


Teens' Sexual Experience, 1995-2002

 *Teen pregnancy and birth rates have declined dramatically since the early 1990s. In fact, the teen birth rate decreased one third between 1991 and 2004.¹ Research indicates that these declines are due almost equally to both a decrease in the proportion of girls and boys having sex, and an increase in the proportion of sexually active teens using contraception.² This Science Says issue brief presents information on the proportion of teens who have had sex, and how the proportion of sexually experienced teens has changed from 1995 to 2002. This brief uses data from the 1995 and 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG)—the premier source of national information on teen sexual behavior—and the 1995 National Survey of Adolescent Males (NSAM). Readers should note that the 1995 NSFG included data for teen girls only. Data presented in this brief refers to teens aged 15-19 unless otherwise noted.*

Highlights:

- Less than half of all teens have had sex.
- The proportion of teens who have had sex declined 17% for boys and 9% for girls between 1995 and 2002 (a statistically significant³ decrease) and among all racial/ethnic groups.
- Non-Hispanic black teens are more likely than non-Hispanic white and Hispanic teens to be sexually experienced.⁴
- Hispanic boys are significantly more likely than Hispanic girls to have had sex.
- Teen boys and girls begin having sex at approximately the same age.
- About one in seven teens has sex before age 15.

Less than half of all teens have had sex.

In 2002, teens aged 15-19 reported similar rates of sexual experience—47% of girls and 46% of boys said they had ever had sex. The proportion of teen boys and girls who have had sex declined 17% and 9% respectively between 1995, and 2002 (a statistically significant decrease) (Figure 1). In 1995 more than half of teen boys and girls

reported having ever had sex (55% of boys and 52% of girls).

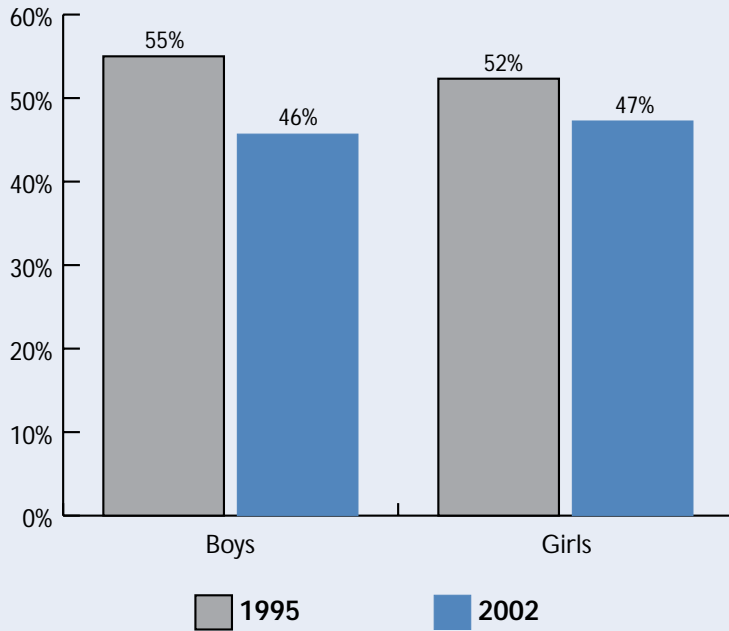
Sexual experience varies by race/ethnicity.

Sexual experience varies significantly by race/ethnicity (Figure 2). In 2002, non-Hispanic black teen boys (63%) were more likely than both Hispanic (55%) and non-Hispanic white teen boys (41%) to have ever had sex. Among girls in 2002, non-Hispanic black girls were more like-

ly (57%) than non-Hispanic white (46%) and Hispanic girls (40%) to have ever had sex.

