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## Executive Summary

As part of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Title V Section 510 provided significant amounts of funding to States to support abstinence education, with the ultimate goal of preventing unwed childbearing, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases. Under this formula block grant program administered by the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, states must match federal funds at 75 percent. Since 1998, when the first program grants were awarded, there has been considerable diversity in the types of abstinence education programs supported as well as the age groups targeted by these programs. Although some states have used all or most of their funds to mount statewide media campaigns, most have funded a variety of local program initiatives, predominantly in school settings.

To learn more about the public's views, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) funded a survey study to examine current attitudes of parents and adolescents regarding sex, abstinence, and abstinence messages. The survey study, the *National Survey of Adolescents and Their Parents: Attitudes and Opinions about Sex and Abstinence*, conducted by Abt Associates Inc., is a public opinion survey of a nationally representative matched sample of 1,000 adolescents and their parents. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What are adolescent and parent attitudes concerning sex and abstinence? How do they vary by basic sociodemographic characteristics?
- How are the attitudes of parents and their adolescents similar to or different from each other? How do these patterns vary by basic sociodemographic characteristics?
- Adjusting for all other variables, what factors are independently associated with adolescents' attitudes about sex and abstinence? More specifically, how are sociodemographic characteristics, peer attitudes and communication, and parent attitudes and communication independently associated with adolescents' attitudes about abstinence?

The survey findings can be used in the future to inform public education campaigns and abstinence education programs as well as to assist ACF with grant administration and technical assistance activities.

## Methodology

The goal of this study was to conduct a public opinion survey about sex and abstinence in order to gather up-to-date, high-quality data generalizable to the national population of adolescents aged 12 to 18. In order to maximize comparability with other sources, the Parent and Adolescent Interview instruments used in this study were based to the extent possible on other instruments that have been or are being used in other national surveys. Cognitive interviews were conducted to verify the validity of proposed questions; where necessary items were modified to improve clarity and comprehension for both older and younger adolescents.

The study employed a probability sample using a random-digit-dial (RDD) sampling design to collect information from 1,000 matched adolescent-parent pairs. For each randomly-selected adolescent interviewed, we additionally obtained survey data from the adult residing in the household who was identified as the “most knowledgeable parent” (MKP) for that adolescent – the parent or guardian living in the household who knew the most about that adolescent’s attitudes and beliefs about sexual activity, abstinence from sex, and abstinence education. Sampling weights were calculated to account for the probability of selection into the sample, to adjust for survey nonresponse, and to bring the weighted distribution of the 1,000 paired interviews into agreement with population control totals obtained from the 2006 American Community Survey (ACS). Data collection employed computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) technology, including the use of “digit-grabber” technology to allow parents and adolescents to key in responses to sensitive questions using their touch-tone phones to prevent being overheard.

To analyze the survey results, we first conducted basic descriptive analyses to provide an overview of parent and adolescent attitudes and beliefs about sexual activity and abstinence from sex, and adolescent exposure to information about sex and abstinence in the context of a class or program. In addition to results for the full sample, we examined differences across subgroups defined by parent and adolescent age and gender, race/ethnicity, frequency of religious service attendance, and household income.

All descriptive results incorporated the sampling weights described above, and are thus representative of the United States adolescent population aged 12 to 18. Note that because parents were not randomly selected, results on parent attitudes should *not* be considered representative of the population of parents of adolescents, and should be examined only in conjunction with data on adolescents. In the Executive Summary, reported findings for “parents” should therefore be interpreted more specifically as applicable to “most knowledgeable parents” for the randomly-selected adolescents in our sample.

Finally, to understand the factors associated with differences in adolescent attitudes about sex and sexual abstinence, a multivariate analysis was conducted based on a conceptual model of relationships developed from the literature and our hypotheses about the factors influencing adolescent attitudes about abstinence. We built the corresponding empirical model in stages using nested logistic regression specifications. Seemingly-unrelated regression (SUR) techniques were used to jointly test hypotheses across multiple outcome measures representing single underlying constructs. As with our descriptive analyses, we incorporated sampling weights, so the resulting estimates may be considered representative of the United States adolescent population.

## **Findings**

### **Overview of Descriptive Findings**

The study found definite patterns of attitudes and perception among parents and adolescents surveyed, as well as some similarity in these patterns. In our discussion of results, we use the following language conventions. For measures of general attitudes about sex and abstinence, greater degrees of opposition to pre-marital sex are termed more “conservative,” and lesser degrees of opposition more “liberal.” For measures of attitudes about adolescent sexual behavior, higher levels

of opposition to adolescent sexual behavior are deemed more “restrictive” and lower levels more “permissive.”

