



# SEX IN A

**I**n the late 1940s and early 1950s, when pioneer researcher Alfred Kinsey published his exhaustive — but anecdotally based — research on Americans' sex lives, he was bitterly attacked from all sides. In 1966, when William Masters and Virginia Johnson described what they saw of the human body's sexual responses in the laboratory, they were inundated with hate mail, the "drop dead" letters surpassing others at a rate of 9 to 1. Over the last quarter century, American attitudes have softened a bit and research on sexual habits has continued. Even so, given the earlier controversies, no one seemed willing to underwrite a project that would fully illuminate Americans' sexual behaviors and attitudes.

Until now. For the first time in history, a truly scientific nationwide survey reveals what really happens in America's bedrooms. *Sex in America*,



# MERICA

designed by academics at the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center, asked 210 pages' worth of questions of 3,432 Americans and emerged with a portrait that is comforting about the romance that exists in stable relationships, myth-busting when it comes to the sex lives of single men and women, alarming when it comes to the amount of sex that is forced on women and uniquely revealing about the likely size of the gay population. Among the major findings:

- Fidelity reigns. Fully 83 percent of Americans had sex with one person or had no sex partners in the past year, and half of Americans have had only one partner in the past five years.
- Most Americans have sexual intercourse six or seven times a month.
- Married people and couples living together have the most sex — 40 percent

SEX IN AMERICA  
SURVEY

# ROMANCE



Here are some of the major highlights from the University of Chicago path-breaking sex survey of 3,432 Americans:

**HOW MANY PARTNERS:**  
71% of Americans have only one sexual partner in the course of a year. 12% have none. Only 3% have five or more.

53% had one sex partner in the last five years.

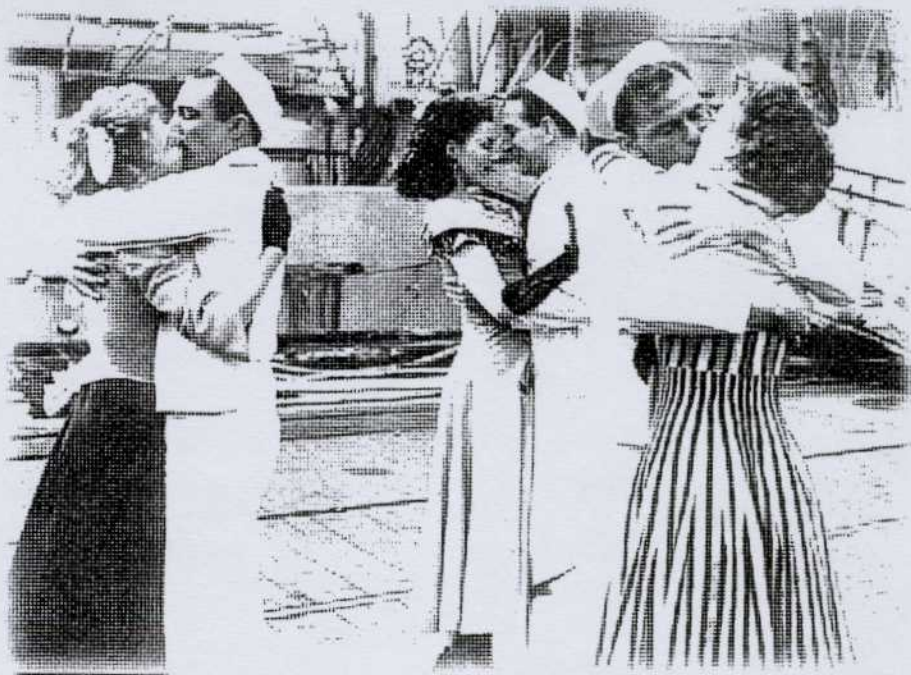
Median number of partners since age 18 reported by men: 6; women: 2

**HOW OFTEN:**  
Men: 6.5 times a month  
Women: 6.3 times

One third of Americans have sex at least twice a week. A third have sex a few times a month. The final third have sex a few times a year or not at all.