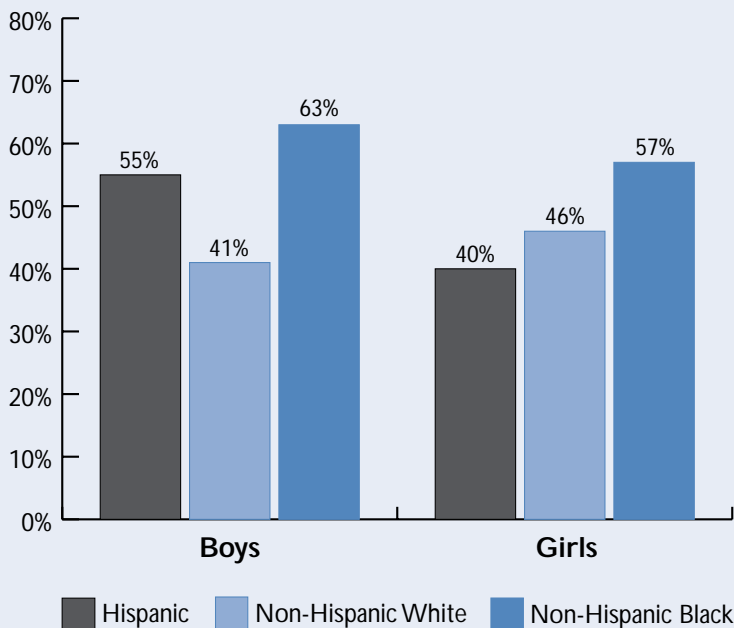
Among Hispanic teens, the difference in the proportion of sexually experienced boys and girls is statistically significant (55% for boys vs. 40% for girls). The gender differences in sexual experience among non-Hispanic blacks and non-Hispanic whites are not considered statistically significant.

FIGURE 1: Percentage of teens (15-19) who have ever had sex, 1995 and 2002



* The difference between 1995 and 2002 is statistically significant for both boys and girls

FIGURE 2: Percentage of teens (15-19) who have ever had sex by race/ethnicity, 2002



* The difference by race is statistically significant for both boys and girls

The proportion of non-Hispanic white teen boys who have had sex decreased from 50% in 1995 to 41% in 2002. Among non-Hispanic black teen boys, the proportion who have had sex decreased from 81% in 1995 to 63% in 2002. The percentage of sexually experienced Hispanic boys also decreased from 61% in 1995 to 55% in 2002. The decreases among non-Hispanic whites and non-Hispanic black teen boys are considered statistically significant (Figure 3).

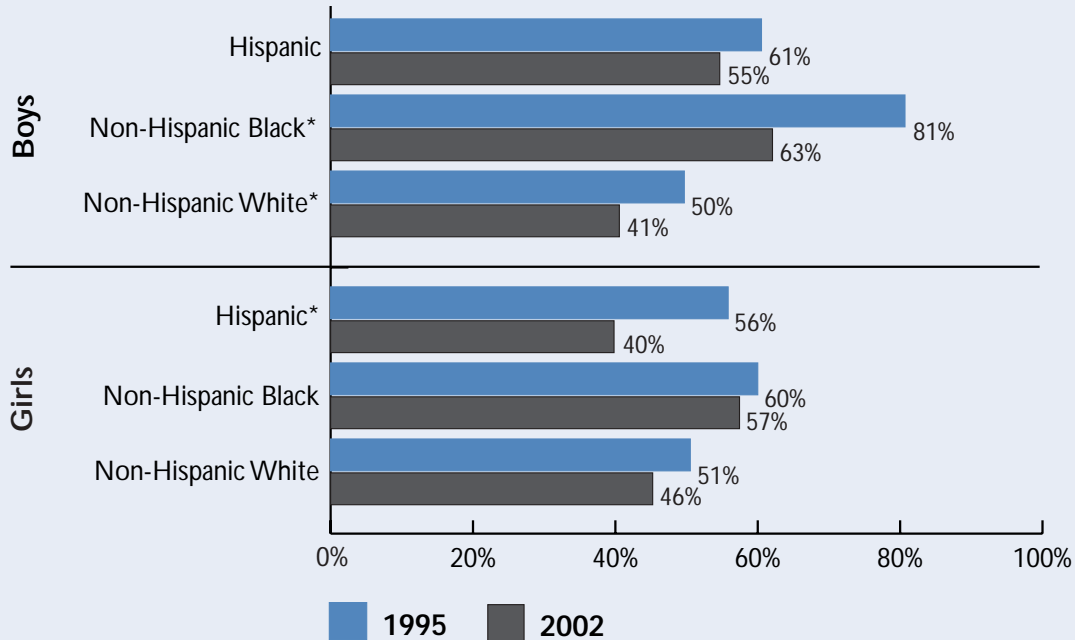
The proportion of non-Hispanic white teen girls who report ever having had sex decreased from 51% in 1995 to 46% in 2002 and among non-Hispanic black girls the percent who report ever having had sex decreased from 60% in 1995 to 57% in 2002. These changes are not considered statistically significant. The proportion of Hispanic girls who have had sex decreased from 56% in 1995 to 40% in 2002, a statistically significant decrease (Figure 3).

