Sex Map Shows Chain of Almost 300 High School Lovers

WASHINGTON (Reuters) – The first "map" of teen sexual behavior gives new meaning to the old warning that you don't just have sex with a person, but with everyone that person ever had sex with, researchers said on Monday.

They found a chain of 288 one-to-one sexual relationships at a high school in the U.S. Midwest, meaning the teenager at the end of the chain may have had direct sexual contact with only one person, but indirect contact with 286 others.

The sociologists who conducted the study said they were surprised by the findings, which also showed that despite reputations and popularity, most teens in their study did not engage in promiscuous behavior with many others.

"From a student's perspective, a large chain like this would boggle the mind," said sociologist James Moody, who led the study. "They might know that their partner had a previous partner. But they don't think about the fact that this partner had a previous partner, who had a partner, and so on."

This means that teens need a different approach to sexual health education and especially prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, the team at Ohio State University said.

Moody and colleagues studied a single Midwestern high school, in an unidentified mid-size town. The students had taken part in an anonymous survey that included details of their sexual behavior.

They found that, just as in the U.S. teen population as an average, just over half the students had ever had sexual intercourse.

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In one instance, 288 students were linked in a one-to-one chain of sexual contact that rarely looped back. In other words, one boy had sex with one girl, who had sex with another boy, who had sex with another girl and so on.

And they were doing it this way on purpose, Moody said. "All the evidence from this network suggests that the kids were very aware of the local pattern and local history of sexual activity," Moody said.

"They know they are not going to date their ex-boyfriend's girlfriend's partner. That's too close." He said it was almost like an incest taboo. "It forces people to find new partners instead of recycling."

This is very different from adult sexual behavior, Moody said. "In adults you'll have like NBA (basketball) stars with thousands and thousands of partners," Moody said.

Attempts to stop the spread of sexually transmitted diseases among adults target highly active people. Among students, it seems, educational outreach might target each one.

"The students in this network are not unusual. They are just average students, and not extremely active sexually. So social policies that could help some of them protect themselves from STDs could break a lot of these chains that can lead to the spread of disease," Moody said.

"Anything that limits that and restricts the flow of body fluids between people would help." That includes education about condom use, abstinence and other policies, he said.

For their study Moody and colleagues used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, done in 1995.

They say their study is representative of mid-size towns. Moody said the behavior at an urban high school, for instance, would likely be different.