

TUNE IN

New Mexico Attitudes on Sex Education

Key findings from a statewide survey of 1,200 New Mexican adults on sexuality education for youth. The October, 2000 survey was commissioned by the New Mexico Teen Pregnancy Coalition and conducted by Research and Polling, Inc.

This project was made possible by:
New Mexico Department of Health/Family Planning Program,
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Introduction

The New Mexico Teen Pregnancy Coalition (NMTPC) is the statewide non-profit organization committed to reducing teen pregnancy and the negative consequences of teen pregnancy and teen parenting. Although teen pregnancy is on the decline, it is still a serious problem that significantly diminishes the life opportunities of teen parents and their children and often impacts the entire family and community. Currently, New Mexico's teen birth rate is the fifth highest in the Nation. According to NM Department of Health Vital Statistics Bureau, girls under age 20 gave birth to 4,984 babies in 1998, or 13 births per day.

In the NMTPC 2000-2003 Plan of Work, our 17-member Board of Directors recommended that we provide technical assistance and support to communities in the area of teen pregnancy prevention and parenting. To proceed in a planned and comprehensive manner, the decision was made to conduct a survey of adult attitudes toward sexuality education as a teen pregnancy prevention initiative.

The results of this survey will allow New Mexico to move forward with accurate, objective, and professional documentation about what New Mexico families want and need regarding sexuality education. We believe that this information will support a strong, positive and credible agenda to reduce teen pregnancy in New Mexico.

About the Survey

Research & Polling, Inc., of Albuquerque, New Mexico conducted the survey in October of 2000. They conducted 1,200 telephone interviews using a random sample of New Mexico residents age 18 and over. The professional interviewers were trained prior to initiating the survey to ensure a complete understanding of the questions.

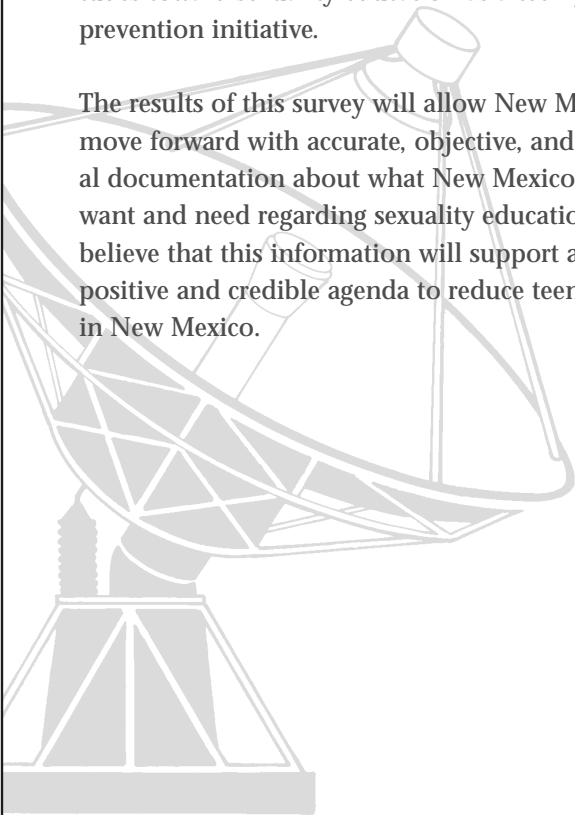
Prior to this survey, a three-tier system was devised whereby each county was ranked as having either a high, moderate, or low teen birth rate (based on 1998 data from the NM Department of Health, Vital Statistics Bureau). For each tier, 400 surveys were conducted and then weighted to their actual proportion of the statewide population so that statewide results could be accurately reported. This allowed us to look at how community attitudes might vary among residents living in different tier designations. The demographics recorded for this survey were: gender, age, ethnicity, level of household income, educational level, party affiliation, political philosophy, parental status, religion, and zip code. This information enabled us to differentiate between the views of different groups of people in our State. A survey of 1,200 residents has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.8%.

