

ADOLESCENT BEHAVIOR AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

by
Julia V. Overturf
Barbara Downs
Population Division
U.S. Census Bureau

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This paper reports the results of research and analysis undertaken by the U.S. Census Bureau staff. It has undergone a Census Bureau review more limited in scope than that given to official Census Bureau publications. This report is released to inform interested parties of ongoing research and to encourage discussion of work in progress.

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This poster uses data from the Adolescent Self-Administered Questionnaire (SAQ) fielded during the 1998 and 2001 waves of the Survey of Program Dynamics (SPD). The SAQ asks adolescents aged 12 to 17 to report on many aspects of their lives, including, but not limited to, their relationships with parents, family responsibilities, school attitudes and behaviors, and risk behaviors such as drinking, smoking, illegal drug use, and sex and pregnancy. The 1998 wave of the SAQ interviewed 3,259 (unweighted cases) adolescents (58% response rate), and the 2001 wave interviewed 5,586 (unweighted cases) adolescents (79% response rate).

The SPD is a 10-year longitudinal panel survey, representative of the non-institutionalized civilian population of the United States in 1992 and 1993, the year the survey began. The SPD is a Congressionally mandated survey, designed to measure long-term economic conditions, with particular attention to the effects of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act (Welfare Reform) on economic, individual, and child well-being. In order to learn whether and how adolescents age 12 to 17 responded to changes in their family lives because of Welfare Reform, in 1998 and 2001 the Census Bureau asked them to complete a self-administered questionnaire about their behaviors and family relationships. The summarized findings from these questionnaires yield insight into how adolescents today live their lives.

Social science research has demonstrated that parental involvement affects adolescent behavior, primarily through monitoring behavior on the part of parents. Parents who spend more time supervising their children have children who engage in fewer risky behaviors (Christopher et al 1993; Donovan and Jessor 1985; Perkins et al 1998; Shilts 1991; Small and Luster 1994; Wilder and Watt 2002). Recent research also indicates that the quality of the mother-daughter relationship influences the age at which teenage girls first engage in sex (McNeely et al 2002).

Another aspect of parental monitoring is the amount of responsibility parents give children for household upkeep. This responsibility can be a positive or negative influence on teen behavior. Children who have more household responsibilities may actually have less parental monitoring. That is, their parents may be home less often, and thus the children take on more adult roles. Conversely, some children may have more parental monitoring and thus more chores to ensure their continued involvement in the family. We examine the relationship between the amount of chores children have around the house and their engagement in risk behaviors.

Of course, individual and family characteristics may also affect the likelihood of children engaging in risk behaviors. We examine a number of relationships in order to determine whether boys or girls are more likely to engage in risky behavior, and whether older or younger adolescents report more risk behaviors.

Finally, because this survey was administered either over the telephone, with a trained interviewer, or in private, with the adolescents listening to the questions using headphones, we test mode of administration differences in question responses. Answering personal questions over the telephone, rather than in private, may lead

adolescents to give more socially desirable responses (Hoyt and Chaloupka 1994; Schuman and Presser 1981). In our research we examine whether adolescents give more socially desirable responses to interviewers in response to questions about their family relationships and risk behaviors.

The findings we present tell an interesting story. First, while overall rates have declined slightly, there are few significant differences in risk behavior between 1998 and 2001. Very few teens, less than 10 percent each year, reported they had run away from home in the past year. A larger percentage engaged in destructive activities like damaging property or getting in fights (19 percent and 32 percent, respectively). About 15 percent of the adolescents report stealing something worth less than \$50 in the past year.

Between 30 percent and 40 percent of the adolescents report having tried illicit substances such as cigarettes and alcohol. Fewer, about 17 percent, tried marijuana and only 5 percent report having used other illegal drugs.

A quarter of all 14-to 17-year olds reported having had sex, and about 75 percent of them said they or their partner used a condom the last time they had sex (data not shown).

Since there were very few differences between the reports of risk behavior in 1998 versus 2001, for parsimony's sake we present only 2001 data in the rest of the poster. The next sections describe differences in reported risk behaviors by age, sex, interview mode, and the adolescent's relationship with his or her parent(s).

In 2001, about 25 percent of the 14-17 year olds in 2001 reported having had sex. Not surprisingly, 14 year olds were much less likely to have had sex than 17 year olds (9

percent and 44 percent, respectively). There were also slight, but significant, differences in sexual behavior by the teenagers' sex. At ages 14 to 16, girls were less likely to have had sex than boys, but at age 17, they were slightly more likely to report having had sex. Girls were also more likely to report having tried alcohol at most ages between 12 and 17.

Interview mode appears to affect responses to questions about some risk behaviors more than others. Adolescents were more likely to report risk behaviors in a self-administered format than directly to an interviewer via the telephone. For example, admitting to stealing seemed to be greatly affected by whether it was a private admission or required telling the interviewer the information. Adolescents were twice as likely to admit to stealing if they filled out the survey privately. On the other hand, less stigmatized behaviors, like marijuana use, appeared to be only slightly affected, although the relationship between reporting the behavior and interview mode were statistically significant.

The relationship between parent and child affects adolescent propensity to engage in risk behaviors. In both self-interviews and telephone interviews, there is a clear negative relationship between a child's perceptions of parent(s) knowledge about the goings on in his or her life and engagement in risk activities like smoking marijuana and stealing. And regardless of sex, adolescents are less likely to engage in risk behaviors, in this case alcohol consumption, if they have a positive relationship with their parent(s). Parent-child relationship quality is a scale indicating responses to the following statements about the mother and/or father:

I think highly of her/him.
She/He is a person that I respect.

I really enjoy spending time with her/him.
I can count on her/him to keep her/his promises.

A positive relationship with a non-resident parent is also associated with being in fewer fights in the last year. The graphs show this relationship among girls and boys separately, as well as the number of fights in the past year. Interestingly, being in only one fight – perhaps a fluke occurrence – was not affected by the relationship to an outside parent, for boys. Being in two or more fights, though – an indicator of more serious violence issues – was significantly reduced if the quality of the relationship with the parent living outside the home was improved.

Parental monitoring is also an important correlate of adolescent risk behavior, and the ability to monitor can be reduced if only one parental figure lives with the adolescent. Those who live with two parents (biological, step, other, or any combination thereof) are significantly less likely to engage in risk behaviors such as smoking, property damage, illegal drug use, or running away.

We earlier posed the question of whether household responsibilities would increase or decrease an adolescent's propensity to engage in risk behaviors. Our results indicate that teens with some, but not daily, household duties are least likely to report risky behaviors. Those with no chores and those with the greatest responsibilities are significantly more likely to report risky behaviors. Perhaps those with no chores have more freedom to do as they please with no parental control, while those with daily chores may be helping to run the household because their parent(s) are very busy with work or other demands. It appears, then, that teens with no chores or high levels of chores may have less parental monitoring, leading to risky behavior.

The findings we report in this poster indicate that many boys and girls aged 12 to 17 do engage in risky behaviors, but the influence of their parents by the quality of their relationship and their monitoring can reduce their propensity to engage in acts which may cause themselves harm or lead to other problems in life.

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