

ABOUT TIME

No Sex, Please... We're College Graduates

by Professor John Student

The average adult reports having sex about once a week. But 1 in 5 Americans has been celibate for at least a year, and 1 in 20 engages in sex at least every other day.

American Demographics: Why are we so fascinated with sex?

Professor Student: Because sex embellishes most of life. It sells everything from newspapers to toothpaste. The pursuit of it has humbled heads of state, terminated promising careers, and brought fame and shame to lots of ordinary people. Americans may be

COLLEGE GRADUATES

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AMERICANS.

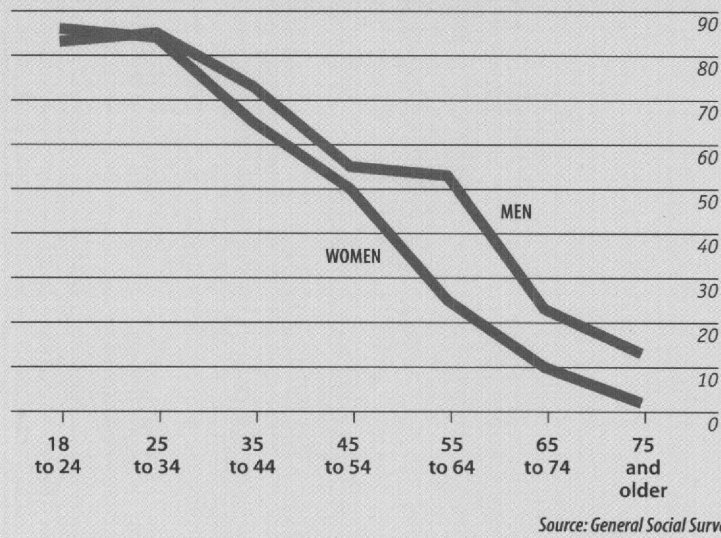
obsessed with sex. But they are also full of misunderstanding about sexual activity because few representative surveys have asked them about their own sexual habits. Sex has not been the topic of many surveys, so not much is actually known about who does what with whom, and how often.

Even surveys that might include sexual activity miss most of it. In 1965, the Americans' Use of Time Study asked 2,000 adults to fill out diaries that listed everything they did for a week, and how long they spent doing it. The closest reference to sex came from one man who reported "sleeping with a friend." Sex has been mentioned more often in subsequent waves of this survey, but the reported diary activity averages less than ten minutes a week. Either a lot of

Professor Student was interviewed by our ace behavioral snoops, John Robinson of the Department of Sociology at the University of Maryland, College Park; and Geoffrey Godbey at Pennsylvania State University.

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

(reported average annual episodes of sexual activity by age and sex, 1996)



Source: General Social Survey

Among the oldest old, 85 percent of all sexual activity is confined to 8 percent of the population.

activity goes unreported or these respondents are exceptionally lonely.

How do you know these diary estimates are too low?

Because more accurate data on the sexual activity of the American public have been collected by social scientists at the University of Chicago. Their most concentrated effort was *Sex in America*, based on a 1992 study totally dedicated to the topic. That work established that Americans are relatively inactive. But the national average in the 1992 study was about one sexual episode a week, lasting about half an hour.

The university's General Social Survey (GSS) database

on sexual activity has grown to nearly 10,000 respondents since 1989, or about three times larger than the 1992 study. The GSS is a very rich and reliable source on the demographics and trends surrounding American sexual activity.

What does the GSS show for adults as a whole?

The data confirm that overall sexual activity is relatively infrequent, with an average of 58 episodes per year, or slightly more than one a week. Yet there was a 5 percent increase in sexual activity in 1996, compared with earlier years. This seems to run contrary to a number of trends, including the gradual aging of the U.S. population, longer work weeks, and the growing presence of distractions like the Internet.

Like wealth, sex is not distributed equally across the population. The GSS shows that about 15 percent of adults engage in half of all sexual activity, and that 42 percent of adults engage in 85 percent of all sex. Sex appears to be distributed more unequally than money, because 20 percent of Americans possess half of the wealth. But sex is more equitably shared than wine, 85 percent of which is consumed by 15 percent of the public.

