After the Sexual Revolution: Gender Politics in Teen Dating

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feature article barbara risman and pepper schwartz

After the sexual revolution: gender politics in teen dating

Is the sexual revolution over? Are teens returning to conservative sexual values? Are we witnessing the end of sexual liberalism and a new trend toward virginity before marriage? This seems to be the consensus of the mass media, and sophisticated academic studies are substantiating these assumptions.

Teenagers hanging out after school in St. Paul, Minnesota.

News of apparent decreasing sexual activity among teens, as well as possible success in abstinence programs and church and government-based “just say no” campaigns, is widely greeted as a positive development. Americans generally regard teen sexuality as a social problem—regardless of whether it results in abortion, single teen motherhood or sexually transmitted disease.

Signs of a new teenage conservatism are, however, at least exaggerated and, more probably, misinterpreted. Hints of increased conservatism apply only to boys, and a great deal of evidence shows that teens continue to be active sexually. Why, then, are social commentators so insistent on making the case for a teenage sexual retreat?

the case for a teenage sexual counterrevolution

Much research suggests that teens became more sexually conservative during the last decade of the 20th century. Several studies show that a smaller proportion of youth had coitus between the ages of 15 and 17. For example, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, designed by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) to find out which behaviors most affect student health, was conducted several times throughout the 1990s, and every replication found a lower percentage of sexually active teens under age 18. In this nationally representative study of over 10,000 students, the percentage of high school
students, ages 15 to 17, who reported they had engaged in sexual intercourse dropped from 54.1 percent in 1991 to 48.4 percent by 1997, a dramatic decrease of some 5.7 percent in a short time. Similar trends were reported in three other nationally representative surveys. While black students continue to be more sexually active than whites, the trends found in this study are similar for blacks and whites. The trend is much less pronounced for Hispanic youth (Figure 1).

Accompanying these statistics is additional good news about the problems that often accompany teenage sexual activities. Not only did the percentage of teens engaging in coital sex fall, but also the serious problems that can result from irresponsible teenage sexuality declined. The teen pregnancy rate showed an impressive 14 percent reduction, lower than any time since 1975 (from a peak of 117 per 1,000 young women in 1991 to 103 in 1995). Fewer teen pregnancies mean fewer teenage mothers and fewer abortions. Reports from the Alan Guttmacher Institute show that the abortion rate decreased 31 percent from 1986 to 1996. The birth rate among teens rose until 1991 and fell steadily since, with a 25 percent decline between 1986 and 1996. When teens did have sex, they waited until somewhat older ages. The percentage of students in grades 9 and 10 who reported ever having had sexual intercourse was 43.7 percent in 1991, but by 1997 the percentage decreased to 40.3 percent. Even among juniors and seniors in high school, the rates of coitus fell nearly 10 percent in that time. Most research finds that the rate of sexually transmitted diseases also declined throughout the 1990s.

**why the apparent declines?**

These findings have many explanations, and most contradict one another. The various speculations for the decline in both sexual activity and the problems associated with it include the following: the success of abstinence education, the positive effect of comprehensive sex education, the cultural backlash against the sexual revolution, or the fear of disease (or some combination of these factors). Douglas Kirby’s comprehensive analysis of the research on sex education indicates that while good studies show that comprehensive sex education delays the age of first intercourse, none indicate that abstinence-only education is similarly effective. A recent, highly publicized study suggests that abstinence pledges themselves (without actual education) deter teens from sexual activity. While this study was widely reported in the mass media, the story is much more complicated. We believe the claim is inaccurate and explain later in this article why solid scientific research can be distorted when it enters public discourse.

Some commentators have extolled newly conservative values among high school students as the explanation for less teen sex. According to this view, girls especially grew tired of the excesses of the previous decades and wanted to find safety and dignity in less sexualized relationships. Youths looked at the carnage of their parents’ generation—divorce, disease, and a loss of status for women’s choice to say no—and decided to reestablish their power through less, not more, sexuality. The explanation sounds possible, but little research exists to test this.

**figure 1**

Percentage of Sexually Active High School Students by Race

![Bar chart showing percentage of sexually active high school students by race in 1991 and 1997.](chart)

Source: Authors’ tabulations from 1991 and 1997 Youth Risk Behavior Surveys.

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assertion. Fear of disease does seem to be one part of the puzzle. Considerable evidence indicates that some people have changed their sexual habits because of the perceived risk of contracting a permanent or fatal sexually transmitted disease.

