

Sexual Debut among Latino Teens:
A Comparison of Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans, and Puerto Ricans

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Introduction

Though sexuality is a cultural universal, it is constituted differently within diverse socio-cultural contexts. The timing of first intercourse is one form of sexuality shaped by the social and cultural environment. Cultural norms, values, and opportunity structures dictate the appropriate circumstances for sexual debut (Brewster, Billy, and Grady 1993; Lammers et al. 2000; Upchurch et al. 1999; Upchurch et al. 2001).

Most commonly, studies of adolescent sexual behavior in the United States make comparisons by race/ethnic group, usually including some combination of whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians. The assumption of these studies is that the proper level of distinction is a rather broad one. This may be a reasonable assumption, given similarities of culture, history, and racial experience that the groups under consideration may share. However, it is also possible that these expansive race/ethnic categories obfuscate important intraethnic differences. For instance, grouping Chinese and Filipino youth into the same category may conceal important differences in sexual behaviors, as Grunbaum and associates (2000) have found.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the applicability of the panethnic label “Hispanic” to describe the adolescent sexual behaviors of the three largest Hispanic subgroups in the United States, which are Mexicans (66.9% of Hispanics), Puerto Ricans (8.6%), and Cubans (3.7%) (Ramirez and de la Cruz 2003). Disaggregation by Hispanic subgroup is especially needed, given the lack of literature on Latino adolescent sexual behaviors by national origin (Asencio 2002; Day 1992; Driscoll et al. 2001).

Group Similarities

Many studies purport that Hispanics value Roman Catholicism, familialism, and traditional gender roles (Driscoll et al. 2001; Faulkner 2003; Jimenez, Potts, and Jimenez 2002;

Medina 1987; Raffaelli and Ontai 2001; Upchurch et al. 2001; Villarruel 1998; Villarruel and Rodriguez 2003). With respect to sexuality, Roman Catholicism prescribes monogamy and abstinence until marriage, and proscribes birth control. Familialism, understood as the importance of the family over the individual, is expected to delay the initiation of sexual activity for teens (Driscoll et al. 2001; Upchurch et al. 2001; Villarruel 1998; Westhoff, McDermott, and Holcomb 1996). Gender roles dictate sexual scripts (Simon and Gagnon 1987) with respect to appropriate sexual norms and values (Espín 1997; Faulkner 2003; Hurtado 2003; Upchurch et al. 2001; Villarruel and Rodriguez 2003), such as “what happens when, where, how, why, and by whom” (Faulkner 2003: 179). For Hispanic men, gender roles prescribe machismo, which is imbued with traditional attitudes about masculinity and patriarchy. In contrast, the gender role for Hispanic women, marianismo, is modeled on Catholicism’s Virgin Mary, “who was a virgin and a mother, but never a sexual being” (Espín 1997: 88). Women are expected to be virgins until marriage, modest, monogamous, and deferential to men, even in their sexuality.

Group Differences

Although many scholars purport these values of shared religiosity and traditional gender roles to be “Hispanic”, there is some evidence of significant variation in adherence to them. As Asencio (2002) points out, a significant percentage of Latinos are Protestants, and many Latinos also practice Santería and Espiritismo, either alone or in combination with a mainstream religion. Thus, the degree of Catholicism’s influence on sexuality is not uniform among all Hispanics. Even for those who do share the Catholic religion, sexual behaviors are not always tied to religious imperatives (Asencio 2002).

There are diverse gender role attitudes among Latinos, particularly among different generations, social classes, regions, and ethnic groups (Asencio 2002; Espín 1997). Sexual

scripts are also reported to change with the level of acculturation (Driscoll et al. 2001; Faulkner 2003). For example, many studies demonstrate a significant difference in sexual behaviors among Hispanic teenagers based on nativity and/or acculturation: US-born adolescents are usually more likely than their foreign-born peers to have ever had sexual intercourse and are younger at sexual debut (Aneshensel et al. 1990; Brindis et al. 1995, Ebin et al. 2001, Ford and Norris 1993, Kaplan, Erickson, and Juarez-Reyes 2002, Minnis and Padian 2001, Spence 2003).

Moreover, the panethnic designation glosses over differences in socio-demographic characteristics, cultures, and histories, among other things. Although Hispanics undoubtedly share some similarities, these broad categories gloss over intraethnic heterogeneity. The three groups under study have distinct racial features, disparate socioeconomic positions, and unique family structures. Each of these interrelated factors has certainly influenced their incorporation into American society (Bonilla-Silva and Glover 2004). In addition, these factors are significantly related to adolescent sexual activity, rendering these differences critical in an evaluation of the efficacy of the panethnic designation when speaking of sexual debut.

