

trends in culture & church

D. MICHAEL LINDSAY



Sex, Lies, and Surveys

Pastors often ask me what surveys can tell us about church members' sex lives and, more specifically, whether the church's teachings on sex and intimacy make any difference in our behavior. The answer—at least for now—is “not much” on both counts.

For example, although we all sense intuitively that pornography is a growing cancer within the church, no national survey conducted to date has revealed widespread addiction to pornography among churchgoers. Does this mean that porn isn't really an issue? Hardly. What it does show is that this is the part of our sexual behavior that people in the church are the least likely to divulge. In social science, we call this the social desirability bias: People answer survey questions the way they want to be perceived, not the way they actually behave.

Do Surveys Lie?

Sociologists Michael Emerson and David Sikkink have released early results from their path-breaking survey *Panel Study of American Religion and Ethnicity*. This project will track responses from a nationally representative sample of American adults on a host of subjects over the next 20 years. One of the questions they asked people was how often they'd viewed pornography in the last year. Because this survey also includes fine-grained data on religion, we can compare responses in ways very helpful for pastors.

But the problem is that I suspect many people lied. Despite the care Emerson and Sikkink took in designing the survey, some of the answers given by churchgoers don't make sense. Three in four black Protestants say they've never viewed pornography.

Two in three Evangelical Protestants say the same, and similar figures can be found among mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Even among the religiously unaffiliated, 46 percent said they have never viewed pornography. Oh, really?

The National Opinion Research Center, one of the most reliable sources for national surveys, reported in 1998 that 24 percent of Americans had viewed pornography in the last year, and that was before the Internet boom we've experienced over the last decade. During this time, the number of hardcore titles to hit the movie market each year has multiplied sixfold. The reach of the pornography industry is sometimes hard to estimate, but we know that more than 10 percent of all Web sites today contain pornographic material. One in four search engine requests relate to porn in some way. For a nation where four in five adults claim to be Christian, these are troubling numbers. The statistical likelihood that most Christians never view porn is practically impossible.

Three Major Problems

1) The church is reluctant to talk about pornography. The church discusses divorce, infidelity, and premarital sex far more often than pornography. This may be because porn is so pervasive, or perhaps it's because the industry's rapid growth has simply caught church leaders off guard.

2) Trends show no signs of a slow down. The Internet has opened the door for harder-core material to find its way into our homes, and the relative anonymity this affords creates addictions that can quickly spiral out

of control. When PBS' *Frontline* interviewed Dennis McAlpine, an entertainment industry analyst, he noted the increasing libertine attitude toward pornography that begins within the industry and gradually becomes part of wider society. He said, “As you show one area, that becomes accepted, so you go to the next one. And you go to the next one. And things that 10 years ago were not permissible now are accepted by society.”

3) The young people in our churches are following the adults' example.

Like adult churchgoers, Christian teens are becoming as sexually active as non-churchgoing teenagers. If you read only one book on the subject, I strongly recommend *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press) by Mark Regnerus. Examining three national surveys and interviews with more than 250 teenagers across the country, Regnerus finds that evangelical teens aren't less sexually active than non-evangelical teens; they just feel guiltier about it. However, his research shows that faith can make a difference. A central Christian identity diminishes adolescent sexual activity, but that happens in less than 10 percent of all youth. Indeed, few teenagers are even able to articulate their church's sexual ethic.

So what's a pastor to do? At a basic level, we need to address the pervasiveness of porn, even if some surveys overestimate its reach and others minimize it. We also need to overcome our reluctance to talk about pornography, which is an ever-growing pitfall for many within the church. Finally, we need to redouble our efforts to teach and model a God-honoring and healthy approach to sex, for our own sake and that of our children. 📌

D. MICHAEL LINDSAY is an assistant professor of sociology at Rice University. He and George Gallup Jr. are co-authors of *The Gallup Guide: Reality Check for 21st Century Churches (Group)*.