- *Parent Attitudes*

- Approximately 70 percent of parents surveyed are opposed to pre-marital sex both in general and for their own adolescents. This finding is consistent with results from previous public opinion surveys of parents on abstinence and abstinence messages.
- While most parents oppose their adolescents engaging in sexual intercourse under any circumstances, patterns of permissiveness for a minority of parents vary by specific context. In particular, across the outcome measures examined, parents are least likely to oppose sexual intercourse for their adolescents when birth control is used or when their adolescent plans to marry their prospective partner, and most likely to oppose sexual intercourse “if the adolescent and his or her partner think that it is okay.”
- Parents with more restrictive general views about sex and abstinence are more likely to feel they can influence their adolescents’ sexual behavior.
- Parents expressed more permissive views about sexual behavior for older adolescents and for male adolescents.
- General parent views about sex and abstinence were more conservative among non-Hispanic blacks, Hispanics, parents from lower-income households, and parents attending religious services more frequently. In contrast, however, patterns in permissiveness about sexual behavior of adolescents varied substantially by context among these groups relative to patterns in the overall population.
- The majority of parents surveyed favor their adolescents receiving abstinence messages from multiple sources. Ordered from most preferred to least preferred, parents favored abstinence messages delivered at a place of worship (85 percent), a doctor’s office or health center (85 percent), school (83 percent), a community organization (71 percent), and the internet (55 percent).

- *Adolescent Attitudes*

- While the majority of adolescents surveyed oppose pre-marital sex in general and for themselves, on average adolescents expressed less conservative general views about sex and abstinence than their surveyed parents.
- Similarly, adolescents were more likely than their surveyed parents to agree that engaging in sexual intercourse would be permissible for them in specific contexts.
- In general, adolescents expressed more permissive views when asked specifically about their attitudes about their own sexual behavior, as opposed to more general statements about sexual values.
- Older adolescents and male adolescents expressed more permissive views about their own sexual behavior, consistent with parents’ reported attitudes.
- Non-Hispanic black adolescents reported the most permissive views about their own sexual behavior, despite the more restrictive views expressed by their parents. Hispanic adolescents expressed more restrictive views than adolescents of other race/ethnicities, more in line with their parents’ attitudes.

- Adolescent frequency of attending religious services was strongly associated with more conservative general views about sex and abstinence among adolescents, as well as more restrictive views about their own sexual behavior.

### **Multivariate Analysis Findings**

Using a model developed from the literature and hypotheses about the relationship of parent, peer, and adolescent attitudes and communication patterns, we performed a series of multivariate analyses in order to better understand how peer and parent influences and adolescent exposure to information about sex and abstinence in a class or program are associated with adolescent views about sex and abstinence. Unlike the descriptive analyses previously discussed, multivariate analyses of this kind allow us to examine independent associations between attitudes and individual explanatory factors, adjusting for associations with all other variables included in the model.

Key findings from the multivariate analysis are as follows:

- *Adolescent Perceptions of Parent-Adolescent Communication.* We analyzed adolescent reports of communication with their parents about sex, abstinence, and sexual values, adjusting for parent-reported communication levels, in order to examine factors associated with differences in whether adolescents are hearing the same messages parents say they are sending.
  - Older parents reported lower frequency of communication about sex, abstinence, and sexual values with their adolescents, and, conditional on parents' own reports, adolescents were less likely to report that they had heard these messages from older parents. Similarly, adolescents reported lower levels of communication from male parents, even adjusting for the lower frequency of communication reported by male parents overall.
  - Non-Hispanic black parents reported much more frequent communication with their adolescents about sex and abstinence than parents from other racial/ethnic groups, and their adolescents were more likely to have heard these messages, conditional on parents' own reports.
  - Higher adolescent-reported frequency of conversations about sex and abstinence, adjusting for parent-reported communication levels, was positively associated with adolescent age, more frequent religious service attendance, higher parent-perceived levels of control over adolescent sexual behavior, and better parent-adolescent relationship quality. This finding indicates that these factors are associated with an increase in the probability that adolescents report hearing the messages parents say they are communicating.
  - Adolescent exposure to specific topics related to sex and abstinence in a class or program was strongly associated with higher adolescent-reported communication levels with parents about those topics, adjusting for parents' own reports, perhaps indicating that these programs may increase adolescent capacity to understand and communicate the messages they are hearing from parents.
- *Adolescent Attitudes about Sex and Abstinence.* Finally, we examined associations of adolescent characteristics, parent and peer characteristics, and adolescent exposure to

information about sex and abstinence in classes or programs with differences in adolescent attitudes about sex and abstinence. Like the multivariate results on adolescent perceptions of parent-adolescent communication described above, these results are adjusted for associations with all other variables included in the model. The study found:

