

Sex Between Young Teens and Older Individuals: A Demographic Portrait

By Jennifer Manlove, Ph.D., Kristin Moore, Ph.D., Janet Liechty, M.S.W., Erum Ikramullah, and Sarah Cottingham
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O *verview.* Over the past decade, considerable legal and policy discussion has emerged about sexual activity between young teens and older individuals. This discussion has been prompted by the growing awareness of the personal and societal costs of this activity. Sex between young teens and older individuals is linked with risky sexual behaviors that could lead to unintended pregnancy and childbearing, as well as to sexually transmitted infections. Among sexually experienced teens, having sex with someone who is older has been associated with reduced and inconsistent use of contraception,¹⁻³ including reduced use of condoms,⁴ and a greater risk of a teen pregnancy.⁵ More than one in four babies born to mothers between the ages of 15 and 17 were fathered by someone who was five or more years older.⁶ On average, young teens who have sex with an older individual report a larger number of sexual partners during the high school years and higher levels of drug and alcohol use than do other sexually experienced teens.^{7,8}

Some studies of male and female middle school and high school teens also have found that those who were dating an older individual were more likely than were those who were dating a similar-aged individual to engage in sexual intercourse in that relationship.⁹⁻¹¹ And early sexual activity, in itself, is linked to a host of negative outcomes, including having a greater number of sexual partners, a reduced likelihood of using contraception, and a greater likelihood of getting pregnant and giving birth during the teen years.¹² Some research on adolescent brain development provides a larger context for these patterns; this research suggests that young teens are not prepared cognitively to make significant life decisions, including decisions about sex and contraception.¹³

This research brief draws on recently released data on first sexual experiences from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG 2002) to present an updated look at sexual relationships between young teens and older individuals. Specifically, we examined males and females whose first sexual intercourse was at age 15 or younger with an individual who was three or more years older. We examined prevalence and trends in first sexual experiences between young teens and older individuals and identified family and individual factors associated with these young adolescents having sex with individuals three or more years older. We also looked at how the characteristics of the relationships that young teens have with older individuals differ from the characteristics of other adolescent sexual relationships, and we assessed whether sex between young teens and older individuals is correlated with other risky adolescent behaviors.

Results of these analyses reinforce the findings of previous research, while also providing new information. For example, Child Trends' analyses show that a significant proportion of young male teens – not only of young female teens – have engaged in a first sexual relationship with an older individual of the opposite sex. Among other key findings derived from these analyses are that the youngest sexually experienced teens are the most likely to have sex with an older individual, and that early sex with older individuals is linked with nonvoluntary and forced sex.

PREVALENCE

Females are more likely than are males to have sex with an older individual. In 2002, 13 percent of females and 5 percent of males reported a first sexual experience at age 15 or

younger with an individual who was three or more years older (See Figure 1). Males were more likely than were females to be in the “other sexually experienced” category (46 percent,

STATE LAWS ADDRESSING ILLEGAL SEX WITH MINORS

Laws addressing illegal sexual relations with minors are designed to protect young people from sexual exploitation.¹⁴ Each state has its own legal definition of when having sexual relations with a minor is considered illegal. Most often, specific reporting requirements related to criminal sexual acts with minors are found in sections of a state's civil code that describe child abuse reporting. Only five states specifically use the term "statutory rape," even though each state documents criminal sexual acts based on the age of legal consent, often in combination with age differences between minors and older individuals. According to a recent publication by The Lewin Group,¹⁴ each state sets an age when individuals legally can consent to sexual intercourse, regardless of the age of the individual with whom they are having sex. Thirty-four states set this age of consent as 16. However, only 12 states include a single age of consent. The remaining 38 states and the District of Columbia also include language about age differences, the minimum age of the minor, and/or the minimum age of the defendant (in cases of prosecution). Those states that include age differential requirements most often set these at a two-to-five-year age difference. State laws are based on the age of the parties involved, even if both parties believe the contact was voluntary, motivated by the understanding that minors below a certain age cannot legally consent to sexual intercourse.

