

# Sexual Debut and the Number of Sexual Partners in Emerging Adulthood

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## Introduction

### Background

- Youth are more likely to engage in risky sexual behavior than adults over 25 (Ciocanel et al., 2017), and sexual risk in adolescents can continue to compound into adulthood (Shneyderman & Schwartz, 2012).
- Sexual debut in adolescence can influence negative outcomes in emerging adulthood such as mental health (Prendergast et al., 2019), physical health (Boislard, Bongardt, & Blais, 2016), and more sexual partners (Kugler et al., 2017) which can lead to higher rates of STIs and compound the effects of the prior outcomes (Vasilenko & Lanza, 2013).
- Identifying the impact of risk factors at different age periods can be instrumental in increasing the influence of interventions (Vasilenko & Lanza, 2013) and lead to overall greater well-being (Chen et al., 2019) and sexual outcomes (Boislard, Bongardt, & Blais, 2016).

### Research Question and Hypothesis

- How is sexual debut in adolescence (or lack thereof) associated with the number of casual and committed sexual partners in emerging adulthood?
- We hypothesized that the earlier sexual debut occurred within adolescence, the more sexual partners one would have in emerging adulthood.

## Methods

### Sample

- The sample consisted of 1005 emerging adults (36.2% male, 62.8% female, 1.0% transgender). Wave 1 of Project READY was used for the age of sexual debut, with Waves 1 and 5 being used to calculate the total number of sexual partners in the first five years of emerging adulthood.

### Measures

- Sexual Debut
  - ◆ Early Adolescent Debut (Ages 10-12) \*3% of participants
  - ◆ Mid-Adolescent Debut (Ages 13-15) \*17.7% of participants
  - ◆ Late Adolescent Debut (Ages 16-18) \*33.8% of participants
  - ◆ Virgins (Ages 19+) \*45.5% of participants
- Number of Sexual Partners
  - ◆ # of sexual partners in a committed relationship (committed partners)
  - ◆ # of sexual partners outside of a committed relationship (casual partners)

**Table 1**

OLS Regression Results Predicting the Number of Emerging Adulthood Sexual Partners

Variable	Model 1 (Committed Partners)		Model 2 (Casual Partners)	
	$\beta$	p-value	$\beta$	p-value
Intercept	0.72	**	0.23	
Sexual Debut <sup>a</sup>				
Early Adolescence	2.85	***	5.65	***
Mid-Adolescence	0.81	**	2.83	***
Late Adolescence	0.35		3.11	***
Biological Sex <sup>b</sup>				
Female	-0.10		0.00	
Transgender	0.28		0.28	
Ever Cohabited	0.67	***	0.80	
Religiosity	-0.12		0.12	
Race <sup>c</sup>				
Black	-0.06		1.67	*
Asian	-0.15		0.38	
Latino	-0.18		0.11	
Mixed/Biracial	0.12		3.50	
Other	0.19		0.39	*

Note. \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$

<sup>a</sup>Reference = Virgin

<sup>b</sup>Reference = Male

<sup>c</sup>Reference = White

R-squared (Model 1) = 0.06

R-squared (Model 2) = 0.07

## Results

- Model 1 predicted little of the variation in the number of committed sexual partners ( $R^2 = 6\%$ ), but still showed significant differences between sexual debut ages. On average, those with an early adolescent debut had 2.85 ( $p < .001$ ) more committed sexual partners than virgins. Those with a mid-adolescent sexual debut had 0.81 more committed sexual partners ( $p = .001$ ) than virgins on average. Finally, those with a late adolescent sexual debut did not have significantly more committed sexual partners than virgins ( $\beta = 0.35$ ;  $p = .074$ ).
- Model 2 followed a similar pattern in predicting only a small amount of the variation in number of casual sexual partners ( $R^2 = 7\%$ ). On average, those with an early adolescent debut had 5.65 ( $p < .001$ ) more casual sexual partners than virgins. Further, those with a mid-adolescent sexual debut had 2.83 more casual sexual partners ( $p < .001$ ), and those with a late adolescent sexual debut had 3.11 more casual sexual partners than virgins on average ( $p < .001$ ).

## Discussion

- The earlier that an individual had a sexual debut, the more sexual partners they were likely to have on average in emerging adulthood across both models. However, this pattern is more defined in Model 2 predicting the number of casual sexual partners.
- This pattern demonstrates the need to distinguish between committed sexual partners and casual sexual partners in future research. Notably, differences between casual and committed partners also appear in patterns of relationship formation (see Busby et al., 2020).
- Although the R-squared for both of the models were low and only a small amount of variation in the number of sexual partners was predicted, the results still suggest that these patterns are significant. Future research should continue to seek more understanding in this variation with possible variables including attitudes toward sexual behaviors, relationship status, and other living arrangements.
- Adolescence is an important aspect of predicting the number of sexual partners in emerging adulthood. Awareness of this can lead to improved quality in parent-child sex discussions. Prior research supports this kind of sex communication between parents and children (Flores & Barroso, 2017; Vasilenko & Lanza, 2013), however, the findings of this study suggests the need for parents to encourage sexual debuts after adolescence considering the implications adolescent sexual debut has for risky behaviors (i.e. more sexual partners) in emerging adulthood.
- Limitations include having more females than males in the sample, and the sample not being totally representative of the United States in general.