Weighing these various explanations is complicated. Reports that the rates of birth, abortion, and sexually transmitted diseases fell much faster than rates of coitus convince us that young people are acting more responsibly when they are sexually active. Responsible sex, rather than postponed sex, seems to explain these improvements. For example, the Alan Guttmacher Institute calculates that less than 25 percent of the decline in pregnancy rates can be attributed to increased abstinence; they attribute the remainder of the decline to the more efficient use of birth control by sexually experienced women. Teens are primarily becoming sexually more responsible and only secondarily less sexually active. Whether such responsibility is attributable to comprehensive sex education or simply to the fear of disease, heightened by mass media reports on AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, remains unclear.

While credible competing explanations vie for credit when it comes to explaining the reduction of adolescent pregnancy, we still doubt the underlying premise that sexual activity is on the decline.

a closer look at the data

When we separate the data by gender, the story changes dramatically. Several rigorous studies indicate that the number of high school boys—but not girls—under 18 who remain virgins dramatically increased.

The drama of this decrease in sexual activity among high school boys was hidden in the earlier data that combined the sexes because girls’ behavior did not change significantly (Figure 2). And yet the story is even more complicated. Sexual trends follow the same direction for white, black and Hispanic boys, but the picture is more complex for girls (Figures 3 and 4).

The rate of sexual activity among white and Hispanic girls has remained generally stable. Black girls, however, reduced their rates of sexual activity, moving toward levels comparable to that of white and Hispanic girls.

So what is going on? Boys’ sexual behavior is becoming more like girls’ behavior. Among whites, boys are less likely than girls to be sexually active by age 17. Black and Hispanic boys are still more likely than girls to report sexual intercourse, but the gaps are closing here, too.

We can only speculate about the explanations for the complexity of these changes. We draw on several intensive interview and observational research studies to help understand the reasons for the decrease in teenage boys’ sexual experience while in high school. Our best sociologically informed guess is that the cultural norms for girls’ sexuality have dramatically changed. Girls are now presumed sexually active inside, but not outside, romantic relationships. Boys are therefore now much more likely to begin their sexual lives with a girlfriend.

The decline in problematic outcomes such as pregnancies is the result, we believe, of girls’ increased influence in intimate relationships. In the past, boys were often introduced to sex in a hasty encounter with a girl outside their social circle, one stigmatized by her own sexual appetite or with a desperate need for any kind of approval or inclusion. These girls were often ostracized and stigmatized by both sexes and cruelly smeared as sluts. In previous decades when boys were more sexually active than girls at younger ages, a small pool of “bad” girls probably serviced many boys (otherwise, how

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**Figure 2**

Percentage of Sexually Active High School Students by Gender

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1991</th>
<th>1997</th>
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<tr>
<td>females</td>
<td>50.8</td>
<td>47.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>males</td>
<td>57.4</td>
<td>48.9</td>
</tr>
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Source: Authors’ tabulations from 1991 and 1997 Youth Risk Behavior Surveys.
could so many fewer girls be sexually experienced than boys?). Nowadays, with boys and girls reporting more similar rates of sexual activity (although only equal rates at the moment for whites), more boys apparently have their first sexual experiences inside a “relationship” of some sort. Adult observers may, however, have to stretch their imagination a bit to define the word relationship as casually as teens do, since it may mean accepting the idea of a two-week acquaintance as a relationship. Nonetheless, there seems to be good reason to suspect that the decrease in boys’ activity must have something to do with girls’ increasing control over the conditions of sexual intercourse.

We also speculate that girls are more likely to insist on safer sex. Dana Lear’s interview study with college students at UC Berkeley found that even in that educationally elite context, it was women who responded to the threat of disease as well as pregnancy and insisted on the use of condoms, at least until the relationship generated enough trust to move toward other...
means of birth control. Girls’ increasing ability to define sex as part of a relationship is one of the reasons for more responsible teen behavior. To the extent that boys have sexual relations with girlfriends, we would expect more condom use and less problematic outcomes of coitus.

Does this mean that the gender revolution is over, that girls are now their boyfriends’ equals as sexual partners? We think not. White girls are as likely as white boys to be sexually active. But beyond that, a remnant of the sexual double standard is alive and well. In studies from London to several American college campuses to urban and rural high schools, young women still report being worried about being labeled a slut. A new definition of the word slut, however, has surfaced—one that demonstrates that the sexual revolution is over, even while the gender revolution has hardly been won. Girls today may be able to have sex without stigma, but only with a steady boyfriend. For girls, love justifies desire. A young woman still cannot be respected if she admits an appetite-driven sexuality. If a young woman has sexual liaisons outside of publicly acknowledged “coupledom,” she is at risk of being defamed. If a girl changes boyfriends too often and too quickly, she risks being labeled a slut. This puts her one down as a power player in her relationship, because her boyfriend does not have to worry about moving on too quickly and being stigmatized for his sexual choices.

