

Nation

Reported number of teen virgins rises

By Cheryl Wetzstein
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Survey polled 13,601 high schoolers

A decade ago, more than half of high school teens had sexual intercourse while they were in high school.

Now, according to new federal data, it appears that the tables have turned, and virginal teens outnumber the sexually active ones.

While some people are quick to say abstinence education has been the pivotal factor, others say that teens are simply responding to a bombardment of "please just wait" messages.

The data was released late last month in the 2001 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) report, which asked 13,601 teens about such things as substance use, sexual behavior and physical activity.

In 1990, the YRBSS found that 54.3 percent of teens in grades 9-12 had had sexual intercourse.

By 2001, however, 54.4 percent of high schoolers said they had not had sex.

The turning point occurred in the mid-1990s, right around the time the federal government started funding abstinence programs teaching teens to save sex for marriage, said Peter Brandt of Focus on the Family, a traditional values group in Colorado Springs, Colo.

"There is no doubt that kids are responding to an unambiguous abstinence message," he said. "The federal Title V abstinence program is having a tremendous impact."

"The only thing that changed in that time frame is the amount of talk and programming for abstinence until marriage," added LeAnna Benn, director of the Teen-Aid abstinence program in Spokane, Wash., and advisory board member of the Abstinence Clearinghouse, which today begins its national conference in Washington.

William Smith, director of public policy for the Sexuality Information

and Education Council of the United States, sees a broader explanation for declining teen sexual activity rates.

"I think that it coincides with the overwhelming number of young people who are reporting that they are getting HIV/AIDS education," he said, noting that virtually 90 percent of high school students say they are learning about AIDS, according to the 1999 and 2001 YRBSS reports.

"Sex is natural, healthy and great, but it's also serious business, and I think some of the HIV/AIDS education out there are underscoring that [teens] don't have to have sex, that it's important for young people to delay sexual activity until they're ready for it, emotionally or otherwise," said Mr. Smith.

The YRBSS, conducted every two years by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has been one of two primary vehicles to track

teen sexual behavior, said Kristin A. Moore, president of Child Trends Inc.

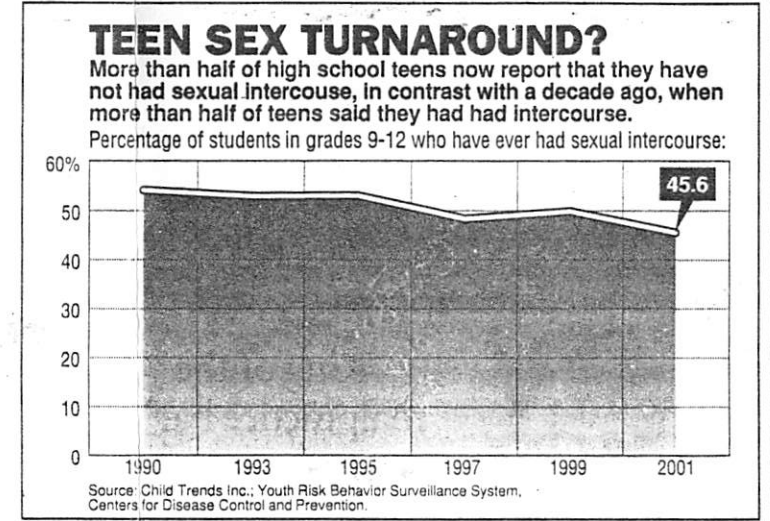
The National Survey of Family Growth is the other vehicle, she said. The most recent NSFG, however, was in 1995, and the next one — due in a year or so — is eagerly anticipated because it will include teens who are not in school, she said.

While the YRBSS data show an important change in teen sexual activity, "I don't think it's strong enough to be a U-turn," said Ms. Moore.

"It's trending down," she said, "but even with improvements, we have a lot of kids who are having risky sex." It even appears that there could be two very different groups of teens — "some of whom are committed to abstinence to marriage and some of whom are really quite sexually active," she added.

Abstinence education is up for debate with other welfare issues in Congress this year.

In 1996 Congress created the Title V \$50 million-a-year program for abstinence-only education pro-



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grams as part of the welfare law. A House bill renews the Title V program; a Senate Finance Committee bill also renews it but adds a second, \$50 million-a-year program for "abstinence-first" programs.

Abstinence-first programs encourage teens to abstain from sex but also teaches them how to prevent pregnancy and disease should they decide to have sex. Proponents say

this is what parents and teens want.

However, abstinence-only supporters say this is just the same old sex education that led to increases in teen pregnancy and disease. "They all say wait until you get your condoms," said Mrs. Benn.

Religious groups gird for battle over voucher decision

By Larry Witham
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Liberals campaign to 'ignore' court on school choice

Religious groups on the left and right are preparing for local skirmishes after the Supreme Court allowed education vouchers, which have been used mostly at church-related schools.

local school boards should take the legalization of "school choice" to heart.

"It's interesting that the left can just pick and chose what Supreme

nents.

"The lower-income families in the cities are going to drive the debate," he said.

Mr. Gaddy said the statement to

schools, most of which are parochial schools.

"For the more liberal groups, the voucher issue has become a talisman for church-state separa-

"We feel it is in the best interest of the constitutional principle of religious liberty for education leaders to not adopt a voucher system," he said.

On moral issues, civil disobedience has been applied toward voting rights for minorities, anti-war protests, some school decisions to

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