

Friendships and Early Relationships: Links to Sexual Initiation Among American Adolescents Born to Young Mothers

By Elizabeth C. Cooksey, Frank L. Mott and Stefanie A. Neubauer

Elizabeth C. Cooksey is associate professor of sociology, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH. Frank L. Mott is senior research scientist, and Stefanie A. Neubauer was formerly research assistant, both with the Center for Human Resource Research, The Ohio State University.

CONTEXT: Preadolescent friendships and early teenage dating relationships have implications for adolescent sexual initiation that may differ by race and gender.

METHODS: Data on participants in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and their children are used to profile friendship and dating patterns among a sample of youth born to relatively young mothers. Logistic regression analyses examine whether these patterns predict early sexual initiation, and whether there are differences associated with gender and race.

RESULTS: As youth moved from late childhood to midadolescence, they shifted from having almost exclusively same-sex, same-grade friends to having more relationships with persons who are of the opposite sex and older. By ages 15–16, 34% had had sexual intercourse; the proportion was significantly higher among blacks (45%) than among others (31%). Most adolescents reported neither frequent dating nor a steady partner by ages 15–16, although the prevalence of such reports was related to friendship patterns in late childhood. Twelve percent of youth who initiated sex in early adolescence did so outside of a dating relationship. For most subgroups examined, the odds of initiating intercourse during early adolescence were associated with going steady, but not with frequency of dating.

CONCLUSIONS: Prior social networking is an important element in predicting early sexual activity. Overall, youth whose mothers gave birth at young ages remain sexually inexperienced into middle adolescence, but certain subgroups are more likely than others to initiate early sexual activity.

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Despite recent decreases in adolescent pregnancy rates and birthrates in the United States,¹ the overwhelming majority of American youth engage in sexual intercourse as teenagers, and fewer than half remain sexually inexperienced by age 18.² Approximately one-quarter of 15-year-olds (24% of females and 27% of males) have had sex,³ and the proportion of young teenagers becoming sexually active has been increasing.⁴

As youth move from elementary school to junior high to high school, their physiological development takes place in tandem with changes in their relationships and social networks. During this period, friendship patterns become more heterogeneous, and relationships shift in nature and intensity.⁵ Dating relationships, while socially acceptable, afford adolescents opportunities to engage in sexual activity, and may even motivate youth to become sexually active. Not surprisingly, prior research suggests that there is a significant association between dating and sexual activity.⁶ Like sex, dating is being initiated at an earlier age today than it was in the past.⁷

The nature of friendship patterns, relationship experiences and sexual behaviors differs for males and females, particularly at young ages. Males tend to report more casual relationships with their first partners, while females have more intimate first relationships.⁸ Males are likely to emphasize sexual aspects of relationships, while females are likely to romanticize relationships.⁹ In addition, males

who initiate sex at early ages often do so for different reasons than their female counterparts.¹⁰

Racial differences in teenage sexual activity are also well documented. A larger proportion of black than of nonblack adolescents (especially males) report sexual intercourse by ages 15–17,¹¹ although the onset of dating is later for black than for white females.¹² Consistent with these findings, dating appears to be a stronger predictor of sex for white than for black youth.¹³

In this article, we focus on the role that friendship groups and relationship patterns in late childhood and early adolescence play in predicting sexual debut among young adolescents. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), we profile the gender and age balances of friendship groups, the nature of heterosexual relationships and the initiation of sexual activity among a segment of American youth as they move through late childhood into early and middle adolescence. Most important, we examine the temporal, gender and racial associations between these events.

Much of the previous research linking adolescent dating to sexual initiation assumes that youth progress from dating to sexual activity.¹⁴ In part, this assumption is made because relatively few adolescents report ever having had sex before they ever dated. While the assumption may be true, the conclusion is drawn from information on dating and sexual activity reported retrospectively by youth at a single survey point.¹⁵ A unique aspect of the NLSY data is

that the relationship information is collected on an ongoing basis and may therefore be less subject to recall error or intentional misreporting. Our data are collected every other year from the same youth at ages 11–12, 13–14 and 15–16 and, hence, afford the opportunity to address the question of whether there is a logical progression to the behaviors studied.

DATA AND METHODS

Sample

We used data from the 1979–1998 waves of the NLSY and linked 1990–1998 child and young adult files. The original NLSY sample included 12,686 males and females who were aged 14–21 on December 31, 1978.¹⁶ By the late 1990s, approximately 85% of eligible respondents were participating in the survey, including oversamples of black men and women.

Our sample included 1,678 children of female NLSY respondents who were 11–12 years old in 1990, 1992 or 1994. The children were interviewed in one of these baseline years and at the next two consecutive biennial survey points (for example, 1992 and 1994 for the 1990 cohort). Youth who were 11–12 in 1990 were all born to mothers aged 13–22 at the time they gave birth.* The 11–12-year-olds in 1992 were born to women who were approximately two years older at the time they gave birth, and the youth 11–12 in 1994 were born to women two years older still. Although the sample is skewed toward those with younger mothers, by combining the three cohorts of 11–12-year-olds, we expanded the range of mothers' ages at birth to 13–26 years; the majority of mothers were 17–24 when their children were born.