Part of the reason for this inequity is that about 1 in 5 U.S. adults says he or she did not engage in any sex the previous year. Only 1 in 20 Americans has sex three or more times a week, so that this group claims about 30 percent of all sexual activity. Perhaps these are also the people who tell us about their sex lives on TV talk shows.

Don't men overreport their sex lives, while women underreport them out of modesty?

Men do report more sexual frequency than women, but not because men are more driven or boastful about their prowess. It's because of demographics. Widows and older women without partners dominate the 20 percent who are inactive. Among married people, the frequency reports of

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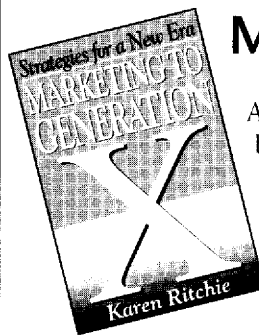
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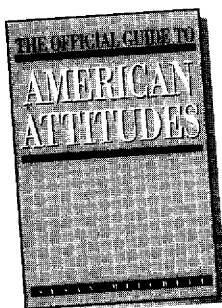


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THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF SEX

(estimated annual occasions of sexual activity by selected demographic characteristics, with unadjusted results by sex and overall results adjusted for differences in age, race, and marital status, 1989-97)

	<i>men</i>	<i>women</i>	<i>adjusted</i>		<i>men</i>	<i>women</i>	<i>adjusted</i>
total sample	64	54	58	EDUCATION			
AGE				grade school only	47	22	58
18 to 24	83	86	100	some high school	69	51	59
25 to 34	85	84	87	high school			
35 to 40	73	65	65	graduate	65	54	58
45 to 54	55	50	47	some college	71	61	62
55 to 64	53	25	33	college graduate	61	61	56
65 to 74	23	10	13	graduate school	56	49	50
75 or older	13	2	9	RACE			
PRESENCE OF CHILDREN				white	62	54	57
aged 0 to 5				black	80	55	66
none	60	48	58	other	70	55	69
one	86	77	56	MARITAL STATUS			
two or more	91	81	58	married	68	68	71
aged 6 to 12				widow	25	6	49
none	61	48	57	divorced	60	48	57
one	70	70	56	separated	75	61	62
two or more	84	83	64	never married	61	56	46
aged 13 to 17				ANNUAL HOUSEHOLD INCOME			
none	63	52	58	less than \$10,000	64	48	63
one	73	63	58	\$10,000 to \$14,999	61	51	56
two or more	77	63	58	\$15,000 to \$19,999	61	52	60
WORK HOURS PER WEEK				\$20,000 to \$24,999	68	50	59
none	43	43	58	\$25,000 to \$29,999	73	49	59
1 to 19	62	57	55	\$30,000 to \$34,999	61	56	NA
20 to 29	65	65	58	\$35,000 to \$39,999	68	68	60
30 to 39	48	60	57	\$40,000 to \$49,999	66	62	56
40	76	68	63	\$50,000 to \$59,999	65	63	56
41 to 49	72	69	61	\$60,000 to \$74,999	62	67	55
50 to 59	73	70	63	\$75,000 or more	61	68	60
60 or more	82	50	65				

Source: author's calculations based on Census Bureau data

Sexual activity is not distributed equally among Americans. In fact, sex is more concentrated in the hands of a few than money.

husbands and wives (not in the same couples) are within one episode per year—58.6 for married men and 57.9 for married women. And if other differences between men and women are statistically controlled

(such as sexual preference, age, and educational attainment), married women actually report a slightly higher frequency than men.

While married men and women agree on frequency, other surveys have shown that

men are likely to report having more lifetime sexual partners. This seems to be due to the different cognitive strategies, or “rules,” that men and women use to count up their former lovers.

How active are older people? If there's snow on the roof, can there still be fire in the hearth?

