Risk Behaviour Among High School Adolescents in the North West Province, South Africa

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Adolescent risk taking behaviours have become important policy issues in South Africa which is faced with a myriad of social and health problems in this group. HIV prevalence rates are high, adolescent rates are among the highest in the world, substance and alcohol abuse are high among teenagers and rape cases perpetuated by boys to girls in these age groups have increased. In response to these issues, a study on Risk Behaviour Among High School Youths was undertaken at the North-West University (Mafikeng Campus) under the doctoral program in the Population Studies and Demography Programme.

Study Rationale: Adolescent risky sexual behaviour is an issue that everyone needs to be concerned with, because it affects the lives of all individuals as taxpayers, parents and educators, as well as the national and provincial governments. The health and economic burdens resulting from the frequent outcomes associated with adolescent sexual behaviour is huge and it is imperative to evaluate the relevant antecedents that contribute to the context of adolescent sexual behaviour with particular reference to high school adolescents in the North West Province of South Africa. Given the risks of unprotected sexual activity during adolescence, it is equally imperative to obtain a comprehensive understanding of those factors associated with protective behaviours like sexual abstinence, as well as addressing the needs of high school adolescents in the province.
Although there has been a significant amount of research related to adolescent sexual behaviour, the bulk of the literature, tends to focus on initiation of sexual activity rather than on sexual risk-taking behaviours (Chilman, 1990; Jaccard et al, 2000; Lammers et al, 2000; Luster and Small, 1994; Metzler et al, 1994; Rodgers, 1999; Small and Kerns, 1993; Small and Luster, 1994; and Smith, 1997). The rationale for this study includes, therefore, and not restricted to, examining risk markers of adolescent sexual behaviours, including sexual intercourse, and examining the factors that contribute to such behaviours with specific reference to Grade 9 and Grade 11 high school adolescents in Ngaka Modiri Molema District of the North West Province.

**Objective:** To explore the risky behaviours (sexual activity, cigarette smoking, alcohol consumption, and marijuana smoking) among learners, and contributing factors related to such risky behaviour among learners in North West Province, South Africa. This paper presents the results of the predictors of sexual behaviour measured by three outcome variables: ever had sex, frequency of sex and number of sexual partners.

**Data:** A multi-cluster sampling was used to collect data covering 7 schools and 1065 students in Grades 9 and 11. Considering the sensitivity of the questions, need for honesty responses and the high literacy levels of the group, self-completion questionnaires were used.

**Methods of Data Analysis:** Logistic regressions models were used to model the effects of ever had sex, frequency of sex and sexual partners. For this analysis these were reduced to binary outcomes.

**Results:** Out of the 1065 respondents, 322 reported that they had ever had sex. Sexual debut is very early with the median age for girls being 16 years and boys was 15 years. Male students were three times more likely to have sex than females. Grade, marital status of parents, and parental knowledge of where their adolescent children are when they are out at night were the strongest positive predictors of the probability of learner ever having sexual intercourse. Students who had a boyfriend or girlfriend were more likely to have had sex. Age, parents’ knowledge of their children where they are when they are out at night, friends sometimes encouraging them to have sex, religion were the strongest predictor of age at first sexual intercourse.

The significant predictors of the number of sexual partners ever had by learners were school, grade, family and parent variables (parents knowing where their adolescents were when they are out at night and perceived importance of having a boyfriend/girlfriend?, do your peers sometimes tell you to go out with boys/girls?, do your friends sometimes encourage you to have sex’ and ‘friend ever indicated to you they wanted to have sex with you?), learner perception about sex-related issues (if I had sexual intercourse they would feel less lonely, one can show each other they love one another without having sex and it is right to be their ages and not to have sex) and knowledge of HIV/AIDS (aware that HIV/AIDS can be prevented?, that only abstinence or condom/contraceptive use prevents pregnancy/STDs? and having occasional sex does not need to use a condom/contraceptive?”).
Significant predictors of frequency of sexual activity among learners were peer influence (encouragement by friends to have sex) and religiosity (consulting religious beliefs regularly). Frequency of sexual activity is also significantly related to accurate knowledge about HIV and AIDS and sexual health issues.

**Conclusion**: Parental control and peer pressure have emerged as the strongest predictors of teenage sexual activities. Also, the roles of the family and religious institutions as protective factors have been established. Peer pressure emerged as the most important risk factor. One important observation is that youth who have accurate knowledge are more likely to take protective action.