We compared maternal and family characteristics of youth in the sample with those of a cross section of children born to all NLSY mothers aged 33–40 in 1998 and found that although the youth born to the youngest mothers were more likely than others to be from disadvantaged backgrounds, they were by no means socioeconomic outliers. As expected, mothers of youth in our sample were significantly more likely to have dropped out of high school, had somewhat lower family incomes and were more likely to be black or Hispanic than other mothers. There was no significant difference, however, in the proportion of families in each sample living in poverty, although a larger proportion of youth in our sample were not living with their fathers. Thus, our sample and their families may be appropriately characterized as falling primarily within the American socioeconomic mainstream. Because of the mothers' young age at the time of birth, however, these children are at higher risk of early sexual activity than a cross section of their peers, including those born to older women.

Measures

Data on friends' characteristics are available for all youth at ages 11–12; information on dating relationships and sexual activity is available for all youth at ages 11–12 (preteenage), 13–14 (early adolescence) and 15–16 (middle adolescence).†

• *Friendship variables.* All 11–12-year-olds were asked how

many close friends of each gender they had. We classified the gender of a preteenager's friends as "all or mostly the same" if more than 60% were of the same sex as the respondent, as "all or mostly opposite" if fewer than 40% were of the same sex or as "approximately equal" if the proportion who were of the respondent's gender fell between 40% and 60%. Respondents were also asked about the grade level of most of their close friends. We included the small proportion of youth who reported that most of their friends were not in school (1%) with those who reported that most were in higher grades, since the sample in this category was not large enough to analyze separately, and youth not enrolled in school are generally at least 16.

• *Relationship variables.* In the NLSY, the wording of questions relating to dating behavior differs slightly depending on the respondent's age. For 10–14-year-olds, the question "At what age did you have your first date or begin going out alone with someone of the opposite sex?" helps to clarify that dating is defined as one-on-one time spent within a heterosexual relationship; one possible answer to this question is "Haven't started to date yet." In the middle adolescent years, respondents are asked, "About how many different persons have you dated in the past twelve months"; one possible response is "Do not date/Haven't started dating yet." Although this question does not define dating, respondents have read the earlier definition on at least two prior occasions.

All adolescents who reported ever having dated were asked how often they usually date. Respondents aged 10–14 were also asked if they usually go out with the same person, and 15–16-year-olds were asked if they have a steady boyfriend or girlfriend. We used this information to classify current dating behavior as steady or not.

• *Sexual activity.* Beginning at age 13, NLSY respondents were asked, "Have you ever had sexual intercourse ('had sex', 'made it')?" Those who had had sex were asked their age at first sex. From this information we classified respondents as sexually experienced or sexually inexperienced at each interview, and defined transitions from inexperience to experience. We cannot be certain which behaviors teenagers actually considered to be "sex." For example, those aged 15–16 may define sex according to context and situation, such as who is doing what to whom or whether the behavior leads to orgasm; however, some evidence suggests that adolescents tend to define sex as heterosexual intercourse.¹⁷ Youth have come to consider "sex" and "intercourse" as being somewhat synonymous because they associate both with the risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.¹⁸

*The sample was limited to the offspring of young mothers because all mothers were aged 14–21 in 1978.

†Although all the youth were either 11 or 12 years old at the baseline survey, not all of them were exactly 13–14 or 15–16 years of age at the two consecutive survey points, because interviews were not always exactly two years apart. For example, a 12-year-old at baseline could have turned 15 by the next interview. Although we describe those interviewed two years after baseline as 13–14 years old, 6% either were still 12 or had recently turned 15.

TABLE 1. Percentage distribution of 11–12-year-old children of female participants in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, by friends' characteristics, according to gender and race, 1990–1994

Characteristic	All (N=1,481)	Gender		Race	
		Male (N=733)	Female (N=748)	Black (N=559)	Nonblack (N=922)
Gender†					
All/mostly same sex	65.0	65.9	64.2	55.1*	67.7
About equal	29.6	29.1	30.2	37.8*	27.4
All/mostly opposite sex	5.3	5.0	5.6	7.2	4.8
Grade‡					
Same	83.5	82.7	84.3	73.7*	86.2
Higher	12.7	12.7	12.7	20.7*	10.5
Lower	3.8	4.6	3.0	5.6	3.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

*Significantly different from percentage for nonblacks at $p < .05$. †Excludes 1% of youth who reported having no close friends. ‡Friends who are not in school (1%) were included with those in a higher grade. Note: Percentages are weighted, and missing data are excluded.

