

Early sexual debut in South Africa:

Comparing results from national population-based HIV surveys in 2017 and 2022

Shandir Ramlagan¹, Mikateko Mazinu², Yolande Shean¹

¹Human Sciences Research Council

²Biostatistics Unit, South Africa Medical Research Council



Email: sramlagan@hsrc.ac.za

BACKGROUND

- Early sexual debut is defined as having had first sexual intercourse (insertion of the penis in the vagina and/or anus) before 15 years of age.
- Research suggests that individuals engaging in their first sexual experience before turning 15 years old, have heightened risks to their sexual and reproductive health, HIV risk, as well as negative emotional consequences.
- We investigated early sexual debut in South Africa in 2017 and 2022 as well as its demographic determinants.

RESULTS

The table below presents the proportion of youth in South Africa reporting sexual debut before the age of 15 in 2017 and 2022.

Percentage youth aged 15–24 years reporting sexual debut before the age of 15, South Africa, 2017 and 2022

	2017			2022		
	N	%	95% CI	N	%	95% CI
Total	5 464	13.0	11.7–14.4	6 246	11.2	9.8–12.7
Sex						
Male	2 446	19.0	16.9–21.2	2 843	15.7	13.4–18.3
Female	3 018	7.0	5.8–8.4	3 402	6.6	5.2–8.3
Race						
Black African	4 696	13.1	11.7–14.6	5 754	11.1	9.7–12.7
White	108	11.6	5.0–24.8	73	10.7	3.7–26.8
Coloured	532	12.8	9.5–17.2	375	13.0	9.4–17.7
Indian/Asian	128	11.8	5.4–23.7	38	10.3	3.7–25.6
Locality type						
Urban	2 847	14.3	12.6–16.2	3 832	12.1	10.3–14.1
Rural informal (tribal areas)	2 079	10.9	9.0–13.1	1 773	9.7	7.5–12.3
Rural formal (farms)	538	10.0	6.4–15.3	641	9.2	5.9–14.0
Province						
Western Cape	322	14.0	9.9–19.5	262	16.3	11.6–22.5
Eastern Cape	388	15.8	12.0–20.5	964	15.3	11.4–20.2
Northern Cape	316	11.4	7.6–16.9	224	8.0	5.1–12.5
Free State	237	13.7	9.7–18.9	549	9.2	6.1–13.7
KwaZulu-Natal	1 744	8.2	6.0–11.2	2 243	8.6	6.4–11.5
North-West	417	12.0	8.8–16.2	547	8.8	6.3–12.1
Gauteng	900	14.8	11.9–18.2	492	13.2	9.9–17.3
Mpumalanga	745	13.3	10.5–16.7	624	5.4	3.1–9.2
Limpopo	395	13.5	10.0–18.0	341	8.7	6.0–12.5

DISCUSSION

- Fewer youth in 2022 are having their first vaginal and/or anal sexual encounter before the age of 15 years as compared to the 2017 survey.
- Disparities between male and female youth remain and have persisted since 2002, with males reporting higher proportions than females.
- In both survey years, youth in urban areas reported higher rates of early sexual debut before the age of 15.
- In 2022, youth in the Western Cape reported the highest proportion of early sexual debut whereas youth living in Mpumalanga reported the lowest proportion where the difference between 2017 and 2022 was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE FULL 2022 SURVEY RESULTS, PLEASE ATTEND THE HSRC'S SATELLITE SESSION:

Date: Wednesday, July 24, 2024

Time: 18:00 - 19:30

Venue: Room 1/Channel 2

Title: The South African HIV Prevalence, incidence and behaviour (SABSSM) survey results: A legacy of public health data that has improved lives of South Africans

METHODS

- Data collected from two national household-based surveys in South Africa (2017 and 2022).
- Both national surveys utilized a multi-staged, stratified cluster design.
- All individuals in the selected household who slept there the night before were invited to participate and those who agreed underwent formal informed consent.
- Data was weighted and benchmarked to ensure that the sample accurately represented the population.
- The analysis focused on adolescents and young adults aged 15–24 years.



CONCLUSION

- Delayed sexual debut has been and should remain a priority of the HIV prevention programmes to curtail the HIV epidemic.
- The observed overall decline in the proportion of those engaged in early sexual debut in 2022, although not significant when compared to the 2017 survey results, is an encouraging finding.
- The findings though suggest further research in Mpumalanga province into best practices to reduce early sexual debut as well as a need for strengthening prevention strategies and effective strategies to significantly reduce early sexual debut.