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True Love Waits: Do Southern Baptists? Premarital Sexual Behavior Among Newly Married Southern Baptist Sunday School Students

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Abstract

This study measures premarital sex prevalence, sources of sex education, and support for secular sex education among 151 newly married young adults surveyed at 9 Texas Southern Baptist churches. More than 70% of respondents reported having had premarital vaginal or oral sex, but more than 80% regretted premarital sex. The proportion of premarital sex exceeded 80% in 6 of 9 churches, among men and women married after age 25 and women married before age 21. School sex education was the only source of information about sexually transmitted infections for 57% of respondents, and 65% supported secular sex education despite church opposition.

Keywords

Young adults; Adolescents; Sexual behavior; Sex education; Evangelical Christians

Background

Conservative religious groups present abstinence until marriage as a religious ideal. Federal sex education policy has promoted abstinence until marriage as the expected standard for children (GAO 2006) since 1996, with just a one-year break at the beginning of the Obama administration. The Obama health reform law passed in March 2010 included \$250 million over 5 years for abstinence-only sex-education programs. Abstinence-only until marriage is also the basis for most states' sex-education policies (Guttmacher 2010). Despite this substantial federal and state policy commitment to abstinence until marriage, it is unknown whether even religiously conservative, church-going young adults delay sex until marriage.

American adolescents who consider themselves highly religious (Lammers et al. 2000; Hardy and Raffaelli 2003; Rostosky et al. 2003; Meier 2003; Haglund and Fehring 2009), who often pray (Laflin et al. 2008; Nonnemaker et al. 2003) and attend church or religious

youth group (Nonnemaker et al. 2003; Santelli and Peter 1992), and come from religious families (Manlove et al. 2006, 2008) delay sex, but it is unknown how many delay sex until marriage. Religious adolescents may preserve “technical virginity” (Gagnon and Simon 1987; Reiss 1960) by having oral sex instead of vaginal sex (Bearman and Brückner 2005), but other research find no evidence for substitution among virginity pledgers (Uecker et al. 2008; Rosenbaum 2009) or religious adolescents (Uecker et al. 2008). If such substitution exists, it may not persist until marriage: most adolescents who have had oral but not vaginal sex have generally had only one partner, suggesting that substitution does not persist over multiple partners (Lindberg et al. 2008), similar to the pattern noticed by sociologist Ira Reiss in 1960: “kissing only while in high school, petting after high school and often accepting full coitus in their twenties” (Reiss 1960, p. 201). In the general population, premarital sex is common, but not universal: one estimate found 85% of ever-married women had their first intercourse before marriage (Chandra et al. 2005), and a second estimate found 75% of Americans had premarital sex by age 20, 89% by age 25, and 93% by age 30 (Finer 2007). Conservative evangelicals who attend church and Sunday School weekly are consistently exposed to messages of abstinence, which may insulate them from broader population trends, yielding lower than average rates of premarital sex; on the other hand, evangelicals may have high rates of premarital sex, following the observation of sociologist Mark Regnerus that many evangelical adolescents compartmentalize their sexual and religious lives, following religious dictates in every area other than sexuality (Regnerus 2007).

Parents as the primary sex educators is a second basis for many states’ sex-education policies—32 states do not include contraception and condoms in their sex education (Guttmacher 2010) often due to implicit or explicit beliefs that these topics are controversial and better taught within the family than within the classroom (Luker 2006), although evangelical and politically conservative parents are not categorically opposed to teaching contraception in schools. One survey found 89% of American parents, 83% of Born Again Christian parents, and 51% of politically “very conservative” parents support comprehensive school sex education (Eisenberg et al. 2008). Parents can be successful sex educators (DeVore and Ginsburg 2005; Jaccard et al. 1996; Dittus and Jaccard 2000; DiIorio et al. 2003; DiClemente et al. 2001) and some interventions increase sex education by parents (Schuster et al. 2008; Kirby and Miller 2002; Klein et al. 2005; Lefkowitz et al. 2000), but other studies find that parents have inaccurate information about condom effectiveness and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Eisenberg et al. 2004) or teens do not learn the sex education topics that their parents intended to communicate (Rosenbaum et al. 2007). Religious families likely have a religious perspective to impart to their children, and churches stress the importance of family sex education (Stephens 2009). To our knowledge, no published studies have examined either the extent and effectiveness of family sex education within evangelical families or evangelicals’ attitudes towards sex education. Public opinion polls do not ask sexual histories; this study has the unique ability to evaluate whether these young adults’ attitudes towards sex education are associated with their personal sexual histories. One might predict that young adults who were sexually active before marriage may be more supportive of sex education.