All states have laws mandating the reporting of child abuse, but these laws vary considerably in their definitions, scope, and procedures. State child abuse laws typically mandate that professionals who are in contact with children must report child abuse and neglect. These laws apply generally to teachers, health care providers, child care workers, clergy members, legal professionals, and state employees who work with children.¹⁴ Federal agencies that provide funding for programs for children and adolescents are subject to child abuse reporting requirements in compliance with state laws. For example, Title X - the U.S. government's program that provides funding for family planning services - includes appropriations language which states that family planning providers are not exempt from state reporting requirements. Each year since 1999, appropriations language for the Title X program has clarified the responsibility of health care providers to report by stating that: "Notwithstanding any other provision of law, no provider of services under Title X of the Public Health Service Act shall be exempt from any State law requiring notification, or the reporting of child abuse, child molestation, sexual abuse, rape, or incest."^{15,16}

ABOUT THE RESEARCH SOURCE FOR THIS BRIEF

The 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG 2002), conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), is designed to provide reproductive health information about men and women between the ages 15 to 44. To learn more about sexual relationships between young teens and older individuals, we limited our sample to 2,059 males and 2,513 females between the ages of 15 and 24 in 2002, with retrospective information on their age at first sexual intercourse and the age of the individual with whom they first had sex. Comparison information is available for 2,934 females in 1995.

Child Trends analyzed these data to examine first sexual experiences that occurred during the middle and secondary school years (under the age of 18). In these analyses, we defined young teens as those who were 15 and younger at first sex, because 16 is the most common state-mandated age of consent. We defined an older individual as someone who was three or more years older than such a young teen at first sex, because a number of states include this age difference in their language about sex with minors.¹⁴ This brief presents information on those respondents in the sample whose first sexual experience occurred when they were aged 15 or younger with an individual who was three or more years older ("sex between young teens and older individuals"), compared with respondents in two other groups: those whose first sexual experience was before the age of 18 but was not classified as sex between young teens and older individuals (referred to as "other sexually experienced"), and those who did not experience sexual intercourse before the age of 18 (referred to as "not sexually experienced"). All differences presented are statistically significant ($p < .05$). *Note that because sexual relationships between young teens and older individuals are often exploitive and coercive, we use the term "older individual" instead of "older sexual partner" within this brief.*

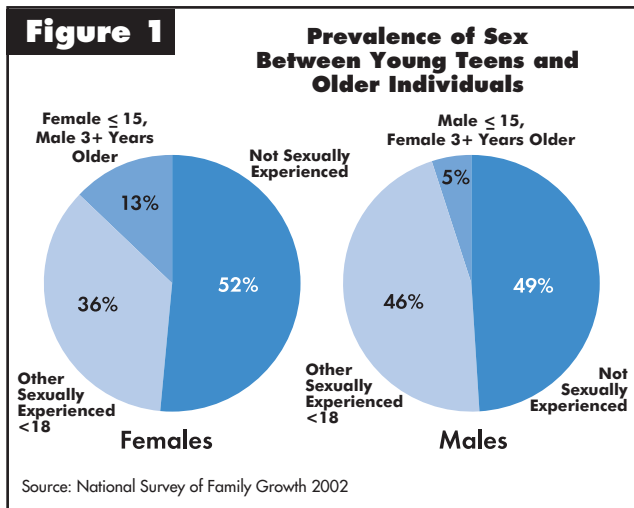
compared with 36 percent of females). About one-half of females (52 percent) and males (49 percent) did not experience sexual intercourse before age 18. Additional analyses (not shown in a figure) indicate:

- Overall, males represented 26 percent of teens whose first sexual relationship

occurred at age 15 or younger with someone three or more years older.