Sexual experience increases with age.

Not surprisingly, the proportion of teens who have had sex increases with age (Figure 4). Among teen girls, approximately one in seven 15 year olds, almost one in three 16 year olds, almost half of 17 year olds, close to two-thirds of 18 year olds, and three quarters of 19 year olds have had sex.

Among teen boys, almost one in six 15 year olds, one in three 16 year olds, almost half of 17 year olds, six in ten 18 year olds, and more than two thirds of 19 year olds have had sex.

FIGURE 3: Trends in teen (15-19) sexual activity from 1995 to 2002 by race/ethnicity



* The difference between 1995 and 2002 is statistically significant

When comparing teens by age group, younger girls are significantly less likely to have had sex than older teens. Thirty percent of girls aged 15-17 and 71% of girls aged 18-19 have had sex. Similarly, almost one third of boys aged 15-17 have had sex (32%), compared to almost two thirds of boys aged 18-19 (65%).

Girls aged 15-17 were significantly less likely to have had sex in 2002 than in 1995 (30% vs. 39%). However, there was no change in the proportion of girls aged 18-19 who were sexually experienced (71% in 2002 and 1995).

For boys, both younger and older teens were significantly less likely to have had sex in 2002 than in 1995. Less than a third of younger boys (aged 15-17) were sexually experienced in 2002 (30%) compared to 43% in 1995. Among older teens (aged 18-19) less than two thirds

were sexually experienced in 2002 (65%) compared to 76% in 1995.

The median age that teens first have sex is similar for both boys and girls, but varies by race/ethnicity.

The median age that teen boys first have sex is 17.3 years. For teen girls, the median age is 17.1 years.

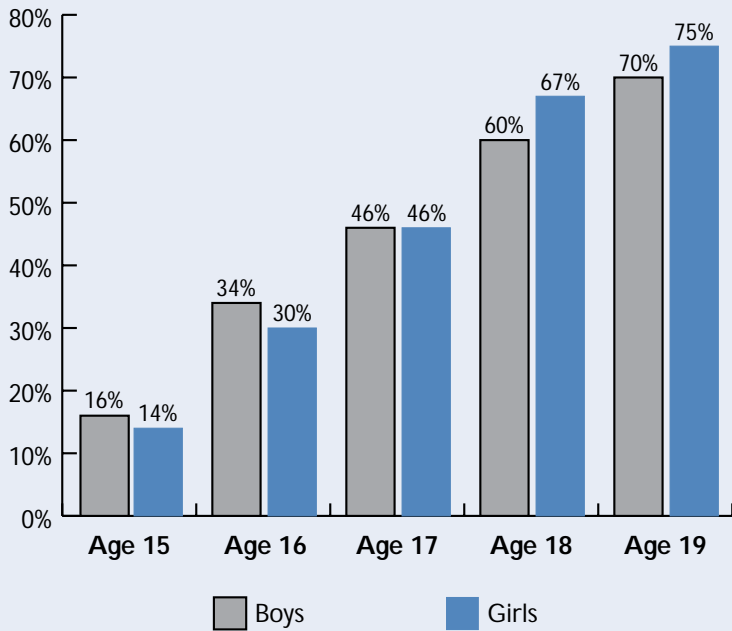
The median age non-Hispanic black teen boys first have sex is 16.0, compared to 16.7 for Hispanic teen boys and 17.8 for non-Hispanic white teen boys. The median age of first sex for teen girls also varies by race/ethnicity. The median age that non-Hispanic black teen girls begin to have sex is 16.3, compared to 16.9 for non-Hispanic white teen girls and 18.3 for Hispanic teen girls.

One in seven teens has sex by age 15.

Teen Boys. Approximately one in seven boys aged 15-19 (15%) had sex before age 15. The percentage of teen boys aged 15-19 who report having had sex for the first time before age 15 varies significantly by race/ethnicity. Approximately one quarter of Hispanic (24%) and non-Hispanic black (29%) teen boys have had sex before they were 15, compared to less than one in ten non-Hispanic white teen boys (9%) (Figure 5).