Analytic Methods

Our descriptive results are based on weighted data that adjust for the overrepresentation of minority youth and ensure that the sample is representative of children born to the original NLSY cohort by age 26. We tested for differences in proportions between the various age, race and gender subgroups. Logistic regression analysis was used for our multivariate modeling of the likelihood of initiating sexual activity during early adolescence; all statistical analyses were performed in STATA.¹⁹

RESULTS

Friendships, Relationships and Sexual Initiation

Two-thirds (65%) of 11–12-year-olds reported that most or all of their close friends were of the same gender as themselves; 84% reported that most of their friends were in the same grade (Table 1). Significantly smaller proportions of

black youth than of nonblack youth reported having mostly same-sex friends (55% vs. 68%) and same-grade friends (74% vs. 86%); larger proportions of blacks than of nonblacks had an equal number of friends of both genders (38% vs. 27%) and mostly friends in higher grades (21% vs. 11%). No significant differences were found between males and females.

The vast majority (92%) of 11–12-year-olds indicated that they had never or rarely dated (Table 2). Those who had dated mostly did so sporadically: Overall, 6% dated less than once per week, and 2% dated more frequently. Females were significantly more likely than males to report never or rarely dating (94% vs. 89%), and were less likely to report dating less than once a week (4% vs. 8%). Pre-teenage males with dating experience were more likely than their female peers to report going steady (67% vs. 49%).

As expected, only a very small proportion of 11–12-year-olds indicated that they had had sex (3%); males were more likely than females (5% vs. fewer than 1%), and blacks were more likely than nonblacks (5% vs. 2%), to report being sexually experienced. These reports are consistent with national figures on sexual intercourse at young ages.²⁰

A significantly smaller proportion of 13–14-year-olds than of 11–12-year-olds indicated having never or rarely dated (71% vs. 92%). Young adolescent females were significantly more likely than males to report having never or almost never dated (75% vs. 68%). A greater proportion of blacks aged 13–14 than of their nonblack peers had never or almost never dated (79% vs. 69%); a smaller proportion of blacks than of other youth this age dated less than once a week (12% vs. 21%), and among those who had ever dated, a smaller proportion of blacks had a steady boyfriend or girlfriend (50% vs. 59%). The data do not permit an understanding of how youth define “dating” and “going steady.” For example, a greater proportion of 13–14-year-olds who were going steady than of those who were dating multiple people reported weekly dating (32% vs. 14%); however, 22% of those going steady reported that they almost never dated (not shown).

TABLE 2. Percentage distribution of youth, by relationship characteristics and sexual activity, according to age, gender and race

Characteristic	All			Gender						Race					
				Male			Female			Black			Nonblack		
	11–12	13–14	15–16	11–12	13–14	15–16	11–12	13–14	15–16	11–12	13–14	15–16	11–12	13–14	15–16
Dating frequency															
Never/almost never	91.6	71.4	46.2	89.1*	68.3*	48.4	94.1	74.6	44.1	91.6	79.2†	58.7†	91.6	69.2	42.9
<once per week	6.3	19.0	26.9	8.5*	19.3	27.5	4.1	16.0	26.3	5.3	11.5†	26.0	6.7	21.0	27.1
≥once per week	2.0	9.6	26.9	2.4	12.4	24.1*	1.8	9.4	29.7	3.1	9.2	15.4†	1.7	9.8	30.0
Going steady‡															
Yes	59.6	58.0	42.4	66.9*	55.2	32.9*	49.1	61.7	51.9	52.7	50.4†	54.5†	61.1	59.4	39.9
No	40.4	42.0	57.6	33.1	44.8	67.1	50.9	38.3	48.1	47.3	49.6	45.5	38.9	40.6	60.1
Ever had sex															
Yes	2.5	10.1	33.6	4.5*	11.9*	31.7	0.4	8.2	35.6	4.9†	18.4†	44.6†	1.8	7.8	30.6
No	97.5	89.9	66.4	95.5	88.1	68.3	99.6	91.8	64.4	95.1	81.6	55.4	98.2	92.2	69.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

*Significantly different from percentage for females of the same age at $p < .05$. †Significantly different from percentage for nonblacks of the same age at $p < .05$. ‡Based on adolescents who had ever dated. Notes: Percentages are weighted, and missing data are excluded. Italics signify that age differences within the gender or racial category are significant at $p < .05$.

