number of times a respondent attended services monthly), academic performance (numerical grade-point average*), and participation in risk behaviors (ever having smoked tobacco, drunk beer or wine, or used marijuana).

Students also responded to items on their attitudes toward sexuality and childbearing, including the ideal age to first have intercourse, the ideal age for having children and perceived obstacles posed by early parenthood. (The responses to this item, which were not mutually exclusive, were that early parenthood is expensive and that it creates difficulties for finishing school, for going to college, for marrying and for finding a job.)

The adolescents answered an item on the ideal circumstances under which one should first have intercourse (i.e., that a couple should be married, be engaged, be dating steadily, be dating often, be dating occasionally or have just recently met). For this item, we created a scale by coding responses from one to six, according to the relationship at which coitus was deemed acceptable, with one being the most traditional (sex is appropriate only within marriage) and six being the most liberal (sex is appropriate even when a couple has just met).

Finally, the students provided information on their current relationship, on their perception of peers’ sexual experience and on how they would react if they (or their partner) were to become pregnant in the next six months. We analyzed all of these data separately for males and females.

We first conducted bivariate analyses of the proportions who had ever had sex, by each of the characteristics. We then constructed five separate multivariate logistic regression models, each controlling for age, using the variables found to be significant in the bivariate analysis or deemed theoretically important in explaining when adolescents begin sexual activity. Then, as an intermediary step, we assembled a full multivariate model using only those variables significantly associated with first intercourse (plus the constant control for age) in the five individual models. Finally, to obtain the most parsimonious fit, we constructed a final reduced model, which included only those variables significantly associated with sexual initiation from the intermediary full model, as well as the controls for age.

Dummy variables were created to ensure that at least 95% of the sample was included in all multivariate analyses, and to test for differences between respondents who provided data and those who were “missing” on certain variables. For each variable for which more than 5% of the sample did not provide data, the missing were recoded to one, and those who answered the question were coded zero. Thus, if a dummy variable proved to be significant, respondents who were missing data on that variable differed significantly in sexual initiation from those who supplied data. By including the dummy, the main effects of the variable (e.g., among those who provided data) are given, controlling for the effects of missing data.

Findings

Fairly low proportions of the Santiago students reported ever having had sexual intercourse—21% of the young women and 36% of the young men. The young women first had sex at a median of 15.0 years, while young men first did so approximately one year earlier (median of 14.0). Figure 1 shows that, as would be expected, the proportion of male and female respondents who had ever had sex rises with time—from about 10% of males and about 5% of females aged 13 or younger, to around 70% and 35% of 18–19-year-old males and females, respectively. Interestingly, while a higher percentage of males than females in every age-group had ever had sex, the curves diverged more widely by gender from age 16 through ages 18–19, due to a leveling off in the percentage sexually experienced among females but not among males.

Bivariate Analyses

Approximately 26% of the young men and 30% of the young women reported that their father was absent from their home (Table 1); males whose father was absent were slightly more likely than those whose father was present to have started sexual activity (40% vs. 35%), but this difference was not statistically significant. Among young women, the percentage who had ever had sex was significantly higher (p<.05) for those whose father was absent than for those who lived with their father (28% vs. 18%).

Nearly 62% of the young women’s mothers and 51% of the young men’s mothers had less than a high school education (not shown); the mother’s educational level was not related to adolescent sexual initiation.

For both sexes, frequency of church attendance was significantly (p<.05) associated with sexual initiation in the bivariate analysis: Santiago students who never went to services or did so infrequently were much more likely to have ever had sex than were those who attended services more frequently. Academic achievement was also associated with sexual initiation among both sexes, as students with a lower grade-point average were significantly (p<.001) more likely to have initiated sex than were those with a higher grade-point average.

Females gave a higher ideal age than males for first intercourse to occur (which is reflected in the higher actual median ages at first intercourse among the women in the sample). For example, 74% of the young women, but only 53% of the young men, thought a woman should be at least 19 years old before she has sex. For both genders, students who considered younger ages to be ideal were significantly (p<.001) more likely to have ever had sex.