

Teen Sexual Behavior

Data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2007

When it comes to teens' sexual behavior, the 1990s were a decade of great progress—between 1991 and 2001 the proportion of sexually experienced high school students decreased 16%, the proportion of sexually active high school students who used condoms increased 25%, and teen pregnancy and birth rates declined steadily each year. Teen sexual behavior in the current decade can at best be characterized as running in place. There has been virtually no change since 2001 in the proportion of high school students who have had sex or since 2003 in the proportion of sexually active high school students who used condoms the last time they had sex, and the teen birth rate increased 3% between 2005 and 2006 (data on the teen pregnancy rate for these years are not yet available).

The most recent data from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that nearly half of all high school students have ever had sex and 7% had sex before age 13. Moreover, less than two-thirds of sexually active high school students report using a condom the last time they had sex.

This *Science Says* research brief provides a summary of the sexual behavior of high school students available from the 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), and includes information by gender, grade level, and race/ethnicity. The data in this issue brief are from a nationally representative survey of high

school students in the United States. Thirty-nine states and 22 cities also conducted surveys representative of the high school students in their jurisdiction. Results from these state and local surveys are available on The National Campaign website at <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/state-data/default.aspx>. Readers should note that the YRBS only surveys those young people in high school and that the data in this document refer to teens in high school. Also, all changes mentioned in this document are statistically significant unless otherwise noted.

Teen Sexual Experience

- In 2007, nearly half (48%) of all high school students reported ever having had sexual intercourse. Fully half of teen boys (50%) report ever having had sex compared to 46% of teen girls.
- The proportion of high school students who are sexually experienced differs by race/ethnicity overall, and by race/ethnicity and gender (Figure 1).
 - Overall, non-Hispanic white students (44%) are less likely than their Hispanic (52%) and non-Hispanic black (67%) peers to have ever had sex.
 - Non-Hispanic black teen boys are more likely than their peers to have ever had sex (73%), and they are much more likely than non-Hispanic black teen girls to report being sexually experienced (61%).
 - Among Hispanic teens, there is also a large difference between girls and boys in terms of sexual experience. Less than half of Hispanic teen girls (46%) are sexually experienced compared to nearly 6 in 10 Hispanic teen boys (58%).

FIGURE 1. Proportion of High School Students Who Have Ever Had Sex by Race/Ethnicity and Gender, YRBS 2007

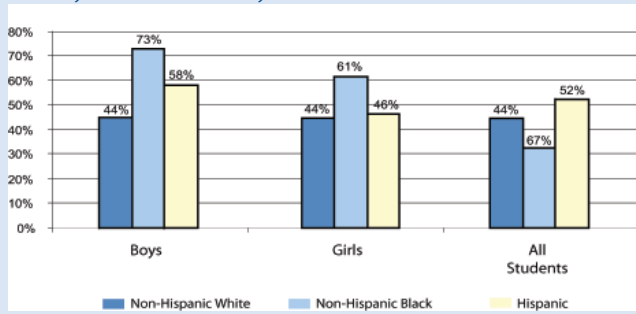
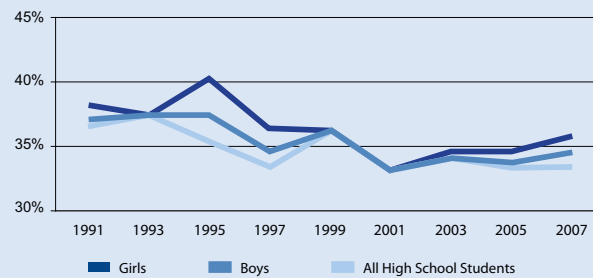


FIGURE 2. Proportion of Sexually Active High School Students by Gender, YRBS 1991-2007



- There is no difference in the proportion of boys and girls who are sexually experienced among non-Hispanic white students (44% for both).
- The proportion of students who have ever had sex increases with grade level.
 - One-third of 9th grade students report that they have ever had sex compared to 44% of 10th grade students, 56% of 11th grade students, and nearly two-thirds (65%) of 12th grade students. Put another way, by 12th grade 2 out of 3 students report having ever had sex.
- The proportion of high school students who have ever had sexual intercourse declined between 1991 and 2007 (54% to 48% respectively).
 - Between 1991 and 2001, the proportion of students who ever had sex decreased 16%. However, between 2001 and 2007, the proportion of students who ever had sex stopped declining—46% in 2001 to 48% in 2007. This change is not statistically significant.
- The most recent measure of sexual activity indicates that the proportion of students who had sex essentially remained stable between 2005 and 2007. In 2005, 47% of all high school students reported having sex compared to 48% in 2007.