TABLE 3. Percentage distribution of adolescents, by dating patterns at ages 13–14 and 15–16, according to gender balance of friendship groups at age 11–12, gender and race

Dating pattern	Mostly same-sex friends					Equal/mostly opposite-sex friends				
	All	Male	Female	Black	Non-black	All	Male	Female	Black	Non-black
Weekly dating	(N=831)	(N=382)	(N=449)	(N=274)	(N=557)	(N=513)	(N=249)	(N=264)	(N=223)	(N=290)
At neither age	73.1*	77.7*,†	68.7*	83.8*,‡	70.8*	62.9	65.0	60.9	72.0‡	59.8
At age 13–14 only	3.3	3.4	3.2	4.9	2.9	5.4	5.8	5.1	7.5	4.8
At age 15–16 only	20.2	16.3†	23.8	10.2*,‡	22.3	24.4	20.8	27.6	18.1‡	26.5
At both ages	3.5*	2.6*	4.3	1.1‡	4.0*	7.3	8.4	6.4	2.4‡	8.9
Steady dating	(N=781)	(N=367)	(N=414)	(N=257)	(N=524)	(N=483)	(N=241)	(N=242)	(N=209)	(N=274)
At neither age	57.3*	63.6*,†	51.3	62.0	56.4*	50.2	50.0	50.4	57.5‡	47.8
At age 13–14 only	12.9*	16.5†	9.5*	6.3‡	14.3*	18.6	20.9	16.5	9.9‡	21.6
At age 15–16 only	21.3	13.3†	30.3*	26.0	21.1	19.9	17.4	22.3	25.1	18.2
At both ages	7.8*	6.6*	8.9	5.7	8.2	11.3	11.8	10.8	7.5	12.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

*Significantly different from percentage for equal or mostly opposite-sex friends at $p < .05$. †Significantly different from percentage for females at $p < .05$. ‡Significantly different from percentage for nonblacks at $p < .05$. Notes: Percentages are weighted, and missing data are excluded. Ns are unweighted.

Between ages 11–12 and 13–14, the proportion of youth who ever had had sex increased from 3% to 10% (Table 2). Although the proportion initiating sex between those ages was essentially identical for males and females, young adolescent males were significantly more likely than their female counterparts to ever have had sex (12% vs. 8%), because they had already reported higher levels of sexual activity at ages 11–12. The racial difference is larger still: Eighteen percent of black youth were sexually experienced at ages 13–14, compared with 8% of nonblacks.

More than half of 15–16-year-olds reported some dating experience: Twenty-seven percent dated less than once a week, and another 27% dated more frequently. At this age, weekly dating was more likely among females than among males (30% vs. 24%), and more common among nonblacks than among blacks (30% vs. 15%). However, although youth were more likely to be dating during middle adolescence than in early adolescence, they were less likely to be going steady (42% vs. 58% of those who had ever dated). This decline is especially prominent for males and nonblacks.

Thirty-four percent of youth had had sex by ages 15–16. Although gender differences are no longer significant (because of the substantially greater increase in sexual initiation for females than for males since ages 13–14), large racial differences remain: Forty-five percent of blacks reported being sexually experienced, in comparison with 31% of nonblacks.

Individual Linkages and Progressions

While the descriptive results suggest a degree of order in the development of relationships that is generally consistent with expectations (i.e., an increase in dating frequency and a greater likelihood of sexual activity with increasing age), they do not address how friendship patterns at ages 11–12 are linked with subsequent dating patterns. To address this issue, we assessed patterns of weekly and steady dating during early and middle adolescence in relation to the characteristics of preteenage friendship groups. We excluded the 3% of youth who reported having had sex by ages 11–12 from this and all subsequent analyses, as only

20% indicated that they had ever “gone steady,” and we suspected that their very early sexual activity may well have been involuntary.²¹

Overall, youth who reported having mostly same-sex friends at ages 11–12 were significantly more likely than those who had friends of both genders to report not dating weekly at ages 13–14 or 15–16 (73% vs. 63%); this association was significant regardless of the youth’s gender or race (Table 3). A smaller proportion of youth with mostly same-sex friends than of those with friends of both genders reported weekly dating at both ages (4% vs. 7%); the same pattern held for males and nonblacks.

Mirroring the above findings, a larger proportion of youth who had had mostly same-sex friends as preteenagers than of those with friends of both genders reported no steady dating during either early or middle adolescence (57% vs. 50%); males and nonblacks reflected the overall pattern. Youth with mostly same-sex friends were less likely than others to report steady dating during early adolescence (13% vs. 19%) or during both early and middle adolescence (8% vs. 11%).

Similar patterns emerge in analyses of dating in regard to the grade level of preteenagers’ friends (Table 4, page 122). Overall, youth who had mostly same- or lower-grade friends at ages 11–12 were more likely than others to report no weekly dating at either ages 13–14 or 15–16 (70% vs. 61%) and less likely to report weekly dating at ages 13–14 (4% vs. 9%); these associations were also significant for males and blacks. Although the differences are not always statistically significant, the general pattern suggested in Tables 3 and 4 is that females and nonblacks are more likely than males and blacks to report weekly and steady dating during both early and middle adolescence, regardless of their friendship patterns at ages 11–12.