About 40% of married people and over half of people living together have sex twice a week. 25% of singles living alone have sex that often.

Percentage of people who married without first living together —  
Born 1933-42. Men: 84.5, women: 93.8  
Born 1963-74. Men: 33.9, women: 35.3



ON THE TOWN, 1949

**Americans usually choose PARTNERS who are close in age and from similar ethnic and educational backgrounds.**

of marrieds and 56 percent of those living together have intercourse twice a week or more—and they enjoy their sex lives more than singles who live alone.

■ More than a fifth of women—22 percent—have been forced to perform sexual acts.

■ The researchers grappled with the explosive question of how large the gay population is; they found that just 2.8 percent of men and 1.4 percent of women say they are gay. When the question is broader, 10.1 percent of men and 8.6 percent of women either identify themselves as gay, say they have had a sexual experience with someone of the same gender or claim to have some physical attraction to members of the same sex.

■ The researchers believe, based on what they have learned about American sexual practices, that there will not be a widespread breakout of AIDS in the heterosexual population.

Generally, Americans are doing less with each other sexually than the images gleaned from popular culture would imply—and when they do have sex, it's pretty conventional. "Overall, the numbers are reassuring and positive," says project leader Bob Michael, dean of the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy, who thinks the survey proves that society is not going to hell in a handbasket after all. John Gagnon, a sociologist and longtime sex researcher from the State University of New York at Stony Brook who collaborated in the survey, is more circumspect. "You could read the

numbers and think, 'Gee, this is terrific; no one's doing anything!'" he points out. "Or you could say, 'This is really terrible. Everyone's so repressed!'"

Whatever the interpretation, the survey has been a long time in coming. It was originally proposed in 1987 by the National Institutes of Health to help scientists fight AIDS. But Congress killed funding for it in 1991 after conservatives caught wind of its intimate questions. It re-emerged after private foundations agreed to back a less ambitious effort.

In fact, though *Sex in America* is subtitled "A Definitive Survey," the authors emphasize that they have only scratched the surface of what there is to learn about sexual man and woman. The survey is just the most visible product of a cadre of sex researchers who now are trying to fill the gaping holes in our understanding of human sexuality. Slowly, they are starting to piece together answers to questions like: How does an orgasm happen? How much do cultural norms influence what we do in bed? What's normal and what's not? Answers to those questions could prove crucial in crafting policies to address very real tragedies like rape, AIDS and unwanted pregnancy.

#### THE PLEASURES OF THE BODY

Today, as in Aristotle's time three centuries before Jesus, scientists know more about sexual functioning in animals than in humans. Aristotle founded sex research in the Western world when he began documenting the sex practices of various animals. But even a



"I LOVE LUCY," early 1950s

## Most spouses report **MARITAL BLISS** in bed; they have sex more often and enjoy it more than singles.

rudimentary understanding of the human body's sexual workings was postponed for another 1,700 years or so under strict religious codes that decreed sexual pleasure of any kind—even in marital relationships—inherently evil. Later, the medical community made its contribution to keeping the study of sexuality a taboo by declaring that sexual pleasure was a disease. In a 1758 treatise, Swiss physician Simon André Tissot gave rise to the notorious conviction that masturbating causes blindness. In the 1800s, Elizabeth Os-good Willard argued that orgasm was more debilitating to the system than a hard day's work, and sex just for pleasure was certain to ruin the body's parenting capabilities. Even in this century, Freud advised that women should receive physical pleasure only from the vagina; any clitorally induced pleasure revealed unresolved psychological problems.

Perhaps the most enduring mystery of the body is the experience of orgasm. Masters and Johnson outlined a simple cycle of genital stimulation leading to arousal and eventual orgasm and described many of the things that happen during orgasm: the fast breathing, the muscular contractions, the dilated pupils, that wacky toe curl. The *Sex in America* survey found 75 percent of American men and 29 percent of American women experience orgasm virtually every time they have intercourse. That's not terribly startling.

