Fact Sheet

RAND HEALTH

Exposure to Sex on TV May Increase the Chance of Teen Pregnancy

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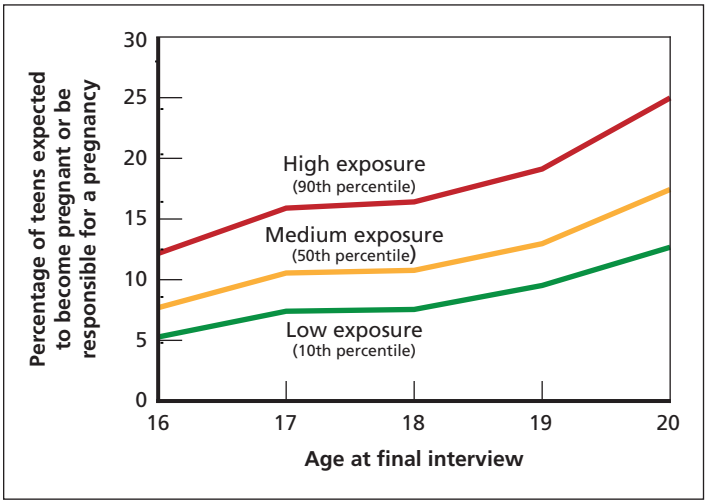
Teen pregnancy remains a serious problem in the United States. Although rates have declined since 1991, the United States still has the highest rate of teen pregnancy among industrialized nations—nearly one million American women aged 15–19 become pregnant each year. A majority of these pregnancies are unplanned. The factors that contribute to teen pregnancy are multiple and complex. However, one factor that has not been studied in depth is exposure to sexual content on television. Previous RAND Corporation research established a link between such exposure and the onset of sexual activity among teens (see http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9068/). Extending this work, a team of RAND researchers examined the link between teen pregnancy and exposure to sexual content on TV. The study found that frequent exposure to TV sexual content was associated with a significantly greater likelihood of teen pregnancy in the following three years.

The study used data from a national longitudinal sample of youth 12–17 years old at initial sampling. The youth were interviewed first in the spring of 2001 and then reinterviewed one year and three years later. Researchers focused on 23 popular programs that were widely available on broadcast and cable television and contained high levels of sexual content (both depictions of sex as well as dialogue or discussion about sex). The shows included drama, comedy, reality, and animated programs.

The analysis found the following:

- After adjustment for other contributing factors, including living in a single-parent household and engaging in problem behaviors such as skipping school, exposure to sexual content on TV was associated with subsequent teen pregnancy.
- From these results, the researchers estimated that the proportion of teens who are likely to become pregnant or be responsible for a pregnancy in their teen years is two times greater among those who view high levels of televised sexual content (those in the 90th percentile) than among those who view low levels (those in the 10th percentile). See the figure.

Based on the Study Results, Teens Who Watch More Televised Sexual Content Have a Greater Risk of Pregnancy



The study is the first to demonstrate a link between exposure to sexual content on TV and subsequently becoming pregnant or being responsible for a pregnancy before the age of 20. The results have several practical implications:

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- TV industry leaders should examine how programming can include messages to teens about the consequences of sexual activity.
- Media literacy instruction in middle and high schools can help teens think more critically about the relative absence of negative consequences of sex in TV portrayals and encourage thinking about alternative outcomes to those seen on TV.
- Training for pediatricians should include intensified efforts to teach about the effects of media exposure on children's health.
- Parents need to monitor their teens' TV viewing and provide education about the consequences of sex. Tools that can help them review television content may be helpful.

As additional research further clarifies the mechanisms that link TV sexual content and teen pregnancy, more focused intervention strategies should become apparent.

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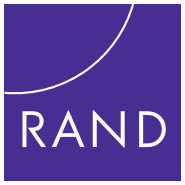

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