If early friendship patterns are significantly associated with young people’s weekly and steady dating, might pre-adolescent friendships and early adolescent weekly and steady dating patterns be associated with sexual initiation? In analyses exploring this question, youth who were sex-

TABLE 4. Percentage distribution of adolescents, by dating patterns at ages 13–14 and 15–16, according to grade level of close friends at age 11–12, gender and race

Dating pattern	Most friends in lower/same grade					Most friends in higher grade				
	All	Male	Female	Black	Non-black	All	Male	Female	Black	Non-black
Weekly dating	(N=1,143)	(N=531)	(N=601)	(N=403)	(N=740)	(N=193)	(N=91)	(N=102)	(N=96)	(N=97)
At neither age	70.4*	73.8*,†	67.2	81.7*,‡	67.8	60.9	61.8	60.0	64.2	59.2
At age 13–14 only	3.7*	3.5*	3.9	4.5*	3.5	8.5	11.9	5.2	14.7‡	5.4
At age 15–16 only	21.0	18.0†	23.8	11.8*,‡	23.1	25.8	21.5	29.9	20.5	28.4
At both ages	4.9	4.7	5.1	2.0*,‡	5.6	4.9	4.9	4.9	0.6‡	7.0
Steady dating	(N=1,072)	(N=513)	(N=559)	(N=374)	(N=698)	(N=184)	(N=88)	(N=96)	(N=92)	(N=92)
At neither age	55.7	60.0†	51.7	63.0*,‡	54.1	51.3	53.0	49.6	43.8	55.3
At age 13–14 only	14.8	18.0†	11.7	6.8*,‡	16.5	16.3	21.2	11.2	13.3	17.8
At age 15–16 only	20.8	13.8†	27.6	24.5	20.0	20.8	18.8	23.0	33.1‡	14.4
At both ages	8.7	8.3	9.1*	5.8‡	9.3	11.6	7.1	16.3	9.9	12.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

*Significantly different from percentage for most friends in higher grade at p<.05. †Significantly different from percentage for females at p<.05. ‡Significantly different from percentage for nonblacks at p<.05. Notes: Percentages are weighted, and missing data are excluded. Ns are unweighted.

ually inexperienced at ages 15–16 were significantly more likely than those whose sexual debut occurred between early and middle adolescence to have had mostly same-sex, same-grade friends at ages 11–12 and to report no weekly or steady dating at ages 13–14 (54% vs. 34%—not shown). Similar results were found for each gender and racial group. Furthermore, youth who had been in a steady relationship at ages 13–14 were more likely than those who had not to have had sex by ages 15–16.

Additional insight into adolescent behavior can be gleaned from analyses examining the relationship between the timing of sexual initiation and dating. Of youth who were sexually inexperienced at ages 15–16, 30% had never dated, 35% first reported having dated during middle adolescence and 35% first reported having dated during early adolescence or earlier (Table 5). Among youth who had not had sex by ages 15–16, males were more likely than females to report dating by ages 13–14 (41% vs. 30%), and blacks were more likely than nonblacks to report never having dated (45% vs. 27%); nonblacks were more likely than blacks to have dated by early adolescence (38% vs. 25%).

Among the one-third of teenagers who first had sex between ages 11–12 and 15–16, 50% reported having dated

before they reported having had first sex. This proportion differs significantly by gender and race: Males were more likely than females (59% vs. 42%), and nonblacks were more likely than blacks (58% vs. 28%), to report dating before reporting sexual debut.

Furthermore, 38% of those who had sex between ages 11–12 and 15–16 reported having dated for the first time and having had sex for the first time at the same survey point. For these youth, as well as for those who reported first dating prior to sexual initiation, we still do not know if first intercourse took place within or outside of a dating relationship. However, 12% of youth who had had sex between ages 11–12 and 15–16 reported having had sex before ever having dated. Females were significantly more likely than males (16% vs. 8%), and blacks more likely than nonblacks (23% vs. 8%), to report having had sex prior to dating; black females were significantly more likely than black males to report sexual debut prior to ever dating (31% vs. 14%—not shown). Despite a move to earlier ages of dating that appears to parallel the move to earlier ages of sexual initiation, these are likely to be conservative estimates of the degree to which first sex takes place outside of any dating relationship for the significant minority of youth who have sex during early adolescence.

Linking Friendships and Dating to the Timing of First Sex

While 90% of all youth were sexually inexperienced at ages 13–14, there was a significant shift toward initiation of sexual activity by ages 15–16. One-third of all adolescents and 45% of blacks reported having had sex. To what extent might an early propensity to “hang out” with youth of the opposite sex or youth in higher grades, to date frequently or to go steady be predictive of the transition to sexual activity in these early teenage years?

