

Increased age of sexual consent in Canada may not protect teens at greatest risk: study

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The increase in the legal age of sexual consent from 14 to 16 years in 2008 may not be protecting those at greatest risk, according to researchers who have analyzed British Columbia population-based data and recommend additional strategies to safeguard vulnerable children and teens.

In the first study of its kind in Canada, researchers from the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University tested the government's reasons for changing the law. Their findings are published in the current issue the *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*.

According to the study's lead author, Bonnie Miller, there were two primary reasons given for changing the law: to protect younger teens from being sexually exploited by adults, and to prevent them from making poorer sexual health decisions because of immaturity.

"The law was changed to protect 14 and 15 year olds from adult [sexual predators](#)," says Miller, a research assistant in the UBC School of Nursing.

"But it turns out they're not the ones at greatest risk. We found children under 13, already protected by the existing law, were the ones most likely to report first sex with adults age 20 years or older."

Thirty-nine percent of teens who reported sex before age 12 had a first sexual partner who was 20 years or older, but only two to three per cent

of 14 and 15 year olds had a first [sexual partner](#) who was 20 or older.

"It's important to protect children and teens from [sexual exploitation](#)," adds senior author Elizabeth Saewyc, professor of nursing and adolescent medicine at UBC. "But changes in laws should be based on evidence, and our evidence suggests this change isn't going to address the real problem."

The research team analyzed data from the 2008 B.C. Adolescent Health Survey, conducted by Saewyc and the McCreary Centre Society. The province-wide survey included more than 29,000 students in Grades 7 to 12.

When it comes to the other reason given for changing the law, are younger teens less responsible? Not generally. "Most teens are not having sex," says Miller, "but among those who are, we found that 14 and 15 year olds were generally making the same good decisions as 16 and 17 year olds."

The study's additional key findings include:

- 14-15-year-olds were more likely than 16-17 year-olds to report ever being forced to have sex, but this was most often by another youth, not adults
- There were no significant differences between older and younger teens regarding sex under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or teen pregnancy
- A slightly higher percentage of younger teens reported three or more sexual partners in the first year of having sex (18 per cent of younger males compared to nine per cent of older males, nine

per cent of younger females compared to four per cent of older females)

- Younger teens were more likely to use condoms, and older teens more likely to use hormonal birth control, but 80-90 per cent of all sexually active teens used some form of effective birth control, and one in three older and younger teens used both condoms and hormonal methods

"The study shows that society needs to do a better job at preventing sexual abuse among children and teens, using strategies that go beyond the legal arena," says Saewyc, who also holds a Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) Applied Public Health Chair in Youth Health.

"Laws usually only come into play after the abuse has already happened," she says. "If we also talk with young people about sexual violence and about healthy relationships, we can help change attitudes and myths about sexual abuse, encourage children and teens to tell someone if they've experienced abuse, and we may even help change behaviours such as forced sex among [teens](#)."

"CIHR recognizes the importance of supporting and advancing research aimed at improving the lives of the most vulnerable," says Nancy Edwards, Scientific Director of CIHR's Institute for Population and Public Health. "We believe that it is essential to work closely with community services, parents, schools and health professionals to tackle [sexual abuse](#) issues among children and youth."

Provided by University of British Columbia

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