Sexual activity does decline with age, but the declines are not regular, and they differ notably for men and women. The average frequency of sex stays steady throughout the 20s and mid-30s, but it falls nearly 20 percent among those aged 35 to 44. It drops another 25 percent for those aged 45 to 54, and another 25 percent for those aged 55 to 64. But the steepest declines happen after age 65. Sexual activity among those aged 65 to 74 is more than 60 percent lower than it is among 55-to-64-year-olds, and there is another drop of 50 percent for those aged 75 and older.

SEXUALLY ACTIVE SENIOR

CITIZENS ARE THE EXCEPTION, NOT THE RULE.

Some of the age-related changes are even more pronounced when other factors are taken into account. For example, the rates for people aged 18 to 24 go up almost 15 percent when controlled for marital status and other factors.

Age-related declines in sexual activity are more drastic for women than for men. The rate for women drops 50 percent after age 55, then 90 percent, to near-complete inactivity, after age 75. In other words, women aged 65 to 74 average about ten episodes of sex a year, but that drops to two a year for those aged 75 and older. Also, sex among the oldest old is restricted to a fortunate few. Eighty-five percent of sexual activity among men and women aged 75 and older happens among 8 percent of this population. We may like to

speculate and make jokes about sexually active senior citizens, but the GSS indicates that they are the exception, not the rule.

Are people more sexually active if they have more free time?

No. People who report having the least free time are married, have children at home, and work long hours. Each of these groups also reports having more sex. Indeed, people who work more than 60 hours a week are about 10 percent more sexually active than other workers, and even those who have preschool-aged children report having more sex than average.

One might think that these higher rates happen simply because the busiest Americans are still young enough to have energy left over at night. Indeed, the greater sexual frequency reported by parents returns to normal levels after their answers are controlled for differences in age, gender, and other factors. But even after the controls, Americans with the longest work hours report higher sexual frequency.

Of course, the main reason why married people have sex more often is that they have easy access to a partner. The low rates of activity among never-married adults drop even further after age and other factors are controlled, while the extremely low rates for the widowed rise to near-normal levels when controlled.

Is it true that affluent, well-educated people have more sex?

They don't have much of an advantage. After controlling for age and marital status, only those in the top one-tenth of the income distribution report above-average sexual frequency. Even then, the rich only report about 5 percent more sex. In fact, adjustment for age and marital status reveals that Americans at the lower rungs of the income ladder may have slightly higher sexual frequency.

Greater educational attainment is usually

associated with greater participation in all kinds of activities, from attending concerts to mountain climbing. Sex, however, is a surprising exception. Sexual frequency peaks among those with some college education, then decreases among four-year college graduates and declines even further among those with professional degrees.

Americans who have attended graduate school may have money and smarts, but they report being the least sexually active educational group in the population. This pattern is true for both men and women, and it persists after age, work hours, and other factors are statistically controlled. It's possible that more-educated respondents are more honest than others in reporting sexual activity, or they are more demanding in their definition of what counts as sex. Whatever the reason, however, sex is different from most other activities because its reported frequency declines with increasing education.

JAZZ FANS ARE 30 PERCENT MORE SEXUALLY ACTIVE THAN PEOPLE WHO LIKE OTHER TYPES OF MUSIC.

Sexual frequency does go up with increased participation in other activities, such as attending concerts, sporting events, and active forms of leisure. Yet it also increases with one notable form of passive behavior: TV viewing. With or without statistical controls, the GSS data indicate that the more TV you watch, the more often you have sex. It is not clear whether the sexual response is stimulated by what is on the screen, or by boredom. And for some reason, watching PBS seems more positively related with increased sexual behavior than watching regular prime-time drama. Who would have thought that *National Geographic* specials or Ken Burns' history of baseball could get people in the mood?



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Is sex too basic for cultured people?

Not always. One of the most sexually active groups in the U.S. is people who have a strong preference for jazz music. Even after controlling for age and race, jazz enthusiasts are 30 percent more sexually active than the average person. Liking other types of music, such as rock or rap, seems to be unrelated to sexual activity.

