ADOLESCENT BEHAVIORS: Facts and Figures

In Latin America and the Caribbean countries, young people between the ages of 10 and 24 make up 30% of the population, with adolescents aged 10–19 representing 20% of the population and 80% of them living in urban areas.

Low parental monitoring has been directly related to increased adolescent risk behavior including cigarette, alcohol, and substance use; sexual involvement and intercourse; unsafe sex practices; teen pregnancy; sexually transmitted infections; and violent and delinquent behaviors.

SEXUAL ACTIVITY
- Approximately one-half of all adolescents in the Region under the age of 17 are sexually active.
- Adolescent boys in certain Caribbean countries initiate sexual activity as early as 10–12 years of age, and by age 15, 90% have had sex.
- Data from Guatemala indicate that although 69% of adolescents between the age of 15 and 19 report knowledge of at least one family planning method, only 4% of sexually active adolescents report using one regularly.
- Surveys in the Caribbean suggest that 40% of girls and 50% of boys had no access to contraceptives during their first sexual intercourse.
- Around half of all new HIV infections are in individuals aged 15–24, the range during which most people start their sexual lives.
- Evidence shows that education on sexual health and/or HIV does not encourage increased sexual activity among adolescents.
- Although identity is being constructed constantly throughout the course of life, early adolescence is a key period of identity formation in terms of the teen’s future sexual and intimate relationships and his or her role in society.

VIOLENCE
- The leading causes of death among those ages 10–19 years are external and include violence and homicide. Twenty-nine percent of all homicides in the Americas occur in this age group.
- From nine English-speaking Caribbean countries, 17% of adolescent males and 15% of adolescent females reported having been physically abused.
- Adolescent attitudes towards violence are strongly associated with witnessing interparental violence, as well as to lower parental attachment, and this association appears to intensify with the simultaneous presence and interaction of these two factors.
- Weapon-carrying and interpersonal violence among middle adolescents have been inversely correlated to effective parenting and positively associated with permissive, authoritarian, and uninvolved parenting.
- The perception of parents’ attitudes toward fighting has also been identified as a strong predictor of aggression among adolescents.

ALCOHOL, TOBACCO, AND DRUG USE
- In the Caribbean countries 40% of females and 54% of males (ages 12–18) drink alcohol.
- In Brazil 25% of children between the ages 6 and 18 who spent all day in the streets and slept there, drank alcohol on a regular, nearly daily basis.
- Studies point to an increase in drinking in Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, and Mexico, especially among young women.
- Heavy drinking by adolescents has been positively correlated with adolescents’ perception that their parents were drinking too much.
- In Uruguay, 35% of students between the ages of 11 and 15 reported having tried their first cigarette, and 21.6% of adolescents were offered free cigarettes by a tobacco company between 1999–2001.
- It is estimated that 46% of Argentine adolescent males and 32% of Argentine adolescent females acquired the HIV infection through the use of intravenous drugs.
- Early adolescents who did not develop a strong personal conviction against drug use during preadolescence experience a clear shift toward greater acceptance, starting with tobacco use.

NUTRITION AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY
- Fifty percent of obese adolescents become obese adults, and the greatest relative risk is among 10- to 15-year-old obese adolescents.
- Girls who report that their mothers have an authoritative parenting style also report higher physical activity and lower sedentary leisure habits.
- Fruit consumption and fruit-specific knowledge are higher among adolescents who are being raised with an authoritative parenting style.
- A decrease in physical activity and in the number of physical education programs in schools is an alarming trend worldwide.


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