While Hispanics may be of any race, the three groups generally differ in skin tone. Most Mexicans are mestizos, a physical type combining European and Indian traits (Marger 2003). Though approximately half self-identify as white, and many appear as such, “most Mexican Americans are physically distinct enough to be perceived by many Anglos in racial terms” (Marger 2003: 315; Saenz 2004). Puerto Ricans have the darkest skin tone of the three groups, resulting from European and African ancestry. Of the three groups, Puerto Ricans are most likely to identify as black (Asencio 2002; Marger 2003; Rosenfeld 2001; Saenz 2004). Cubans are the whitest and least racially heterogeneous of the Hispanic groups (Marger 2003; Rosenfeld 2001). Approximately 85 percent of Cuban Americans self-identify as white (Saenz 2004).

The three groups hold differential socioeconomic positions in the United States. Of all Latino origin groups, Puerto Ricans fare the worst in terms of unemployment, poverty, and education (Asencio 2002; Driscoll et al. 2001). Cubans are the most integrated of the Hispanic subgroups, and they are relatively wealthy and highly educated (Bonilla-Silva and Glover 2004; Driscoll et al. 2001; Qian and Cobas 2004; Saenz 2004). Their privileged position likely results from the fact that early immigrants were political (not economic) refugees, their strong family and kin migrant networks, their ethnic enclave economy, and their light skin tone (Marger 2003).

With regards to family arrangements, Mexican-Americans and Cuban-Americans are the most likely of Hispanic subgroups to be married (53.4% and 55.3% of people age 15 and older in 2000, respectively), while Puerto Ricans are the least likely to be married (42.3%) (Ramirez 2004). The prevalence of female-headed households is highest among Puerto Ricans (37.0% of families in 2000), and lowest among Cubans (15.9%), with Mexicans close to the rates for Cubans (17.5%). Not surprisingly, then, the percentage of children under age 18 living with two parents is highest among Cubans (67.3%) and Mexicans (65.8%), and lowest among Puerto Ricans (43.7%) (Saenz 2004).

Importantly, differences in adolescent sexual activity have been attributed to race, family structure, and socioeconomic status, among other factors. Regarding race, black Americans have sex at an earlier age than white Americans. Thus, Latino groups that are phenotypically black can be expected to have sex earlier than those Latino groups that are phenotypically white. Family structure influences sexual behavior: adolescents who live with both natural parents are significantly less likely to have sexual intercourse than those who live in other family structures. Finally, socioeconomic status is correlated positively with age at sexual debut; the higher the family's socioeconomic status, the older the teen is at first sexual experience. Thus, these

structural differences in race, family structure, and socioeconomic status necessitate caution when making claims about “Hispanics” as a uniform group.

Data and Methods

We use data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), a nationally representative study of over 20,000 adolescents in grades 7 through 12 in the United States in 1995; as such, it is the most comprehensive survey of adolescents ever undertaken in this country. The survey has substantial numbers of Cuban, Mexican, and Puerto Rican teens.

Risk of first intercourse, the dependent variable, is measured dichotomously as whether the adolescent had sexual intercourse before marriage and is defined in annual intervals from age 11 through 20. The sample is used to construct an event history file in which each individual contributed one record for each year they were at risk of first intercourse.

