

# Premarital Sexual Behavior: Examining Religious Commitment and Sexual Permissiveness

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## INTRODUCTION

Studies of college students' premarital sexual behavior are relevant in the understanding of the motivations and determinants behind sexual permissiveness. Knowing about the motivations and determinants of premarital sexual behavior may help to develop programs to educate students about the spread of STDs and how to reduce the number of college dropouts due to unwanted pregnancies for future generations.

Previous research has revealed that four out of every five college students have had sexual intercourse and one in four have had more than six different sexual partners. Only about 28% of students had not had sex in the last year and roughly two out of every ten students do not use some form of contraception. There have also been reports of around 26,518 cases of AIDS nationally within the age range of 20-24 years, which is the age of most college students (Fields, 2002). With these serious consequences of sexual permissiveness, there is much concern regarding possibilities of prevention from these consequences.

Research has included the effects of religiosity on adolescent attitudes and behavior about sex. Research shows that the importance of religious beliefs can influence attitudes and behaviors against premarital sexual intercourse. Most research shows that religiosity delays sexual behavior in adolescents (Rostosky, Regnerus, & Wright, 2003). Religiosity had a significant direct effect on delaying coital debut for both men and women but more strongly for women due to more negative emotional consequences anticipated. Most research shows that, with men and women, high levels of religiosity delays acceptance of early sexual permissiveness (Whitbeck et al., 1999).

This study is intended to examine the relationship between the individual's acceptance of sexual permissiveness and their level of religious commitment. It also explores age at first sexual intercourse and the number of sexual partners the individual had within the last month. In this study I hypothesize that individuals with greater levels of religious commitment will be less likely to accept premarital sexual permissiveness. Secondly, I hypothesize that those with greater religious commitment will report higher ages at first sexual intercourse, and finally, that individuals with greater religious commitment will indicate fewer sexual partners within the last month.

## METHOD

### Participants

A nonrandom, purposive sample of 111 participants was used for this study. The 111 participants were all non-married college students (66.7% women and 33.3% men). 5.4% reported Asian as their ethnicity, 24.3% Euro-American, 9.9% African-American, 50.5% Hispanic, and 8.1% reporting "Other" as their ethnicity. The mean age for the sample was 20.77 years of age.

### Instruments

A cross-sectional survey method design was intended to further explore the relationship between religious commitment and acceptance of sexual permissiveness. A 50-item questionnaire was administered to test the hypotheses. Participants responded to 12 demographic questions, 20 questions regarding sexual history, 15 questions regarding appropriate or inappropriate sexual behaviors, and 3 questions regarding personal religious commitment.

The independent variable for this study is religious commitment. The Saliency in Religious Commitment Scale (Roof & Perkins, 1975) was used to measure the importance of the participant's religious commitment. This is a short measure consisting of three items. The first two are multiple choice regarding importance of religious faith and what extent the participants make decisions based on their religious faith. The third is on a 4-point Likert-type scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 4=Strongly Agree). Total scores range from 3-10. High scores indicate low religious commitment and low scores indicate high religious commitment.

The dependent variables in this study are acceptance of sexual permissiveness, age at first sexual intercourse, and number of sex partners. The Premarital Sexual Permissiveness Scale (Sprecher, 1989) is designed to measure attitudes about premarital sexual behavior under different relationship conditions. Participants were asked to respond to 15 items assessing their attitudes about premarital sexual behavior using a 6-point, Likert scale (1= agree strongly to 6= disagree strongly). Sample items include "I believe that sexual intercourse is acceptable for me on a first date" and "I believe that anal intercourse is acceptable for me when I am seriously dating my partner". This is a cumulative, matrix scale where low score indicates greater acceptance of sexual permissiveness.

For the second and third dependent variables, respondents were asked to indicate age at first sexual intercourse in years as well as the number of sex partners in the last month.

