

Revirginism

Sex, lies, and virginity pledges.

By William Saletan

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Teens who take virginity pledges can't be trusted, according to an analysis of follow-up surveys. [Findings](#): 1) 52 percent of pledgers denied a year later that they'd pledged. 2) Among pledgers who later admitted to having sex the year after the pledge, 73 percent denied they'd pledged. 3) Among pledgers who conceded in the first survey that they'd had sex, nearly one in three claimed a year later that they'd never had sex. 4) Pledgers were four times as likely as non-pledgers to recant previous admissions that they'd had sex. Researchers' [conclusions](#): 1) Teens lie. 2) Pledgers lie more. 3) Born-again pledgers (those who pledge after having sex) lie the most. 4) Pledges fail. 5) We have no idea what works or what the truth is, because all this revisionism makes the data worthless. [Conservative objection](#): Stop dishonoring pledgers by questioning whether they honor their pledges.

FINDINGS:

"Virginity Pledges" by Adolescents May Bias Their Reports of Premarital Sex Most Adolescents Disavowed Their Pledge Within a Year

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[HSPH Findings](#)

Boston, MA -- Adolescents who sign a "virginity pledge" and then go on to have premarital sex are likely to disavow having signed such a pledge, according to an analysis of survey data by Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) researcher Janet Rosenbaum published in the advance online edition of the *American Journal of Public Health's* June 2006 issue. Conversely, adolescents who have had premarital sex and then decide to make a virginity pledge are likely to misreport their earlier sexual history. This misreporting of sexual experience will make it difficult to accurately assess virginity pledges' effects on early sexual intercourse, according to the author.

Moreover, the fact that the majority of adolescents recanted their vows within a year may suggest that the virginity pledge programs have a high drop-out rate and that adolescents do not make a strong affiliation with the pledge, said the author.

Rosenbaum, a doctoral student in health policy at HSPH, examined data from 13,568 adolescents who participated in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a survey sponsored by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the only large national study of its kind that has asked questions about virginity pledges, defined as "a public or written pledge to remain a virgin until marriage."

The analysis of this nationally representative sample compared respondents' reports of virginity pledges and sexual histories in an initial 1995 survey with their reports in a follow up survey a year later. The researcher looked for whether participants failed to report either a previously reported pledge or sexual experience during the second survey.

The conclusion was that adolescents inconsistently report their histories of sexual intercourse and that reports from virginity pledgers were less reliable than non-pledgers.

Recanting sexual experience: Almost one-third of non-virgins in the first survey who later took a virginity pledge recanted their experience with sexual intercourse in the second survey. Adolescents who took virginity pledges or who later became born-again Christians were more

likely to repudiate their earlier reports of having been sexually active. Of teens who reported a sexual experience at the first survey, those who later took a virginity pledge were four times as likely to retract reports of sexual experience as those who still had not taken a pledge at the second survey.

Recanting virginity pledges: The analysis also found that 52 percent of adolescent virginity pledgers in the 1995 survey disavowed the virginity pledge at the next survey a year later. Additionally, 73 percent of virginity pledgers from the first survey who subsequently reported sexual intercourse denied in the second survey that they had ever pledged. Adolescents who end their affiliation with born-again Christianity or who had sexual intercourse were the groups most likely to deny their virginity pledges.

The author concludes that adolescents' self-reported history of sexual intercourse is an unreliable measure for studies of the effectiveness of virginity pledges. Moreover, the research suggests that teens' pervasive recanting of sex makes general research on teen sexuality of particular difficulty. Most worrisome, said Rosenbaum, is that teens who do not acknowledge their sexually active past may perceive their new history as correct and will underestimate the sexually transmitted disease (STD) risk stemming from their prepledge sexual behavior. On average the retractors had more than two sexual partners.

"It's very tempting to craft stories about what may have been going on in these adolescents' minds as they changed their recollections," said Rosenbaum, "but survey data doesn't give us enough information to substantiate the stories. We can say that evaluating the effectiveness of virginity pledge programs is more difficult and complex than we may have thought. A better and more reliable measure than adolescents' self-reported sexual history might be the straightforward results of medical STD tests."

The project was funded in part by the Milton Fund of Harvard Medical School in a grant to HSPH Assistant Professor Michael Ganz.

CONSERVATIVE OBJECTION

[CWA Outraged by Misleading Harvard Study on Virginity Pledges](#) 5/2/2006

Washington, D.C. — Concerned Women for America (CWA) criticizes a study released today by Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) that challenges the authenticity of pledges made by adolescents to abstain from premarital sex. The study attempts to belittle virginity pledges by claiming that adolescents who make pledges to save sex for marriage break their vows within the first year, and that those who relent to premarital sex are more likely to claim that they never made a virginity vow in the first place.

“This new ‘finding’ by Harvard is misleading and deceptive. Those who have committed to saving sex for marriage are to be congratulated and encouraged,” said Dr. Janice Crouse, CWA’s Senior Fellow of the Beverly LaHaye Institute. “This study is in direct contradiction with the trends we have been seeing in recent years — both teen pregnancies and teen abortions are down, and evidence indicates these trends are related to increased abstinence among teens. Those who make virginity pledges have shown greater resolve to save sex for marriage. At the same time, those who have not made a conscious decision to abstain from sex are more likely to engage in premarital sexual activity.

