

The Relationship Between Family Structure and Adolescent Sexual Activity

By Samuel W. Sturgeon

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Special Report
At a Glance

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MAJOR FINDINGS

1. **Likelihood of Being Sexually Active.** Adolescents from more intact family structures are less likely to engage in sexual activity than their peers from non-intact family backgrounds.
2. **Age at First Intercourse.** When adolescents from intact families become sexually active, they tend to do so at an older age than their counterparts from non-intact families.
3. **Impact of Parental Divorce.** Experiencing parental divorce or multiple changes in family structure and living in a single-parent household during childhood are all associated with an increased risk of adolescent virginity loss.
4. **Adolescent Risk Behavior.** On average, youths from intact families have had fewer sexual experiences and fewer sexual partners than adolescents from less intact family structures.

RELATED TOPICS

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- Adolescent Sexual Activity and Adolescent Mental/Emotional Health
- Abstinence Education and Sexual Initiation Age
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Quick Summary

When compared to peers from other family structures, adolescents from intact families were less likely to have been sexually active. Among youths who had been sexually active, on average, those from intact families had fewer sexual partners, were less likely to have a sexually transmitted disease, and were less likely to have ever experienced a pregnancy or live birth. They also tended to delay first intercourse for a longer time than peers in other family structures, and this delay was associated with nearly all other positive outcomes regarding the sexual behavior.

About this Special Report

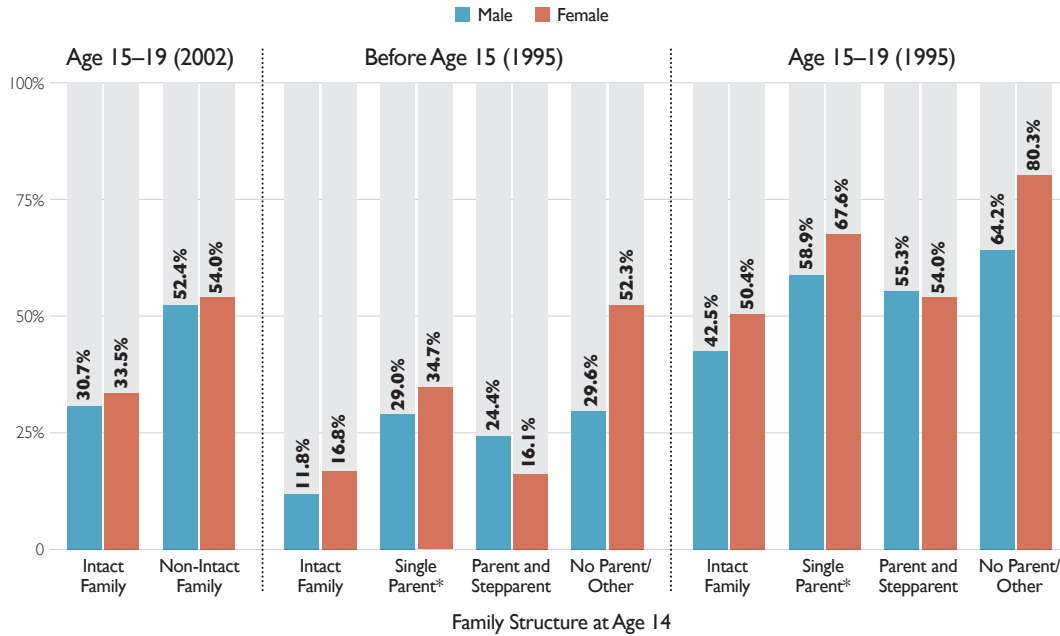
This paper provides a systematic summary of the social science literature that has been published in the past 25 years linking adolescent sexual outcomes to variations in family structure. The paper is based on a review of more than 180 peer-reviewed articles and primarily features the studies that were based on surveys of nationally representative samples, including, the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) 1982, 1988, and 1995 waves; the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS, 2006); the National Survey of Adolescent Males (NSAM) in 1988 and 1995; the National Longitudinal Survey for Youth; and the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health.

A database of social science findings on the family, society, and religion gleaned from peer-reviewed journals, familyfacts.org seeks to make social science research easily accessible to non-specialists, including policymakers, journalists, scholars, and the general public.

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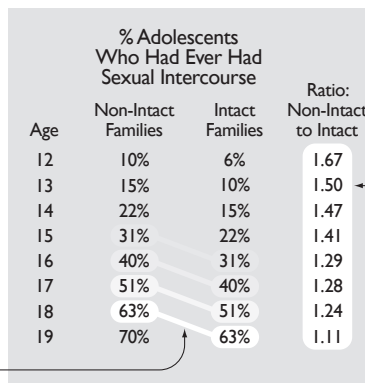
Figure 1. Percent of Adolescents Who Have Ever Had Sexual Intercourse



Note: Data are for never-married adolescents. * Including a cohabiting parent if other adult is not related.
Sources: J. C. Abma, G. M. Martinez, W. D. Mosher, and B. S. Dawson, *Teenagers in the United States: Sexual Activity, Contraceptive Use, and Childbearing*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Health Statistics, 2004), and J. C. Abma and F. L. Sonenstein, *Sexual Activity and Contraceptive Practices Among Teenagers in the United States, 1988 and 1995* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Health Statistics, 2001).

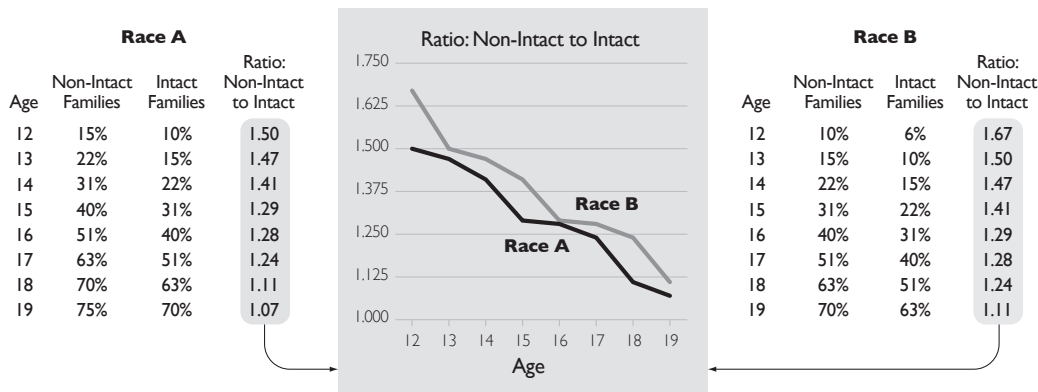
Figure 2: The Effects of Family Structure on Adolescent Sexual Activity

In this hypothetical population, adolescents in intact families have sexual intercourse for the first time at the same rate as those in non-intact families, only they start a year later, a phenomenon referred to as “lagging.”



As a result, the relative proportion of adolescents from non-intact families to intact families who have ever had sexual intercourse is high for younger children but decreases as they get older.

This phenomenon appears as well when comparing two races. When adolescents from one race engage in sexual activity for the first time at an earlier age (Race A in this hypothetical population), their relative proportions of adolescents from non-intact families to intact families who have ever had sexual intercourse are lower than a different race (Race B).



For additional charts on this topic, see “The Harmful Effects of Early Sexual Activity and Multiple Sexual Partners Among Women: A Book of Charts” at www.heritage.org/Research/Abstinence/abstinence_charts.cfm.