This study looks at prevalence and predictors of premarital sex among a sample of highly religiously involved Southern Baptist young adults, sources of their sex education, and their current attitudes towards secular sex education. The Southern Baptist Convention is the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, comprising 6.7% of all Americans and 13.1% of American Protestants (on Religion & Public Life 2008), and the originator of True Love Waits, the first sexual abstinence pledge program. This data is unique for being a sexuality survey administered in Southern Baptist churches on behalf of a Southern Baptist minister, which may have motivated respondents to report even transgressive behavior

accurately. The respondents were over age 22 when they were surveyed in 2001 so had graduated high school before federal Title V abstinence funding began in 1997. This survey may be the only data about the sex education of Southern Baptists prior to federal abstinence-only sex education.

Methods

Data

A self-administered written survey was administered in October and November 2001 to participants married less than 5 years attending 9 geographically diverse Southern Baptist churches in Texas. Two churches with more than 1000 weekly participants were chosen from seven metropolitan areas in Texas—Dallas, Houston, Tyler, Abilene, Waco, Amarillo, and San Antonio—and 10 of the 14 churches (71.4%) agreed to participate. All 10 churches agreeing to participate had at least one Sunday School class for “young married couples”. The class at one of the 10 churches did not have any couples married less than five years, so this church was excluded. The 9 remaining churches administered the survey to 183 participants in Sunday School classes for young married couples, of whom 32 were discarded as ineligible for having been married longer than 5 years. Churches had 6–28 eligible students per class (Fig. 1). The survey was administered to respondents at the beginning of class by a church employee. Respondents were told that the data were anonymous and would be used by Southern Baptist minister (Weathersbee) for his doctoral dissertation at a Southern Baptist seminary.

A total of 151 individuals answered the survey of whom 100% agreed with statement that they “accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior” and 98.7% attended church “often” or “very often” (Table 1).

Variables

History of pre-marital vaginal and oral sex are measured by affirmative answers to “At any time in your life prior to marriage, did you have sexual intercourse?” and “At any time in your life prior to marriage, did you ever engage in other sexual relations such as oral sex?” respectively.

Age of sexual initiation was collected in age ranges: under 13, 13–14, 15–17, 18–20, 21–24, over 25. Age at first marriage was the filled-in answer to, “How old were you when you married for the first time”. Likert scale items were all normalized to a 0–1 scale, with 1 representing strong agreement or high rating.

Experience with school sex education was the answer to, “In junior high or high school I was instructed in human sexuality.” on a 5-item Likert scale. Agreement with secular sex education is the sum of three Likert scale items normalized to 1: “The public school has a responsibility to teach about human sexuality.”; “I believe secular school-based curriculum should teach a young person about sexual matters.”; and “I believe professional sex education counselors should teach a young person about sexual matters.” (Cronbach alpha = 0.79).

For 17 sex education topics, respondents were asked to circle all sources from which they learned the topic: parents, peers, church, and school. Respondents who did not circle any sources for a given topic were coded as having learned the topic from no one.

Analysis

Data were cleaned and analyzed in Stata and R. Fisher's test was used to analyze categorical data: in the exact form where computationally feasible and otherwise the chi-squared approximation.