- Among those who were sexually experienced, females (26 percent) were more likely than were males (9 percent) to report that their first experience with sexual intercourse was at age 15 or younger with an individual who was at least three years older.

The prevalence of sex between young female teens and older males did not change between 1995 and 2002. Separate analyses of data from 1995 (not shown here) indicate that the percentage of young female teens having sex at age 15 or younger with an older male remained essentially stable between 1995 (14 percent) and 2002 (13 percent). Comparable data are not available for male teens.



INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY FACTORS

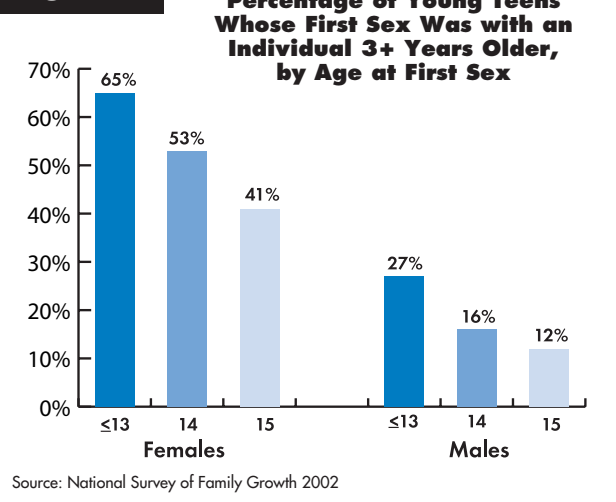
The youngest sexually experienced teens are the most likely to have sex with an older individual. The younger teens were at the time of their first experience with sexual intercourse, the more likely they were to have had that experience with an individual who was at least three years older (See Figure 2).

- Almost two-thirds (65 percent) of females who were aged 13 or younger when they first had sexual intercourse did so with a male who was at least three years older, compared with slightly more than one-half (53 percent) of 14-year-old females and 41 percent of 15-year-old females engaging in sexual intercourse for the first time.
- Similar patterns were found among young males, although the percentages were smaller (27 percent, 16 percent, and 12 percent, respectively).

The typical age gap between young teens and older individuals who are sexually involved is three to four years. An example of this pattern would be a 14-year-old girl whose first experience with sexual intercourse was with a 17- or 18-year-old boy.

- At least one-half of sexual relationships between young teens and older individuals were with an individual who was three to

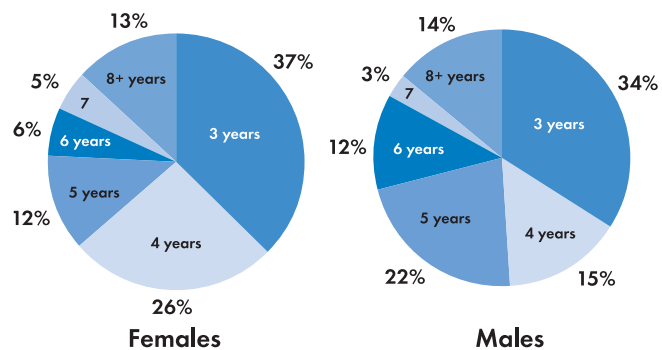
Figure 2



four years older than the young teen (49 percent of those sexual relationships with young male teens, and 63 percent of those sexual relationships with young female teens) (See Figure 3).

- Three-quarters (77 percent) of the older males and females with whom teens aged 15 or younger reported having sex were still in their teens, (in separate analyses, not shown here).
- In contrast, slightly more than one in eight individuals (14 percent for males, and 13 percent for females) was eight or more years older than was the young teen at her or his first sexual experience. None of the teens in the sample reported sex with an individual who was over the age of 40.
- Although sex between young males and older females is less common than is sex between young females and older males, when it does occur, the age gap tends to be larger. Fifty-one percent of young males who had a first sexual experience with an older female reported an age gap of five or more years, compared with 36 percent of young females reporting a similar age gap with older males.