Results from preliminary analyses of these associations suggested that although both frequent and steady dating at ages 13–14 substantially increased the probability of initiating sex by ages 15–16, youth who reported both going steady and dating weekly were the most likely to become

TABLE 5. Percentage distribution of adolescents, by sexual and dating experience, according to gender and race

Characteristic	All	Gender		Race	
		Male	Female	Black	Nonblack
Sexually inexperienced at age 15–16	(N=1,053)	(N=516)	(N=537)	(N=364)	(N=689)
Never dated	30.0	30.0	29.9	45.0*	26.6
First reported dating at age 15–16	34.7	29.2*	40.6	29.9	35.7
First reported dating earlier	35.4	40.8*	29.6	25.1*	37.6
Had sex between ages 11–12 and 15–16	(N=564)	(N=264)	(N=300)	(N=252)	(N=312)
Reported dating prior to first sex	49.7	59.2*	42.2	27.5*	58.0
Reported both at same time	38.2	33.0*	42.3	49.1*	34.1
Reported first sex prior to dating	12.1	7.8*	15.5	23.4*	7.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

*Difference in percentages by gender or race is significant at p<.05. Notes: Youth who had had sex prior to baseline are excluded. Percentages are weighted, and missing data are excluded.

TABLE 6. Odds ratios (and 95% confidence intervals) from logistic regression analyses assessing the risk that adolescents who were sexually inexperienced at ages 13–14 would have sex by ages 15–16, by selected characteristics, according to gender and race

Characteristic	All (N=1,185)	Gender		Race	
		Male (N=562)	Female (N=623)	Black (N=420)	Nonblack (N=765)
Social and demographic					
Male	0.72 (0.5–1.0)*	na	na	0.93 (0.6–1.5)	0.59 (0.4–0.9)**
Black	1.17 (0.9–1.6)	1.51 (0.9–2.4)	0.92 (0.6–1.4)	na	na
Age (mos.)	1.04 (1.0–1.1)**	1.03 (1.0–1.1)	1.05 (1.0–1.1)**	1.02 (1.0–1.1)	1.06 (1.0–1.1)**
Father present in household (ages 11–12)	0.67 (0.5–0.9)**	0.70 (0.5–1.1)	0.61 (0.4–0.9)*	1.06 (0.6–1.8)	0.51 (0.3–0.7)**
Mother's age at first birth	0.87 (0.8–0.9)**	0.87 (0.8–1.0)*	0.86 (0.8–0.9)**	0.84 (0.7–0.9)**	0.89 (0.8–1.0)*
Mother had <12 yrs. of education	1.11 (0.7–1.6)	1.29 (0.7–2.4)	0.97 (0.6–1.6)	0.71 (0.4–1.3)	1.45 (0.9–2.5)
Mother had ≥12 yrs. of education	0.91 (0.6–1.3)	1.13 (0.6–2.0)	0.78 (0.5–1.3)	0.81 (0.5–1.4)	0.95 (0.6–1.5)
Friendship pattern (ages 11–12)					
Mostly opposite-sex friends	0.88 (0.5–1.7)	1.39 (0.6–3.2)	0.45 (0.2–1.3)	1.22 (0.5–2.9)	0.71 (0.3–1.9)
Male and female friend mix	1.22 (0.9–1.6)	1.16 (0.7–1.8)	1.26 (0.8–1.9)	1.23 (0.8–2.0)	1.17 (0.8–1.7)
Mostly friends in higher grades	1.89 (1.3–2.8)**	1.94 (1.1–3.4)*	1.94 (1.1–3.3)*	1.75 (1.0–3.0)*	2.21 (1.3–3.8)**
Dating pattern (ages 13–14)					
Going steady, date weekly	4.21 (2.4–7.4)**	3.65 (1.6–8.4)**	4.57 (2.1–10.2)**	2.39 (0.8–7.4)	5.59 (2.9–11.0)**
Going steady, date monthly	2.71 (1.7–4.4)**	2.90 (1.4–5.8)**	2.37 (1.2–4.7)*	0.94 (0.3–2.8)	3.86 (2.2–6.8)**
Going steady, almost never date	3.08 (1.6–5.9)**	3.04 (1.3–7.0)**	3.79 (1.3–11.2)*	3.52 (1.1–11.2)*	3.26 (1.4–7.4)**
Not going steady, date weekly	2.14 (0.9–5.1)	2.44 (0.9–6.9)	1.48 (0.3–8.2)	2.50 (0.6–10.9)	1.88 (0.6–5.7)
Not going steady, date monthly	1.96 (1.2–3.3)*	1.97 (1.0–4.1)	2.05 (0.9–4.6)	2.02 (0.8–5.1)	2.04 (1.1–3.9)*
Not going steady, almost never date	3.81 (2.2–6.7)**	4.34 (2.0–9.3)**	3.21 (1.4–7.6)**	4.27 (1.4–13.4)*	4.05 (2.1–7.9)**
<i>-2 log likelihood</i>	156.8	78.1	86.7	39.3	134.7
<i>df</i>	18	17	17	17	17

*p<.05. **p<.01, two-tailed. Notes: Cohort variables (whether youth were 11–12 in 1990, 1992 or 1994) were included in equation, but were not found to be significant. Reference categories were female; nonblack; father not present in household; mother had more than 12 years of education; mostly same-sex friends; most friends in same or lower grade; no dating. na=not applicable.