While dating relationships may continue to be somewhat inequitable, the research clearly shows that today’s teenagers are sophisticated sexual actors. No evidence indicates that sex in most high schools has once again been stigmatized. In fact, survey data suggest that a variety of sexual expressions are a part of “relationships.” Most boys who report coitus also report having had oral sex performed on them and having performed it themselves. Even among virgins, over one-third of the students have masturbated a member of the opposite sex to orgasm. No one really knows if oral sex is more common now or simply more openly discussed, but teens clearly often
do not consider oral sex as "real" sex, nor do they understand that disease can be transmitted this way. In one study, one-third of sex educators did not even consider oral sex as real sex.

Another finding is clear. While the incidence of coitus among teenage boys under age 18 has decreased, by the end of the teen years nearly all American youth are sexually active. Nine out of ten Americans are sexually active by the time they are 20. Nearly one-half of teens who are not sexually active by age 17 have become so by their senior year or perhaps immediately after graduation. It is now the statistically atypical woman (one out of four) or man (one out of five) who is still a virgin at the end of the teen years.

Still, some changes have turned in the direction of conservatism. For example, approval of casual sex is down. It was a rare boy or girl in the 1990s who openly approved of casual sex or claimed to engage in it. But the definition of being in a relationship is a social one, and a relationship of only two weeks may count. Therefore the participants may not consider the sex that happens within it as casual sex, although it might be so defined by researchers, parents and policymakers. Young American women no longer hold any attitudes that can be interpreted as a double standard. The majority of American women college students believe that sex with affection is acceptable for women and men, and nearly none of them support the right to casual sex for themselves or others, men or women. And yet, boys do not report being worried about being labeled as promiscuous for having too many partners or for changing partners too often. And while teenage males no longer hold any double standard for the rights of women and men to have sexual relationships with affection, they do hold a double standard in that they approve of casual sex more often for men than for women.

Teenagers are now sexual actors, if not at age 16, then by the time they are old enough to drink legally. The severing of the necessary connection between sexual activity and marriage is irrevocable. What has changed is that teens are not getting into as much trouble as they once did because of their sexual activity.

**what does it all mean?**

The sexual revolution is a fait accompli; no counterrevolution has taken place. Instead, the revolution was such an overwhelming success that it has revised the entire framework of how American society thinks about sex. Premarital, unmarried, and post-divorce sex are now seen as individual choices for both women and men. The revolutionary principle that divorced the right to sexual pleasure from marriage (at least for adults) is no longer controversial; it goes unchallenged by nearly everyone but the most conservative of religious fundamentalists. It is the gender revolution that is unfinished and still progressing. And it is this revolution still in the making that shows up as we see the evidence that girls are beginning to successfully assert their own right to sexuality and to negotiate more control in their heterosexual relationships.

**A friendship totem collage made by two 15-year-old girls.**

Why are teens protecting themselves more from the unintended negative consequences of sexual activity? Our best guess is that it is related to the increasing power of girls in their sexual encounters. If we are correct in asserting that the decrease in boys’ sexual activity at younger ages reflects girls’ increasing negotiation power to restrict sex to relationships (however loosely defined), it is a consequence of more relational and less casual sex that aids more responsible sexual activity.

Despite decreases in abortions, teen pregnancy rates, and sexually transmitted diseases, scientists still write about
teenage sexuality as if it is inherently a social problem. On even the most liberal sex education sites on the Internet (Planned Parenthood, the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States [SIECUS] and the Alan Guttmacher Institute), discussion of teenage sexuality is couched in the somber and concerned tones of what might go wrong and what has gone wrong. Yet because of the underlying presumption of nearly all the scientific literature that teen sex is necessarily bad, it is easy to underestimate how much has already been accepted about sexuality and youth in our society. The sexual revolution has changed the way we think about this “social problem.”

Every American knows that our culture is highly sexualized. We use sex to sell products to teens as well as to adults. Yet our culture is remarkably ambivalent about teens desiring sexual pleasure.

Note that most public concern is focused on teens in high school, not young adults or college students. Polls show that premarital sexuality is acceptable to most Americans, at least for adults. What would have been shocking during the heyday of the sexual revolution now goes unnoticed. Not long ago, Victoria’s Secret ads would have been considered soft pornography, and jokes about oral sex would not have been allowed on prime-time TV. While concern with teenage sexuality continues, the public does not seem willing to desexualize the greater culture that shapes teen experiences. Rather, there seems to be some strange cultural desire, fueled by the mass media, to distort both the scientific research and the reality of teens’ lives.