More interesting are the results of new studies that focus on the physiology of orgasm. Many experts say men and women are capable

of having much more sexual pleasure than they might suspect. (In a truly astounding case, researchers in one lab found a man who had 17 orgasms in an hour and a woman who had 134.) Other studies are challenging the notion that the secret to orgasm lies in the genitals. Rutgers University researchers Beverly Whipple and Barry Komisaruk found that victims of spinal-cord injuries whose nerve pathways from the genitals have been severed often develop hypersensitive areas elsewhere on their body that, when stroked, will bring them to orgasm. They also looked at healthy women and found that the right caressing of the back, the neck, the hands or other favored spot would bring them to orgasm as well.

Together with therapist Gina Ogden, Whipple and Komisaruk took it a step further and discovered that women can indeed reach full-blown orgasm through fantasy alone, with no body stimulation whatsoever. Nobody knows for sure why different stimulations trigger ecstasy. But Komisaruk hypothesizes that orgasm is a matter of the brain recruiting increasing numbers of sensory neurons to fire simultaneously until a threshold is crossed and ecstasy is unleashed.

Not only is orgasm the peak of physical pleasure, it may have significant health benefits that mirror some of the salutary effects of exercise. Orgasm acts as a powerful pain-relief agent, and some studies suggest it bolsters immune functioning. The typical orgasm will boost the body's T3 and T4 lymphocyte cells—the cells that fight off foreign invaders—by up

### SEX IN AMERICA SURVEY

## MARRIAGE

#### LIKE ATTRACTS LIKE:

Married couples share

many key traits—

Same race: 93%

Within 5 years in

age: 78%

Similar education: 82%

Same religion: 72%

#### MARITAL BLISS:

Spouses who enjoy great

sexual pleasure: 88%

Who enjoy great emotional

satisfaction: 85%

#### INFIDELITY:

Wives who have ever had

an affair: 15%

Husbands: 24.5%

37% of men in their 50s

have had an affair; 12.4%

of women that age have.

94% of married people were

faithful in the past year.

#### ORGASM:

75% of men but just 29%

of women always have an

orgasm during sex. 4% of

women and 1% of men nev-

er have an orgasm.

#### HOW LONG SEX LASTS:

Most spend between 15

minutes and an hour having

sex. 20% of men and 15%

of women spend over an

hour.

Married men are five times

more likely than single men

to spend 15 minutes or less

on sexual intercourse.

SEX IN AMERICA  
SURVEY

# PRACTICES

## TURN-ONS:

The sexual practices that appeal most to Americans:

1. vaginal intercourse
2. watching mate undress
3. receiving oral sex
4. giving oral sex

All other practices, such as group sex or sex with a stranger, appeal to only a small minority of Americans.

## MASTURBATION:

The more active your sex life, the more likely it is that you masturbate. 60% of men and 40% of women masturbated in the past year. Among couples living together, that increases to 85% of men and 45% of women.

About 25% of men and 10% of woman masturbate at least once a week.

## EROTICA:

41% of men and 16% of women purchased erotic materials in the past year.

## THINKING ABOUT SEX:

Every day or several times a day:

Men: 54%  
Women: 19%

Once a month or less:

Men: 4%  
Women 14%

Men who have paid for sex: 16%



THE GRADUATE, 1967

**Rather than being wildly experimental, Americans are aroused by conventional **TURN-ONS**.**

to 20 percent. In an ongoing study, Ohio University gynecologist Dudley Chapman has followed the progress of women with breast cancer and finds that the frequency of orgasm might aid their health progress; the more climaxes they have, the healthier they are. He discounts the idea that the beneficial impact of orgasm is due to the general love and support given the cancer victims by their lovers because several of the women who improved most live alone and masturbate to orgasm. "I don't want to wave any flags and say [orgasm] cures cancer," Chapman cautions. "Still, I'm optimistic that we're on to something here."