Sex between young teens and older individuals increases with the number of family disadvantages. The percentage of teens reporting sex at age 15 or younger with an individual three or more years older was higher among teens who grew up under certain circumstances: they lived in a family structure other than one headed by two biological or adoptive parents; they had parent(s) who had lower educational attainment (high school degree or less); and their own mothers were teens at the time of their first birth. Because these factors tend to occur together, Child

Figure 3**Distribution of Age Difference Among Young Teens Whose First Sex was with an Individual 3+ Years Older**

Source: National Survey of Family Growth 2002

Trends created an index of family disadvantage. We found that as the number of family disadvantages increases, the likelihood of sex between young teens and older individuals increases correspondingly (see Figure 4).

- Among females, 7 percent of those with no family disadvantages had a first sexual experience at age 15 or younger with a male who was three or more years older, compared with 12 percent of those with one disadvantage, 20 percent with two disadvantages, and 23 percent with all three disadvantages.
- Among males, the percentages were smaller but showed a similar increase between those with no family disadvantages (2 percent) and those with all three disadvantages (10 percent).

RELATIONSHIP TYPE AT FIRST SEX

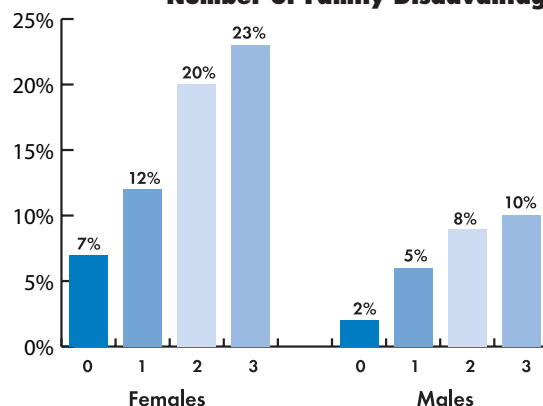
Sex between young teens and older individuals is more likely to be considered casual than are other sexual relationships, but females and males view these relationships differently. Females whose first sexual experience was at age 15 or younger with an older male were less likely to report that they were “going steady” with the male than were other sexually experienced females (59 percent versus 76 percent). Differences among males were even more striking. Males aged 15 or younger who reported having a first sexual relationship with an older female were even less likely to report their relationship as “going steady” (17 percent) than were other sexually experienced males (55 percent). Despite the difference in perceptions between young females involved sexually with older males and those involved sexually with males closer to their own age, the majority of young females who had sex at age 15 or younger with

older males viewed these relationships as “going steady” (See Figure 5). In contrast, the majority of young male teens whose first sexual experience was with older females viewed these relationships as casual. That is, these males reported that they only “went out occasionally,” or had “just met,” or “were just friends” at the time of their first sexual relationship with these older females. Among teens who had sex at a young age with an older individual:

- Fifty-nine percent of females reported that they were “going steady” with that older individual, compared with 17 percent of young males. Another 3 percent of females reported that they were engaged or cohabiting at the time of their first sexual relationship with that older individual, but no males fell into this category.
- In contrast, two-thirds of young males (67 percent) whose first sexual relationships were with older females said that they were going out occasionally with these females at the time of the first sexual encounter, compared with 29 percent of young females involved sexually with older males.
- Altogether, 16 percent of males and 9 percent of females reported they had just met or were just friends at the time that they first had sex with that older individual.

