

Sense of personal control influences Latinas' decisions about sexual debut

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A sense of personal control over sexual behaviors strongly influences Latina women's decisions of when to first engage in sex, report researchers from the University of Chicago Medical Center in the November issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

Greater sense of personal control over sexual behaviors appeared to be the strongest factor influencing delay. This suggests that Latina women's own beliefs regarding timing of first sexual intercourse may outweigh the influence of family, friends, and partners.

The study also revealed a high correlation between a young Latina's decision about when to first initiate sexual activity and her family's expectations.

“Both personal control and family expectations had a very important role in delaying early initiation of sex,” said study author Melissa Gilliam, MD, MPH, section chief of Family Planning at the University of Chicago Medical Center. “If the daughter perceived that her family felt her education was important, then it led her to delay sex.”

Gilliam and colleagues conducted seven focus groups to determine survey questions most relevant to the culture and experience of the young Latina population. They then developed, tested and administered the survey in both English and Spanish to a separate group of 270 Latinas, between the ages of 17 and 25. The age at the time of sexual initiation ranged from 12 to 24 with 16.15 years as the mean.

The study also found a strong correlation with the young woman's mother's age at first pregnancy and the age of the young woman's first sexual partner. The greater the age difference between the woman and her older partner, the more likely she was to engage in sex at an earlier age.

This study on the sexual attitudes of a specific population is unique because researchers used focus groups to develop the survey questions. If they had found that other factors influenced behavior then they would have included questions on those subjects.

"If focus group participants had said that music played a big role in their behaviors or drug use or gangs, then those topics would be in the model," Gilliam said.

Statistics from previous studies show that compared to African-American and white adolescents, the Latina population has higher rates of teen pregnancy despite lower rates of sexual activity, and they are less likely to use contraception the first time they have sex. "There are these health disparities that very much track along racial, ethnic lines," Gilliam said.

Many times researchers presuppose the questions that should be asked and design questionnaires based on those suppositions, said Gilliam, whose work identifies populations most at risk for unintended pregnancy and ways to improve education. "They're often not rooted in the belief systems of a population.

"If we're serious about doing research in understudied populations, especially with adolescents, we want to start moving away from cultural comparisons," she said. "We want to start thinking about questions that are culturally appropriate for the group being studied."

Source: University of Chicago

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