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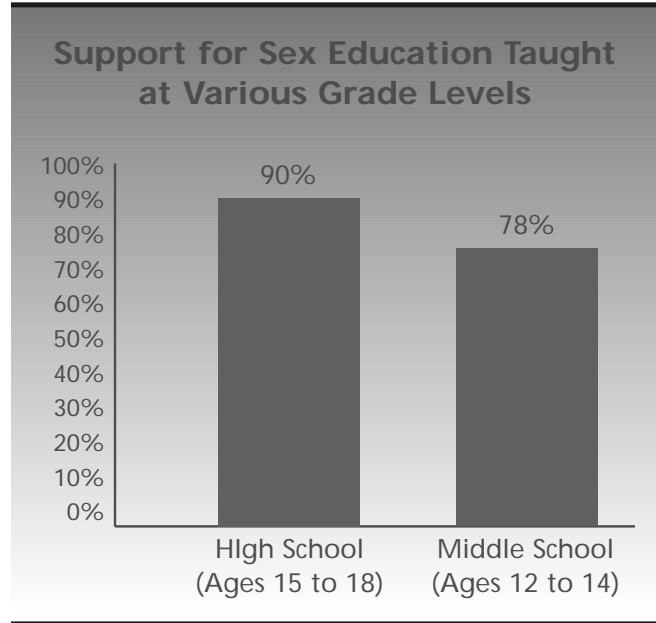
PREVENTION • PARENTING



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- New Mexicans identified teen pregnancy as one of the biggest problems facing our youth, just behind drugs, poor quality of education, and lack of parental involvement. It is notable that experts in the field of teen pregnancy have identified substance abuse and lack of connection to family and school as closely related to high teen pregnancy rates.
- 80% of New Mexican adults agree that “schools need to supplement what parents teach at home so kids have full information about contraception, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV and AIDS.”
- 90% support sex education for high school students, and 78% support sex education at the middle school level.
- When respondents were asked what grade they feel it is appropriate to teach specific topics in schools, 87-88% indicated the desire to have puberty, abstinence, sexually transmitted diseases, and HIV/AIDS taught in the 7th/8th grade.



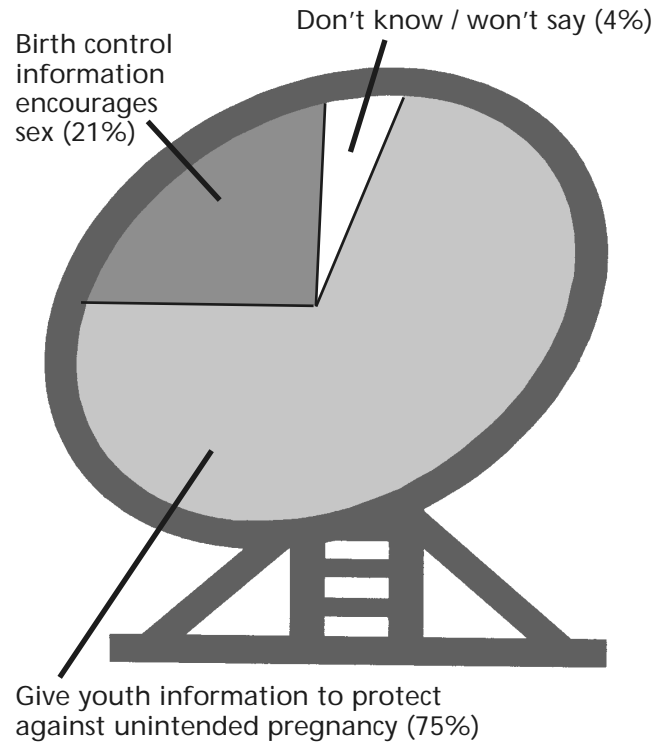
Teaching about condoms at the 7th/8th grade-level was supported by 64%, while 21% feel this should wait until the 9th/10th grade, and 8% thought it should not be taught at all. Teaching about oral contraception and birth control in the 7th/8th grade was felt to be appropriate by 63%, with 24% preferring to wait until 9th/10th grade and 7% thought it should not be taught at all.

Although the topics of sexual orientation and abortion received more responses in the “don’t teach at all” category, 81% wanted the topic of sexual orientation covered by the end of high school and 75% supported including the topic of abortion by that time.

	Appropriate Grade Level to Teach About Subject		
	7th/8th	9th/10th	Don't Teach At All
Puberty	88%	5%	5%
Abstinence	88%	6%	3%
HIV & AIDS	88%	7%	2%
Sexually transmitted diseases	87%	9%	2%
Condoms	64%	21%	8%
Oral contraceptives and birth control	63%	24%	7%
Sexual orientation	55%	21%	16%
Abortion	46%	21%	21%

Scores don't add to 100% since some people indicated the subject should be taught after 10th grade and others had no opinion.

