

Romantic sexual relationships deter teenage delinquency, new study shows

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Sexually active teens in committed, romantic relationships are less likely to engage in delinquent behavior than teens who have casual sex, according to new research from psychologists at The University of Texas at Austin.

The study, published in the June issue of the [Journal of Youth and Adolescence](#), found teenagers who are sexually active in dating relationships show lower levels of antisocial behavior compared to teenagers who are not [having sex](#) at all. However, teenagers who have sex with non-dating partners (“hooking up”) show higher levels of [antisocial behavior](#) compared to the other groups.

Paige Harden, assistant professor of psychology at The University of Texas at Austin, says these results may suggest that [teens](#) who spend more one-on-one time with their boyfriends or girlfriends, and less time with their friends, have fewer opportunities to get into trouble.

While policymakers and researchers commonly focus on the negative consequences of early intimacy, few studies probe into the contexts and potential benefits of teenage sexual relationships, Harden says.

“It can be difficult for researchers to understand how dating experiences in adolescence influence behavior because there can be pre-existing differences between teenagers who date versus those who don’t,” Harden says.

Harden and her colleague, Jane Mendle, professor of psychology at the University of Oregon, analyzed data on 519 same-sex twins in the United States between the ages of 13 and 18. The study focused on twins who differed in their dating and sexual experience. By comparing twins, researchers could control for all genetic and environmental background variables that twins share.

The respondents answered questions about their sexual activity and delinquent behaviors in computer moderated surveys conducted by the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a nationally representative study that followed the respondents from adolescence into early adulthood.

To better understand what influences [teenagers](#) to have sex in dating relationships and with non-dating partners, the researchers examined environmental and genetic variables that predispose adolescents to risky sexual behaviors.

Harden found genes significantly influence sexual behavior among young teens (ages 13-15). Genes related to impulsivity, extroversion and early puberty may influence young adolescents to have sex in non-dating relationships. These same genes may also put them at risk for adverse psychological outcomes, Harden says.

However, older teens (ages 16-18) are more influenced to have non-romantic sex by environmental factors, such as coming from economically disadvantaged households, little parental involvement and poor school systems.

In a related study, published in the June issue of [Child Development](#), Harden and Mendle dispelled a commonly held theory that smart teens delay sex. They found family environmental factors, rather than intelligence, were more important influences on teenage sexual activity.

The second study also used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. The researchers analyzed responses from 536 same-sex twin siblings about their sexual behaviors and cognitive abilities. They found twin siblings who differed in academic achievement lost their virginity at about the same age.

“We found that when we compared unrelated people, teens who did better in school delayed having sex,” Harden says. “But if you compare twins raised in the same family, the difference in academic achievement doesn’t predict the age at first sex.”

The findings show economically disadvantaged teens may be more likely to receive poor grades and lose their virginity at a young age. Wealthier teens, however, may be more likely to excel in school and delay sex, due to more intensive parental monitoring and better schools.

“By simultaneously considering both the environmental contexts of adolescent sexual experience and the role of genetic predispositions, we hope to advance a more nuanced understanding of the developmental impact of adolescent sexual activity,” Harden says.

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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