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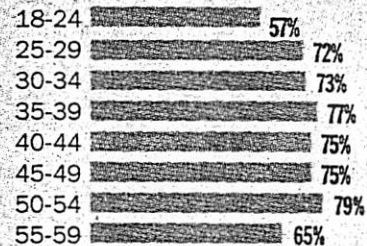
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Less sex, fewer partners

A new study shows American attitudes toward sex.

► **Most have had only one partner in last year**

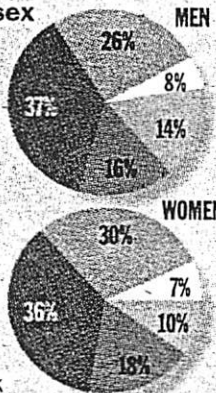
In percent; by age



► **Most have sex less than once a week**

Percent in each category

- ☐ Not at all
- ▒ A few times per year
- A few times per month
- ▓ 2 or 3 times a week
- 4 or more times a week



Sex study shatters kinky assumptions

By Peter Gorner
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

The most sweeping survey of sexual practices and attitudes since the nearly 50-year-old Kinsey reports should calm fears that America is careening into immorality.

Set to emerge officially from the University of Chicago next week, the landmark study, called the "National Health and Social Life Survey," shatters many preconceptions in its attempts to define

normality.

Americans have less sex, fewer partners and use less-exotic techniques than reported in earlier polls, most of which were mail-in surveys such as the Hite reports of the 1970s and 1980s, or focused on narrowly defined groups, such as readers of Playboy and Redbook magazines.

All were flawed methodologically, according to the University of Chicago researchers, and painted a false picture of sex in America.

"It was like looking in a funhouse mirror—all weird and distorted. People got scared," said sociologist Edward O. Laumann, who directed the survey along with economic demographer and public policy expert Robert T. Michael, and John Gagnon, a veteran sex researcher at the State University of New York, Stony Brook.

Americans have sex about once a week, on average, but a third of adults have sex only a few times a year, or not at all, the study

found.

More than 80 percent of Americans had only one partner—or no partner—in the past year. Based on the study, just 3 percent of men and women had five or more partners during that period.

The typical American man has about six sexual partners over his lifetime; the typical woman has two. (However, researchers admitted men may tend to inflate the number while women might

Source: University of Chicago

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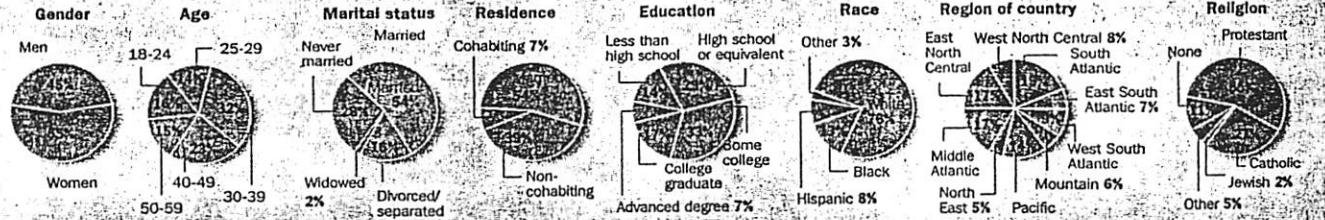
SEE SEX, PAGE 4

Who's who in landmark sex survey

In what is billed as the most sweeping survey of American sexual beliefs and practices, researchers at the University of Chicago report that people behave more conservatively than previous studies had found. Those 3,432 individuals surveyed represented 97.1 percent of the U.S. adult population. Results show that the vast majority of Americans are monogamous, meet partners through family or mutual friends and are not sexually adventurous.

Source: University of Chicago

Profile of participants:



Chicago Tribune/Terry Volpp, Trisha Gura

Sex

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1
(underreport.)

The survey revealed that only three sex practices appeal to more than a small fraction.

Heterosexuals overwhelmingly prefer vaginal intercourse and include it in almost every sexual encounter. Watching a partner undress ran a distant second, followed by oral sex, which many have experienced but which is not a regular part of most people's lovemaking, the study found.

Despite a liberalization of attitudes since the 1960s—particularly about premarital sex, cohabitation and divorce—Americans still view marriage and long-term commitment as the goal.

About 90 percent of Americans marry by age 30 and, despite seven-year liches and mid-life crises, 75 percent of married men and 85 percent of married women

say they have been faithful. "There is remarkable consensus in the general population—about 91 percent—that extramarital affairs are bad," Laumann said.

Monogamous couples have the most sex and are happiest with their sex lives, the study reported.

The survey was conducted in 1992 by the university's National Opinion Research Center and presents the results of detailed interviews with 3,432 Americans age 18 to 59 selected randomly nationwide. They represent 97.1 percent of the adult population.

Their responses to a voluminous questionnaire and sit-down conversations with 220 research center interviewers provided a wealth of data about the sex lives of ordinary people.

Proposed in 1987 by the National Institutes of Health to help scientists battle AIDS, the national sex survey was killed by conservative forces in Congress and the Reagan and Bush administrations.

Undaunted, the scientists sought and received support from private foundations, but had to scale down their research from a proposed 20,000 Americans to 3,500.

In the process, the researchers expanded the survey to focus on sexual behavior in general, rather than just on high-risk behaviors.