Personal Opinion About Young People Receiving Birth Control Information



- 75% of New Mexicans agree that “whether or not young people are sexually active, they should be given information to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy”, while 21% believe that “telling young people about birth control only encourages them to have sex.”
 - ◆ The majority view was more likely to be expressed by parents of school age children (80%), Catholics (80%), Native Americans (87%) and residents of counties with the lowest teen birth rates (80%).
 - ◆ The majority view was less likely to be supported by Protestants (69%), residents of counties with the highest teen birth rates (68%), and the south/southwest region of NM (69%).
- 70% agree that “young people are going to explore their sexuality as a natural part of growing up and the best approach is to provide information and services to help them act responsibly.” Just 25% feel “it is wrong for young people to be exploring their sexuality and the best approach is to expect abstinence until marriage.”
 - ◆ The majority view was more likely to be expressed by Catholics (75%) and Hispanics (74%).
 - ◆ Less support for the majority view was expressed by Protestants (62%), and the northwest and south/southwest regions of NM (66% and 65%).

- 80% agree that “sex education programs should focus on how to avoid unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV and AIDS, since they are such pressing problems in America today.”
- 55% disagree that “giving young people information about contraception in schools sends a mixed message and encourages young people to have intercourse”, while 32% believe that it does, and 10% say that it depends.
 - ◆ The majority view is more likely to be supported by Native Americans (74%) and counties with the lowest teen birth rates (60%).
 - ◆ Less support for the majority view was expressed by Protestants (38%) and counties with the highest teen birth rates (38%).

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- Despite the strong support for sex education that includes information on contraception, New Mexicans strongly support abstinence as an important part of this education. Just under half of all respondents (48%) agreed that it is realistic to teach abstinence and 46% agreed that “the best approach to protect the morals of young people at this critical time in their lives is to teach abstinence-only-until-marriage.”

- ◆ Protestants are much more likely to support the teaching of abstinence, as are residents of the south/southwest and eastside of the State and counties with the highest teen birth rates.

- 72% think that “school nurses and school counselors should refer young people to clinics that treat and prevent sexually transmitted diseases” (39% feel this should be done in the 7th grade or earlier).

- 65% think that “school nurses and counselors should refer sexually active young people to family planning clinics” (32% feel this should be done in the 7th grade or earlier).

- 46% think “school nurses and counselors should make condoms and other forms of birth control available to sexually active young people,” while 49% believe that school nurses and counselors should not make condoms and birth control available. Parents of school age children split 49% to 49% on this question. Hispanics and native Americans are more likely to show support for this service, 55% and 61% respectively.

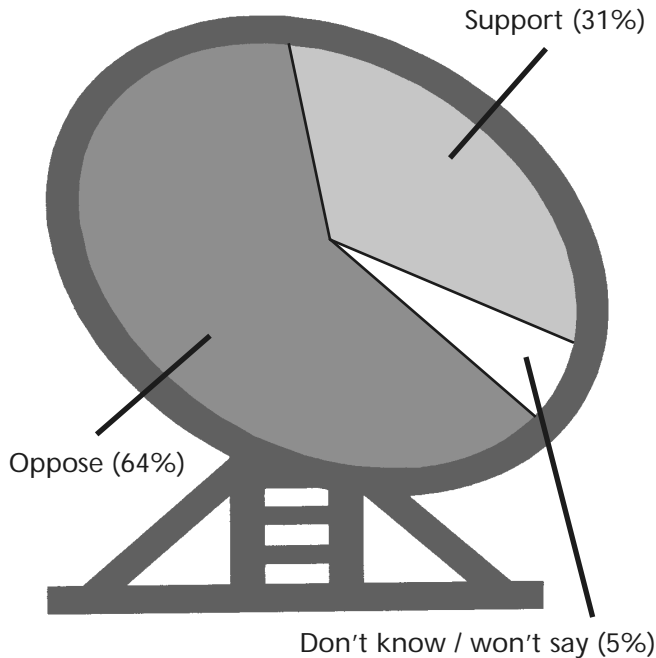
- Adults also have mixed views about when sexual intercourse is appropriate. When asked which statement is closest to your own point of view:

38% of New Mexicans said, “Intercourse should only occur in marriage”

34% said, “Intercourse should be reserved for a committed, monogamous relationship, whether or not people are married”

25% said “Intercourse is acceptable among consenting adults even if they are not involved in a committed relationship”

Support for Using Tax Dollars for Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Sex Education That Excludes Contraceptive Information



- 64% of New Mexicans oppose using tax dollars for abstinence-only-until-marriage sex education that does not include contraceptive information, while 31% do support this approach.

New Mexicans who are more likely to oppose using tax dollars to support abstinence-only education that does not include contraception are:

- ◆ parents of school age children (70%)
- ◆ Native Americans (77%)

The highest level of support for using tax dollars for abstinence-only-until-marriage sex education that does not include contraceptive information was among:

- ◆ strong Republicans (45%)
- ◆ conservatives (41%)

No group or region expressed more than 45% support for this policy.