### Procedure

Surveys were administered to one hundred and eleven never-married students at a small university in Southern California. Surveys were administered in residence halls, dining halls, and in regularly scheduled classes at the university. Participants were informed of the confidentiality of their participation in the survey and that all responses were voluntary. Participants completed a consent form agreeing to participate in the survey. They signed and detached the consent form from the survey. After completion of the survey, the participants were thanked for their help and some were given extra credit in their classes for participating in the survey.

## RESULTS

There were no mean significant differences in age of first sexual experience between males and females ( $t(72) = -1.92, p = .06$ ) and also no differences between males and females on the average number of sex partners ( $t(70) = .761, p > .05$ ). See Figure 1 for means.

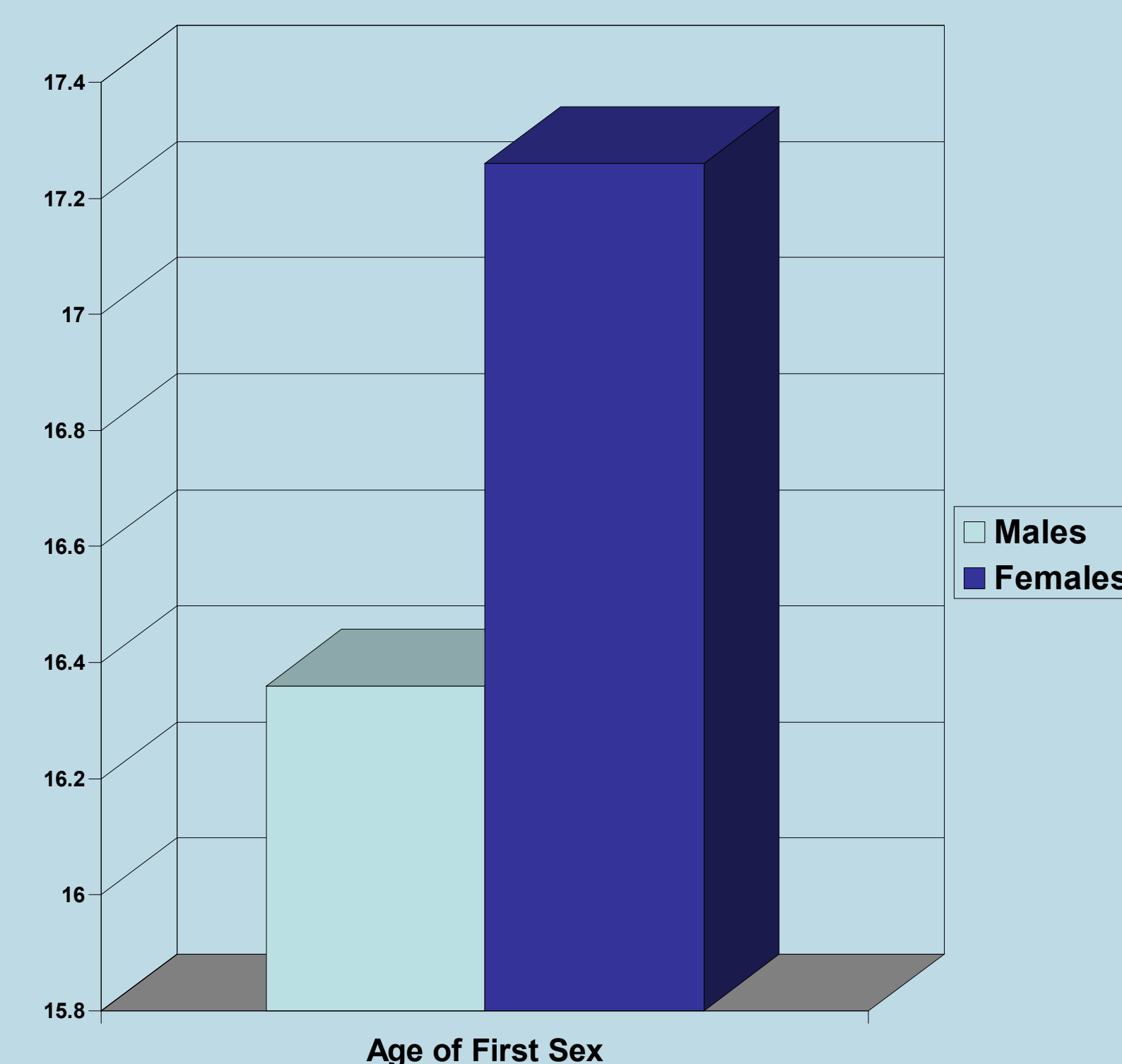


Figure 1. Gender Comparisons of Age at First Sex

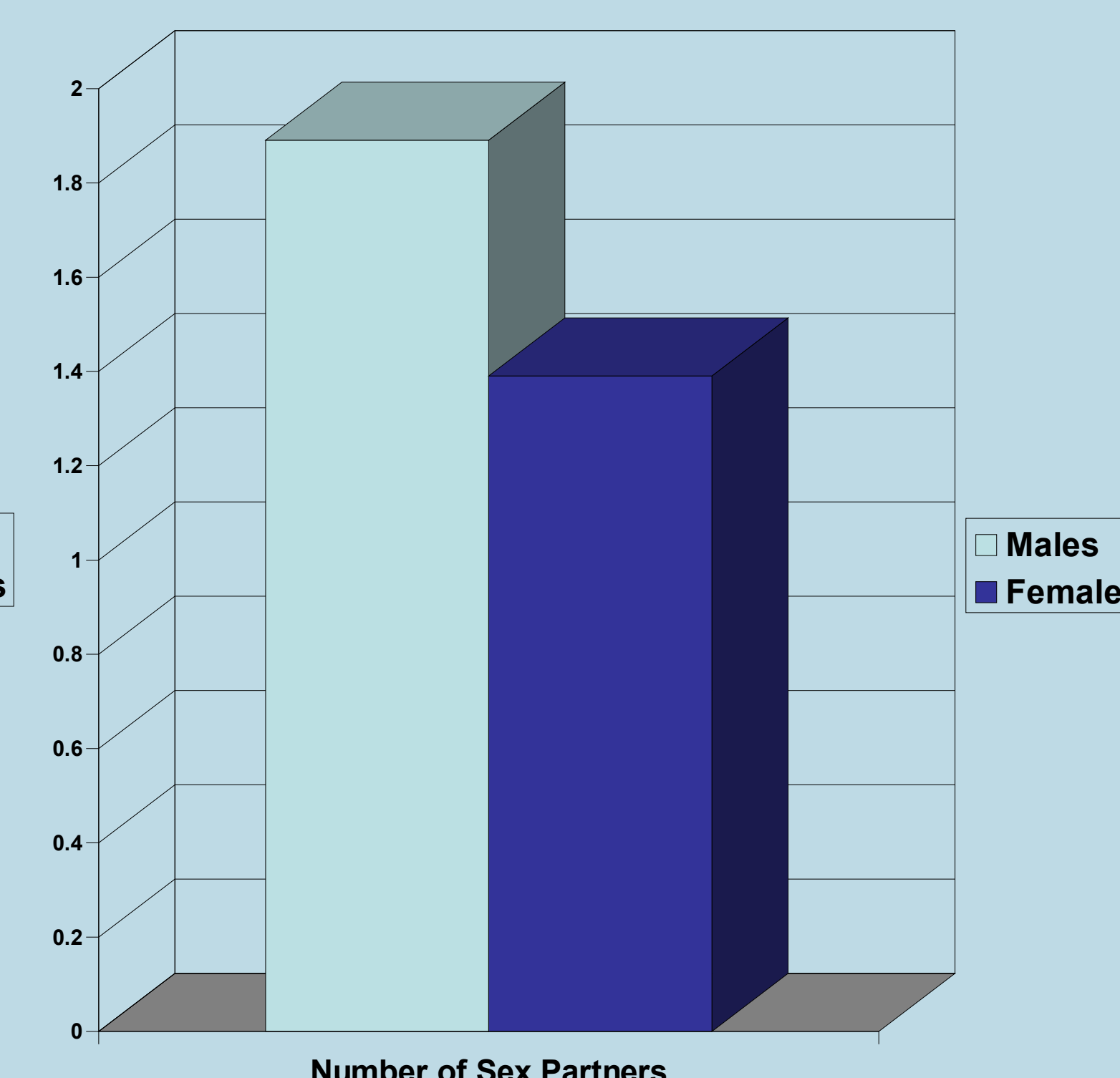


Figure 2. Gender Comparisons of Number of Sex Partners

### Hypothesis 1

Pearson  $r$  correlation was performed to examine the relationship between acceptance of sexual permissiveness and religious commitment. As hypothesized, there is a positive, moderate correlation between acceptance of sexual permissiveness ( $M = 55.76, SD = 20.61$ ) and religious commitment ( $M = 6.14, SD = 2.07$ ),  $r(107) = .30, p < .01$ . These results indicate that individuals with greater levels of religious commitment are less likely to accept premarital sexual permissiveness.

Table 1.

Correlations of religious commitment and independent variables

	Commitment
