

NATION

Sexually, Americans are loving, not fast

Ties are monogamous, study shows

By Robin Rauzi
SCRIPPS HOWARD NEWS SERVICE

Americans are very conservative in their sexual behavior — forming long-term, monogamous relationships and enjoying them — according to a new study.

The University of Chicago study, released today, also found that 82 percent of the general population had one or no sexual partner in the last year. The lifetime average is three sexual partners.

"Americans are far more conventional in their sexual conduct than we were led to believe," said researcher Edward Laumann of the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago.

Researcher Robert Michael, dean of the Graduate School of Public Policy Studies at the University of Chicago, found the low numbers surprising.

"It just doesn't jibe with what you read in novels or see on television or read in the newspapers," he said. "We're much more conventional. Fewer partners. Fewer times. Not less pleasure."

The study is the result of lengthy personal interviews with more than 3,400 adult Americans selected at random. It was privately funded after its initial federal funding proposal caused a stir among conservatives that reached the floor of the Senate.

By asking respondents about the people they have sex with, the researchers have discovered a sort of "sexual network." Simply, people tend to choose sexual partners who are similar to themselves. And most people — more than 60 percent — were introduced to their partner by a mutual acquaintance.

"I think that's a stunning number," said Mr. Laumann, a sociology professor at the University of Chicago. "The effect of that is that the sexual marketplace, as it were, tends to be people who are very similar to you in terms of age

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and race and education or religion."

This has specific implications for the spread of diseases such as AIDS. If there is low turnover in sexual partners, and most partners come from a limited group, that means there are "boundaries" that the virus has to cross between networks.

HIV, which causes AIDS, is fairly difficult to transmit (chances are about 1 in 500 per incidence of unprotected sex) and thus unlikely to reach epidemic levels in the general population.

Mr. Michael said researchers are confident of their findings but "apprehensive about saying it. Not because it's so wildly controversial, but we're afraid that it will be misinterpreted by some young people."

People under 30 who have had five or more sexual partners in the last year are most at risk for disease. Those roughly 3 million people, Mr. Michael said, "should be using condoms and cutting back."

The findings also indicate that AIDS education and prevention efforts might be most effective if targeted at the specific "sexual networks" at risk.

What sets this study apart from its predecessors is that it used a random sample of 3,432 adults. The only limitations were placed on age (18-59), that the respondent speak English, and not live in a group setting, such as a prison or college dormitory.

Previous well-known sex stud-

SURVEY RESULTS

Some of the findings from "The Social Organization of Sexuality," a 700-page volume intended for social scientists and health professionals, and the more reader-friendly 250-page "Sex in America."

- Adult Americans fall into roughly three groups: about 35 percent have sexual intercourse two or more times a week; 35 percent have sex once or several times a month; and nearly 30 percent have sex only a few times a year or not at all.
- About 95 percent of heterosexuals said their most recent encounter included vaginal intercourse.
- 10 percent of men and 14 percent of women have had no sexual partner in the last 12 months.
- 67 percent of men and 75 percent of women have had only one partner in the last 12 months.
- 90 percent of Americans have had fewer than 10 sexual partners. About 49 percent have had four or fewer.
- An estimated 3.2 percent of adult men and 2.5 percent of adult women are virgins.
- 90 percent of women and 75 percent of men report complete fidelity in their marriage.
- 2.8 percent of men and 1.4 percent of women identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual.
- About 17 percent of Americans said they had contracted a sexually transmitted disease at some point in their life.
- About 10 percent of conceptions ended in abortion.
- Most women who have an abortion have only one. About 72 percent of abortions are first abortions.

Source: Scripps Howard News Service

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ies, such as the reports by Alfred Kinsey, William Masters and Virginia Johnson, or Samuel and Cynthia Janus, relied on volunteers. Because those volunteer samples are not random, their statistical findings cannot be projected onto the general population.

An analysis of the new survey is being published in two books. "The Social Organization of Sexuality," a 700-page volume intended for social scientists and health professionals, will be released Oct. 17. The more reader-friendly 250-page "Sex in America," co-written by New York Times science reporter Gina Kolata, goes on sale Monday.

One of the most politically charged findings will be the percentage of homosexuals in the population, which this study estimates to be 2 percent to 4 percent. While this is lower than the famous 10 percent from the Kinsey report, Mr. Laumann said it is consistent with other population-proportional studies.

Still, the response rate differs with the question. More people rate the idea of sex with someone of the same gender as "appealing"

or "very appealing" (5.5 percent of women and 6 percent of men) than have actually done it since the age of 18 (4 percent of women and 5 percent of men). Even fewer identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual (1.4 percent of women and 2.8 percent of men).

Mr. Michael said the findings also support the "migration hypothesis," that homosexuals tend to cluster in large cities. The study found that in the 12 largest cities, about 9 percent of men identified themselves as homosexual or bisexual.

Mr. Laumann said he's sure that some will misinterpret the numbers or take them out of context. But he stands by the assertion that this is the most accurate reflection of Americans' sexual lives ever produced — even with its small figures for frequency of sex and number of partners.

"The funny thing is that since we're coming in with numbers that are so low, people are saying, 'Well, they're lying,' " Mr. Laumann said. "There are obviously biases, but I really think that on the whole, people tried very hard to give us an honest set of answers."