistics/2019/overview.htm>

¹⁷ Forhan, S. E., Gottlieb, S. L., Sternberg, M. R., Xu, F., Datta, S. D., McQuillan, G. M., et al. (2009). Prevalence of sexually transmitted infections among female adolescents aged 14 to 19 in the United States. *Pediatrics*, 124(6), 1505–1512.

Workowski, K. A., & Bolan, G. A. (2015). Sexually transmitted diseases treatment guidelines, 2015. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 64(3). Retrieved May 4, 2016, from <http://www.cdc.gov/std/tg2015/tg-2015-print.pdf>.

¹⁸ *National Overview – Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance*, 2019. (2021, April 13). National Overview – Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance, 2019. <https://www.cdc.gov/std/statistics/2019/overview.htm>

¹⁹ CDC: (2018) Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance 2018. STDs in adolescents and young adults. Accessed July 13, 2021, at <https://www.cdc.gov/std/stats18/adolescents.htm>

²⁰ Centers for Disease Control. (2017) Genital Herpes – CDC fact sheet. Accessed February 2018 at <http://www.cdc.gov/std/herpes/stdfact-herpes.htm>

Centers for Disease Control. (2021) Genital HPV infection – Fact sheet. Accessed July 2021 at <http://www.cdc.gov/std/hpv/stdfact-hpv.htm>

²¹ CDC. Sexually Transmitted Diseases: Adolescents and Young Adults. 2018. [cdc.gov/std/life-stages-populations/adolescents-youngadults.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/std/life-stages-populations/adolescents-youngadults.htm)

CDC. (2019) Sexually Transmitted Diseases Surveillance, STDS in Adolescents and Young Adults accessed July 2021 at <https://www.cdc.gov/std/life-stages-populations/adolescents-youngadults.htm>

²² World Health Organization. (2019) Sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Accessed at <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs110/en/>

Workowski, K. A., & Bolan, G. A. (2015). Sexually transmitted diseases treatment guidelines, 2015. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 64(3). Retrieved July 13, 2021, from <http://www.cdc.gov/std/tg2015/tg-2015-print.pdf>.

These are still the most recent STD Treatment guidelines from the CDC. <https://www.cdc.gov/std/dstdp/dcl-clarification-may2020.pdf>

²³ CDC (2013) Fact Sheet: Incidence, Prevalence and Cost of STIs in the US. Accessed at <http://www.cdc.gov/std/stats/STI-Estimates-Fact-Sheet-Feb-2013.pdf>

CDC (2016). Sexually Transmitted Diseases. STDs in Adolescents and Young Adults Accessed March 2018 at <https://www.cdc.gov/std/stats16/adolescents.htm>

CDC Fact Sheet: Information for Teens and Young Adults: Staying Healthy and Preventing STDs Accessed at <https://www.cdc.gov/std/life-stages-populations/stdfact-teens.htm>

²⁴ White House (2014). National strategy for combating antibiotic-resistant bacteria. Washington, DC. Accessed March 18, 2015, at https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/carb_national_strategy.pdf ANTIBIOTIC RESISTANCE THREATS IN THE UNITED STATES, 2013 Accessed March 18, 2015, at <http://www.cdc.gov/drugresistance/threat-report-2013/pdf/ar-threats-2013-508.pdf>

National Overview – Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance, 2019. (2021, April 13). National Overview – Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance, 2019. Retrieved July 13, 2021, at <https://www.cdc.gov/std/statistics/2019/overview.htm#Gonorrhea>

²⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2010) National Survey of Adolescents and Their Parents: Attitudes and Opinions About Sex and Abstinence. Washington, D. C.: HHS. Accessed August 29, 2011, at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/fysb/content/docs/20090226_abstinence.pdf

Sixty-two percent say that it is against their values to have sex before marriage; 75% believe that having sex would make life difficult; 84% oppose sex at their age; 69% oppose sex while in high school. (p. 61)

²⁶ Barna Group. (2015). Teens Speak Out survey. Ventura: Author.

Albert, B. (2012). With One Voice 2012. Washington, DC: the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. Retrieved March 18, 2015, at https://thenationalcampaign.org/sites/default/files/resource-primary-download/wov_2012.pdf This older survey shows that among younger teens, the regret is even more pronounced.

²⁷ Barna Group. (2015). Teens Speak Out survey. Ventura: Author.

²⁸ CDC (2020). High School YRBS: 2019. Retrieved August 26, 2020, at <https://yrbs-explorer.services.cdc.gov/#/>

²⁹ Barna Group. (2015). Teens Speak Out survey. Ventura: Author.

³⁰ Barna Group. (2015). Teens Speak Out survey. Ventura: Author.

³¹ Barna Group. (2015). Americans Speak Out survey. Ventura: Author. Retrieved April 9, 2018, at <https://tinyurl.com/yc2szsray>

³² Barna Group. (2015). Americans Speak Out survey. Ventura: Author. Retrieved April 9, 2018, at <https://tinyurl.com/yc2szsray>

³³ Barna Group. (2015). Americans Speak Out survey. Ventura: Author. Retrieved April 9, 2018, at <https://tinyurl.com/yc2szsray>

³⁴ Barna Group. (2015). Americans Speak Out survey. Ventura: Author. Retrieved April 9, 2018, at <https://tinyurl.com/yc2szsray>

³⁵ Pulse Opinion Research (2012). Parents Speak Out. Available at www.WhatTheyToldUs.org

³⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2010) National Survey of Adolescents and Their Parents: Attitudes and Opinions About Sex and Abstinence. Washington, D. C.: HHS. Accessed July 13, 2021, at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/archive/fysb/report/national-survey-adolescents-and-their-parents-attitudesand-opinions-about-sex>

