

A new survey of American men shocks the nation with what it didn't find

Newsweek April 26, 1993

Deals with scientific and non-scientific samples; measurement; measures of central tendency and variability, Underlining (for didactic purposes) is mine.[jh]

They're the sorts of questions any average American male--Alexander Portnoy, say, or Holden Caulfield--might have asked himself: How many times a night should I be having sex? In what grade should I start? Is 20,000 women too many? But there is nowhere to turn for answers. If you wanted to know something the government considered important, like the size of the sardine catch, you could look it up in a minute. That's because people pay money for sardines, but they usually get sex free --or, in any case, they don't pay taxes on it, so the government has no reason to keep track of it. The Statistical Abstract of the United States, in its relentless emphasis on the material at the expense of the sublime, skips over sex, going directly from "Sewers" to "Sheep." That gap in our national education has been filled by the media, which give us teen siren Amy Fisher (alleged lover Joey Buttafuoco, she says, could copulate six or eight times a night, easy), the Spur Posse high-school sex gang (some of whose members presumably had to be driven to their assignations by their moms) and Wilt Chamberlain (who claimed in 1991 to have packed into his career the equivalent of 400 years of love making by ordinary mortals). This is like keeping track of the fishing industry by interviewing someone who says he once caught a 12-pound sardine. What the country needs is data.

Now, at last, science is providing data, even if it's hardly titillating enough to make the TV talk shows. For several days last week, the most talked-about article in the United States was a technical paper in the March/April issue of Family Planning Perspectives, the journal of the Alan Guttmacher Institute. In what the authors call the first scientifically valid survey of its kind, 3,321 American men in their 20s and 30s were questioned about their sexual practices, and for the first time in the history of sex research, the results are not astounding. The median number of sex partners over the whole lifetimes of these men is 7.3. This is the equivalent of a six-day road trip for Chamberlain. More than a quarter of the men have had three partners or fewer (although almost a quarter have had 20 partners or more). The median age at which the white men in the survey lost their virginity is 17.2 years—in other words, they were seniors in high school. (For black

men it is 15.) The median frequency of sexual intercourse is slightly less than once a week overall, slightly more than once a week for married men. You'd think that would constitute the ultimate nonstory: *Man Makes Love to Wife*. It is hard to think of another area in which such mundane findings could be frontpage news.

Actually, the authors —four researchers at the Battelle Human Affairs Research Center in Seattle— did come up with one remarkable statistic. Of the men they surveyed, only 2.3 percent reported any homosexual contacts in the last 10 years, and only half of those—or just over 1 percent of the total said they were exclusively gay in that period. That number was surprising in light of the widespread belief, dating to the Kinsey report of 1948, that homosexuals accounted for 10 percent of the population. But that was a misreading of what Kinsey actually found (box), and more recent surveys had typically put the number much lower. The 1 percent figure, though, was the lowest yet, and it will be controversial for a long time. It raised the prospect of having to rethink yet again some of the most contentious social issues of the last few years —from the likely future course of AIDS to the much overhyped question of homosexuals in the armed services. Gay rights groups assumed that their power would diminish if they were seen as speaking for a much smaller constituency, and conservative Christian groups were quick to endorse the Battelle findings. On the other hand, if the 1 percent figure is accurate, then an infantry company, on average, would contain approximately two gay soldiers --hardly enough to cause the dire disruptions predicted by the generals.

Rock groupies: Will the names of the Battelle researchers --John O.G. Billy, Koray Tanfer, William R. Grady and Daniel H. Klepinger— go down in history alongside those of Kinsey, Masters and Johnson, and their illustrious predecessors dating to Ovid? Hard to say. The four set out to investigate male sexual behavior mostly in search of information that might be useful in combatting AIDS. But perhaps their most valuable contribution was to uncover the vast gap between what Americans actually do in bed, as a statistically verifiable

A new survey of American men shocks the nation with what it didn't find

Newsweek April 26, 1993

Deals with scientific and non-scientific samples; measurement; measures of central tendency and variability, Underlining (for didactic purposes) is mine.[jh]

fact, and what they assume goes on in most people's lives based on extrapolating the autobiographies of rock groupies and the letters to the advice columns in girlie magazines. "I don't think they're interviewing the right people," said David Hoffman, 27, a vice president of a Chicago store called Condoms Now. "What about guys on sports teams in colleges?" Many average adults found it hard to believe that the median figure for sexual partners could be as low as 7.3. "I think men lie," said a Boston paralegal who gave only her first name, Veronica. "They hide things more than women do." Veronica, 30 and married, thought the right number was around 15. Perhaps, like many lay people, she is confused by the mathematical terms used. A "median" of 7.3 means that there were approximately as many men with seven or fewer partners as with eight or more; therefore a man with 100 partners got the same weight as one with 10. In a "mean", or "average", the extreme values would count for more. The mean number of sex partners for the men in the survey is 16.2.

