

Do Adolescent Sexual Behavior and Intention to Engage in Sexual Behavior Change in High School Years in Hong Kong?



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ABSTRACT

Study Objective: In this study we examined sexual behavior and intention to engage in sexual behavior among Chinese high school students in Hong Kong using 6 waves of data collected over 6 years. We also focused on the related sociodemographic and family correlates.

Design, Setting, Participants, Interventions, and Main Outcome Measures: A 6-year longitudinal study was conducted. At each wave, a questionnaire was used to collect data on sociodemographic characteristics, positive youth development, and family functioning in the respondents.

Results: Individual growth curve models showed that adolescent sexual behavior and intention increased over time. Adolescents with higher levels of positive youth development reported lower levels of past sexual behavior. Youths from better-off and higher functioning families increased their sexual behavior at slower rates than did youths from families with economic disadvantage and poor family functioning. Regarding intention to have sex, older adolescents reported higher levels of intention. Youngsters with higher levels of perceived family functioning and positive youth development reported lower levels of initial intention. Adolescent boys increased their intention at a faster rate than did girls.

Conclusion: Findings from the study identified risk factors (ie, age, gender, and economic disadvantage) and protective factors (ie, healthy family functioning, positive youth development) that influence the levels and growth rates of adolescent sexual behavior and intention. Implications for future research and interventions are discussed.

Key Words: Sexual behavior, Sexual behavior intention, Chinese adolescents, High school students

Introduction

Adolescent “sexual behavior” and “depression” were key words that had the most occurrences in articles published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* in the past decade.¹ This is not surprising because of the high prevalence of sexual behavior among high school students. For example, according to the Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention,² a survey of American high school students in grades 9 through 12 revealed that in 2013, 46.8% of respondents had sexual intercourse within the past 3 months and 5.6% of students had had sexual intercourse for the first time before the age of 13 years. Through the Healthy People 2020 initiative, the US federal government has made it a national goal to reduce the proportion of adolescents aged 17 years and younger who engage in sexual intercourse. A similar worrying picture can be found in non-Western contexts. For example, Shek and Leung³ observed worrying trends among Hong Kong adolescents. Particularly, rates of premarital sex increased between 1991 to 2011 for boys (from 1.2% to 9.8%) and girls (from 0.2% to 7.4%). Hong Kong youths

have also adopted more liberal attitudes toward sexuality over the years.⁴ To tackle the problem, there is a need to better understand why adolescents initiate early sexual intercourse and what factors prevent risky sexual behavior.

Correlates of Adolescent Risky Sexual Behavior

Adopting a multisystemic perspective on the basis of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory,⁵ Kotchick and colleagues⁶ proposed that individual factors in the self-system (eg, age, gender, race) and environmental factors in the family and extra-familial systems must be examined to understand adolescent risky sexual behavior.

Primarily, sociodemographic factors are related to adolescent sexuality. Research shows that age is related to adolescent risky behavior. Research on the trajectory of problem behaviors such as smoking⁷ and crime rates⁸ among adolescents generally showed that prevalence increases in early adolescence, peaks in the late teens, and decreases slowly into early adulthood. Interestingly, only few studies have reported growth trajectories of sexual behavior among adolescents. Fergus et al⁹ reported an acceleration of sexual risk behaviors in adolescent years, with a peak and deceleration during young adulthood. However, because the study was conducted mostly in African Americans from a high-poverty community, the authors warned

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that the findings from the study might not be generalized to all populations of adolescents. Baumgartner and colleagues¹⁰ examined the developmental pathways of online (eg, sending sexual images to strangers) and offline sexual risk behavior (ie, casual sex) of Dutch teens. Similar developmental trajectories were found for online and offline sexual risk behaviors with an increase from early to middle adolescence, a peak in middle adolescence, and a decline thereafter. A pitfall of this study is that offline sexual behavior was narrowly operationalized as casual sex. The authors suggested future studies to adopt a broader measurement of sexual behavior to fully reflect adolescents' sexual development.