Every American knows that our culture is highly sexualized. We use sex to sell products to teens as well as to adults. Yet our culture is remarkably ambivalent about teens desiring sexual pleasure. Jocelyn Elders lost her position as surgeon general of the United States because she publicly advocated that masturbation be discussed, and even promoted as “safe” sex, as a part of sex education. She suggested that such self-gratification might delay entry into too early or more risky sexual activities simply to satisfy sexual appetites. The reactions to her comments were outrage, loathing, and anger far above the general distaste for sex education itself. The prompt and wide-


dy publicized dismissal of Elders indicates that at least publicly, our society denies the legitimation of safe sexual expression to teens and may have difficulty accepting sexual feelings outside of a spiritual, relational or reproductive context. The Elders incident reflects the American ambivalence toward and queasiness about the sexuality of youth. Teenage sexuality challenges both the public and the research community because teen sex is obviously not about reproduction or long-term mating behavior in kin groups—or even about love. Teen sex makes adults admit that sex may be purely about play and pleasure. Furthermore, even though today’s parents lived through the sexual revolution, many are not comfortable allowing their own children the freedom they enjoyed (although they clearly cannot hinder sexual activity very effectively).

Perhaps this is why scientific studies on teen sex are often misrepresented in the media. Recently, a study of abstinence
Nearly all the survey studies on teenagers have presumed that "sex" means heterosexual sex. No trend data are available on same-sex encounters, bisexuality or gay identity. About 10 percent of teens on some surveys report being confused about their sexual identity. We cannot tell if this simply reflects the same developmental struggles about identity that every generation of teens faces or whether the decreased stigma attached to being gay, reflected in the mass media, has encouraged more open exploration of sexual alternatives. Most gay men and many lesbians remember same-sex attractions and considering a gay identity in middle school and sometimes before. Some also remember feeling alienated from traditional masculine or feminine pursuits they were presumed to share.

Articles in the public press and some ethnographic research suggest at least more acceptance of bisexuality, and perhaps homosexuality as well, among teens. In 1995 Newsweek went so far as to suggest the existence of "bisexual chic," at least for girls, in some high schools. In one study of fans at rock clubs, women who identified themselves as heterosexual routinely had same-sex erotic experiences with other women, without redefining their identities. Categories of gay and straight, queer or not, may be more fluid among teens today than ever before. Many students support the position that erotic attractions need not remain stable; others—both gay and straight—hold fast to their sexual identities. Solid scientific studies in the future can no longer presume that when teenagers report "having sex," all of them mean heterosexual coitus.

pledges was highly publicized, often with headlines such as "Abstinence Pledges Work." Yet, the headlines were hardly accurate. Indeed, Peter Bearman and Hannah Bruckner's rigorous study suggests that abstinence pledges succeed in delaying coitus only when neither too many nor too few peers pledge, so that abstinence becomes the membership badge of a social clique. When the majority of students pledge virginity or too few teens pledge to make a reasonable peer group, the pledges are ineffective. Abstinence pledges are headlined as "working" when in fact they may postpone intercourse only for 14- and 15-year-olds within an identifiable clique, and then for a total of 18 months. And when such pledges do work, they come with an unwelcome side effect: the pledges are less likely to use condoms when their sexual activity does begin. Many in our culture are so desperate to justify the money put into abstinence programs that there is little desire to look at the downside of such programs.

The dialogue on teenage sexuality could be more useful if writers and researchers openly addressed their value assumptions about whether adolescent sexuality is developmentally appropriate or inherently pathological. Presently, the usually unstated assumption is that teenage sex is inherently a social problem. We do not believe the data support such a conclusion. Sexual exploration may in fact be part of the developmental journey of adolescence.

Whichever values one holds—that teen sex is either pathological or natural—American society cannot afford to continue to define teen sexuality as necessarily problematic. Both younger and older people no longer tie sexuality to long-term personal or institutional commitments. Teens and adults have sex before, during, and after marriage with a variety of partners over their life course. A policy that denies this reality cannot provide adequate medical and social education that promotes responsibility and safety. For most people, a sexual life begins during adolescence and is likely to include all kinds of sexual behaviors, including coitus, before people reach the legal age for drinking alcohol.

The sexual revolution has changed us. It redefined sexual activity as a right of individuals and not merely as a means for reproduction or even marital intimacy. This new view of sex is no longer a revolutionary ideal or even a liberal notion but has become a mainstream American value. Teenagers are simply living in the same culture as the rest of us. The sexual revolution is social history, the gender revolution continues, and teenagers struggle to create new norms that work for them in the 21st century.
Teens walking on a country road in Minnesota.

recommended resources