The only people who found nothing surprising in the results were the investigators themselves. "I can't find them surprising or nonsurprising," said Billy, with the magisterial detachment of Rutherford announcing the discovery of the electron. "We have no basis for comparison except popular wisdom—which is often inaccurate." Other researchers on men's sexual behavior generally found nothing astonishing in the report either, except for the data on homosexuality. The data on sex partners "isn't surprising to me," said University of Washington sociologist Pepper Schwartz, who published a 10-year study of American sexual attitudes. "Four to seven [partners] is what the informal studies say." She also wasn't surprised that married men reported having sex around once a week, although she I thinks you have to make allowance for inflation. "People don't have sex every week they have good weeks and bad weeks. But they think, 'I'm married and should be having sex more,' and round it off to about once a week." Debra Haffner, executive director of the Sex Information and Education and Education I Council of the United States, agrees: "It usually comes out to 57 times a year... which I figure means once a week, and three times on vacation."

Appalling slander: But at the same time there was a body of Opinion that the Battelle group had perpetrated an appalling slander on the virility of American men. A one-night stand is by definition forgettable, and you have to guard against the tendency to undercount them. Warren Farrell, author of "Why Men Are the Way They Are," says that in workshops he asks participants to write down—privately—their total number of sexual partners. After a period of discussion he asks them to write it down again, and finds that on average men recall twice as many partners as they did at first and women three times as many). Therefore he suspects the figure of 7.3 partners should actually be doubled.

One thing the Battelle study did reveal was the huge philosophical gap between two schools of sex research. One group conducts personal interviews with subjects chosen on the basis of census data to represent a scientific sample of the population, which is supposed to provide better statistical validity. The other usually uses anonymous mail-in questionnaires, which seem to elicit juicier responses. The former generally publish papers in scientific journals, while the latter typically write articles in women's magazines and best-selling books. From them comes such illuminating data as the fact that 67 percent of men would not have their penises enlarged, even if it didn't hurt or cost anything (Glamour, 1992). "These kinds of reports are highly suspect," says Tom W. Smith of the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center. Shere Hite, the famous bombshell sex researcher of the 1970s, used this technique, as did board-certified sexologist Samuel S. Janus and his wife Cynthia whose "Janus Report on Sexual Behavior" got a lot of attention just a few weeks ago. Janus, who distributed his surveys through graduate students and in piles left in doctors' offices, asserts that people are more likely to be truthful on an anonymous questionnaire than in face-to-face interviews. The Battelle group's interviews were all conducted in the respondents homes, by female interviewers who knocked on the door with no previous introduction. Thirty percent of the men contacted in this way refused to participate. Janus suggests that the missing homosexuals are probably in that 30 percent. On the other hand, the people

A new survey of American men shocks the nation with what it didn't find

Newsweek April 26, 1993

Deals with scientific and non-scientific samples; measurement; measures of central tendency and variability, Underlining (for didactic purposes) is mine.[jh]

motivated to pick up, fill out and mail in a questionnaire on sex represent a self-selected group—selected, in part, by being interested in sex. Janus's data also show that his subjects were considerably richer, less Protestant and more Jewish than the nation as a whole. And, for what it's worth, they seemed in some ways to be having a lot more sex than the ones surveyed by the Battelle group. In his study, more than half the men age 18 to 38 said they had sex either "daily" or "a few times weekly".

So, in the famous phrase, you pay your money (\$24.95 for "The Janus Report," \$28 a year for Family Planning Perspectives) and you take your choice—either most men are having sex three to seven times a week (Janus), or the median is slightly less than once a week (Battelle). In favor of the Battelle thesis, you might want to consider what Curtis Pesman, author of "What She Wants: A Man's Guide to Women" had to say; "A lot of men will feel better about their real lives. There are a lot of men who think everybody is having more sex than they are, and they'll feel better being close to the average... and I know a lot of wives and girlfriends who will be happy that the average is not up in the teens or twenties."

On the other hand, as Jennifer Knopf, a Chicago sex and marital therapist, points out, it's only reassuring if you're having sex once a week; "if you're having sex twice a month it's probably frightening."

Which suggests the only possible conclusion On which all sides will undoubtedly agree. We need more data.

THE REPORT

In the most complete study since the Kinsey report, a new survey charts American sexual activity. The results are—yawn—striking.

1

is the median number of times men said they had sex per week

7.3

is the median number of sexual partners per man

INFIDELITY

How faithful are the women of America? It depends on whom you ask. Two studies produced very different answers.

26%

Married women who have had extramarital affairs
(Janus, 1993)

39%

Married women who have cheated on their husbands

(Cosmopolitan Readers Survey, 1993)

TALL TALES

Some of us are still living the wild life—or at least telling survey takers we are.

Have had sex with more than 100 partners

4% women **10%** men

(Janus, 1993)

Have sex more than once a day

6% married **12%** living together **13%** going steady

(Cosmopolitan Readers Survey, 1993)