

Original article

## Interpersonal and Personal Factors Influencing Sexual Debut Among Mexican-American Young Women in the United States

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to better understand factors influencing the age of sexual initiation among Latina youth.

**Methods:** Prior qualitative research with young women from the target population and the existing literature determined the theoretical framework for this study. A quantitative instrument was then developed and pre-tested. We enrolled a convenience sample of predominantly Mexican-American adolescent and young adult women from the west side of Chicago. A total of 271 participants were included in the analysis. Bi-variate and multivariable analyses were conducted to determine factors associated with age of first sexual intercourse.

**Results:** We found that personal, family, and peer/partner related factors influence the sexual decision making of these young women. Strong family expectations regarding educational attainment, negative parental messages about premarital sex and pregnancy, resistance to the influence of peers and partners, greater sense of personal control over sexual behaviors, preference for speaking Spanish, and small age difference between the young woman and her first sexual partner were all positively associated with age of sexual initiation. Among these, greater sense of personal control over behaviors was the strongest factor influencing age of sexual initiation.

**Conclusions:** This study provides a model that can be used to better understand Latina sexual decision making. Our findings might also inform future programs for Latinas, as they suggest that increasing girls' feelings of personal control over decisions regarding sexual debut and helping Latino parents to communicate strong messages about educational achievement, pregnancy, and sexuality may lead to positive health behaviors. © 2007 Society for Adolescent Medicine. All rights reserved.

**Keywords:** Latina; Adolescents; Sex; Relationships; Sexual initiation

The sexual decision making of Latina youth merits special attention, as this rapidly growing segment of the youth population [1] has been under-examined in the literature on adolescent sexual behavior and decision making [2]. Data from the most recent cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) show an overall decline in sexual activity and a higher age of sexual debut among youth, with fewer

15- to 17-year olds reporting sexual activity [1]. Among Latina teens in particular, the number of 15- to 17-year olds who report ever having had sex fell drastically from 49% in 1995 to just under 25% in 2002 [1]. Although Latina adolescents have sexual activity rates lower than those of female African-American teens and comparable to those of Caucasian female teens [3], sexually active Latina teens are at an increased risk for early, unintended pregnancy.

Early sexual initiation not only places Latinas at risk for unintended pregnancy, Latina adolescents who experience early sexual debut are also at an increased risk for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and future high-risk behavior

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[5–8]. As a result, the literature examining sexual debut among Latina youth tends to focus on “risk factors” that influence early sexual initiation and other problematic behaviors. Little is known about factors influencing a Latina adolescent’s actual decision to initiate or delay sexual activity. Yet understanding factors that promote the delay of sexual initiation among Latinas can be useful in improving existing reproductive health programs, services, and policies aimed at preventing Latina youth from engaging in early sexual intercourse [2]. There is also a continued need to develop culturally sensitive interventions to assist Latina teens in making healthy reproductive choices [2]. The purpose of the current study was to identify culturally relevant variables related to personal, family, and partner/peer factors influencing sexual initiation among Latina youth and to develop an ecological framework that considers factors, such as cultural and familial values and acculturation, specific to the sexual decision making of Latina youth.

## Theoretical Framework

One approach to understanding factors related to age of sexual initiation among Latina adolescents is to consider the context in which sexual behavior and decision making occurs [9]. The application of ecological and other multi-system frameworks to understanding a Latina’s decision to initiate or delay sex is compelling, as these frameworks acknowledge the embeddedness of the developing adolescent in the environmental context of family, peers, and partners, as well as the broader social structure of neighborhood and racial/ethnic community [10,11]; factors that have all been associated with sexual initiation among diverse groups of adolescents. Such frameworks move away from the individualized risk factor approach by considering how ecology and youth interact in the development of adolescent sexuality, while allowing for the consideration of cultural influences specific to various groups of youth. Thus an ecological, or multi-system approach, appears to be an excellent starting point for understanding factors influencing the decision to initiate and/or delay sexual initiation among Latina adolescents.

### *Personal factors*

Studies not specific to Latino populations show that personal factors, such as self-esteem, perceived self-efficacy, religiosity, and future personal and career goals influence an adolescent’s sexual decision making, including the decision to initiate or delay sexual intercourse [4,12,13]. In a study of Latino youth, those who delayed first sexual intercourse were more likely to believe early sexual activity would interfere with their future goals and to feel proud of themselves for abstaining from sex [14]. Thus, personal factors, including individual values and beliefs, religiosity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy may influence a Latina

adolescent’s decision making regarding timing of sexual initiation.

### *Familial factors*

Parental attitudes and disclosure of values related to sex also appear to affect an adolescent’s decision to initiate or delay sex [15]. In general, adolescents who perceive strong maternal disapproval of sex tend to initiate intercourse later than those who do not [16]. Studies specific to Latino teens suggest that parental responsiveness and open communication about issues related to sex protect Latina adolescents from engaging in early sexual activity and may counteract negative peer influences and norms [17–19]. In a study of Mexican-American youth, alignment of parent–child values and beliefs regarding sexual behavior was the number one predictor of abstinence and delayed sexual debut [20]. Additional studies have found that the more conservative a mother’s attitude is toward sex, the less likely a Latino adolescent is to report being sexually experienced [21]. Similarly, the perception that their parent(s) would be proud of them for delaying sex also appears to play a role in the intention to delay intercourse among Latino youth [14]. Taken in aggregate, these studies suggest that family characteristics and parental values, beliefs, and family expectations for Latina adolescent sexual behavior are important factors influencing the timing of Latina sexual debut.

### *Peer/Partner factors*

Social group interactions and peer norms also play a role in an adolescent’s decision to initiate or delay sexual activity. The literature on sexual initiation among African-American and Caucasian youth suggests that sexually experienced adolescents are more likely to have peers who are sexually active and to perceive social benefits to the onset of sexual activity [22,23]. Although little is known with respect to the role of peers in a Latina teen’s decision to initiate sex, previous research has found that social norms and the opinions of others in her social network may influence her contraceptive decision making [24]. In addition to peer influence, there appears to be a significant relationship between various partner and relationship factors and the timing of sexual initiation among Latina adolescents. Relationship with an older partner and/or a Latino (vs. Caucasian) partner has been associated with early sexual debut among Latina youth [25–27]. Therefore, understanding Latina adolescents’ decision to delay sexual initiation requires attention to peer and partner influences, as well as partner characteristics.

### *Cultural factors*

In studying Latina sexual decision making, one must also consider the cultural context of Latina sexuality, as these youth may face cultural norms and expectations that influence the timing of sexual debut and other sexual behaviors

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