- Adolescent characteristics:
  - » Older adolescents had more conservative general attitudes about sex and abstinence, but simultaneously expressed less restrictive attitudes about their own sexual behavior.
  - » Male adolescents expressed consistently less conservative general views about sex and abstinence and less restrictive views about their own permissible sexual behavior.
  - » Black and Hispanic adolescents reported significantly more permissive views about their own sexual behavior. For non-Hispanic black adolescents, this finding stands in contrast to the more restrictive views about sex and abstinence expressed by their parents.
- Parents:
  - » Although, as seen above, older parents explicitly communicated less with their adolescents about sex and abstinence, adolescents with older parents expressed more restrictive views about their sexual behavior and greater perceived parental control over their sexual activity.
  - » Although higher income was associated with relatively more permissive views about sex and abstinence among parents, adolescents from higher-income households expressed more restrictive attitudes than their peers in households from lower income brackets.
  - » More conservative parent attitudes about sex and abstinence were broadly associated with more conservative attitudes among adolescents, adjusting for other factors.
  - » Overall parent-adolescent communication levels were not associated with differences in adolescent attitudes, but frequency of discussion of specific topics related to sex and abstinence had some statistically significant effects.
  - » In contrast to previous studies, we found evidence that the association of parent attitudes with adolescent views increased with adolescent age.
- Peers:
  - » Adolescents with more conservative peers expressed more conservative attitudes about sex and abstinence and more restrictive views about their own sexual behavior.
  - » Higher levels of peer-adolescent communication about sex were associated with less conservative adolescent attitudes.
  - » Peers were found to be more strongly associated with differences in adolescent attitudes for males than for females.
- Adolescent exposure to information about sex, abstinence, and sexual values in classes or programs:
  - » Both parent-reported adolescent participation in a class, program, or event that taught about waiting to have sexual intercourse until marriage, and adolescent-

reported receipt of information about specific topics related to sex, abstinence, and sexual values were associated with higher levels of communication about sex and sexual values with both parents and peers.

- » Parent-reported adolescent participation in the past year in a class, program, or event that talked about waiting to have sexual intercourse until marriage was not associated with any differences in adolescent attitudes about sex and abstinence.
- » However, there were some statistically significant associations observed between adolescent attitudes and adolescent-reported exposure to some types of specific information about sex and abstinence in a class or program.

## Conclusions

We find that parents and adolescents generally oppose pre-marital sex. However, adolescents tend to express more permissive attitudes about their own sexual behavior than their surveyed parents. Social and cultural norms seem to be significant predictors of adolescent attitudes, with persistently more permissive views expressed both by and about males than females. We additionally found evidence of significant differences by race and ethnicity, with variation not only in overall restrictiveness of attitudes, but in patterns of attitudes by specific contexts of sexual behaviors.

In general, our findings indicate that adolescent attitudes about sex and abstinence are more subject to influence from parents and peers than to messages about sex and abstinence delivered in the context of classes or programs. However, adolescent receipt of information about sex, abstinence, and sexual values in a class or program was associated with increased levels of adolescent communication about sex and abstinence with both parents and peers. Furthermore, adolescent exposure to some specific topics related to sex and abstinence in a class or program appeared to increase the likelihood that adolescents heard and reported similar messages about sex and abstinence delivered by their parents.

Note that our study did *not* examine a number of factors that might also be influential in determining adolescent attitudes about sex or abstinence, such as exposure to messages from advertising, entertainment, or other media, and relationships with non-parental family members such as siblings or other relatives. It is additionally important to note that this multivariate analysis does not constitute an evaluation of the influence of abstinence or sex education on adolescents. Although we hypothesize a direction of influence for each relationship included in our conceptual model in order to guide our analytic approach, empirical analyses can test only for correlational relationships, not causative influences. Readers are thus encouraged to avoid making inferences about causation based on the findings presented here.

Conditional on these caveats, our findings suggest several things. First, the significant disparities in attitudes and communication levels across subgroups defined by race/ethnicity, gender, age, and socioeconomic characteristics suggest that different kinds of abstinence messages may resonate differently across different groups. Secondly, given the multiple pathways of influence on adolescent attitudes about sex and abstinence through interactions with parents and peers, broad-based community initiatives designed to influence attitudes and behaviors across all these groups may be more successful than programs targeting only one subgroup or setting. Similarly, given the evidence that hearing messages about sex and abstinence from more than one source increases the likelihood

that adolescents hear and report these messages, a multi-pronged approach to delivering these messages to adolescents will likely be more influential than approaches focusing on a single message source. Furthermore, the study shows that surveyed parents are generally comfortable with this type of strategy, with the majority favoring abstinence messages delivered in places of worship, doctor's offices, schools, and community organizations.