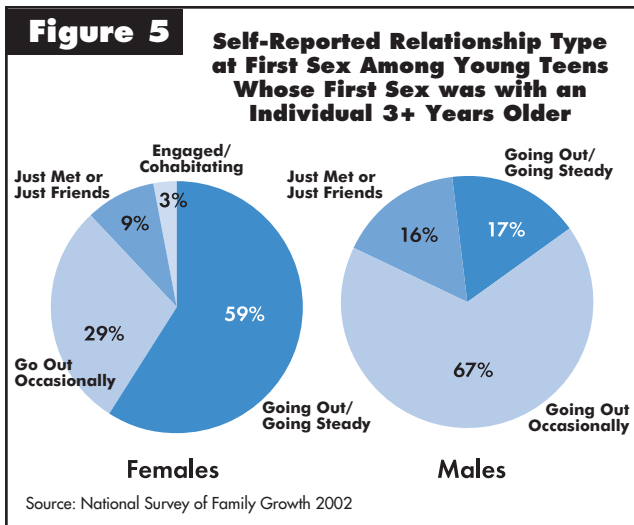
ASSOCIATIONS WITH OTHER OUTCOMES AND BEHAVIORS

Sex between young teens and older individuals is associated with other risk behaviors and with negative reproductive health outcomes, but cause-and-effect linkages are difficult to assess. For example, if teens in a sexual relationship

Figure 4 Prevalence of Sex Between Young Teens and Older Individuals, by Number of Family Disadvantages*

*Family disadvantages include low parent education, family structure other than two biological parents, and son/daughter of a teen mother.

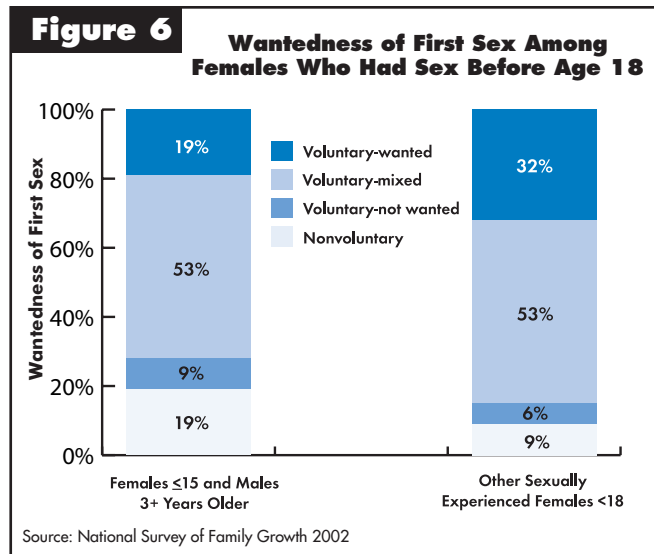
Source: National Survey of Family Growth 2002



with someone older also report lower contraceptive use during that relationship, it cannot be determined whether this association is due to having sex with an older individual *or* whether it is due to the likelihood that teens with a higher risk threshold are more likely to have sex at a young age with an older individual and to be less motivated to use contraception. The associations between first sexual experiences with older individuals and other behaviors are reported here in order to further discussion about these issues.

Young teen females whose first sex was with an older male are twice as likely as are other sexually experienced females to report the encounter as nonvoluntary. Among these younger female teens, 19 percent reported the experience was nonvoluntary (that they did not choose to have sex of their own free will), compared with 9 percent of other female teens who had sex before age 18 (see Figure 6).

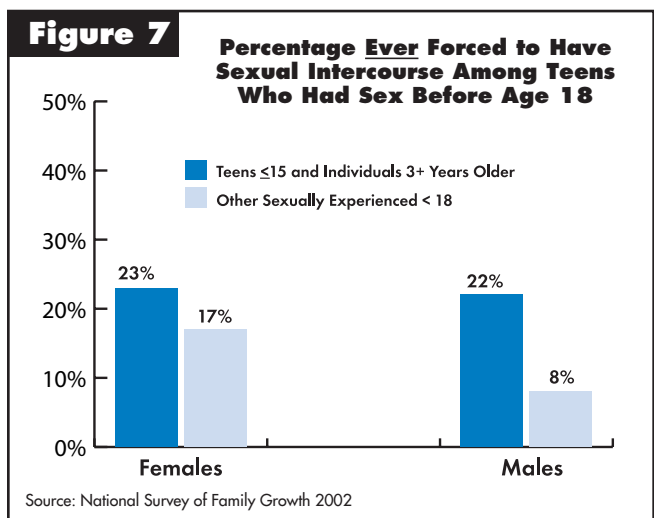
- An additional 9 percent of females whose first sexual experience was at age 15 or younger with an older male and 6 percent of other sexually experienced female teens said that their first sexual experience was voluntary, but that they did not really want it to happen at the time.
- In contrast, only one in five females (19 percent) whose first sexual experience was at age 15 or younger with an older male reported that this experience was both voluntary and wanted, compared with 32 percent of other sexually experienced female teens.
- Separate analyses (not shown here) indicate that both the majority of males who had sex at age 15 or younger with females three or