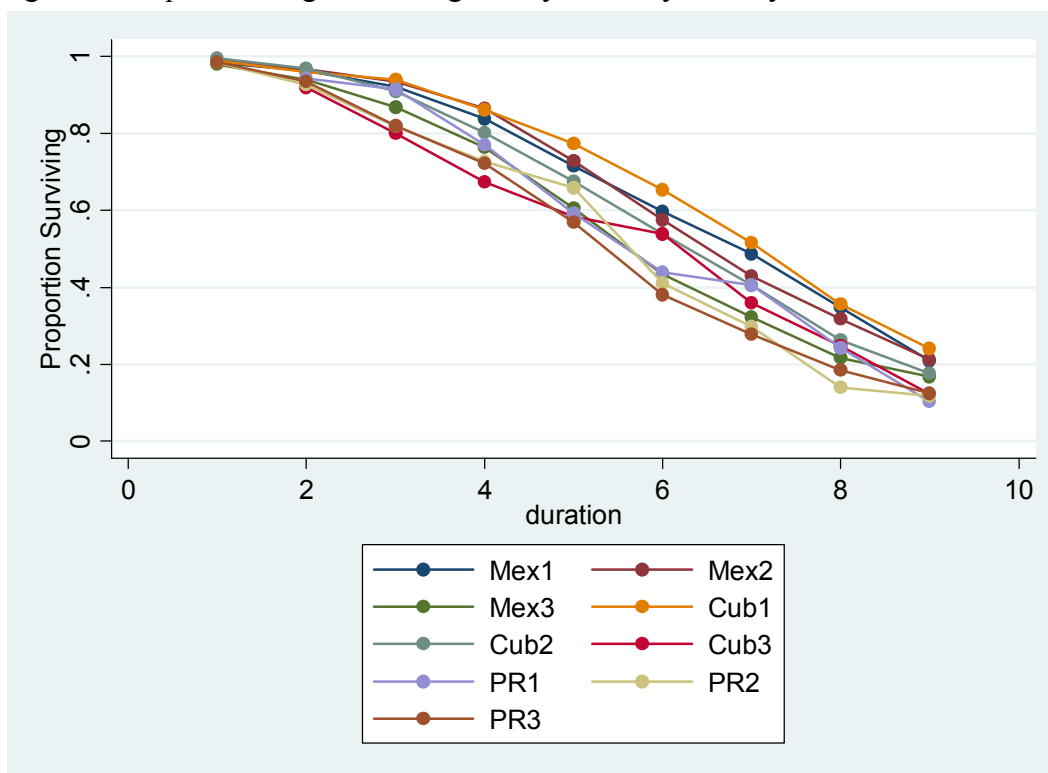
The key independent variable is country of origin and generational status (in the case of Puerto Ricans, whether the respondent and his/her parents are island- or mainland-born). Nativity/generational status is crucial because US-born adolescents are usually more likely than their foreign-born peers to have had sexual intercourse and are younger at sexual debut (Aneshensel et al. 1990; Brindis et al. 1995, Ebin et al. 2001, Ford and Norris 1993, Kaplan, Erickson, and Juarez-Reyes 2002, Minnis and Padian 2001, Spence 2003). With time spent in the US, the sexual behaviors of immigrants are expected to increasingly approximate the rates of sexual behavior of mainstream American society. Since second generation youth are more assimilated into American society, age at first sex is expected to be lower than for the first generation youth. Likewise, second generation adolescents should demonstrate a higher age at first sex compared to third-plus generations. Multivariate analyses control for characteristics that have been found to be significant correlates of sexual behavior among teenagers: gender, race,

household parental figures, parental education (to proxy for socioeconomic status), religious affiliation, religiosity, and urbanicity.

Findings

Survival rates for the transition to first sex by ethnicity/generation are presented below.

Figure 1. Proportion virgins from age 11 by ethnicity/nativity.



Virtually none of the sample has had sex by their 12th birthday (97-100%). However, the transition to sexual intercourse varies by group after this. By age 13, three or four percent of first and second generation Mexican-Americans and Cuban-Americans have had sex, compared to six to eight percent in the other ethnic/generation groups.

By age 15, the rates of virginity are highest among first and second generation Mexican-Americans and first-generation Cuban-Americans (84%, 86%, and 86%, respectively). The lowest rates of virginity at this age are among the third-plus generation Cubans and mainland-born Puerto Ricans (67%, 72-73%, respectively)

At the 17th birthday, the group disparities in virginity are more evident. First generation Cuban-Americans are least likely to have had sex (35%), followed by first-generation Mexican-Americans (40%), second generation Mexican-Americans (42%), second and third-plus generation Cuban-Americans (46%), island-born Puerto Ricans (56%), third-plus generation Mexican Americans (57%), mainland-born Puerto Ricans of island-born parents (59%), and mainland-born Puerto Ricans of mainland-born parents (62%).

By age 18, over half of all teens in the sample have had sex, although the percent having had sex is lowest among first generation Cuban-Americans (at 48%) and highest among mainland-born Puerto Ricans of mainland-born parents (at 72%).

By their 20th birthday, the percentage of respondents remaining virgins ranges from a low of 10% among island-born Puerto Ricans to a high of 24% among first generation Cubans.

In sum, Cuban-Americans transition to first sex at the latest ages, followed by Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans. We also find a generational pattern, where each subsequent generation experiences first sex at an earlier age. To illustrate, the age by which half have had premarital sex is age 19 for first generation Cubans, but it is one year earlier for later generations of Cuban-Americans. Half of first and second generation Mexican-Americans have had first sex by age 18, while it is age 17 for the third-plus generation. Puerto Ricans' generational pattern is somewhat less prominent; in all three groups, half have experienced first sex by age 17. Results from the log-rank (chi-square, 8df = 62.47; $p < 0.0001$) and the Wilcoxon tests (chi-square, 8df = 73.58; $p < 0.0001$) are significant, demonstrating the difference in timing of the transition to first sex between the groups.

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