Acceptance	.30**
Age	.16
Sex Partners	-.15

$n = 111$ ; \*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$

### Hypothesis 2

The influence of religious commitment on ages at first sexual intercourse was examined with a Pearson  $r$  correlation. The Pearson  $r$  correlation indicated no significant relationship between religious commitment ( $M = 6.14, SD = 2.07$ ) and age at first sexual intercourse ( $M = 16.91, SD = 1.99$ ),  $r(71) = .16, p = .08$ . These results indicate that religious commitment is not related to age at first sexual intercourse.

### Hypothesis 3

It was hypothesized that there would be a positive relationship between religious commitment and number of sex partners in the last month. A Pearson  $r$  correlation was used to examine the relationship. The Pearson  $r$  correlation indicated no significant relationship between religious commitment ( $M = 6.14, SD = 2.07$ ) and number of sex partners ( $M = 1.58, SD = 2.74$ ),  $r(69) = -.15, p = .10$ . These results indicate that religious commitment is not related to number of sex partners.

## CONCLUSION

- The objective of this research was to further explore the relationships between religious commitment and acceptance of sexual permissiveness.
- Individuals who are more religiously committed are less likely to accept premarital sexual permissiveness.
- Individuals, regardless of their level of religious commitment, experience first sexual intercourse roughly around the same mean age (16.9). The individual's current religious commitment showed no significant influence on the age of first sexual intercourse.
- The level of religious commitment did not have significant influence on the number of sex partners. The majority of individuals reported around the same number (1.58) of sex partners.
- The majority of college students had engaged in sexual intercourse.
- Only 28.8% of the participants reported that they had never engaged in sexual intercourse. Out of those 71.2% who had sex, 58.6% reported having unprotected sex.
- The majority of college students are not only sexually active, but they are also placing themselves at risk for STDs, and possibly for an early unwanted pregnancy.

Some limitations of this study were that the Saliency in Religious Commitment Scale was missing one possible multiple choice option to answer a question in the survey. This made the total religious commitment score range from 3-10 instead of the range score of 3-11 from the original scale. Another implication about the Saliency in Religious Commitment Scale was that the scale measured the individuals present commitment instead of the commitment at the time of the individuals first sexual intercourse. It may be possible that religious commitment changes over time and this might be why no correlation was found between religious commitment and age at first sexual intercourse. The majority of participants also reported Christianity as their religion (75.7%) and this may have prevented the sample from being generalized to the larger society.

Suggestions for future research includes examining religious commitment of the participant at the time of the individual's first sexual intercourse as well as the present commitment. It is also suggested to examine family and peer influence on sexual permissiveness. And finally, it would be helpful to explore the incongruence found between sexual attitudes and sexual behaviors, and the possible feelings of guilt due to the incongruence.