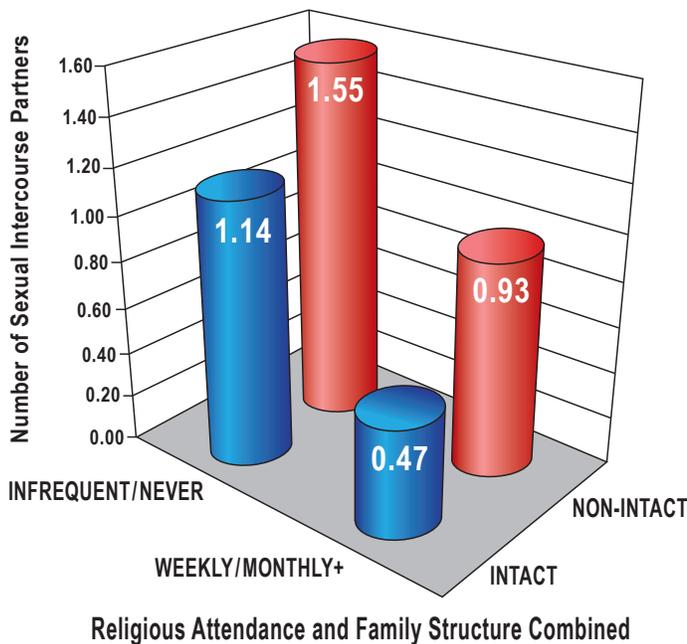




Marriage, Religion, and the Common Good – Number 6

Religious Attendance, Family Structure and Sexual Intercourse Partners—Adolescent Girls

Girls' Sexual Partners by Religious Attendance and Family Structure¹



This chart groups the data in four categories, with two different configurations for each of two major indicators, frequency of religious attendance (monthly or more/less than monthly) and family structure (intact/non-intact).

The intact category comprises families with both biological parents, married or unmarried, raising their children. The non-intact category comprises families without both biological parents, including married stepfamilies, cohabiting stepfamilies, divorced single-parent families, and always single-parent families.

The resultant four categories are 1) intact family with monthly or more religious attendance; 2) intact family with less than monthly religious attendance; 3) non-intact family with monthly or more religious attendance; and 4) non-intact family with less than monthly religious attendance.

¹ This chart draws on a large national sample (16,000) from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Waves I and II. This work was done by the author in cooperation with former colleagues at The Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C.

Adolescent girls from intact families who worship frequently have the fewest sexual partners in high school.

This chart depicts the average number of sexual intercourse partners for American female adolescents in Grades 7-12 when correlated with religious attendance and family structure. Female students in Grades 7-12 have an average of 0.47 sexual partners when they live in intact families and worship at least monthly. By contrast, those who worship less than monthly and come from broken or reconstituted families have an average of 1.55 sexual partners. Those who worship at least monthly but come from broken or reconstituted families have 0.93 partners. Girls who come from intact families but worship less than monthly have a slightly higher average of 1.14. The data is taken from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Waves I and II.

Other Studies

Several other studies corroborate findings along these lines.² Analyzing fathers' relationships with their adolescent daughters, Mark Regnerus of the University of Texas

at Austin and Laura Luchies of Northwestern University report that while dads may feel off balance when their daughters become teenagers, their involvement in their daughters' lives makes a significant difference, especially if they take them to church weekly and minimize their dating.³

Surveying more than 26,000 female *and* male adolescents, Christina Lammers of South Dakota State University and colleagues reveal that teens are more likely to practice sexual abstinence if they are more religious, live in a two-parent household, and believe that their parents care about their actions.⁴

Michael J. Donahue and Peter L. Benson of the Search Institute in Minneapolis also find that religious worship is the aspect of religiosity most directly correlated to abstinence among adolescents, more so than considering religion important or participating in church-related activities.⁵

Analyzing contextual environmental data on family structure and religious adherence, Karin L. Brewster of the University of North Carolina and colleagues report that adolescent girls who live in neighborhoods with a high percentage of divorced or separated women are particularly likely to have premarital sexual intercourse. This likelihood, however, is modified by the percentage of religious believers in the community. The greater the percentage of those who practice their faith the less the sexual activity of adolescent girls.⁶

Absent fathers and empty churches contribute to the increased sexual activity of female adolescents. The evidence strongly indicates that teenage girls are least likely to engage in sexual intercourse when living in an intact family that worships frequently.

Thus the two great relationships, between spouses and with God, seem most protective of the sexuality of young female teenagers.

Patrick F. Fagan, Ph.D.

2 The following findings are from www.familyfacts.org, except for Regnerus and Luchies, which is from the Howard Center for Family, Religion, and Society.

3 Mark D. Regnerus and Laura B. Luchies, "The Parent-Child Relationship and Opportunities for Adolescents' First Sex," *Journal of Family Issues* 27 (February 2006): 159-183.

4 Cristina Lammers, Marjorie Ireland, Michael Resnick, and Robert Blum, "Influences on Adolescents' Decision to Postpone Onset of Sexual Intercourse: A Survival Analysis of Virginity among Youths Aged 13 to 18 Years," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 26 (2000): 42-48.

5 Michael J. Donahue and Peter L. Benson, "Religion and the Well-Being of Adolescents," *Journal of Social Issues* 51 (1995): 145-160.

6 Karin L. Brewster, William R. Grady, and John O. G. Billy, "Contextual Effects on the Sexual Behavior of Adolescent Women," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 56 (1994): 387-404.



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