Sexually Active Teens

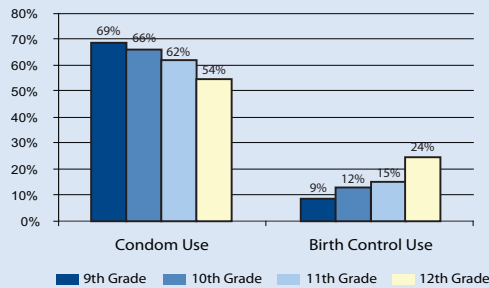
- In 2007, more than one-third (35%) of all high school students reported being sexually active—that is, they had sex with one or more people in the past 3 months. Although the difference is not statistically significant, 36% of girls compared to 34% of boys report being sexually active.
- There are slight variations in the proportion of sexually active students by race/ethnicity. Fully one-third of non-Hispanic white students are sexually active compared to 37% of Hispanic students and 46% of non-Hispanic black students.
- The proportion of sexually active students increases by grade

- level. One-fifth (20%) of all 9th grade students are sexually active compared to 31% of 10th grade students, 42% of 11th grade students, and more than half of 12th grade students (53%).
- Between 1991 and 2007 there was a statistically significant decrease in the proportion of sexually active high school students from 38% in 1991 to 35% in 2007 (Figure 2).
- Between 2005 and 2007 the proportion of students who were sexually active remained essentially unchanged (34% in 2005 vs. 35% in 2007).

Contraceptive Use

- In 2007, 62% of sexually active students used a condom the last time they had sex, and 16% of sexually active students used birth control pills before last sex.
- Although girls were less likely than boys to report using a condom the last time they had sex (55% vs. 69%), girls were more likely than boys to report using birth control pills to prevent pregnancy before they last had sex (19% vs. 13%).
- There are minor variations by race/ethnicity in the proportion of students who used a condom the last time they had sex. (Readers should note that only the differences between non-Hispanic white teens and non-Hispanic black teens are statistically significant.)
 - Two-thirds (67%) of non-Hispanic black students used a condom the last time they had sex compared to 61% of Hispanic students and 60% of non-Hispanic white students.
- Birth control pill use at last sex varies dramatically by race/ethnicity.
 - Non-Hispanic white students are twice as likely as non-Hispanic black and Hispanic students to report using birth control pills before they last had sex—21% of non-Hispanic white students compared to 9% of both Hispanic and non-Hispanic black students.

FIGURE 3. Condom Use at Last Sex Among Sexually Active High School Students, YRBS 2007



- As grade level increases, the proportion of students who report using condoms at last sex decreases and the proportion of students who used birth control pills before they last had sex increases. Among sexually active 9th grade students, 69% used a condom at last sex and 9% used birth control pills. Among sexually active 12th grade students, 54% used a condom the last time they had sex and 24% used birth control pills (Figure 3).
- Condom use at last sex increased steadily from 1991 to 2003 (46% to 63% respectively), but has leveled off between 2003 and 2007 (63% and 62% respectively).
 - Among non-Hispanic black students, the proportion of sexually active students who used a condom the last time they had sex increased significantly between 1991 and 1999 (from 48% to 70%). However, between 1999 and 2007 there was essentially no change in the proportion of sexually active non-Hispanic black students who used a condom at last sex (70% in 1999 to 67% in 2007).
 - The proportion of sexually active non-Hispanic white students who used a condom at last sex has increased from 47% in 1991 to 60% in 2007. Between 2005 and 2007 the proportion who used condoms did not change (63% and 60% respectively).
 - The proportion of sexually active Hispanic students who used a condom at last sex increased significantly from 37% in 1991 to 61% in 2007.
- Between 1991 and 2007, there has been no statistically significant change in the proportion of students who report using birth control pills before last sex—21% of students used birth control before last sex in 1991 compared to 16% in 2007.
- There was essentially no change between 2005 and 2007 in the proportion of sexually active students who used a condom the last time they had sex or in the proportion of sexually active students who used the birth control pill the last time they had sex.

