Sexual Activity Among Adolescents in Urban and Rural Settings

Sexual activity among adolescents in the United States is increasing dramatically. Youth are engaging in sexual behaviors at younger ages than ever before. This is a concern for both urban and rural populations. The views of both urban and rural residents tend to be the same when it comes to their teens having sex; they are against it. Many studies have been conducted addressing the topic of teen sex. Atav & Spencer (2002) suggest that rural adolescents are more likely to engage in sexual behavior than those youth living in urban areas. Although, studies do not suggest that there is more tolerance for teen sex in rural areas.

Most studies done on the topic of adolescent sexual activity of youth in urban areas are associated with other deviant behavior such as substance abuse and violence. A longitudinal study conducted on sexual activity and problem behaviors among 705 black, urban youth suggests that there is a strong correlation between sexual behavior, substance use, and violence (Ensminger, 1990). A longitudinal study of 1000 seventh and eight graders attending public, urban schools suggests that the consistent and strong impact of substance use on adolescent sexual activity is related to the urban ecology (Smith, 1997). Many of the youth in urban areas are violent, sexually active, and use drugs because of psychological, environmental, and behavioral factors that facilitate and predispose them toward these behaviors (Ensminger, 1990).

A study using secondary data from the 1996 Teen Assessment Project (TAP) was done on 2094 teens from rural, suburban, and urban areas. This study suggests that youth who live in rural areas are about twice as likely as their suburban and urban counterparts
to have had sexual intercourse (Atav & Spencer, 2002). The likelihood that rural youth participate in sexual behavior more than urban youth could be due to the fact that parents and teachers often underestimate children’s emergent sexual behaviors (O’Donnell, O’Donnell, & Stueve, 2001). A survey of 374 rural parents suggests that most parents believed that the majority of sex education should be provided by the family and should be supplemented by outside organizations (Jordan, Price, & Fitzgerald, 2000). Being that rural populations tend to be more religious than urban populations, abstinence is the major topic in sexual education classes for rural youth. Although, most of the rural, religious parents did support including information on contraception methods, and including condoms in formal sexual education courses (Jordan, Price, & Fitzgerald, 2000). In the evaluation of an abstinence only program, no evidence was found that these types of programs change adolescent sexual behavior (Barnett & Hurst, 2003). Teaching youth that abstinence is the best way to avoid sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy and other health risks does not keep them from having sex.

The youth in the United States are having sex at earlier and earlier ages. Populations of rural and urban areas both agree that sex among adolescents is wrong. Neither urban nor rural areas have a higher tolerance of this behavior. Most of the research above is based on self-reported data. This type of data could pose problems due to the reporting of incorrect information. The results of much of the research cited can not be generalized because it was not taken from a representative sample. Also, most of the research is either based on sexual behavior of rural adolescents or sexual behavior of urban adolescents. Only one article was a comparison of the two. More research could be done comparing the differences of sexual behaviors among rural and urban
adolescents. More data should be collected from representative samples so that intervention programs can be developed to target the specific needs of rural youth and of urban youth.
References