The percentage of teen boys who said they had sex before age 15 decreased significantly from more than one in five (21%) in 1995 to one in seven (15%) in 2002. The proportion of teen boys who had sex before age 15 decreased for all racial/ethnic groups between 1995 and 2002. For non-Hispanic white teen boys the proportion who had sex before age 15 decreased from

FIGURE 4: Percentage of teens (15-19) who have ever had sex by single year of age



14% to 9% and for non-Hispanic black boys it decreased from 49% to 29%. The proportion of Hispanic boys who had sex before age 15 decreased from 27% in 1995 to 24% in 2002.

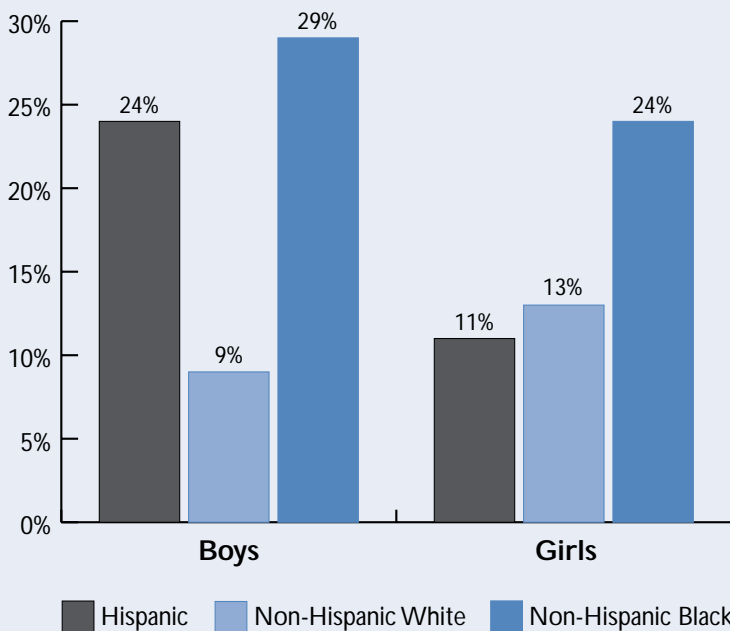
Teen Girls. Almost one in seven girls aged 15-19 report that they had sex for the first time before age 15 (14%). About one quarter of non-Hispanic black teen girls report having sex before age 15 (24%) compared to 13% of non-Hispanic white teen girls and 11% of Hispanic teen girls (Figure 5).

The percentage of teen girls reporting having had sex before age 15 also decreased significantly—from one in five in 1995 (20%) to one in seven in 2002 (14%). There was also a decrease in the percentage of girls who had sex before age 15 across all racial/ethnic groups. Among non-Hispanic black teen girls, the proportion who had sex before age 15 decreased from 31% in 1995 to 24% in 2002. For non-Hispanic white teen girls the percentage who had sex before age 15 decreased from 17% in 1995 to 13% in 2002 and for Hispanic girls the percentage decreased significantly from almost one quarter in 1995 (24%) to close to one in ten in 2002 (11%).

The difference between the percentage of Hispanic boys and girls that had sex before age 15 in 2002 is considered statistically significant.

The overwhelming majority (98.5%) of teens are not married. Consequently, statistics on sexual activity among unmarried teens are very similar to statistics for all teens.

FIGURE 5: Percentage of teens (15-19) who report having had sex before age 15



The proportion of *never-married* sexually experienced teens (45.6% of boys and 45.4% of girls) are similar to the proportion of *all* teens that have ever had sex (46.0% of boys and 46.8% of girls).

What it All Means

More teens are delaying sex. The percentage of sexually experienced teens has decreased rather dramatically in recent years. This decrease is especially notable among specific groups such as young teens (aged 15-17), Hispanic girls, non-Hispanic white and non-Hispanic black teen boys (aged 15-19), in particular, and older boys (aged 18-19) more generally. There has also been a remarkable decrease in the proportion of teens who have had sex before age 15 although it is still the case that one in seven teens has sex by age 15.