sexually active. We therefore combined these two aspects of dating in early adolescence into a single set of dummy variables. Although our descriptive results suggest linkages between friendship patterns and relationship situations on the one hand, and the likelihood of initiating sexual activity between ages 13–14 and 15–16 on the other, these associations may reflect uncontrolled background characteristics. Thus, in our multivariate analyses, we additionally controlled for age of the youth, presence of the youth's father in the household at age 11–12, age of the youth's mother at first birth and her current level of education. Each of these variables predicts adolescent relationship behaviors and early sexual activity.²²

As expected, the odds of initiating sex between these ages increased significantly with the adolescent's age and were inversely related to the mother's age when she first gave birth (odds ratios, 1.0 and 0.9, respectively—Table 6). The presence of the father in the child's household at ages 11–12 decreased the odds of initiating sex in early adolescence for the total sample, females and nonblacks (odds ratios, 0.5–0.7). The odds of sexual initiation were significantly lower for nonblack males than for nonblack females (0.6), but were not significantly lower for black males than for black females; these findings are consistent with data from the Add Health Survey.²³

The gender of a youth's friends at ages 11–12 was not associated with the likelihood of initiating intercourse between ages 13–14 and 15–16 for the overall sample; however, the data suggest that having mostly opposite-sex

friends increased the odds of sexual initiation for males and decreased them for females (odds ratios 1.4 and 0.5, respectively). Analyses including an interaction term between gender and sex of close friends revealed that the overall non-significant finding masked a significant gender difference: Males with mostly female friends were significantly more likely than females with mostly male friends to initiate sex between ages 13–14 and 15–16 (2.3—not shown). Furthermore, the effect of having mostly opposite-sex friends was statistically significant for males in models that did not include dating variables at ages 13–14 (not shown).

Youth who reported that as preteenagers most of their close friends were in higher grades had nearly twice the odds of becoming sexually experienced between ages 13–14 and 15–16 of youth who reported that most of their close friends were in the same or lower grades (1.9). Results were similar regardless of young people's gender or race (1.8–2.2).

Overall, the odds of sexual initiation were significantly higher for youth who reported going steady by ages 13–14 than for those who were not dating, regardless of dating frequency (odds ratios, 2.7–4.2). The results were similar for males, females and nonblacks (2.4–5.6); among blacks, however, only those who reported going steady but almost never dating had elevated odds of initiating intercourse as young adolescents (3.5).

One dating category—not going steady and almost never dating—unexpectedly showed a consistently strong predictive link with sexual initiation. We examined whether adolescents in this modestly sized group (N=65) might have

had some prior behavioral indicators that set them apart from their peers. There seemed to be no difference between these youth and others, except that their mothers were significantly more likely to have reported that they had been “hanging around with kids who get into trouble” at ages 11–12 (not shown). Further exploration is needed, but this evidence suggests that these youth may represent an outlying social group.

DISCUSSION

Commenting on dating, courtship and sexual intimacy among white adolescents in the 1970s, Thornton wrote that “individuals enter the teenage years as children and exit them as young adults.”²⁴ Our findings suggest a similar developmental path for adolescents in the 1990s. However, there seems to be a downward shift in the age at which certain transitions occur, as well as some important differences between subgroups in the timing and patterning of friendships and relationships.

Because our sample consisted of adolescents born to younger mothers, it may not be representative of all American youth. Although children of young mothers are likely to be at the forefront of transitions to heterosexual relationships and sexual activity, the vast majority of 11–12-year-olds were indeed still behaving as children: They had predominantly same-sex friends, had little interaction with older youth, dated infrequently and were, for the most part, sexually inexperienced. Nationally representative data for a fuller cross section are likely to show even fewer opposite-sex friendships and less dating and sexual activity.

However, the modest number of youth who follow non-normative paths should be the object of special concern. The results suggest that preteenagers who have a disproportionately high ratio of friends in higher grades have an elevated likelihood of initiating sexual activity as young teenagers. One possible explanation for this finding is that this early friendship pattern may be in part a proxy for other, even earlier nonnormative behaviors: For example, a significantly higher proportion of youth who reported having friends in higher grades than of those who reported having most of their friends in the same or lower grades had been held back at least two grades (29% vs. 9%). This proxy for early heterosexual interaction should not be underestimated, as social networking at ages 11–12 is powerfully predictive of sexual initiation between ages 13–14 and 15–16. As such, it may be viewed as a red flag for those who are concerned about early sexual activity and what it implies for teenage pregnancy or other health hazards.

In contrast, only a small proportion of 11–12-year-olds reported mostly opposite-sex friends, and this behavior pattern shows no connection with early sex. However, this “nonfinding” masks significant gender differences. Overall, the data suggest that males who have mostly female friends at ages 11–12 have an elevated likelihood of dating at ages 13–14 and becoming sexually active by ages 15–16.