more years older (65 percent) and the majority of other sexually experienced males (63 percent) reported that their first sexual experience was wanted. Males did not report on nonvoluntary sexual experiences.

Almost one-quarter of young teens who had a first sexual experience with an older individual report *ever* having had forced sexual intercourse. Both female and male teens whose first sexual experience was at age 15 or younger with an older individual were more likely than were other sexually experienced teens to report that they had *ever* been forced to have sexual intercourse (see Figure 7). Although it cannot be determined whether or not the forced sexual experience was with the older individual or in some later sexual relationship, there is an association between these risky sexual experiences.

- Among sexually experienced teens, 23 percent of females and 22 percent of males whose first sexual experience was at age 15 or younger with an older individual reported

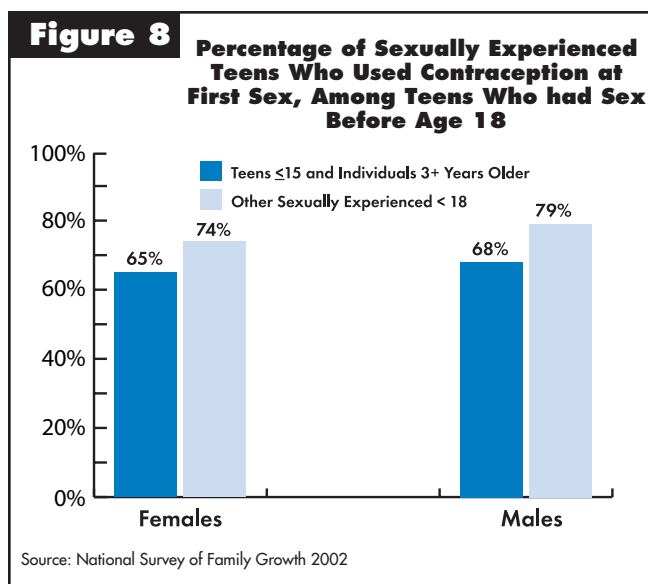


ever being forced to have sexual intercourse by a member of the opposite sex. These proportions are lower for other sexually experienced female and male teens (17 percent and 8 percent, respectively).

Young teens who have sex with an older individual are less likely to use contraception than are other sexually experienced teens. Both males and females whose first sexual experience was at age 15 or younger with an older individual were less likely than were other sexually experienced teens to use contraception the first time that they had sex (See Figure 8).

- Among females, 65 percent of those whose first sexual experience was with an older male and 74 percent of other sexually experienced female teens reported using contraception the first time that they had sex.
- Among males, 68 percent of those whose first sexual experience was with an older female and 79 percent of other sexually experienced male teens reported using contraception the first time that they had sex.

Teen childbearing is more common among females who had a first sexual relationship at age 15 or younger with an older male than it is among other sexually experienced females. Separate analyses (not shown here) indicate that 44 percent of young female teens who had a first sexual relationship with an older male reported giving birth as a teen, compared with 26 percent of other sexually experienced females. It is important to note that the teen birth could have occurred in the first sexual relationship or in another sexual relationship.



SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This research brief provides updated information on sexual relationships between young teens and older individuals. We find several risk factors associated with these sexual relationships. These risk factors include being at a younger age at the first sexual experience, being female, having a parent or parents who have a lower level of education, growing up in a family environment other than with two biological or adoptive parents, and being the child of a teenage mother. We find that sexual experiences between young teens and older individuals tend to be more casual than are the sexual experiences of other teens who have sex before age 18 and that these experiences are more likely (among females) to be nonvoluntary. Although we cannot determine a cause-and-effect relationship, sex between young teens and older individuals is linked with negative reproductive health outcomes, including a lower prevalence of contraceptive use, a greater likelihood of experiencing forced sex, and having a teen birth. Several findings and issues emerge from these analyses:

- **Young males, as well as young females, are a risk group.** While the National Center for Juvenile Justice estimates that 95 percent of reported statutory rape incidents occur with a female victim,¹⁷ Child Trends' analyses of population-based self-report survey data suggest that more than one in four first sexual experiences between young teens and older individuals occurs to males. Media attention on issues related to statutory rape tends to focus on young female teens having sex with older males, but it is important not to ignore the situation of young males who also may feel pressure to have sex with older females.
- **Most of these sexual experiences occur between young teens and older teens,** rather than between young teens and adults aged 20 or older. In fact, few of these sexual relationships (14 percent) occurred between young teens and individuals who were eight or more years older. Thus, older teens represent a key target audience for prevention efforts, along with the smaller percentage of adults in their twenties or thirties who had sex with a teen aged 15 and younger.
- **The youngest teens are at the highest risk.** The younger teens are at their first sexual experience, the greater the likelihood is that they are having sex with an older

individual, a finding that confirms other research.^{9,10} However, not all young teens recognize that there may be potential problems associated with having a relationship with an older individual. For example, a recent poll conducted by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy found that close to one-third of young teens (those between the ages of 12 and 14) thought it was “okay for teens aged 14 or younger to date someone who is three or more years older.” This percentage was higher among young teens than it was among older teens (only 19 percent of those between the ages of 15 and 19 thought that such dating relationships were “okay”).¹⁸ Alternatively, almost one in five females in other sexual relationships experienced forced sex. These findings underscore the importance of engaging in public discussion about norms for adolescents regarding the appropriate age differences between dating and sexual partners.

- **Most of these sexual experiences were voluntary.** Although young female teens who engaged in sex with older males were twice as likely as were other sexually experienced female teens to report that their sexual relationship was nonvoluntary, eight out of ten young females reported that their relationship with an older individual *was* voluntary, and two-thirds of males reported that they wanted this first sexual experience with an older female. These findings highlight the differences between “statutory rape” and rape, and the complexity associated with classifying, reporting, managing or prosecuting these types of sexual relationships.

CONCLUSION

While this research brief answers several questions about the prevalence and risk factors associated with sexual experiences between young teens and older individuals, a number of unanswered research questions remain. Future research could help us to better understand underlying factors that cause some young teens to take sexual risks by having sex at an early age with an older individual. For example, we may ask whether a teenager’s vulnerability to sexual exploitation by an older individual is related to young age per se, or to other factors, such as low self-esteem, poor social support, or structural barriers to alternative opportunities. We also need a better

understanding of what motivates older individuals (including older teens, young adults, and those who are much older) to have sex with young teens. We need a better understanding of the association between sex between young teens and older individuals and other outcomes. For example, are poorer reproductive health outcomes among this population due to a younger age at the first sexual experience, to having sex with an older individual, or to a combination of factors? We also need to examine subgroup differences related to race and ethnicity, cultural context, and gender, topics on which the research base is thin. Future research on these topics can help illuminate the causes and consequences of sexual involvement between young teens and older individuals, can help reduce young teens’ vulnerability to sexual exploitation, and can inform prevention efforts.

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