## THE SOCIAL SIDE OF SEX

The *Sex in America* survey shows just how strongly societal norms rule bedroom behavior. Sexual impulses are not purely instinctive, untamable and unvarying among most ordinary men and women. Not only does society constrain what we do and with whom we do it, but social dictates affect what we think about and what we find arousing. The survey authors say Americans' sex lives, in large part, follow social "scripts" that influence everything from what's happening when potential sex partners encounter each other casually, to what they find alluring in each other and to their reactions to the impulses those encounters stir. For example, when males listen to the story of a woman entering a room, removing her clothes, a man entering and various activities occurring, they will often be sexually aroused if told the man is

her boyfriend. But the same script will not arouse them if told the man is her doctor.

One trouble with scripts is that they can sometimes lead people to act in inappropriate or harmful ways. In general, researchers have found that men are more prone than women to read sexual implications into casual encounters. That may explain the results of a University of New Orleans study that found men thought women had initiated sexual encounters in far more instances than the women themselves said they had. "The survey shows how troubled the relationship between the sexes still is," says Gagnon, because the signals men and women are trying to send each other often get confused.

The power of social scripts also extends to more benign sexual encounters. When instances of rape are not included, research at the University of Kansas suggests that men actually engage in more unwanted sex than women, perhaps because of the societal expectation that men have stronger desires than women and should therefore be more eager for sex. Other evidence shows wives tend to initiate more and more sex as each year of marriage goes by, which might reflect how they are freeing themselves from stigmas against acting on sexual impulses that they picked up when they were younger.

Sometimes, however, basic sexual arousal prevails over societal taboos. For instance, much pornography is so appealing that it has managed to survive from the days of cave drawings and thrives even in today's disap-

**SEX IN AMERICA  
SURVEY**

# PROBLEMS

**SEXUAL DIFFICULTIES:**

Percentage experiencing these problems in past year —

Pain during sex

Men: 3, Women: 14.4

Sex not pleasurable

Men: 8.1, Women: 21.2

Unable to have orgasm

Men: 8.3, Women: 24.1

Lacked interest in sex

Men: 15.8, Women: 33.4

Performance anxiety

Men: 17, Women: 11.5

Climax too early

Men: 28.5, Women: 10.3

Unable to keep erection

Men: 10.4

Had trouble lubricating

Women: 18.8

**FORCED SEX:**

22% of women have been forced to perform a sexual act. 96% knew the person who forced them.

Percentage who say the person who forced them to do it was:

Someone she loved: 46

Someone she knew well: 22

Acquaintance: 19

Spouse: 9

Stranger: 4

**SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES:**

16.9% have ever had an STD.



CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF, 1958

## Women report more **SEXUAL PROBLEMS** than men, though men fret most about their performance.

proving society. The *Sex in America* survey shows that 41 percent of men and 16 percent of women buy erotica in the course of a year. And even though women say they're less turned on by erotica, lab researchers find they are usually just about as aroused as men and even tend to be slightly more "turned on" if the plot features a woman as the main character. But even when breaking the rules, Americans often keep them in mind. Virtually all viewers of pornography prefer highly conventional sex acts between consenting adults and are disturbed by acts that deviate from the norm, according to Clive Davis at Syracuse University.

**GOOD SEX, BAD SEX**

With all the modern folklore about what constitutes great sex, it's easy to forget that for a significant portion of Americans, sex can be the source of deep anxiety if not outright misery. One in 5 women and 1 in 10 men told *Sex in America* surveyors that sex is not pleasurable for them. The American Urological Association reports that 30 million men a year have trouble with erections, and 20,000 get penile implants to help with their dysfunction. Clinicians say that men also complain about their inability to control the timing of ejaculation, and both sexes routinely report problems with desire. Twenty years ago, such individuals were automatically assumed to be racked with mental problems. "Today the pendulum has shifted to the other extreme, where everything is medi-

calized," says Raul Schiavi, director of the Human Sexuality Program at the Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York. The reality is that true sexual dysfunction often stems from a mix of mental and physical problems.

An even greater reality is that many of the "problems" that therapists are asked to cure are actually quite normal sexual behaviors. Those patients only need accurate information about the range of sexual normalcy. Even with the abundance of tell-all talk shows and pop sex advice books, therapists still see plenty of men who think they're sick because they masturbate and women who think they're frigid because they can't reach orgasm every time they have intercourse. "The more research I do, the more I realize how normal most people are and how few realize it," says Donald Strassberg, a sex therapist and psychology professor at the University of Utah. Though most men will ejaculate within two to six minutes with genital stimulation, for example, many feel inadequate if they can't hold out for much longer periods.

