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The effect of family structure on the sexual behaviour choices of female adolescents in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The sexual behavioural choices made by adolescents are a salient issue in South Africa. The practice of risky sexual behaviour puts one at risk of unwanted pregnancy, STI and HIV infection. These behaviours affect one not only physically but mentally as well. Adolescence is a "turbulent" time in ones life and risky sexual behaviour makes this period all the more difficult and could result in disastrous consequences. This is due to the fact that sexual health and sexual practices of adolescents has implications for morbidity and mortality rates in South Africa.

In order to address the issue of risky sexual behavioural choices made by adolescents, this study has examined the effect of family characteristics on adolescent sexual behavioural choices. The 1998 South African Demographic and Health Survey data was used. The data set was a nationally representative data set with a probability sample of 12000 women aged 15-49 taking part in it. Analysis for this study was based on 2373 female adolescent respondents aged 15-19. The association between individual and family background characteristics and risky sexual behavioural choices was examined. Crucial variables were extracted and fitted to logistic regression models.

The study found that 47% of the female adolescents were sexually active. Of these, only 15% used a condom at the last sexual encounter despite the fact that 78% had a high degree of knowledge concerning HIV and condom use. South African adolescents are thus engaging in risky sexual behaviour.

The family household structures in which adolescents reside was found to be associated with risky sexual behavioural choices. Sexual activity is strongly associated with socio-economic status of the family. Condom use and HIV & contraceptive (condom) knowledge was found to be less strongly associated with the socio-economic (financial) status of the family but rather the social processes and relationships within the family are speculated to have a greater effect. The need for a more in-depth analysis with reference to family processes and relationships is recommended in order to properly understand the familial effect on sexual behavioural choices.

The findings from this study have implications for reproductive health and reproductive rights policies. Appropriate national strategies are needed to reduce risky sexual practices and thus ensure lower morbidity and mortality among South African youth.