The most common ages of marriage for each gender were defined as the smallest number of consecutive ages that includes the modal age of marriage and captures more than half of the sample; where there was a choice to include one of two ages to reach a majority of the sample, the age included was the one with the proportion of premarital sex closest to that of the modal age of marriage.

Church choice may proxy for socioeconomic preferences and identities. Multivariate models were hierarchical using church as a grouping variable in the lme4 package for R (Bates and Maechler 2009). Analysis of the outcome of premarital sex used logistic regression. Analysis of current attitudes towards sex education used linear regression.

This study analyzes preexisting non-identifiable data and was deemed exempt by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Institutional Review Board.

Validation with National Data

Premarital sex prevalence was compared using a subsample of National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (Add Health) wave 3 data. The subsample comprised married, non-Catholic Christian respondents who reported at least monthly church attendance ($n = 635$), with a further subset of Born-Again Christians ($n = 337$), considered equivalent to the statement endorsed by 100% of the sample that they "accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior." Measures of religious denomination were not used because of validity concerns (Nonnemaker et al. 2003).

The prevalence of premarital sex in the validation data was computed from wave 3 data, reweighed by sample age composition. Premarital sex was defined as in previous studies (Finer 2007; Chandra et al. 2005): a respondent who reported a marriage age greater than their reported age of first sex is considered to have had premarital sex.

Results

Premarital Sexual Activity

In this sample, 72.9% reported having had vaginal or oral premarital sex, with no difference between males and females (Table 1). Of the premarital sexually active, 82.7% reported regretting not waiting until marriage, which did not vary by level of premarital sexual activity ($P = 0.15$). Respondents who were sexually active before marriage initiated vaginal and oral sex at median ages 18–20.

Association Between Premarital Sex and Church—Premarital sexual activity prevalence varied by church ($P = 0.000$) even within the same city (Table 1, Fig. 1). One church had a majority (66.7%) of respondents remain abstinent before marriage, and 6 of the 9 surveyed churches had more than 80% prevalence of vaginal or oral sex.

Association Between Premarital Sex and Marriage Age—Women's modal age of marriage is 22; 25.6% of women married at 22 and 57.7% married at 21–24. About half (48.9%) of women who married at ages 21–24 had premarital vaginal sex, and 60.0% had oral sex (Fig. 2). Nearly all women who married outside this age range had premarital sex: 11 of the 12 (91.7%) who married at ages 16–20, and 17 of the 20 (85.0%) who married

after age 24. The proportion of women reporting sex before age 21 did not differ between women who married after age 24 and women who married at ages 21–24: (55.0 vs. 48.9%, $P = 0.82$).

Men's modal age of marriage is 22; 15.1% of men married at 22 and 58.9% married at ages 22–26. A majority of men who married at ages 22–26 had premarital vaginal sex (60.5%) or oral sex (62.8%) (Fig. 2). A bare majority of men who married at ages 19–21 had premarital sex (7 of 12, 58.3%). Most men (77.8%) who married after age 26 had premarital sex, as did virtually all (6 of 7, 85.7%) men who married after age 29. The proportion of men reporting sex before age 21 did not differ between men who married after age 26 and men who married at ages 22–26: (50.0 vs. 51.2%, $P = 1.0$).

Potential Substitution of Oral for Vaginal Sex—A quarter (25.5%) of respondents who remained technical virgins had premarital oral sex. Respondents who attended church more frequently during childhood were less likely to have vaginal sex (Wilcoxon $P = 0.009$, 58.2 vs. 63.6%) but did not differ in premarital oral sex prevalence (Wilcoxon $P = 0.11$; 63.6 vs. 66.9%) (Table 1). Respondents who married at ages 21–24 were less likely to have vaginal sex (Odds ratio 0.38, 95% CI (0.16, 0.88), $P = 0.02$) but not oral sex (OR 0.54, 95% CI (0.24, 1.20), $P = 0.13$), after adjusting for gender, intact family, childhood church attendance, and school sex education, none of which were significant in multivariate hierarchical logistic regression.

