SEXUAL BEHAVIOR AMONG ROMANIAN ADOLESCENTS

The study “State of Adolescents in Romania - an analysis of determinants” was launched by UNICEF Romania with the intention to deepen the understanding of adolescents, in particular of vulnerable adolescents and to identify the barriers that hamper the realisation of their rights. According to national statistics, the number of adolescents living in Romania at July 1, 2011 amounted to 2,012,709, (9.43% of the overall population).

A quantitative questionnaire-based study was performed on a nationally representative sample of 607 adolescents, aged 10-18 years, having a maximum margin of error of +/- 3.9% at a 95% confidence interval (Fig. 1a-c).

Fig 1. Sample structure

a. Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>52.90%</td>
<td>47.10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b. Age-groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>10-13 years</th>
<th>14-17 years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age groups</td>
<td>54.40%</td>
<td>45.60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residence</td>
<td>50.90%</td>
<td>49.10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SEXUAL ACTIVITY

15% of adolescents declared they were sexually active. A quarter of adolescents over 14 years and less than 1% of those younger than 14 years were sexually active.

Sexual activity in adolescents over 14 years was more common in boys than in girls and in urban than in rural areas (Fig. 2 a, b)

Fig. 2a. Sexual activity by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexual activity</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 2b. Sexual activity by residence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexual activity</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On average, adolescents had their first sexual relation at the age of 15.5.
SEX WITH A STEADY PARTNER

- At the time of research, sexually active adolescents had had 2.3 partners on average and 68% of them had a steady partner.
- Having a steady partner is more common in girls. 84% of sexually active girls said they had a steady partner as compared to 60% of boys.

**One third of adolescents having a steady partner use the condom occasionally.** (Fig. 3)

- Almost half (47%) of the adolescents having a steady partner said they had always used a condom with their steady sex partner in the past month.
- 17% of adolescents said they had used a condom only sometimes or rarely and 16% said they had never used the condom with their steady partner.

**Condom use with steady partner is more prevalent in girls.** (Fig. 4)

Girls seem to be more careful when it comes to protection, more than half of them using always condoms with their steady partner as compared to 43% of boys.

**Boys and girls use condoms for different reasons.**

- Girls are more pushed by fear of pregnancy (81% vs. 51% of boys).
- Boys are more concerned about protection (25% of boys and only 10% of girls mentioned that they were using condoms for protection).

Condom is used especially to avoid pregnancy.

- 63% of adolescents said they had used a condom mainly to prevent pregnancy
- 19% of adolescents said they had used a condom to protect themselves from diseases.
Main reason for not using condom is discomfort. (Fig. 5)
• 47% of adolescents saying they hadn’t used a condom with their steady sex partners in the past month, declared they hadn’t used it because of the discomfort
• 20% of non-users said they hadn’t had one.

SEX WITH CASUAL PARTNERS
• 4 in 10 sexually active adolescents said they had had sex with a casual partner in the past 12 months and only 60% of them used a condom each time;
• Casual sex is rather a ‘boy habit’. Around 49% of sexually active boys and 20% of girls had sex with a casual partner in the past 12 months while 53% of these boys and 71% of these girls used a condom each time.
• 5% of sexually active adolescents said they had had sexual relations with a commercial/paid sex partner in the past 12 months and all of them had used a condom.
• Sex for material gains is exclusively an urban experience Over the past 12 months, just over 1% of urban adolescents had sex for material gains (gifts and other incentives)
• Casual sex is more common among rural adolescents. Around 45% of sexually active adolescents living in rural areas and 33% of those living in urban areas had sex with a casual partner over the past 12 months.

PREGNANCY
• 6% of teenage girls said they had been pregnant at least once in their lifetime, but none of them declared to have ever had an abortion.
• 1% of teenage boys said their girlfriend had been pregnant at least once by the time of the survey, 22% of them said their girlfriend had never been pregnant while 77% of adolescent boys said their girlfriend hadn’t had their sexual debut yet.
• None of the interviewed adolescents had experienced motherhood/fatherhood at the time of research.

AWARENESS AND KNOWLEDGE OF HIV RISKS
In general, adolescents have satisfactory information about HIV.
Answering the question “What does HIV mean to you?”, most adolescents associated it with a disease, a serious/fatal disease, a sexually transmitted disease or a virus, which means that they have accurate knowledge of the matter while not discerning well between HIV and AIDS.
Adolescents’ awareness of factors that may ease HIV transmission was assessed through a questionnaire including a list of statements related to connection between the risk of HIV transmission and different kind of behaviours. Respondents were asked to express agreement / disagreement with these statements.

Adolescents seemed to be mostly aware of the risks related to unsafe sex/not using condoms and of the fact that you can’t tell from someone’s appearance (healthy/not healthy) whether they are HIV-positive or not.

The level of awareness regarding the risk factors for HIV transmission was similar between boys and girls, but it varied consistently among age-groups and by residence, being higher in older adolescents and in urban areas (Figure 6 a-c).

Fig. 6*
This could be due to the fact that in most secondary schools HIV risks are not tackled at all. Adolescents aged 14 years and older and those from urban areas are more informed because they seek various sources of information, thus acknowledging better the means of HIV infection.

Nevertheless, 10.6% of our respondents aged 10-13 years and 18.2% of those aged 14-18 believe that eating at the same table with an HIV-infected person poses a HIV risk, suggesting that specific education on the topic is still needed in both age-groups and with more persuasion in rural adolescents.

Fig. 7.

The level of information about the places where a HIV test can be taken was reduced (Fig. 7).
- Less than half of the adolescents indicated the hospital.
- One of five adolescents (21%) did not know/didn’t answer where he could get an HIV test in the neighbourhood.
- Younger and rural adolescents seem less informed than older and urban teenagers, but no relevant differences were found among genders.
Conclusions

- A quarter of adolescents over 14 years were sexually active, mostly the boys and mostly those from urban areas;
- Condom’s use with steady sex partner is occasionally in one third of adolescents.
- The adolescents have satisfactory information about HIV, but the level of awareness regarding the risk factors for HIV transmission is lower among younger adolescents and among those living in the rural areas.
- The level of information about the places where a HIV test can be taken is reduced

Recommendations

- Taking into account these figures and adolescents’ propensity for casual sex Health education concerning at least the risks related to unsafe sex, STDs and HIV ways of transmission should be widely provided, starting at young ages and with focus on rural areas.

References

1 NIS, TEMPO-Online, [https://statistici.insse.ro/shop/]