Sex Before Age 13

- In 2007, 7% of high school students reported that they first had sex before age 13. Boys are 2 times more likely than girls to report having had sex before age 13 than girls. Fully 10% of boys and 4% of girls report having had sex before age 13.
- The proportion of high school students who had sex before age 13 differs by race/ethnicity—4% of non-Hispanic white teens, 8% of Hispanic teens, and 16% of non-Hispanic black teens report having had sex before age 13.
- Between 1991 and 2007, the percentage of teens who reported having had sex before the age of 13 decreased from 10% to 7%. Between 2005 and 2007, there was no change in the proportion of teens who reported having had sex before age 13 (6% and 7% respectively).

Multiple Partners

- In 2007, 15% of sexually active high school students reported already having had 4 or more sexual partners—almost the same as in 2005 (14%).
- Sexually active boys (18%) are more likely than sexually active girls (12%) to report that they have had 4 or more partners.
- The number of sexual partners also differs according to race/ethnicity. Non-Hispanic black students (28%) are more likely than their Hispanic (17%) and non-Hispanic white peers (12%) to report that they have had 4 or more sexual partners.
- The proportion of sexually active students who report having 4 or more partners increases with grade level. Nine percent of 9th grade students have had 4 or more partners compared to 13% of 10th grade students, 17% of 11th grade students, and 22% of 12th grade students.
- The proportion of students who have had 4 or more sexual partners decreased significantly from 19% in 1991 to 15% in 2007 (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4. Proportion of Sexually Active High School Students Who Have Had 4 or More Partners, by Gender, YRBS 1991–2007

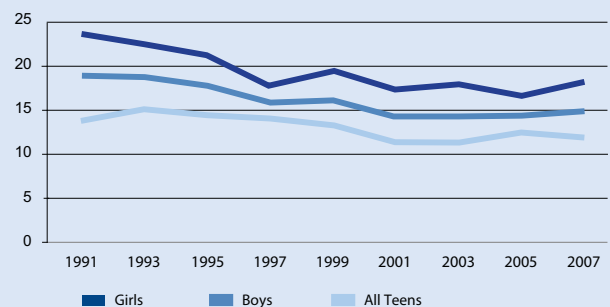
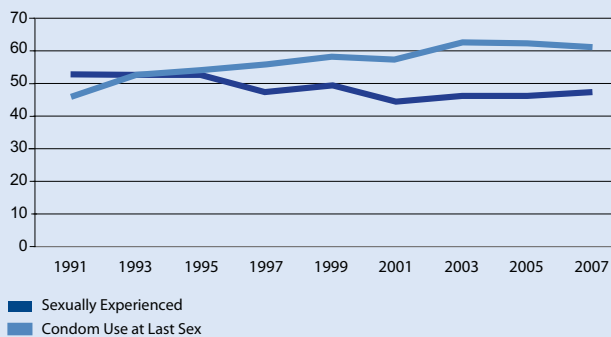


FIGURE 5. Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 1991–2007



What it All Means

When it comes to teen sexual behavior, pregnancy, and childbearing, the message from the 2007 YRBS is simple: there is much work still to be done. That teen sexual activity and contraceptive use has leveled off—coupled with the recent news that the teen birth rate increased for the first time in 14 years—makes clear that we all must intensify and be more creative in our efforts to prevent too-early pregnancy and parenthood. Complacency is not an option.

A tale of two trends. The 1990s can be described as almost unrelentingly positive with regards to teen pregnancy prevention—the proportion of teens who had sex declined, and among those who did have sex, more used condoms. The current decade, on the other hand, can be characterized as holding steady at best. The proportion of sexually experienced teens has not changed since 2001 and, the proportion of sexually active teens who used a condom the last time they had sex, has remained virtually the same since 2003 (Figure 5).