What kinds of attitudes are most likely to be associated with having lots of sex?

Sexual activity is higher among self-defined political liberals than among moderates or conservatives, and it is highest among those who describe themselves as "extreme liberals." On the other hand, sexual activity is also above average among "extreme conservatives." People who are passionate about politics are also passionate about other things.

The same pattern seems to hold for people's opinions about specific liberal-conservative issues, such as aid to minorities or approving of non-traditional family situations. But here, the differences disappear after controlling for demographic variables.

Catholics are slightly more sexually active than Protestants. But both Christian groups are about 20 percent less active than are Jews or Agnostics. Among Protestant groups, Baptists are slightly above average and Presbyterians and Lutherans are slightly below average.

The more important religious predictor of sexual activity is less belief-driven and more determined by activity. Those who attend religious services at least once a week are less sexually active. This finding also goes against the "more-more" pattern found for other activity.

The most sexually active Americans are far more likely than average to approve of premarital or extramarital sex, to see positive benefits in pornography, to watch X-rated movies, and to favor giving birth control pills to teenagers. These strong

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POLITICS AND OTHER PASSIONS

(estimated annual occasions of sexual activity by selected characteristics, unadjusted and adjusted for differences in age, race, and marital status, 1989-97)

ideology	unadjusted	adjusted
extreme liberal	73	72
liberal	62	62
slight liberal	63	60
moderate	60	60
slight conservative.....	55	54
conservative	52	54
extreme conservative	59	62

Source: General Social Survey

People who hold strong political views also report more frequent sexual activity.

correlations are not affected by age, gender, or marital status. Here is one area where attitudes do match behavior. But it isn't always liberal attitudes that match up with having a lot of sex. People who own guns also have higher-than-average sexual frequency.

Perhaps sexual activity is highest among people who are most likely to seek adventure. The most sexually active people are more likely to report having been threatened by guns or knives in their lives. They are also likely to report frequent contact with friends rather than relatives, and they are more likely to go out to bars. Smoking is associated with about a 10 percent increase in sexual activity, and drinking is associated with about a 20 percent increase. Those who both smoke and drink report almost twice as much sexual activity as those who do neither.

So what's the bottom line? Does sex make people happier or healthier?

The more sex a person has, the more likely he or she is to report having a happy life and a happy marriage. This connection is stronger among women than men, again contrary to popular stereotypes. A second and more important predictor of sexual frequency is the feeling that one's life is excit-

ing rather than routine or dull. And being excited by life is most strongly associated with being happier. It seems that increased sexual activity is one of the many benefits of having a positive attitude.

Still, sex doesn't solve all your problems. A high frequency of sex is not associated with greater satisfaction with job or family, for example. And people who report a high degree of satisfaction with their city or community are actually less likely than average to report having more sex. Perhaps sex is one of the psychological tactics people use to escape from a less-than-satisfying community.

A similarly surprising connection is lack of confidence in the presidency. Confidence in most social institutions has nothing to do with sexual activity, but somehow, lack of confidence in the nation's chief executive is associated with having more sex. The pattern was more apparent in the years when George Bush was president than it is during Bill Clinton's presidency, however.

One disturbing connection is that the most sexually active Americans are also more likely than average to say they do not regard other people as fair or trustworthy. In other words, some Americans who have more sex may be attempting to compensate for a general attitude of suspicion or mistrust. Sex is universally cited as Americans' favorite activity. But the General Social Survey hints that for a few Americans, a robust sex life goes along with a pessimistic view of other people.

TAKING IT FURTHER

A complete report on the 1992 Chicago survey is published in *Sex in America: A Definitive Survey* (1995: University of Chicago Press, \$12.99). For further explanations of the "more-more" phenomenon, free time, and other aspects of Americans' time use, see *Time for Life* by John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey (1997: Penn State University Press, \$24.95), available from the American Demographics catalog; telephone (800) 828-1133. "Professor John Student" is a statistical poltergeist who is fascinated by numbers on sex, beer, and rock n' roll.

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