Simply getting young people to delay sexual activity can play an important role in reducing rates of teen pregnancy and childbearing as well as rates of sexually transmitted diseases among teens. For example, the later a teen begins having sex, the fewer sexual partners they are likely to have and the lower their risk for early-pregnancy and childbearing. Still, despite significant progress in reducing sexual activity among young people, almost half of all teens have had sex—a percentage that increases with age. These data suggest that in addition to being encouraged to delay sex, teens need information about contraception and sexually active young people need access to reproductive health services.

About the Putting What Works to Work Project

Putting What Works to Work (PWWTW) is a project of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy funded, in part, by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Through PWWTW, the National Campaign is translating research on teen pregnancy prevention and related issues into user-friendly materials for practitioners, policymakers, and advocates. As part of this initiative, the *Science Says* series summarizes recent research in short, easy-to-understand briefs.

Author Information

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About the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization supported largely by private donations. The National Campaign's mission is to improve the well-being of children, youth, and families by reducing teen pregnancy. When we began in 1996, we set a goal of a one-third reduction in the teen pregnancy rate in ten years. Ten years later, it seems almost certain that the nation will reach this goal. Building on this great success, the National Campaign's new challenge to the nation for the next decade will be to reduce the teen pregnancy rate by *another* one-third.

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Data Sources

All statistics for 2002 were generated with data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) Cycle 6, a periodic national survey on fertility-related issues conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). NSFG data sets on CD-ROM are available free of charge from NCHS: visit www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg.htm, call (301) 458-4222, or e-mail: nsfg@cdc.gov for more information.

All statistics for 1995 girls were generated with data from the NSFG, Cycle 5. Because the 1995 cycle of the NSFG included females only, male statistics for 1995 were generated with data from the National Survey of Adolescent Males (NSAM), a national survey designed to parallel the NSFG. NSAM was conducted by staff at the Urban Institute, the University of Illinois, and Research Triangle Institute under grants from the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), National Institutes of Health, HHS. NICHD and the Office of Population Affairs, Maternal and Child Health Bureau, HHS provided additional funding to prepare the data sets for release to the public. NSAM data sets are available via Sociometrics Corporation's Data Archive on Adolescent Pregnancy and Pregnancy Prevention (product numbers O7 and P1-P4). For pricing information, visit www.socio.com or call (650) 949-3282.

Please Note: The NSFG has typically been conducted about every 7 years. According to NCHS, it plans to change to continuous data collection in 2006 or 2007, interviewing a smaller number of people each year so researchers will need to group several years' data together to generate estimates for smaller populations such as teens. If

this plan is implemented, it seems likely that enough teen data to generate statistics will not be collected and released to the public until at least 2010 or 2011.

The NSFG is the only known nationally-representative survey of teens that includes questions on oral sex, but if you must use more current data you might want to check a research-related search engine such as PubMed (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/entrez/query.fcgi?db=PubMed>) for possible studies.

Notes

1 Hamilton, B.E., Ventura, S.J., Martin, J. A., Sutton, P.D. (2005). Preliminary Births for 2004. *Health E-Stats*. Retrieved October 28, 2005 from http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/hestats/prelim_births/prelim_births04.htm

- 2 Santelli, J.S., Abma J., Ventura S., et. al. (2004). Can Changes in Sexual Behaviors Among High School Students Explain the Decline in Teen Pregnancy Rates in the 1990s? *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 2004: 35 (2): 80-90.
- 3 For those unfamiliar with the term "statistical significance," this refers to the results of statistical testing to measure whether observed differences between groups (boys versus girls, older versus younger teens, etc.) are true differences in attitudes/behavior, or are due to the particular teens included in the survey, which is meant to be representative of the U.S. teen population. For the purposes of these analyses, the threshold for statistical significance is 0.05. That is, results are considered significant if the "p value"

(or probability of the difference being just a random occurrence) is equal to or less than 5%.

- 4 For boys, being "sexually experienced" is defined as having been married, having cohabited with a female, or having answered yes to the following question: "have you ever put your penis in a female's vagina (also known as vaginal intercourse)?" For girls, being "sexually experienced" is defined as having been married, having cohabited with a male, having been pregnant, or having answered yes to the following question: "Has a male ever put his penis in your vagina (also known as vaginal intercourse)?" "Virgins" are those who have never married, never cohabited, never been pregnant (girls only), and answered no to the question regarding having had sexual intercourse.