

Age of First Sexual Intercourse

Overview of SSuN Data

Through enhanced surveillance activities conducted as part of the STD Surveillance Network (SSuN), interviews were conducted for 19,952 patient visits to STD clinics in the Richmond, Virginia area from 2009 through 2011 (including clinics in the localities of Richmond City, Henrico County, and Chesterfield County). All patients presenting to these STD clinics were asked to complete a SSuN interview form during the registration process. This interview form solicits patient information on basic demographics as well as risk behaviors, including age of first vaginal or anal sexual intercourse.

Sexual Initiation by Patient Characteristics

SSuN interview data indicate that most STD clinic patients (61%) reported having vaginal or anal sex for the first time between 14-17 years of age (Table 1). The average age of first sexual intercourse (or sexual debut) was 15.6 years.

Males reported earlier ages of sexual initiation than did females (Figure 1). Twenty-two percent of males reported sexual initiation between 10-13 years, while 16% of females reported the same. Approximately one-fifth of both males and females reported first sex when 18 years of age or older.



Twenty percent of non-Hispanic Black patients reported first sex between 10-13 years, compared to approximately 12% of Hispanic and non-Hispanic White patients. The average age of first sex among Black patients was 15.4 years, compared to 16.3 years among White patients.

Sexual Initiation by Sexual Orientation

Men who have sex with women (MSW) and bisexual patients (male or female) were most likely to report sexual initiation between 10-13 years (24% and 23% respectively). Men who have sex with men (MSM) had the highest proportion of late sexual initiation, with 44% reporting first sex at 18 years of age or older.

Table 1. STD Clinic Patient Characteristics by Age of Sexual Initiation, 2009-2011

Risk Behavior*	<10 Years		10-13 Years		14-15 Years		16-17 Years		18+ Years	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender										
Male	105	1.4	1,669	22.3	2,063	27.5	2,155	28.8	1,498	20.0
Female	60	0.7	1,424	15.5	2,856	31.1	3,171	34.6	1665	18.1
Transgender	1	4.5	1	4.5	7	31.8	5	22.7	8	36.4
Race/Ethnicity										
Black, non-Hispanic	129	1.0	2,631	20.4	3,929	30.5	4,085	31.7	2,101	16.3
White, non-Hispanic	19	0.8	286	12.2	596	25.4	781	33.3	661	28.2
Hispanic/Latino	8	0.7	149	12.5	330	27.8	375	31.5	327	27.5
Other, non-Hispanic	10	3.7	28	10.3	71	26.1	84	30.9	79	29.0
Sexual Orientation										
MSM*	15	2.4	66	10.4	94	14.8	183	28.7	279	43.8
MSW†	84	1.3	1,572	23.9	1,910	29.0	1,888	28.7	1131	17.2
Women	46	0.5	1,244	14.6	2,634	31.0	2,980	35.1	1594	18.8
Bisexual‡	20	2.2	211	22.7	277	29.8	270	29.1	151	16.3
Transgender‡	1	4.5	1	4.5	7	31.8	5	22.7	8	36.4
Totals	166	1.0	3,094	18.5	4,926	29.5	5,331	31.9	3,171	19.0

* Data is limited to patients for whom age of first sex is known (N=3,264 excluded). Unknown/missing data categories not shown.

† Men who have sex with men ‡ Men who have sex with women § Includes both men and women

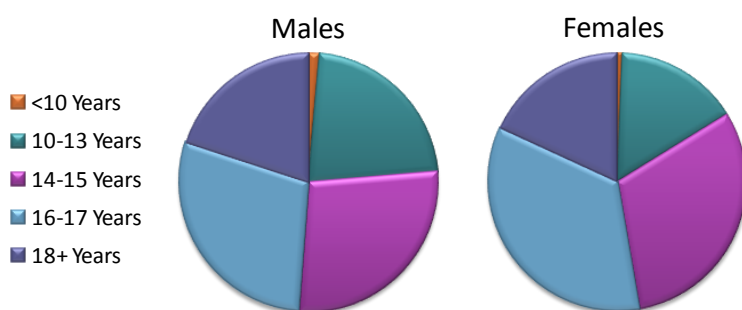
SSuN Special Focus: Age of First Sex

Sexual Initiation and Risk Behaviors

Previous research indicates that early age of sexual initiation may be associated with engagement in high risk behaviors which place individuals at increased risk of acquiring sexually transmitted infections. For example, first sex before 15 years has been associated with unprotected intercourse and multiple sex partners.¹⁻³

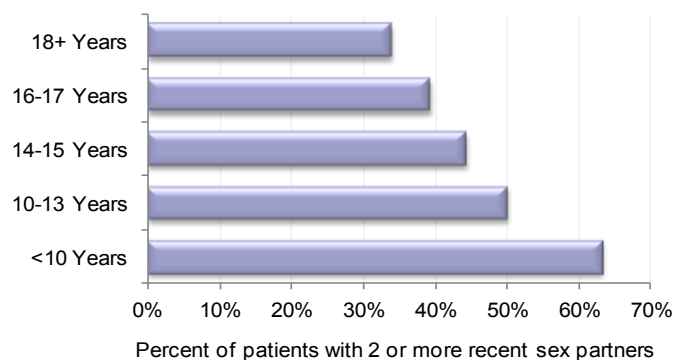
Among SSuN STD clinic patients, risk behaviors varied notably by age of sexual initiation. In general, patients who reported earlier ages of first sex were also more likely to report engagement in high-risk sexual behaviors, such as having anonymous sex, exchanging money or drugs for sex, and having multiple sex partners (Table 2). For example, condom use was more common among patients who reported first sex when 18 years or older (41%) compared to those who reported first sex between 10-13 years (34%).