³⁷ Ibid

Rotz, Dana, Brian Goesling, Nicholas Redel, Menbere Shiferaw, and Claire Smither-Wulsin (2020). Assessing the Benefits of Delayed Sexual Activity: A Synthesis of the Literature. OPRE Report 2020-04, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved July 13, 2021, at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/assessing-benefits-delayed-sexual-activity-synthesis-literature>

³⁸ Moore, K. A., Miller, B. C., Sugland, B. W., Morrison, D. R., Flei, D. A., Blumenthal, C., (n.d.) Beginning too soon: Adolescent sexual behavior, pregnancy and parenthood: A review of research and interventions. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of HHS. Retrieved on July 13, 2021, from <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/cyp/xsteesex.htm>

Ethier KA, Kann L, McManus T. (2018) Sexual Intercourse Among High School Students—29 States and United States Overall, 2005–2015. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2018;1393-1397. DOI: <http://dxdoi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm665152a1> Retrieved July 13, 2021, at <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/66/wr/mm665152a1.htm#suggestedcitation>

Kugler KC, Vasilenko SA, Butera NM, Coffman DL. (May 2017) Long-Term Consequences of Early Sexual Initiation on Young Adult Health: A Causal Inference Approach. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*. 2017;37(5):662–676. doi:10.1177/0272431615620666

Rotz, Dana, Brian Goesling, Nicholas Redel, Menbere Shiferaw, and Claire Smither-Wulsin (2020). Assessing the Benefits of Delayed Sexual Activity: A Synthesis of the Literature. OPRE Report 2020-04, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved July 13, 2021, at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/assessing-benefits-delayed-sexual-activity-synthesis-literature>

³⁹ <https://www.cdc.gov/std/tg2015/clinical.htm>

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2001). Trends in the Well-Being of America's Children and Youth, 2000. Office of the Asst. Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, Washington, DC

Paik, A., (2011) Adolescent sexuality and the risk of marital dissolution. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 73:472-485.

Rotz, Dana, Brian Goesling, Nicholas Redel, Menbere Shiferaw, and Claire Smither-Wulsin (2020). Assessing the Benefits of Delayed Sexual Activity: A Synthesis of the Literature. OPRE Report 2020-04, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved July 13, 2021, at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/assessing-benefits-delayed-sexual-activity-synthesis-literature> For more information, contact Ascend at info@WeAscend.org or call 202-248-5420 © 2021 Ascend

⁴¹Chen, Y., Haines, J., Charlton, B.M. et al. Positive parenting improves multiple aspects of health and wellbeing in young adulthood. *Nat Hum Behav* 3, 684-691 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-019-0602-x>

McLanahan, S., & Sawhill, I. (2015). Marriage and child wellbeing revisited: Introducing the issue. *The future of children*, 3-9.

Heiland, F., & Liu, S. (2006). Family structure and wellbeing of out-of-wedlock children: The significance of the biological parents' relationship. *Demographic Research*, 15, 61-104. Retrieved July 13, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26347908>

Harknett, K. Why are Children with Married Parents Healthier? The Case of Pediatric Asthma. *Popul Res Policy Rev* 28, 347-365 (2009). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-008-9102-9> Accessed July 13, 2021, from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11113-008-9102-9>

⁴² Wilcox, B., & Wang, W. (2017, June). The millennial success sequence: Marriage, kids, and the 'success sequence' among young adults. American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for Family Studies. <https://www.aei.org/research-products/working-paper/millennials-and-the-success-sequence-how-do-education-work-and-marriage-affect-poverty-and-financial-success-among-millennials/>

Wilcox, B., Lerman, R., Price, J., (2015) Mobility and Money in the US States: The Marriage Effect. Brookings Institute accessed April 5, 2018, at <https://www.brookings.edu/research/mobility-and-money-in-u-s-states-the-marriage-effect/>

US Census Bureau. (2020, August 17). Poverty Status: POV-03. The United States Census Bureau. Accessed July 13, 2021, at <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/cps-pov/pov-03.html>

⁴³ Ascend (2016) SRA Works. Washington DC

⁴⁴ 2010 Abstinence Education Evaluation Conference, April 2010, Arlington, VA. "Evaluating Community-Based Risk Prevention Programs for Youth: Informing Abstinence Education." Sponsored by the Family & Youth Services Bureau and the Center for Research and Evaluation on Abstinence Education at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

2007 Abstinence Education Evaluation Conference, March 2007, Baltimore, MD. "Strengthening Programs Through Scientific Evaluation". Sponsored by the Office of Population Affairs and the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

2005 Abstinence Education Evaluation Conference, November 2005, Baltimore, MD. "Strengthening Programs Through Scientific Evaluation." Sponsored by the Office of Population Affairs and the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

⁴⁵ Ibid

Ascend (2016) SRA Works. Washington DC

Ericksen, Irene H., and Weed, Stan E. (2019). "Re-Examining the Evidence for School-based Comprehensive Sex Education: A Global Research Review." *Issues in Law and Medicine*, 34(2):161-182.

⁴⁶ National Conference of State Legislatures. (2020). State policies on sex education in schools. October 1, 2020. Accessed July 13, 2021, at <http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/state-policies-on-sex-education-in-schools.aspx>

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Guttmacher Institute (2021, July 1). Sex and HIV Education. Washington, DC: Accessed July 13, 2021, at <https://www.guttmacher.org/state-policy/explore/sex-and-hiv-education#>

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Ibid