On the other hand, the data suggest that females who reported having mostly male friends at ages 11–12 were

less likely than those with mostly female friends to initiate sex between ages 13–14 and 15–16. This finding is less counterintuitive if we consider that 11–12-year-old girls who hang out mostly with boys may be the more active, sports-oriented youngsters who traditionally would have been called tomboys. In the light of research showing a higher age at sexual initiation for adolescent females who participate in athletics, we would also expect these young women to be less likely to initiate sex at early ages.²⁵

As children become adolescents, they gain more freedom to socialize and spend time with neighborhood and school peers; they also gain opportunities to begin dating. Among junior high and high school students, both males and females are interested in dating older partners, and at the younger ages in particular, adolescents of both genders tend to date older partners.²⁶ Our data are consistent with these findings.

Although only three in 10 youth reported having dated during early adolescence, of those who did, six in 10 reported going steady. While this statistic may seem innocuous on its own, our multivariate results suggest that dating relationships that youth define as steady are significantly associated with early sexual behavior, regardless of dating frequency. Therefore, frequent dating may be more innocuous than going steady in regard to sexual debut.

The results of our study also raise some important questions about what adolescents understand by the terms “relationship,” “dating” and “going steady,” and how these definitions may differ among subgroups. Although few studies have explored group differences in the meaning of dating, research has shown that adolescent males and females date for different reasons, as do older compared with younger youth.²⁷ Today’s youth use different terminology than young people in the past used to describe their relationships,²⁸ and certain terms may be used primarily by certain racial or socioeconomic groups.²⁹

Even though the NLSY questionnaire provides a partial definition of what constitutes dating and steady dating, these questions may still be ambiguous. For example, while steady dating may be a commonly known term for many youth, to fully interpret the meaning of this term, or to understand how others may interpret it, one needs to also incorporate dating frequency. We would expect youth who report steady dating to be more likely than others to date frequently. When we compared the dating frequency of 13–14-year-olds who said they were “going steady” with the frequency among those who were dating multiple people, we found that those who were going steady were more likely to date weekly; however, nearly a quarter of those going steady reported that they almost never dated.

Thus, although the data suggest that youth who are going steady are more likely than others to date frequently, they also suggest that at least a subset in steady relationships no longer consider themselves to be dating. It may be that some who report going steady have psychologically removed themselves from the dating pool, and thus consider a response of frequent dating as inappropriate. Youth who re-

port little or infrequent dating may well comprise both those who do not go out with the opposite sex and those who are in relationships but no longer view the time they spend together as dating. Clearly, much more in-depth research is needed to disentangle the threads of what is occurring.

The racial differences we found also support the notion that subgroups define relationships differently. For example, blacks are significantly less likely to report dating than are nonblacks, but are significantly more likely to have sex at early ages. In addition, the association between dating at ages 13–14 and the odds of sexual initiation between then and ages 15–16 is much weaker for blacks than for nonblacks. Furthermore, a significantly larger proportion of black than of nonblack youth reported sexual initiation prior to first dating. The degree to which sexual activity is taking place outside of a relationship—or the extent to which the understanding of the term “dating” differs among racial groups—is unclear. Likely both are occurring, but again, there is a need for further exploration of how youth understand these terms.

Not only black youth appear to be having sex for the first time outside of a dating relationship: Overall, 12% of those who initiated sex between ages 11–12 and 15–16 first had sex outside of a relationship. For a significant proportion of young people, the normative relationship path may not be from casual dating to steady dating and then to sexual activity. A multiplicity of relationship paths not only are theoretically possible but are followed by these youth, and some have a higher probability of detrimental outcomes than others.

In an analysis using data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), only 4% of adolescents who had dated and were sexually experienced had had sex prior to dating.³⁰ Part of the difference between these findings and ours may be due to different data collection methods. The NSFH data on timing of first date and timing of first intercourse were collected retrospectively at a single survey point, whereas the NLSY data were collected at multiple time points. We would therefore expect less reporting of sexual debut prior to dating in the NSFH than in the NLSY.

It is also likely, however, that the degree to which sexual initiation takes place outside of a dating relationship decreases as adolescents get older, and our sample of sexually experienced adolescents is a youthful one. Had we included youth who had had sex prior to ages 11–12, the proportion who reported first sex prior to first date would have been higher still. This is a worrisome phenomenon, given the increased risks associated with casual or forced sex, and the prevalence of early sex among certain subgroups. Those early sexual initiators are, in all likelihood, at high risk of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

The bottom line is that although some of today’s youth may be at risk of early sexual initiation, dating infrequently and casually is clearly the norm. Additionally, since two-thirds of our sample were still sexually inexperienced at ages 15–16, American youth wait until they leave childhood

behind and embark on the journey into young adulthood, at least as suggested by this one dimension of development. However, it is also clear that some late childhood and early adolescent behaviors—having most friends in higher grades and steady dating—may represent a red flag in terms of predicting midadolescent sexual initiation.

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Author contact: Cooksey.1@osu.edu

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