“Abstinence education is the only effective tool for teaching young men and women the dangers of promiscuous behavior. Pre-marital sex, especially with multiple partners, greatly increases the risk of sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancies. Not to mention the emotional impact of sexual intimacy.

“The Harvard report is wrong. I know numerous couples who have saved sex for their wedding night. Research is clear — that it is the best recipe for marital happiness and well-being. Abstinence-until-marriage is a beautiful promise that should be encouraged and promoted.”

Teen Pledges Barely Cut STD Rates, Study Says

By Ceci Connolly

Washington Post Staff Writer

Saturday, March 19, 2005; Page A03

Teenagers who take virginity pledges -- public declarations to abstain from sex -- are almost as likely to be infected with a sexually transmitted disease as those who never made the pledge, an eight-year study released yesterday found.

Although young people who sign a virginity pledge delay the initiation of sexual activity, marry at younger ages and have fewer sexual partners, they are also less likely to use condoms and more likely to experiment with oral and anal sex, said the researchers from Yale and Columbia universities.

"The sad story is that kids who are trying to preserve their technical virginity are, in some cases, engaging in much riskier behavior," said lead author Peter S. Bearman, a professor at Columbia's Institute for Social and Economic Research and Policy. "From a public health point of view, an abstinence movement that encourages no vaginal sex may inadvertently encourage other forms of alternative sex that are at higher risk of STDs."

Rates of Disease

The findings are based on the federally funded National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a survey begun in 1995 that tracked 20,000 young people from high school to young adulthood. At the start of the project, the students were 12 to 18 years old and agreed to detailed, sexually explicit interviews. They were re-interviewed in 1997 and again in 2002, when 11,500 also provided urine samples.

Virginity pledges emerged in the early 1990s based on the [hypothesis] that young people would remain chaste if they had stronger community support -- or pressure -- to remain abstinent. Programs vary, but in most cases teenagers voluntarily sign a pledge or publicly announce their intention to abstain from sex. Often pledgers receive a pin or ring to symbolize the promise and team up with an "accountability partner."

Since it was founded in 1993, the virginity group True Love Waits claims 2.4 million youths have signed a card stating: "Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, those I date, and my future mate to be sexually pure until the day I enter marriage."

The study, published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*, found that 20 percent of those surveyed said they had taken a virginity pledge. Bearman and co-author Hannah Bruckner broke them into two categories -- "inconsistent pledgers" and "consistent pledgers" -- to reflect the fact that some changed their status or their responses between interviews. Among those youngsters, 61 percent of the consistent pledgers and 79 percent of the inconsistent pledgers reported having intercourse before marrying or prior to 2002 interviews.

Almost 7 percent of the students who did not make a pledge were diagnosed with an STD, compared with 6.4 percent of the "inconsistent pledgers" and 4.6 percent of the "consistent pledgers." Bearman said those differences were not "statistically significant," although Robert Rector, who studies domestic policy issues at the conservative Heritage Institute, said he interpreted the data to mean that young people committed to the abstinence pledge were less likely to become infected.

The study did not detect major geographic differences but found that minorities were far more likely to have an STD. About one quarter of African American girls in the survey tested positive for at least one STD in 2002.

In terms of high-risk behavior, the raw numbers were small, but the gap was statistically significant, Bearman said. Just 2 percent of youth who never took a pledge said they had had anal or oral sex but not intercourse, compared with 13 percent of "consistent pledgers."

Debate on Abstinence

The report sparked an immediate, bitter debate over the wisdom of teaching premarital abstinence.

Deborah Roffman, an educator and author of "Sex and Sensibility: The Thinking Parent's Guide to Talking Sense About Sex," said youths who take virginity pledges are often undereducated about sexual health. "Kids who are engaging in oral sex or anal sex will tell you they are practicing abstinence because they haven't had 'real sex' yet," she said.

Ralph DiClemente, a professor at Emory University's School of Public Health in Atlanta, compared virginity pledges to adults' efforts to make New Year's resolutions. "I wish it was that easy. We'd all be a lot healthier," he said. "If we can't do it as adults, why would we expect kids to be able to handle those issues?"

But Joe S. McIlhaney Jr., chairman of the Medical Institute for Sexual Health, said the study offers an incomplete picture because it could not say whether sexually active teens who did not take a pledge had been pregnant or treated for an STD before the 2002 testing. The analysis "doesn't prove or disprove" assertions that virginity pledges are flawed, he said.

On the other hand, Bill Smith, public policy vice president for the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, said, "Not only do virginity pledges not work to keep our young people safe, they are causing harm by undermining condom use, contraception and medical treatment."

Conservative academics said the paper overlooked earlier important findings about adolescents who take virginity pledges, most notably that they have fewer pregnancies and out-of-wedlock births. "It's hugely successful on those variables," Rector said. "Bearman has focused in on the one variable he thinks can show they [pledgers] don't do better."

President Bush has requested \$206 million in federal funding for abstinence-only programs this year (2005).

Several True Love Waits officials were unavailable Friday, according to a receptionist. Telephone calls to another virginity group, the Silver Ring Thing, were not returned.