In the Asian context, in a large-scale longitudinal study of adolescents in Hong Kong, Shek¹¹ and Shek and Leung¹² reported a gradual increase in sexual behavior and intention to engage in sexual behavior in junior secondary school years. Few researchers have systematically examined how psychosocial factors might influence adolescent sexual behavior and intention trajectories, especially in the Asian context. Fabio and colleagues⁸ highlighted the importance of examination of individual and social factors that might affect adolescent risk behavior trajectories. They argued that "...knowing the shape of the curve revealed at what age risk started, when risk was greatest, when it decreased, and allowed us to target prevention programs at specific age groups. Identifying systematic variation in the age-crime curve with neighborhood disadvantage provided a basis for targeting interventions geographically or temporally by predicting when future violence epidemics might emerge" (pp S331).

Regarding gender, Petersen and Hyde¹³ found, in a meta-analysis, that adolescent boys were more likely to report being sexually active than did girls. This might be because of different reasons. First, adolescent boys generally have an earlier sexual debut than girls. Second, there might be a systematic reporting bias in which girls are more likely to deny their sexual experience.¹⁴ Third, socialization and gender role development results in more sexual freedom for boys, and girls are more sexually restricted.¹⁵

Regarding family structure, in a study conducted in more than 60,000 Brazilian adolescents, a higher frequency of sexual behavior was reported by adolescents who lived with neither of their parents, with only 1 parent, who rarely or never have meals with their parents, and those with low rates of parental supervision.¹⁶ These findings are in line with existing literature that reported the well established relationship between family structure and adolescent sexual behavior in the West. Adolescents from intact families (ie, living with both biological parents) tend to initiate sexual intercourse at an older age,¹⁷ and youngsters who live in single-parent families are more likely to have had sexual intercourse¹⁸ and less contraceptive use.¹⁹ Longitudinal studies have shown that adolescents who do not live with their biological parents at age 11 reported higher numbers of sexual partners at age 15.²⁰

Different explanations have been offered for these observations. First, compared with intact families, the level of supervision in single-parent families is often lower.²¹ Besides, the number of hours youths left unsupervised was

positively related to reports in ever having intercourse.²² Second, in the course of parental separation, adolescents might experience emotional instability which might increase their odds of engaging in risky sexual behaviors.¹⁹ Third, from the social learning perspective, living in a nonintact family might provide exposure to permissive sexual norms, especially in the presence of maternal models of nonmarital intercourse.²³ Last, Simons et al²⁴ argued that youths from single-parent or divorced families might hold more cynical views of marriage as opposed to those from intact families, which negatively affects their sexual behaviors. Indeed, scholars found that adolescents from intact families were more committed to marriage, which reduced the probability of risky sexual behavior. The presence of a father and a mother within a family is crucial for adolescents in Hong Kong as well. Law and Shek²⁵ reported that paternal and maternal factors (eg, behavioral and psychological control, parent-child relational quality) influenced adolescent sexual behavior and intention to engage in sexual behavior.

Finally, adolescents who grew up in neighborhoods with high levels of poverty and crime rates tended to report earlier onset of sexual intercourse, lower use of contraception, and higher teenage pregnancy rates.¹⁸ However, Upchurch et al²⁶ found that only boys from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds showed higher risks of sex. The authors suggested that the risk of becoming sexually active might not be solely explained by socioeconomic factors. Thus, it would be meaningful to examine other factors that influence adolescent sexual behavior and intention.

Personal factors also determine adolescent risky sexual behavior. In a 4-year longitudinal study of more than 1000 American youth-parent pairs, Oman and colleagues²⁷ investigated the effect of youth assets on the initiation of sexual intercourse before age 20, and birth control use and pregnancy before age 20 years. Assets at the individual level (eg, general and educational aspirations, self-confidence, religiosity, ability to make responsible choices), family level (eg, family communication, parental monitoring), and community level (eg, community involvement, positive peer role models, school connectedness) were associated with different adolescent sexual behaviors. Findings from the study highlighted the importance of promotion of youth assets for adolescent sexual health which is in line with the positive youth development approach, which advocates that nurturance of youth strengths, developmental assets, and positive attributes would help to decrease adolescent risk behaviors and increase positive adolescent developmental outcomes.^{28,29}

Previous findings have also shown that higher levels of positive youth development were associated with lower levels of adolescent sexual behavior and intention.^{11,12,30} More specifically, in terms of intrapersonal competencies, Lando-King and colleagues³¹ found that girls with higher intrapersonal skills (eg, emotional intelligence, self-directed thinking and actions) reported fewer male sex partners in the past 6 months. Authors reasoned that adolescents who are equipped with intrapersonal competencies might be more thoughtful about their decisions to engage in or

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