One of the most promising areas of research is focused on the sexuality of aging people. Many complain of low desire, and that has created the widespread impression that the golden years mean the end of one's sex life. But work by Helen Singer Kaplan and Richard Cogan at Cornell Medical Center shows that lack of testosterone is often the culprit and that tiny doses of it can return a zesty libido to many women who have lost their drive. (Research on the impact of

# POLITICS

## HOMOSEXUALITY:

Just 2.8% of men and 1.4% of women identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual. But 9% of men and over 4% of women have had a sexual experience with someone of the same sex since puberty.

Geography matters: More than 9% of men in the 12 largest cities say they are gay; 3% to 4% in the suburbs and 1% in rural areas say they are.

## SEXUAL PHILOSOPHIES:

**Traditional:** About one third of Americans (26.9% of men, 33.7% of women) tend to say their religious beliefs guide their sexual behavior, that homosexuality, premarital and extramarital sex are always wrong.

**Relational:** Nearly half of Americans (40.1% of men and 47.6% of women) don't believe that sex has to be reserved for marriage but do insist partners be in love and faithful to one another.

**Recreational:** A little over a quarter of Americans (33% of men and 18.7% of women) say that sex doesn't have to have anything to do with love and tend to oppose prohibitive laws, such as bans on pornography.



PHILADELPHIA, 1993

## The survey suggests that a rampant spread of AIDS among drug-free heterosexuals is unlikely.

giving testosterone doses to older men is underway.) "The difference between sexually satisfied and unsatisfied older couples is primarily one of attitude," says Schiavi. "Those who don't cling to unrealistic notions—say that the man should always have a rigid penis—find that sex provides just as much pleasure as ever."

Though fears of sexual deviance or dysfunction are unfounded for the vast majority of the population, there are distinct subgroups with severe sexual sicknesses who do pose a danger to others. Unfortunately, researchers know little about the causes of these problems because they start during childhood or early adolescence years. Since most parents are loath to let researchers near their children to talk about sex, it is likely to take years to unearth the roots of severe deviance.

### BEYOND THE MEASURING STICK

There are certain aspects of sexuality that survey research and laboratory experiments cannot illuminate, argues therapist Gina Ogden, author of the new book, *Women Who Love Sex*. She is a kind of anthropologist gathering stories from couples that focus on the emotional side of arousal. Her work centers on people like Judy Tobin, a subject who comes to orgasm without touching herself. That has been confirmed in a lab, but it doesn't reveal much about the role sexuality plays in her life. As it turns out, Tobin was raised as a "good little Jewish girl" to think sex and masturbation were bad. She lived a commonplace life with

two kids and two cars in the New Jersey suburbs, until the day she decided she felt dead inside and left her marriage. As she and her second husband, Paul, explored their sexuality, they both discovered capabilities like the ability to "think off" (to come to orgasm through fantasy) or to create orgasmic states just by breathing in certain ways.

For now, one can only guess how many people have secretly experienced phenomena like this. But researchers like Bernie Zilbergeld and Carol Ellison are trying to form a larger picture of the less definable aspects of sex by polling 2,600 women across the nation and allowing for expansive, essay-like answers to questions such as: What exactly do you like about sex? How important is it whether or not you have an orgasm?

Beyond those deeply personal issues lie some enormous social ills that are linked to some aspects of Americans' sexual behavior. The AIDS epidemic and the teen-pregnancy problem have worsened at least in part because of the public's squeamishness about asking basic questions about sex and conveying explicit information about it. The *Sex in America* survey and other sexuality research projects will do two things. They will help fill gaps in our understanding of how to address these cultural problems. And they will help explain the source of the greatest human pleasure. That's not a bad marriage at all. ■

By JOANNIE M. SCHROF  
WITH BETSY WAGNER