last 10 years. They show the impressive mix of religious and ethnic groups typical of fast-growing urban communities, and have experienced rapid change in norms, values and gender roles. They attract many young people from the surrounding rural world with learning and earning opportunities.

We used both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative component was a survey of 3,603 randomly selected young people. The sample consisted of 2,114 primary and secondary school pupils, who completed a self-administered questionnaire, and 1,489 out-of-school youths,* who were predominantly illiterate and participated in individual interviews. The 40-item questionnaire included respondents’ age at first intercourse; coital frequency during the previous month; lifetime number of sexual partners; current partner’s profession; and pregnancy, abortion and contraceptive histories.

Pupils were selected through a stratified cluster-sampling procedure, in which the different school grades (6–13) were defined as the strata and randomly selected classes from each grade as the clusters. All individuals present on the day of the interview were eligible for participation; our sample comprised 21% of youths enrolled in school.

For the out-of-school sample, we chose men and women of selected occupations that represent substantial segments of both the formal and the informal sectors: carpenters (male apprentices), cart-pushers (male unskilled worker), dressmakers (female apprentices) and itinerant vendors (female unskilled workers).† Participants were randomly selected on the basis of an inventory of individuals belonging to each group; they totaled 16% of out-of-school young people.

The qualitative component of the study consisted of 25 same-sex focus groups—13 with pupils, seven with apprentices and five with youths from the informal sector—aimed at understanding young people’s criteria of partner choice and attitudes toward premarital pregnancy and the prevention of pregnancy and disease. Participants were recruited from among the survey sample and were selected on the basis of their gender and grade or occupational sector. In all, 192 young people participated in the focus groups.

Results

Background Characteristics

Of the 3,603 young people interviewed, 76% were 15–19 years of age, and 24% were 20–24; 42% were women, and 58% men (Table 1). Students and out-of-school respondents had roughly similar age distributions, but differed with respect to sex: Pupils were about evenly divided between men and women, but males outnumbered females in the out-of-school sample by nearly two to one.

The sample reflects the mix of ethnic groups typical for the region. The majority of respondents were Malinke (46%), followed by Kissi (24%), Fulani (14%), Soussou (4%) and various others (12%). Some 74% of the sample were Muslims, 18% Catholics, 5% Protestants and 3% members of other religious groups.

Sexual Activity

Overall, 50% of female and 76% of male participants were sexually experienced. The mean age at first intercourse was 16.3 years for females and 15.6 for males; except among adolescent males, pupils reported a significantly later mean age at initial sexual experience than out-of-school respondents (Table 2).

Sexually active young men reported a greater mean lifetime number of sexual partners (4.0) than sexually experienced young women (2.1), and respondents in their 20s had had more partners than adolescents. Female pupils had had fewer partners than their out-of-school counterparts; however, among young men, the reverse was true for adolescents, and no significant difference was found among those aged 20–24.

While 42% of females and 44% of males said they had had no coitus in the previous month, 45% and 51%, respectively, had had sex 1–3 times, and the remainder had had sex more often. Out-of-school males reported fewer sexual encounters in the previous month than did those in school, but the opposite was the case among young women.

Despite the apparent differences between male and female respondents’ sexual behavior,† their sexual activity can be described as episodic. In the focus groups, participants explained that having sex is perceived as a normal or inevitable part of friendship between young men and women. The reasons given for engaging in sex were manifold. Some participants viewed intercourse as a biological need.

“You’re satisfying a need. The need is [there] every day, and this need must be satisfied, not every day but once a month or a week.”—Female pupil

Young men and women alike favored episodic sex. They explained that for those who take their studies or their apprenticeship seriously, sex has its place only on weekends or at holiday times.

Many young people of both sexes believed that “either you are the right age and can start sexual activity or you are not the right age” and should abstain. When asked what is the “right” age to begin, respondents said 15–18 years old, and they gave a variety of reasons not to begin at an older or younger age. A fear was expressed that starting too early can cause weakness and illness. Several young men worried that they would not have enough sperm when they were older if they used them up early. On the other hand, a number of participants were afraid of becoming ill or infertile if they started sexual activity too late.

Young people reported that both their partners and their peers pressured them to have sex. Many women said they had succumbed to a male’s desire; some even reported having been forced into having sex. Female participants said they fear losing their partner if they refuse and assume that any other boyfriend would express the same desire.

“To get on with a boy implies to have sex and to do what he wants you to do.”—Female apprentice

Male participants admitted that in order to persuade a young woman to have sex, they would, if necessary, promise a long-lasting relationship and faithfulness. Some claimed that they were pressured by sexually experienced young women, and that if a young man does not agree to have sex, subsequent rumors may “damage” his reputation.

Table 1. Percentage distribution of survey respondents, by gender and age, according to school status, Guinea, 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender and age</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>In school</th>
<th>Out of school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(N=3,603)</td>
<td>(N=1,489)</td>
<td>(N=2,114)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>58.0</td>
<td>49.8</td>
<td>63.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–19</td>
<td>40.5</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>49.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–24</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>42.0</td>
<td>50.2</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–19</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>30.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–24</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Out-of-school youths may either learn a trade (e.g., carpentry, mechanics, painting or dressmaking) as apprentices in the formal sector or make a living as unskilled workers (e.g., shoe cleaners, cart-pushers, itinerant vendors or housemaids) in the informal sector.

†A qualitative analysis prior to sampling showed that young people working in the informal sector would easily be missed by a household sampling procedure because they often sleep in the commercial area (e.g., cart-pushers may sleep in the cart owner’s shop).

‡To conform to social norms, males may overreport their sexual experience, while females may underreport theirs. However, checks of our data for internal consistency confirmed the validity of the answers.