



Full Length Article

Age at migration, family instability, and timing of sexual onset

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ABSTRACT

This study builds on and extends previous research on nativity variations in adolescent health and risk behavior by addressing three questions: (1) whether and how generational status and age at migration are associated with timing of sexual onset among U.S. adolescents; (2) whether and how family instability mediates associations between nativity and sexual debut; and (3) whether and how these associations vary by gender. We find that first- and second-generation immigrant youth initiate sexual activity later than native youth. Foreign-born youth who migrate after the start of adolescence exhibit the latest sexual onset; boys' sexual behavior is particularly sensitive to age at migration. Parental union stability is protective for first- and second-generation youth, especially boys; however, instability in co-residence with parents accelerates sexual debut for foreign-born girls, and dilutes protections from parental marital stability. Use of a non-English language at home delays sexual onset for immigrant girls, but not boys.

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1. Introduction

Sexual onset is one of several pivotal life transitions that largely occur during adolescence. Despite declines in teenage sexual activity over the past few decades, approximately three-quarters of young women and men in the United States engage in sexual intercourse by their 20th birthday (Finer and Philbin, 2013; Martinez and Abma, 2015). The particular age at which sexual debut occurs has important short- and long-term implications for health and wellbeing. For example, sexual debut early in adolescence has been linked with elevated risk of sexually transmitted infection during the teenage years and adulthood (Buffardi et al., 2008; Kaestle et al., 2005; Upchurch et al., 2004), risky sexual behavior in adulthood (Sandfort et al., 2008), and early pregnancy and childbearing (Resnick et al., 1997; Wellings et al., 2001).

As part of a larger body of scholarship on immigrant-native differences in health across a range of outcomes and life stages (e.g., Cho et al., 2004; Harris et al., 2009; Hummer et al., 1999; Jasso et al., 2004; Markides and Eschbach, 2005), recent research on adolescent sexual behavior in the United States has begun to consider differences by immigrant background. Currently one in four U.S. youth are first- or second-generation immigrants¹ (Migration Policy Institute, 2015a); this share is projected to reach one in three by 2050 (Passel, 2011). Despite emerging evidence that foreign-born youth initiate sexual activity later than US-born youth (Harris, 1999; McDonald et al., 2009; Spence and Brewster, 2010), and that U.S. immigrant

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E-mail addresses: rachel.goldberg@uci.edu (R.E. Goldberg), tienda@princeton.edu (M. Tienda), adsera@princeton.edu (A. Adserà).¹ First generation immigrants are born outside the United States. Second and third generations refer, respectively, to the children and grandchildren of immigrants.

youth's acculturation is associated with earlier sexual debut (Afable-Munsuz and Brindis, 2006; Greenman and Xie, 2008; Upchurch et al., 2001), existing research has not clearly identified underlying mechanisms for observed nativity-based differentials, and has only minimally explored heterogeneity within immigrant generations.

Analyzing data from the 1997 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97), we extend prior research in three main ways. First, in addition to considering variations in sexual debut by immigrant generation, we ask whether and how the life stage at which migration occurs is associated with the timing of sexual onset. Age at migration has been linked with numerous aspects of immigrants' social integration, including language acquisition and educational attainment (Beck et al., 2012; Bleakley and Chin, 2010; Gonzalez, 2003), but its association with sexual behavior has not been assessed.

Second, we investigate family instability as a mechanism contributing to nativity differences in timing of sexual activity. Prior studies on nativity differentials in health have largely ignored the potentially harmful consequences of family instability among youth with immigrant backgrounds, due to deportation, circular migration (repeated migration experiences between an origin and destination), and staged migration whereby parent(s) migrate first and later send for children (Adserà and Tienda, 2012; Landale et al., 2011). To capture the migration-related family instability often experienced by immigrant youth, we distinguish between parents' union instability and instability in parent-child co-residence. This distinction is important because the relatively stable marriages of immigrant youths' parents appear to protect against risk behaviors (Perreira and Ornelas, 2011). Because migration-linked family changes may accelerate sexual debut, the net effect on timing of sexual initiation of both forms of instability is difficult to predict.

Finally, we consider gender differences in the associations between timing of sexual debut and both nativity and family instability. Prior research has separately examined gender differences in norms of sexual behavior (Crawford and Popp, 2003), parental control (Axinn, et al., 2011), and the consequences of parental union instability (Cooper et al., 2011), but not in associations between migration background and sexual debut. Gender-based differences in norms, behaviors, and social control are often greater among immigrants than non-immigrants (Lopez-Gonzalez et al., 2005; Suárez-Orozco and Qin, 2006). Furthermore, parenting roles also are frequently gendered (Carling et al., 2012; Goldberg, 2013a). Therefore, we investigate whether generational variation in sexual onset is more salient for adolescent girls than boys, and also whether the consequences of migration-related family changes differ according to the sex of the parent as well as the child.

We find that on average, youth with migration backgrounds initiate sexual activity at later ages than their native counterparts; however, the timing of sexual debut differs by generational status, and for the foreign-born, also by age at migration. Boys' sexual initiation is particularly sensitive to age at migration, whereas for young women sexual onset timing mainly varies along generational lines. Both parental union instability and co-residential instability are associated with accelerated sexual onset, with notable gender differences. First- and second-generation youth, particularly boys, benefit from parents' relative union stability; however, maternal co-residential instability increases the risk of early sexual debut for foreign-born girls and dilutes protections from parents' marital stability. Use of a non-English language in the home delays girls' sexual debut, but not that of boys.

2. Background

Several literature are relevant for understanding nativity differentials in sexual activity, including scholarship about immigrant health advantages and a growing body of evidence about the developmental significance of age at migration for adult outcomes. In addition, we draw on studies that link family instability—both union dissolution and changes in living arrangements—with youth development for insights about their implications for the timing of sexual initiation.

2.1. Age at migration

Central to Elder's (1998) life course paradigm is the claim that the developmental impact of a life transition is contingent on the age it occurs. In support of this claim, several recent studies demonstrate that the age at which individuals migrate is consequential across a range of outcomes, including language acquisition (Bleakley and Chin, 2010; Oropesa and Landale, 1997), educational attainment (Beck et al., 2012; Corak, 2012; Gonzalez, 2003; Rumbaut, 2004), health (Gubernskaya et al., 2013; Kimbro, 2009), and fertility (Adserà et al., 2012; Bean et al., 2000). Age at migration not only indicates the extent of early socialization into the institutions and values of an individual's origin country, but also the lifecycle timing of move-related disruptions in peer networks and social relationships.²

With a few recent exceptions, the burgeoning empirical literature about immigrant health advantages seldom considers age at migration. Building on the classical and reformulated assimilation framework (Gordon, 1964; Alba and Nee, 1997), most studies of immigrant integration consider years in the host country or comparisons between first, second, and higher generations to assess convergence with norms and behavior of the native population (Waters and Gernstein Pineau, 2015). Several studies show that youth with migration backgrounds fare better than their native-born counterparts in obesity, substance use, and sexual risk behavior, but concur that the immigrant health advantages fade over time (Waters and Gernstein Pineau, 2015; Afable-Munsuz and Brindis, 2006; Creighton et al., 2012; Gfroerer and Tan, 2003). Inferences that

² Age at migration is the core dimension undergirding Rumbaut's "decimal generations," which are social aggregates "defined by age and life stage at migration for the foreign born, and by parental nativity for the native born" (Rumbaut, 2004: 1160).

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