

This is a summary of a study entitled “Antecedents of Sexual Activity and Condom Use among Secondary School Students in Urban Peru.” Limited numbers of a full copy of this report are available from FOCUS on Young Adults upon request.

Correlates of Early Sexual Activity and Unprotected Sex among Urban Secondary School Students in Peru

Source: Robert Magnani, Eric Seiber, Emily Zielinski Gutierrez, and Dorina Vereau. *Correlates of Sexual Activity and Condom Use among Secondary School Students in Urban Peru*. Washington, DC: FOCUS on Young Adults, Pathfinder International, August 1999.

Background

Recent data indicate that adolescent fertility rates in Peru remain stubbornly high and that Peruvian adolescents and young adults account for a disproportionate share of new HIV infections. The present study was undertaken to identify key risk and protective factors for early sexual activity and unprotected sex among secondary school students in nine large cities in Peru.¹ A deeper understanding of the factors that put Peruvian adolescents at risk for unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) would provide valuable input into the design of effective interventions to stem these ominous trends.

Data and Methods

Survey data from 6,962 urban secondary school students ages 13-18 were gathered as part of an evaluation of the initial phase of the Peruvian Ministry of Education’s national sex education program (Programa Nacional de Educacion Familiar y Sexual), that began in 1996. The data was collected between September and November 1998. Hazard, logit and tobit regression methods were used to examine the determinants of initiation of sexual relations, number of different sexual partners, and condom use at first and last sexual intercourse. All but one multivariate analysis was limited to males due to the low reported rate of sexual initiation for females.

Findings

- Preliminary bivariate analyses revealed several factors that were not associated with any of the outcomes of interest in the study. Notable among these were knowledge of reproductive health risks and means of avoiding them, gender-role perceptions, and religiosity.
- Seventeen percent of students reported ever having had sexual intercourse, with boys being more likely (32 percent) than girls (7 percent) to have reported having had sex.

¹ These included the Lima-Callao Metropolitan area and eight other large cities representing the major ecological/cultural regions of Peru: Chiclayo, Chimbote and Tacna (coast), Ayacucho, Cuzco and Huaraz (mountains) and Iquitos and Pucallpa (jungle).

Among those reporting having had sex, the mean age at first sex among boys was 13.1 and 14.1 among girls. Not surprisingly, older students were much more likely to have reported having a sexual experience than younger students. Having friends who had had sex proved to be one of the strongest correlates of ever having had sex for both boys and girls. Boys from the jungle region were more likely to have had sex than students from other regions of the country. Youth of both genders who felt important to or connected with their families were less likely to have had sex. High self-esteem was a risk factor for boys, but protective for girls. Girls from higher economic status families were less likely to have ever had sex, but family economic status was not significant for boys.

- Five percent of students reported having had sex in the three months prior to the survey—10 percent of boys and 2 percent of girls. Among female students, the large majority (91 percent) reported only one partner. Among boys, however, 27 percent reported having had two sexual partners during this reference period, 12 percent three partners, and 15 percent four or more partners. In the multivariate analyses (males only), high family economic status, working for pay, having friends who had had sex, and high self-esteem were all associated with a greater likelihood of multiple sexual partners in the three months prior to the survey.
- Thirty-eight percent of boys and 26 percent of girls reported having used a condom at the time of first intercourse. Among boys, higher family economic status, living with at least one biological parent, and having peers that had had sex were associated with a higher likelihood of condom use at first sexual encounter. High self-esteem, however, was associated with a lower likelihood of condom use at first sex.
- Sixty-three percent of boys and 42 percent of girls reported having used a condom at the time of their last intercourse (during the last three months). Coming from a higher economic status family was again associated with a higher likelihood of condom use. On the other hand, residing with the mother only (as compared with both parents) and having sexually active friends were associated with a lower likelihood of condom use. High self-esteem was again associated with a lower likelihood of condom use at first sex.

Implications

- In the major cities of Peru, the youth who are at the greatest risk of adverse reproductive health outcomes appear to be those from low economic status families, who reside in the Selva (a proxy indicator for more liberal social norms regarding sex and marriage), who work for pay, and who have friends/peers who are sexually active. Self-esteem appears to be protective against early sexual activity among girls, but for boys the effects of self-esteem were mixed. Because the present study was undertaken among secondary school students, it likely obscures another important protective factor—being in school/attaining higher levels of education.

- One major challenge facing programs aimed at improving reproductive health outcomes in Peru is the sizable number and diverse nature of factors that appear to influence adolescent behaviors. Some of these are characteristics of adolescents themselves, while others are characteristics of the environment in which youth are raised. Because of this, it is unlikely that a single, easy-to-implement intervention will provide a solution to the unacceptably high rates of adolescent pregnancy and levels of risk for STI transmission in Peru.
- Also apparent in this study are the significant roles that parents and peers play in influencing adolescent behaviors. Thus, initiatives directed at “engaging” parents are likely to make a contribution to reducing the prevalence of adverse reproductive health and social outcomes among youth in Peru and elsewhere. At the same time, strategies that incorporate peers as a key component are also important. These might include community-based and mass-media approaches for increasing the capacity of youth to resist negative influences of peers by increasing individual self-efficacy, educational efforts directed at youth and parents, and modifying group norms through mass media and peer and community education so that risky behaviors become less accepted.
- The behaviors of urban Peruvian youth are influenced in important ways by a myriad of factors. In the present study, these included region of residence, economic position of the family, family structure, communication with parents, working for pay, peer behaviors and self-esteem. Knowledge of pregnancy and STI risks and means of avoiding them did not, however, differentiate risk-takers from non-risk-takers. The study findings are supportive of other recent research suggesting that adolescent programs that are able to influence some of the key “contextual” antecedents of adolescent behavior are likely to be more effective than those that focus on only “proximate” antecedents such as knowledge, attitudes and access to contraceptives and health services.

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