Sources of Sex Education

Most (71.2%) respondents had school sex education in junior high or high school. Most (64.6%) were educated by one or both parents, but 25.2% reported that no family member took an active role in their sex education, which does not differ for respondents who grew up in two-parent versus other family structures (24.4 vs. 30.0%, binomial $P = 0.92$).

Parents were the most cited sources for dating standards (70.2%), choosing a mate (76.2%), sexual ethics (63.6%), abstinence (70.2%), and long range goals (77.5%) (Fig. 3). Churches were the most cited sources for staying a virgin until marriage (74.8%), the emotional aspects of sex (50.3%), and spiritual aspects of sex (68.2%). Schools were the least cited sources for dating standards (13.9%), choosing a mate (6.0%), sexual ethics (9.9%), staying a virgin for marriage (7.9%), emotional aspects of sex (7.3%), and spiritual aspects of sex (5.3%).

Only half of respondents reported learning from parents about menstruation (52.3%), pregnancy (49.0%), intercourse (39.1%), and birth control (39.7%), and few respondents reported learning from parents about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (13.9%) and oral sex (4.6%). Peers were the most commonly cited source of information about vaginal sex (73.5%), oral sex (75.5%), and birth control (50.3%), and the second most common source of information about STIs (32.4%). Schools were most commonly cited source of information about STIs (68.0%). Schools were the only adult source of information about STIs for 57.0% of respondents and about birth control for 27.2% of respondents.

Respondents who reported learning about more topics from parents also reported learning about more topics from church ($r = 0.38$, $P < 0.0001$), school ($r = 0.23$, $P = 0.005$), and less from peers ($r = -0.17$, $P = 0.03$). Respondents who reported having learned more sex education topics at school also reported learning more topics from parents ($r = 0.23$, $P = 0.005$) and church ($r = 0.19$, $P = 0.02$) but not from peers ($r = 0.15$, $P = 0.07$).

Current Attitudes Toward Secular Sex Education

Most (65%) supported secular sex education. Support for secular sex education was associated in the multilevel model with having received school sex education (0.29, 95% CI (0.15, 0.43)) but not with gender (−0.01, 95% CI (−0.09, 0.07)), current age (0.0, 95% CI (−0.02, 0.02)), childhood church attendance (−0.01, 95% CI (−0.17, 0.15)), current church attendance (−0.05, 95% CI (−0.35, 0.25)), or premarital sexual experience (0.01, 95% CI (−0.03, 0.05) (Fig. 4). Respondents who reported receiving the strongest school sex education supported secular sex education by 29% points more than those who reported receiving the weakest school sex education.

Validation

In the Add Health comparison sample, the survey-weighted prevalences of premarital vaginal sex was 80.2% among non-Catholic Christians who attended church at least monthly ($n = 635$) and 78.5% among self-identified Born Again Christians ($n = 337$).

Discussion

More than 70% of respondents reported having had premarital vaginal or oral sex, with the proportion exceeding 80% among men and women who married after age 25, women who married before age 21, and in 6 of 9 churches. These high rates were seen in spite of the sample's religiously conservative norms: more than 80% of the premaritally sexually active regretted premarital sex, nearly all of the sample attended church frequently both at the time of survey and in childhood, and the entire sample was Born Again. The majority of premarital abstainers adhered to conservative religious norms, but the majority of respondents with these norms had premarital sex, suggesting that religious norms were not transferred into sexual behavior.

One of 9 surveyed churches had a majority of respondents report complete premarital abstinence. This church was atypically homogeneous: all respondents married at ages 21–25 and 90% attended church “very frequently” in childhood. This group's high prevalence of abstinence could be explained by the church or Sunday school class being more conservative than the others or self-presentation bias to answer the survey in conformance with conservative religious norms irrespective of actual sexual history. Religious clergy may personally identify with and socialize with more religiously adherent congregants. Kahneman and Tversky's theory of the availability heuristic predicts that people over-estimate the prevalence of examples that come to mind readily (Tversky and Kahneman 1973). If clergy socialize more with religiously adherent congregants, clergy would be expected to over-estimate the number of religiously adherent churches, such as this one, and to under-estimate the number of churches with high prevalences of premarital sex, such as the other eight surveyed churches.