Trends Among Demographic Subgroups

Parents of school age children are among the strongest supporters of sex education that includes contraceptive information. The vast majority of parents want the education to begin by mid school and to include all of the mentioned topics. They are also more likely to oppose the use of tax dollars for programs teaching abstinence without contraceptive information. Older parents with grown children show the least support for sex education.

Hispanics and Native Americans show higher levels of support for sex education in middle school than Anglos (80%, 87%, 76% respectively); although all groups show strong support. Residents under the age of 35 express the strongest support for sex education that includes contraception; that support declines substantially after age 50. Also, as a person's level of education increases, so does their support for sex education that includes contraception.

Self-identified strong Democrats and Independents are the most supportive of sex education that includes contraceptive information, while strong Republicans and conservatives are least receptive. Those identifying themselves as not-so-strong Democrats or not-so-strong Republicans are both very supportive of sex education that includes contraceptive information. Not-so-strong Republicans indicate views closer to strong Democrats than to strong Republicans. Respondents who self identify as being philosophically liberal are much more likely to support various aspects of sex education than are self-identified conservatives.

Catholics are more receptive to sex education that includes contraception than are Protestants. Protestants show support for high school level sex education and are also much more in favor of expecting abstinence.

Comparing Counties with Highest/Lowest Teen Birth Rates

Based on data from the New Mexico Department of Health, all counties were ranked to have either high, medium or low teen birth rates. This allows for analyzing and comparing attitudes across the three tiers.

*Counties with the **highest** teen birth rates are **more likely** to:*

- Believe that the best approach to protect the morals of young people is to teach abstinence-only until marriage (57%). The statewide level of support for this statement was 46%; and the counties with the lowest teen birth rate expressed only 40% support.
- Believe that teaching about birth control encourages sex, and to oppose education on AIDS, STDs, birth control, and condoms. When they do support such education, it is at a later grade.
- Believe that sexual intercourse should only occur in marriage (48%), while 37% share this view in low teen birth rate counties.

*Residents in the **lowest** teen birth rates counties are **more likely** to:*

- Support sex education that includes contraceptive information (and to start teaching the subject earlier) than are resident of areas with the highest teen birth rates.
- Believe that, “Whether or not young people are sexually active, they should be given information to protect themselves from unwanted pregnancy.” Their 80% support compares to only 68% of those living in areas with the highest teen birth rates. However, it is important to note that the majority of adults residing in areas with the highest teen birth rates still do support sex education that includes contraception.
- Believe that school nurses and counselors should make condoms and other forms of birth control available to sexuality active young people.

Counties with moderate teen birth rates tend to fall in between these two groups when it comes to their attitudes regarding sex education.

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Summary

New Mexicans overwhelmingly support sex education that includes information about contraception. Encouraging abstinence is seen as a very important component of this education. New Mexican's don't accept having to choose between an educational approach that focuses exclusively on abstinence or one that includes contraception and protection. They clearly believe that both are necessary.

A large majority of adults believe that sex education should begin in the 7th/8th grade and should include the topics of puberty, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, abstinence, condoms, and birth control.

Sixty-four percent (64%) of respondents oppose the spending of tax dollars for teaching about abstinence without also teaching about contraception.

New Mexicans are divided about whether school nurses or counselors should make condoms and other forms of birth control available for sexually active young people (46% support, 49% oppose). Whereas, 65% of respondents said that school nurses and counselors should refer sexually active young people to family planning clinics or clinics that treat and prevent sexually transmitted diseases.

Conclusion

New Mexicans prefer an inclusive approach that encourages abstinence among school-age youth and still provides the information that they perceive as necessary to protect young people from pregnancy and disease.

We recognize that some responses to our survey appear to be contradictory. A clear majority of people express a strong preference for the inclusion of contraceptive information and don't believe that providing this information will encourage teens to have sex (including those who self identifying as conservatives). It is also true that nearly half of respondents feel that teaching abstinence until marriage is the best approach to protect the morals of young people.

Researchers note that it's not unusual for people to answer difficult questions with seemingly contradictory responses. One interpretation is that adults attempt to walk a fine line or take a balanced approach. Perhaps there is an attempt to balance real life with a perfect world – the pragmatic with the ideal. Parents have high aspirations for their children, even while they struggle with the realities of modern life. The reader will have to make their own judgment, but clearly it would be inaccurate to not represent both of these somewhat inconsistent responses.

Reducing teen pregnancy will strengthen New Mexico's families, communities, and economy. Therefore, the New Mexico Teen Pregnancy Coalition urges schools, community groups, youth-serving organizations, religious institutions and governmental entities to take action based on the insights from this statewide survey.