



News Release
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RAND STUDY FINDS ADOLESCENTS WHO LISTEN TO A GREAT DEAL OF MUSIC WITH DEGRADING SEXUAL LYRICS HAVE SEX SOONER

A RAND Corporation study issued today presents the strongest evidence yet that sexually degrading lyrics in music encourage adolescents to more quickly initiate sexual intercourse and other sexual activities.

The study found that the more time adolescents spend listening to music with sexually degrading lyrics, the more likely they are to initiate intercourse and other sexual activities. This holds true for boys and girls as well as for whites and nonwhites, even after accounting for a wide range of other personal and social factors associated with adolescent sexual behavior.

Researchers found that only sexually degrading lyrics – many quite graphic and containing numerous obscenities – are related to changes in adolescents' sexual behavior. These lyrics depict men as sexually insatiable, women as sexual objects, and sexual intercourse as inconsequential. Other songs about sex do not appear to influence youth the same way.

"These portrayals objectify and degrade women in ways that are clear, but they do the same to men by depicting them as sex-driven studs," said Steven Martino, a RAND psychologist who led the study. "Musicians who use this type of sexual imagery are communicating something very specific about what sexual roles are appropriate, and teen listeners may act on these messages."

The study, titled "Exposure to Degrading Versus Non-Degrading Music Lyrics and Sexual Behavior among Youth," is published in the August issue of the journal [Pediatrics](#).

With funding from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, RAND researchers surveyed 1,461 adolescents ages 12 to 17 from across the nation in 2001, asking them about their sexual behavior and how often they listened to music by various artists. The participants were followed up one and three years later.

Adolescents typically listen to 1.5 to 2.5 hours of music per day, which does not include the amount of time they are exposed to music through music videos. Studies show that about 40 percent of popular songs contain references to romance, sexual relationships, and sexual behavior. One earlier study suggested a link between adolescents' exposure to sexual content in music and their sexual behavior, but that earlier effort had several shortcomings, according to RAND researchers.

In the RAND study, information about listening habits was combined with the results of a scientific analysis of lyrics' sexual content to determine the frequency and type of sexual content the adolescents were exposed to during the time they spent listening to music.

Researchers found that adolescents who listened to a lot of music containing objectifying and limiting characterizations of sexuality progressed more quickly in their sexual behavior than did adolescents who listened to less of this kind of music.

Because teenagers have more unplanned pregnancies and are more likely to contract sexually transmitted diseases, increasing rates of sexual activity among this population has serious public health implications. Federal statistics show that about 750,000 teens around the country become pregnant each year, and an estimated 4 million contract sexually transmitted diseases.

In addition, exposure to sexually degrading music may also have worrisome implications for what boys and girls come to expect from their future relationships.

"It may be that girls who are repeatedly exposed to these messages expect to take a submissive role in their sexual relationships and to be treated with disrespect by their partners," Martino said. "These expectations may then have lasting effects on their relationship choices. Boys, on the other hand, may come to interpret reckless male sexual behavior as 'boys being boys' and dismiss their partners' feelings and welfare as unimportant."

The study recommends that parents set limits on what music their children can purchase and listen to and be careful not to listen to sexually degrading music when their children are around.

"Talking with their children about music's sexual content can also give parents a chance to express their own views about sex, and may prompt teens to think more deeply about the ways in which sex is portrayed – and perhaps distorted – in the music they listen to," Martino said.

Other authors on the study include Rebecca Collins, Marc Elliott, David Kanouse, and Sandra Berry of RAND, and Amy Strachman of UCLA.

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