Premarital sex is nearly universal in two groups of women—women who married at ages 16–20 (92% prevalence) and women who married after age 24 (85%)—and common among men who married after 26 (72%). The nearly universal premarital sex among women who married at ages 16–20 could be explained by some of these marriages being due to premarital pregnancy. Women and men who married after ages 24 and 26, respectively, could have started out less adherent to religious norms, and were thus more likely to have premarital sex and marry later, or they could have become less adherent as they stayed single longer. The evidence seems consistent with respondents having changed norms as they remained single; both men and women who married later did not differ in the proportion who had sex before age 21, an age by which 75% of Americans have had sex (Finer 2007). Event order cannot be discerned by cross-sectional data, but if respondents

who married later had started out less adherent, we would expect that premarital sex before age 21 would be more common in respondents who married later than respondents who married earlier. Women have traditionally been portrayed as sexual gatekeepers (Reiss 1960), but among respondents in this sample who abstained until age 21, women left abstinence at younger ages and at greater rates than men did.

Substitution of Oral Sex for Vaginal Sex

Substitution of oral for vaginal sex was evident in only two groups of respondents. Frequent childhood church attenders and respondents who married at ages 21–24 were less likely to have vaginal sex but not less likely to have oral sex. Age of marriage was a stronger predictor of substitution than childhood church attendance. Lindberg and colleagues found that successful substitution occurs only with initial sexual partners (Lindberg et al. 2008). Respondents who married earlier had fewer past sexual partners, whereas respondents who married later had more time to accumulate additional sexual partners and stop substituting oral for vaginal sex.

Sources of Sex Education

Religiously conservative organizations encourage parents to speak with their children about sex (Stephens 2009), but more than half of this sample did not learn from their families about core sex education topics such as menstruation, pregnancy, sexual intercourse, and birth control, and 25% reported no family sex education at all, even about ethics or relationships.

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are a crucial sex education topic, but most respondents (67.5%) reported learning about STIs from school and few (13.9%) learned about STIs from parents. School was the only adult source of information about STIs for 57.0% of respondents, for whom school filled a role that parents did not.

Peers were the most commonly cited source of information about vaginal (73.5%) and oral (75.5%) sex and the second most common source of information about STIs (32.4%). There is reason to doubt that peers provide accurate information. The three adult sources of sex education—school, family, and church—need to supplement information that adolescents receive from peers.

There was a positive correlation between church, home, and school sex education, which may imply that school, home, and church sex education are complements rather than substitutes. School, home, and church sex education seem to teach distinct sex education topics. For moral areas, parents and church were a major source of information for more than 70% of respondents, while schools were a source for fewer than 10% of respondents. For many factual areas, either peers or school were the most common source of information.

About two-thirds (65%) of respondents supported secular school sex education. We might expect that respondents who were sexually active before marriage would be more likely to support secular sex education, but only respondents' experience with school sex education is associated with support for secular sex education. Conservative religious organizations oppose secular school sex education out of concern that students will not learn sexual morality, but the secular sex education system may be self-perpetuating among laity, with those who received the most extensive school sex education most likely to support it.

Strengths and Limitations

Previous studies of young adult on religiosity and sexual behavior relied on self-reported religiosity and church attendance, which seem to be over-reported by a factor of two

(Hadaway et al. 1993). Church attendance overreport would be expected to bias upward estimates of premarital sex prevalence and bias toward the null associations between religiosity and sexual behavior. This data was collected in church Sunday School, so respondents were verified not only to attend church worship services but also supplementary Sunday School classes.