Figure 1. Age of Sexual Initiation by Gender



The percent of patients who reported having 2 or more sex partners in the 3 months prior to their clinic visit was highest among patients with earlier ages of sexual initiation (Figure 2). Recent marijuana use and a history of incarceration were also more common among the population reporting early ages of sexual initiation.

Figure 2. Multiple Sex Partners by Age of First Sex



Quick Data Summary

- * The average age of first sex (either vaginal or anal) among STD clinic patients was 15.6 years.
- * Approximately one-fifth of patients reported having sex for the first time between 10-13 years of age.
- * High-risk sexual behaviors were more common among patients who reported earlier ages of first sexual intercourse.

Table 2. STD Clinic Patient Risk Behaviors by Age of Sexual Initiation, 2009-2011

Risk Behavior*	<10 Years		10-13 Years		14-15 Years		16-17 Years		18+ Years	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Used condom last sex	51	30.7	1,053	34.0	1,685	34.2	2,028	38.0	1,306	41.2
Anonymous sex [†]	24	14.5	309	10.0	386	7.8	361	6.8	221	7.0
Marijuana use [†]	70	42.2	1,184	38.3	1,574	32.0	1,351	25.3	641	20.2
Incarcerated [†]	24	14.5	350	11.3	367	7.5	276	5.2	121	3.8
Exchanged money or drugs for sex [†]	9	5.4	63	2.0	54	1.1	32	0.6	23	0.7
Number of sex partners [‡]										
0 partners	11	6.6	118	3.8	166	3.4	253	4.7	269	8.5
1 partner	44	26.5	1,378	44.5	2,505	50.9	2,911	54.6	1,776	56.0
2 partners	49	29.5	854	27.6	1,354	27.5	1,389	26.1	706	22.3
3+ partners	56	33.7	694	22.4	828	16.8	707	13.3	369	11.6

* Data is limited to patients for whom age of first sex is known (N = 3,264 excluded). Unknown/missing data categories not shown.

[†] In the previous 12 months

[‡] In the previous 3 months

Data Considerations

There are some important considerations regarding both the data collection methodology and the study population which should be kept in mind when interpreting these data.

First, there is some evidence that STD clinic patients represent a high-risk subgroup that is different from the general population, and thus we might expect to see earlier ages of sexual initiation among patients in this setting. For example, the average age of sexual debut reported by female STD clinic patients in the Richmond area was 16 years, compared to the national estimate of 17 years for girls in the United States.⁴ Therefore, these enhanced surveillance data should not be used to make generalizations outside of the local STD clinic population.

Secondly, the SSuN interview form asks patients their age the first time they had vaginal or anal sex. The interview does not capture information on other types of sexual contact, such as oral sex. It is possible that the average age of sexual initiation among all patients would drop if oral sex were considered, as several studies have indicated that oral sex may be a precursor to vaginal or anal sex.⁵ Data from the 2006-2008 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) indicate that among persons aged 15-24 who ever had oral sex, 51% had first oral sex before first vaginal intercourse.⁶

It is also possible that some groups of patients are more likely to engage in these other forms of sexual interactions. For example, men who have sex with men (MSM) may be more likely to engage in oral sex rather than anal sex at younger ages. This may explain the data presented here (see Table 1) indicating that MSM report first sexual intercourse (anal sex) at older ages than MSW. According to data from the 2006-2008 NSFG, 2.2% of males aged 15-19 years reported having oral sex with same-sex partners, while only 1.2% reported having anal sex with same-sex partners.⁶

Finally, the SSuN interview form does not capture information about whether patients' first sexual experience was consensual or not. Previous research has indicated that the nature of sexual initiation may have important links to sexual health later in life, including STDs and unintended pregnancies.⁷⁻⁸ Therefore, some of the associations noted between early age of first sex and high-risk sexual behaviors may be confounded by the impact of non-consensual or coercive first intercourse.

What is SSuN? A Quick Overview

The STD Surveillance Network (SSuN) is an enhanced surveillance project sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The purpose of SSuN is to fill critical gaps in national surveillance and improve the capacity of national, state, and local sexually transmitted disease (STD) programs.

SSuN has two main components: STD clinic surveillance and *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* (NG) population surveillance. The former involves collecting enhanced information on patients presenting to STD clinics, while the latter involves interviewing patients diagnosed with gonorrhea in the general population. The data captured as part of SSuN include information not only on STD diagnoses, but also on patient demographics, disease symptoms, treatment, and high-risk behaviors.

Twelve sites across the United States now participate in these enhanced surveillance activities, including 42 STD clinics in 115 counties. Nationally, SSuN now captures information on approximately 20% of all gonorrhea cases diagnosed annually.

In Virginia, three localities participate in the SSuN project: Richmond City, Chesterfield County, and Henrico County. Enhanced surveillance data is captured for approximately 6,000 STD clinic visits and over 1,000 cases of gonorrhea each year in Virginia.

References

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