

Religiosity and gender differences in transition to first intercourse among Polish students

Abstract

The timing of the first sexual intercourse is one of the dominant foci of research on the sexual behaviour of young people. Numerous factors influence the initiation of sexual activity, including individual, family-related and sociocultural characteristics.

The purpose of this study is to estimate the effects of religiosity and gender on the risk of the first intercourse in university students in Poland.

We analyse data from two comparative studies of affective life, sexual behaviour, and attitudes conducted among university students in 2001 (n=1525) and in 2013 (n=1424). Survival analysis techniques are used to test for relative differences in the effects of religiosity on the timing of the first sexual intercourse.

The results confirm that religiosity is a significant factor differentiating sexual behaviours of students in Poland. However, religiosity is shown to be a significant predictor of sexual abstinence only when the young person regards religion as very important. The unadjusted median age at first sex for participants who attach no importance or little importance to religion is more than 2 years lower than the median among those who find religion very important and who attend church service regularly. There are also significant gender differences, with young males beginning sex earlier than young females, the differences being weaker in 2013. The respondents in 2013 generally reported a younger median age at first sex compared to those who participated in the study in 2001.

The multivariate analyses based on a proportional hazards model show that non-religious young men in 2001 had had their first sex before the 18 birthday 4 times more often compared to young women who found religion very important, vs. 3.2 times more often in 2013. After controlling for family background characteristics and the students' life style during their adolescence, the effect of religion was reduced, but not significantly.