

Study challenges popular perception of new 'hookup culture' on college campuses

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A University of Portland study challenges the popular perception that there is a "new and pervasive hookup culture" among contemporary college students.

"Recent research and popular media reports have described [intimate relationships](#) among contemporary college students as characterized by a new and pervasive hookup culture in which students regularly have sex with no strings attached," said study co-author Martin Monto, a sociology professor at the University of Portland. "This implies that the college campus has become a more sexualized environment and that undergraduates are having more sex than in the past. We were surprised to find this is not the case."

In their study, Monto and co-author Anna Carey used a nationally [representative sample](#) from the General Social Survey of more than 1,800 18 to 25-year-olds, who had graduated from high school and completed at least one year of college. Monto and Carey, a recent University of Portland graduate with a BA in sociology and psychology, compared responses from 1988-1996 with those from 2002-2010, the era that researchers often describe as characterized by a "hookup culture."

"We found that college students from the contemporary or 'hookup era' did not report having more frequent sex or more [sexual partners](#) during the past year or more sexual partners since turning 18 than [undergraduates](#) from the earlier era," said Monto, who along with Carey,

will present the findings at the 108th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association.

Among the 1988-1996 cohort, 65.2 percent reported [having sex](#) weekly or more often in the past year, compared to 59.3 percent of college students from the "hookup era." In addition, 31.9 percent of the earlier cohort reported having more than one sexual partner in the past year, compared with 31.6 percent of contemporary college students. Also, 51.7 percent of the earlier group reported having more than two sexual partners after turning 18, compared to 50.5 percent of the 2002-2010 cohort.

In terms of attitudes toward other sexual norms, the researchers also found that contemporary college students were no more accepting than those in the earlier cohort of sex between 14 to 16-year-olds, married adults having sex with someone other than their spouse, or premarital sex between adults. But contemporary college students were significantly more accepting of sex between adults of the same sex.

"Our results provide no evidence that there has been a sea change in the sexual behavior of college students or that there has been a significant liberalization of attitudes towards sex," Monto said.

However, Monto said it is true that sexually active college students from the contemporary era were more likely than those from the earlier era to report that one of their sexual partners during the past year was a casual date/pickup (44.4 percent compared to 34.5 percent) or a friend (68.6 percent compared to 55.7 percent), and less likely to report having a spouse or regular sexual partner (77.1 percent compared to 84.5 percent).

"Contemporary college students are coping with a new set of norms in which marriage occurs later," Monto said. "This means the idea of

waiting until marriage to begin sexual behavior is a less tenable narrative. Courtship and relationship practices are changing, and the implications of these changes present a new unique set of challenges, but this study demonstrates that we are not in the midst of a new era of no rules attached sexuality. In fact, we found that, overall, [sexual behavior](#) among [college students](#) has remained fairly consistent over the past 25 years."

More information: The paper, "A New Standard of Sexual Behavior? Are Claims Associated with the 'Hookup Culture' Supported by Nationally Representative Data?," will be presented on Tuesday, Aug. 13, at 10:30 a.m. EDT in New York City at the American Sociological Association's 108th Annual Meeting.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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