

“I WAS INDIFFERENT ABOUT IT...”: A MIXED METHODS EXPLORATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE’S REASONS FOR EXPERIENCING UNWANTED SEXUAL EVENTS

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Background: Adolescence is a period in which young people are developing their values and views of sexual norms. Any type of unwanted sexual experiences at this time can negatively impact their future health and relationships. This research sought to examine socio-demographic correlates of unwanted sexual experiences and how young people describe and experience unwanted sex.

Methods: Data were drawn from the online 6th National Survey of Secondary Students and Sexual Health. Sexually active participants (N=3,838) responded to measures of socio-demographics, lifetime experiences of unwanted sexual activity (n=1,138), STI diagnosis, condom and contraceptive use, pregnancy, and reasons for having experienced unwanted sex (qualitative response of n=255). Statistical relationships were analysed using chi-square and logistic regressions and a thematic analysis was employed for open-ended responses.

Results: Females were three times more likely and LGB young people almost twice as likely to have reported an unwanted sexual experience. Being frightened was the most common reason for female participants, while for males it was peer pressure. Those with an unwanted sexual experience were less likely to use a condom at last intercourse, more likely to have received an STI diagnosis and more likely to have had sex resulting in a pregnancy. Qualitative themes included assault/lack of consent, pleasing a partner, ambivalence, feeling pressured/persuaded, lack of agency to say no and a change of mind.

Conclusion: Unwanted sex was more common for adolescent women and LGB young people and was associated with potentially adverse sexual health outcomes. Reasons for unwanted sexual experiences involved more than assault or violence, (e.g., ambivalence). Efforts to reduce unwanted sex should cover assault and consent, but also the contexts of unwanted sex beyond sexual violence, particularly among those who felt they were not coerced, to recognise and develop young people’s sexual agency.

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