

# Sexual lyrics in popular songs linked to early sexual experiences

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With sexual activity among adolescents in the United States resulting in over 750,000 teenage pregnancies each year and reports of up to 25 percent of all female adolescents in the US having sexually transmitted infections, researchers and public health officials are looking for those factors that might increase sexual activity in teens. In an article published in the April 2009 issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, researchers found that teenagers who preferred popular songs with degrading sexual references were more likely to engage in intercourse or in pre-coital activities.

Writing in the article, Brian A. Primack, MD, EdM, MS, Center for Research on Health Care at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, states, "This study demonstrates that, among this sample of young adolescents, high exposure to lyrics describing degrading sex in popular music was independently associated with higher levels of sexual behavior. In fact, exposure to lyrics describing degrading sex was one of the strongest associations with sexual activity... These results provide further support for the need for additional research and educational intervention in this area."

Surveys were completed by 711 ninth-grade students at three large urban high schools. These participants were exposed to over 14 hours each week of lyrics describing degrading sex. About one third had previously been sexually active. Compared to those with the least exposure to lyrics describing degrading sex, those with the most exposure were more than twice as likely to have had sexual intercourse. The relationship between

exposure to lyrics describing degrading sex and sexual experience held equally for both young men and women.

Similarly, among those who had not had sexual intercourse, those in the highest third of exposure to lyrics describing degrading sex were nearly twice as likely to have progressed along a noncoital sexual continuum compared to those in the lowest third. Finally, the relationships between exposure to lyrics describing non-degrading sex and sexual outcomes were not significant.

Students reported the number of hours per day that they listen to music and their favorite musical artists. Through a detailed content analysis, the percentage was calculated of each artist's most popular songs containing lyrics describing degrading sex. An exposure score for lyrics describing degrading sex was then computed by multiplying each student's hours of music exposure by the percentage of his or her favorite artists' songs that contain lyrics describing degrading sex.

Dr. Primack comments that these findings build on those of previous studies suggesting that exposure to sex in media messages may be a risk factor for early sexual progression.

More information: The article is "Exposure to Sexual Lyrics and Sexual Experience Among Urban Adolescents," by Brian A. Primack, MD, EdM, MS, Erika L. Douglas, MS, Michael J. Fine, MD, MSc, and Madeline A. Dalton, PhD. It appears in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, Volume 36, Issue 4 (April 2009).

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