The survey reaffirms recent British and French studies suggesting that the number of homosexuals in the population is far lower than generally presumed.

Only 2.8 percent of the American men polled said they were gay or bisexual, while 6 percent reported they have been attracted to other men at some point in their lives. Only 1.4 percent of the women polled identified themselves as lesbian.

The implications for public health policy are profound. If the researchers are correct, AIDS may be less likely to spread widely into the heterosexual population.

"Most people are not likely to have sex with gay men or intravenous drugs users—the most susceptible group," said Robert Michael, the public policy expert.

"We argue that the finding is optimistic," Michael said. "If the disease stays confined to a smaller group, it will be easier to defeat."

"But we do call for a more focused prevention strategy, with messages and resources directed at those communities at risk."

Abortion is another controversial area on which the survey sheds light: Americans are not using abortion as a form of birth control, researchers reported.

Seventy-two percent of women who have had abortions had only one. Teenagers are by far the most likely to abort pregnancy.

The data offer evidence that harsh deterrent laws on abortion will be ineffective, researchers said.

The survey provides a snapshot of the American population with all its diversity and similarities. It is neither definite nor precise, Laumann cautioned, but it defines broad outlines of group behavior that are statistically valid.

The survey challenges conventional wisdom with abandon.

One of America's most enduring myths, for example, is that love knows no social boundaries, that we can fall in love with anyone from any background or social class.

Real-life Romeo and Juliets are rare, though. Americans seldom cross lines of social class and upbringing when choosing sex partners and mates, the study found. And dating couples are about as alike as those who are married.

Sexual behavior is strongly predetermined by friends, family, neighborhoods, religious beliefs and education. More than 6 couples out of 10 were introduced by unofficial matchmakers, the study found.

What often followed was a classic love story—that of getting to know one's partner first as a friend, building trust and going slowly, then finally having sex and marrying.

If couples stay together, it is because they are sexually compatible, agree on the rules and are faithful.

The small minority of Americans who are into "recreational sex," as the researchers term it, will have more partners. But most people won't.

Opposites may indeed attract, but not for long. Dissimilar couples are more likely to end up in short-term relationships.

The study found that interracial couples are rare—only 7 percent of those who are married. And even differences in education are unusual—only 18 percent of partners have different educational backgrounds.

Not one woman in the study who had a graduate degree had a sexual relationship with a man who had not finished high school. Although thousands of highly educated women may have less-educated lovers, the percentage of American women who do so is small.

In fact, on every measure except religion, sex partners are remarkably similar, and married people

also are likely to have the same religion.

"Friends and families are important brokers, both in initiating relationships but also in sustaining them," Laumann said. "That's why we so often end up with partners who are so much like us."

"We're all vulnerable in sexual relationships. Thus, we let friendly third parties screen our candidates to help us get off to as good a start as possible."

Laumann said he was "stunned" by data revealing forms of sexual abuse of the young and its effect on their sexuality as adults. The scientists asked people whether some adult or adolescent had touched them sexually when they were children. Those who said yes, both men and women, were consistently more sexually active in adulthood than those without such experiences.

For example, 30 percent of American men in the survey had 11 or more partners since they were 18, but that figure reached 50 percent for those who were sexually abused as children. For women, the multiple-partner figures were 7 percent for those who had not been abused, and 21 percent for those who had.

Such men and women were much more likely to report difficulties with sexuality (including anxiety, impotence and inability to reach orgasm), but not necessarily devastating ones.

"They reported more sex partners in their lives, and to have participated in oral, anal and group sex, as well as thinking about sex more often," Laumann said. "On the other hand, in the general population, they're a remarkably robust group."

"People live through these experiences. They're not happy about them. But they don't go crazy, either."

The study represents state-of-the-art sociological research conducted by blue-chip scholars.

Laumann, for instance, formerly served as dean of social sciences at the University of Chicago and

as provost of the university. Michael is founding dean of the Harris Graduate School of Public Policy and a past director of the National Opinion Research Center.

They asked scores of colleagues from throughout the medical and social sciences for advice. The findings will be published next week in two books.

"Sex in America: A Definitive Study" (Little, Brown) is intended for the public. The companion volume, "The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States" (University of Chicago Press), contains the statistical analysis and is geared toward academics.

The first, trail-blazing report by Alfred Kinsey, Sexual Behavior in the Human Male, was published in 1948, followed four years later by Sexual Behavior in the Human Female. Despite being landmarks, they are viewed as being deeply flawed because of the limited and narrow sample the University of Indiana researcher was able to interview.

According to Dr. Joseph Catania of the University of California, an expert in the epidemiology of AIDS and sex surveys, "the [new] survey is light-year's better than Kinsey."

"We still need in-depth pictures of minority populations. But this was one study and it can't do everything. It was work of the highest quality."

In the 1960s, William H. Masters and Virginia Johnson decried the dearth of research on human sexuality. They called this crucial area of human life "science's sole timidity" and challenged the scientific community to respond.

Laumann and colleagues view the National Health and Social Life Survey as an attempt to rise to that challenge. "It is a beginning, not the end," he said. "And hopefully it won't be the last word, as Kinsey turned out to be for the past 50 years."

Staff writer Trisha Gura contributed to this report.