Respondents may not report non-normative behavior accurately on surveys (Rosenbaum 2006), but in this survey, all respondents had discontinued their antinormative premarital sex when they married, and may have thus reported premarital sexual histories accurately. This survey asked respondents whether they had premarital sex instead of relying on accurate recall of dates of first sex and first marriage, which have substantial measurement error (McFarlane and St. Lawrence 1999; Capaldi 1996; Newcomer and Udry 1988; Alexander et al. 1993). The proportion of premarital vaginal sex (63.6%) in this survey is slightly less than that estimated from the Add Health subsample of Born Again Christians attending church at least monthly, but this survey uses verified church attendance rather than self-reported church attendance. These respondents likely attended church more frequently than the Add Health subsample, and also took extra Sunday School lessons, so the lower proportion of premarital sex need not imply under-reporting of premarital sex.

Conclusions

Most respondents were sexually active before marriage in spite of attending church and Sunday School and affirming the religious norm against premarital sex. Abstinence was common in only one of 9 surveyed churches and among those who married at ages 21–24, and the latter group seemed to substitute oral for vaginal sex. Premarital sex was nearly universal among women who married after age 24 and before age 21, and common among men who married after age 26. As in national surveys (Eisenberg et al. 2008), most of these highly religious young adults supported secular sex education. Respondents with the most experience with school sex education were the most likely to support sex education, but respondents who had premarital sex were not more likely to support school sex education. Efforts to increase support for secular sex education may benefit from the involvement of religiously adherent evangelicals who had good experiences with their own secular sex education.

Abbreviations

CI	Confidence interval
STI	Sexually transmitted infection

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Fig. 1. Sexual behavior by church. Churches in the same region are labeled *a* and *b*. Chi-squared $P = 0.001$

Fig. 2.
Proportion to have premarital sex by age of first marriage and gender ($n = 151$)

Fig. 3. Sources of sex education. May add to more than 100% because respondents could select more than one source

Fig. 4. Support for secular sex education (smoothed kernel density) by exposure to school sex education (measured on Likert scale from red = no exposure to blue = much exposure)

Table 1 Demographics of sample of Southern Baptist Sunday School attendees ($n = 151$)

Factor	Premarital sex (%)					<i>P</i>
	No.	No sex	Oral only	Vaginal only	Both	
Total	151	27.2	9.3	6.0	57.6	
Gender						
Male	78	30.1	8.2	5.5	56.2	0.88
Female	73	24.4	10.3	6.4	59.0	
Age at first marriage						
16–20	19	15.8	5.3	10.5	68.4	0.01
21–24	80	38.8	11.3	3.8	46.3	
25–36	68	13.5	7.7	7.7	71.2	
Childhood church attendance						
Very often	110	30.0	11.8	6.4	51.8	0.05
Often	17	35.3	5.9		58.8	
Occasionally	24	8.3		8.3	83.3	
Parents married during childhood						
Married	131	28.2	8.4	6.1	57.3	0.69
Divorced	20	20.0	15.0	5.0	60.0	
Current church attendance						
Very often	102	30.4	9.8	3.9	55.9	0.53
Often	47	21.3	8.5	10.6	59.6	
Occasionally	2				100.0	
Church number						
1a	21	66.7	9.5	9.5	14.3	0.002
1b	6	17.0			83.0	
2	14	43.0	14.0		43.0	
3	28	28.6	25.0	3.6	42.9	
4a	12	16.7	8.3	16.7	58.3	
4b	21	9.5		9.5	81.0	
5	11	18.2	9.1		72.7	

Factor	Premarital sex (%)				
	No.	No sex	Oral only	Vaginal only	Both
6	23	17.4	4.3	4.3	73.9
7	15	13.3		6.7	80.0
“Accept Jesus as Lord & Savior”	151				

P is for relationship between premarital sexual experience and the factor using Fisher’s exact test. For churches, *P* is Chi-squared test with simulated *P* value (MCMC with 2,000 replications). Churches in the same region are designated a and b. Cells with a zero (0.0) value are empty for readability