Why the lack of progress in changing teen sexual behavior and contraceptive use? No one really knows. Some possible explanations include:

- Complacency may have become the enemy of progress. Years of double digit declines in rates of teen pregnancy and birth may have diverted important attention, resources, and funding to other pressing issues.
- The early wins may have been won. Future efforts may well have to be more intense, focused, and creative if the nation is to make continued progress in reducing teen pregnancy and childbearing. Put another way, yesterday's way of doing business will no longer suffice.

What can States and Communities Do?

- **Go local.** Has your state or county recently released teen pregnancy and/or birth data? How about the 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) data on teen sexual behavior? Did your state or city participate in the state specific YRBS? Consider writing a press release, op-ed, and/or letter to the editor about your state's trends. Host a community forum and present the most recent local data you have. You can use state data section of The National Campaign's website to find more information about your state and compare your state to others. Visit <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/state-data/default.aspx> for more details.
- **Re-energize your community.** Use the increase in the teen birth rate as a call to action. Consider holding a town hall meeting on teen pregnancy, giving teens, parents, policymakers, and others the opportunity to voice their opinion. Remember to include those people not ordinarily aligned with efforts to prevent teen pregnancy—business leaders and faith communities for example—and make them aware of the role they can play in helping.
- **Have a goal.** Set a statewide or local goal to reduce teen pregnancy. Use this goal to focus attention on teen pregnancy and to start a conversation about what it will take to reduce the rates in your state. Visit <http://www.teenpregnancy.org/stategoals/> for more information on The National Campaign's teen pregnancy reduction goal and other states' goals.

About the Data

All data in this fact sheet are from the recently released Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), 2007. This survey is administered through the CDC every 2 years in high schools nationwide, and includes a variety of questions about risky behavior including questions about sex, drug and alcohol use, physical fitness, seatbelt use, and other issues. Approximately 14,000 students completed the questionnaire in 2007. The YRBS has been administered since 1991 and thus provides interesting data about the behavior of high school students over time, and is particularly useful for monitoring trends. One important limitation of the data is that they are limited to youth in high school, and do not include students who have dropped out, were absent from school on the day of the survey, or older teens who have graduated from high school. Visit <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/yrbs/index.htm> for more information about the YRBS.

Youth Risk Behavior Survey—1991 through 2007

	1991	1993	1995	1997	1999	2001	2003	2005	2007	Percent Change 1991-2007	Percent Change 1991-2001	Percent Change 2001-2007	Percent Change 2005-2007
Sexual Behavior													
% Who Have Ever Had Sex	54.1	53.0	53.1	48.4	49.9	45.6	46.7	46.8	47.8	-11.6%*	-15.7%*	4.8%†	2.1%
% Who Had Sex Before Age 13	10.2	9.2	8.9	7.2	8.3	6.6	7.4	6.2	7.1	-30.4%†	-35.3%†	7.6%†	14.5%
% Sexually Active (sex in the past 3 months)	37.5	37.5	37.9	34.8	36.3	33.4	34.3	33.9	35.0	-6.7%*	-10.9%	4.8%†	3.2%
% Who Have Had 4 or More Partners	18.7	18.7	17.8	16.0	16.2	14.2	14.4	14.3	14.9	-20.3%*	-24.1%*	4.9%†	4.2%
% Who Were Ever Forced to Have Sex	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	7.7	9.0	7.5	7.8	N/A	N/A	1.3%†	4.0%
% Who Experienced Dating Violence	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	8.8	9.5	8.9	9.2	9.9	N/A	N/A	4.2%†	7.6%
Contraceptive Behaviors													
% Who Used a Condom at Last Sex	46.2	52.8	54.4	56.8	58.0	57.9	63.0	62.8	61.5	33.1%§	25.3%*	6.2%†	-2.1%
% Who Used the Birth Control Pill at Last Sex	20.8	18.4	17.4	16.6	16.2	18.2	17.0	17.6	16.0	-23.1%	-12.5%†	-12.1%†	-9.1%

* The percent change is statistically significant if noted (p <0.05)

† Trend information for this statistic is not reported

§ The percent change is statistically significant from 1991-2003, but there was no change from 2003-2007

About the Putting What Works to Work Project

Putting What Works to Work (PWWTW) is a project of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned 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

This research brief was written by National Campaign staff member Katherine Suellentrop.

About The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization supported

largely by private donations. The National Campaign's mission is to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and responsible policies in both the public and private sectors.

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