

Poor teenage girls more likely to have sex earlier: Study

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Teenage girls from poor neighbourhoods are more likely to have sex at an early age, according to a joint Canadian-American study.

Researchers from the Universite de Montreal, University of New Brunswick and New England's Tufts University also found that girls from disadvantaged backgrounds are apt to engage in sexual intercourse with boys three years or more older.

"The results suggest that neighbourhoods shape peer groups, which in turn influence when girls become sexually active," said lead author Veronique Dupere, who completed the research at the Universite de Montreal and is now a post-doctoral fellow at Tufts.



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Dupere explained that teenaged girls who have shown conduct problems - such as running away, staying out all night or stealing - were more influenced by delinquent friends, who are "thought to provide a pool of willing partners and cultivate a sense that early sexual activity is desirable."

Edith Guilbert, a doctor and adviser for Quebec's Public Health Institute, said the study is in line with the observations of experts and sexual educators who work with teenagers.

"This is a very interesting study that confirms what we witness everyday," said Guilbert. "And it tells us that we still have a lot of work to do to educate teenagers, especially girls who are more at risk."

The study, published in the journal *Child Development*, is based on Statistics Canada data gathered during the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth. The researchers used a sub-sample of 2,596 boys and girls who were followed from the ages of 12 to 15. One-quarter of them were found to live in poor neighbourhoods.

The study found that unlike girls, boys from a disadvantaged background did not become sexually active earlier in their adolescence.

"Family and individual risk appeared more influential in boys' timing their first

sexual experience," said Dupere.

Researchers noted the study underscores the importance of prevention.

"Other studies show that early initiators are more likely to contract sexually transmitted diseases, undergo unwanted teen pregnancy and to report involuntary sexual experiences," Dupere said.

Guilbert agrees with her and noted that the number of teen pregnancies is twice as high in the poorest neighbourhoods of Quebec City and Montreal than in more wealthy suburban areas of the cities.

She said specific sex education programs targeting teenagers is the best way to intervene.

"We have created a program that teaches empowerment to teenage girls and how they can believe in themselves and take control of their lives, and it has proven to be very effective," Guilbert said. She added the program is implemented in low-income schools in downtown Quebec City.

A study released last month by Statistics Canada showed fewer Canadian teenagers, especially girls, are having sex compared to their counterparts a decade ago.

The findings showed that 43 per cent of youths aged 15 to 19 said they had sexual intercourse at least once in 2005, compared to 47 per cent in 1996-97.

The agency attributed the decrease in teenage sexual activity to more teenage girls choosing to wait before becoming sexually active, but it didn't break the numbers down according to the socio-economic background of the teenagers.

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