

## Majorities of U.S. Adults Do Not Believe Abstinence Programs are Effective in Preventing or Reducing HIV/AIDS, Unwanted Pregnancies or Extra-Marital Sex

*However, those under 30 are more likely to believe these programs are effective*

Most programs intended to prevent or reduce HIV/AIDS have focused on “safe sex” and the use of condoms, both in this country and abroad. The use of condoms and other contraceptives have also been central to many campaigns to reduce unwanted pregnancies, particularly among teenage girls. However, some conservatives and religious critics of these programs are concerned that promoting condom use encourages promiscuity. This has apparently led to an increase in programs designed to promote abstinence from sex before marriage as a safer and more moral way to prevent HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancies. The question is, do these programs work?

A new Harris Poll finds that only minorities of all U.S. adults, albeit substantial minorities, believe that these abstinence programs work well. Most adults do not believe these programs are effective in reducing extra-marital sex, HIV/AIDS or unwanted pregnancies. Interestingly, however, younger adults are much more likely to believe these programs work. A majority of adults under the age of 30 believe they are at least somewhat effective in preventing or reducing HIV/AIDS, and about half believe they are at least somewhat effective in preventing or reducing unwanted pregnancies.

These are the results of a nationwide Harris Poll of 1,961 U.S. adults surveyed online between December 8 and 14, 2005 by Harris Interactive.

In reviewing these poll results, one should bear in mind that these results only measure perceptions. They do not provide any measures of the actual effectiveness of these programs. Furthermore, even a modest reduction in HIV/AIDS or unwanted pregnancies could reasonably be counted as a success. What this survey reveals is that majorities of adults are skeptical about the effectiveness of these programs.

Key findings include:

- A 58 to 42 percent majority of all adults do not believe that abstinence programs are effective in reducing or preventing HIV/AIDS.
- A 65 to 35 percent majority do not believe that these programs have been effective in preventing or reducing unwanted pregnancies.

Many people do not believe abstinence programs work well to reduce extra-marital sex, and consequently do not believe they are effective in preventing HIV/AIDS. Only 22 percent of all adults believe these programs are very or somewhat effective in reducing extra-marital sex, while 78 percent believe they are not very or not at all effective.

**TABLE 1**

**Awareness of Programs to Promote Abstinence from Sex Before Marriage**

“Have you heard of programs to promote abstinence from sex before marriage to reduce unwanted pregnancies, and HIV/AIDS?”

Base: All adults

	%
Have heard of	78
Have not heard of	13
Not sure	9

**TABLE 2**

**Perceived Effectiveness of Abstinence Programs in Preventing or Reducing HIV/AIDS, Unwanted Pregnancies and Extra-Marital Sex**

“Do you think these programs to promote abstinence have been very effective, somewhat effective, not very effective or not at all effective in preventing or reducing...?”

Base: All adults

		Very Effective	Somewhat Effective	Not Very Effective	Not At All Effective	Very/Somewhat Effective (NET)	Not Very/Not At All Effective (NET)
HIV/AIDS	%	5	37	33	25	42	58
Unwanted pregnancies	%	4	31	37	28	35	65
Extramartial sex	%	2	20	40	38	22	78

**Differences by Party**

There are substantial differences in attitudes toward abstinence programs among political parties. Although Republicans are more likely to see them as effective, majorities, regardless of political affiliation, do not think abstinence programs are effective in reducing or preventing extra-marital sex or unwanted pregnancies. Furthermore, while clear majorities of Democrats and Independents think these programs have not been effective in reducing or preventing HIV/AIDS, Republicans are equally divided as to whether or not they think they have been effective.

## Differences by age

The most striking, and surely the most important differences among various demographic groups are the differences between younger and older adults. Adults under the age of 30 are much more likely to believe that abstinence programs are effective, and it is of course these adults (and teens who were not included in this survey) who are the main targets for these programs.

Fully 56 percent of people aged 18 to 24, and 60 percent of those aged 25 to 29 believe abstinence programs are effective in reducing or preventing HIV/AIDS, compared to only 31 percent of people aged 65 and over. Forty-nine percent of people aged 18 to 24 and 52 percent of those aged 25 to 29 think abstinence programs are effective in reducing or preventing unwanted pregnancies, compared to only 30 percent of people aged 65 or older.

**TABLE 3**  
**Those Thinking Abstinence Programs are Effective – by Age and Party**  
“Do you think these programs to promote abstinence have been very effective, somewhat effective, not very effective or not at all effective in preventing or reducing?”  
*Percent saying somewhat or very effective*

Base: All adults

	Total	Age						Party ID		
		18-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50-64	65+	Republican	Democrat	Independent
		n=1,961	n=148	n=129	n=206	n=457	n=586	n=435	n=620	n=614
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
HIV/AIDS	42	56	60	43	41	37	31	50	39	34
Unwanted Pregnancies	35	49	52	35	33	28	30	46	28	32
Extra-marital sex	22	28	31	22	22	19	18	31	17	18

## Methodology

*The Harris Poll* was conducted online within the United States between December 8 and 14, 2005 among 1,961 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

In theory, with probability samples of this size, one could say with 95 percent certainty that the overall results have a sampling error of plus or minus 2 percentage points of what they would be if the entire U.S. adult population had been polled with complete accuracy. Sampling error for the various sub-samples listed in the tables above is higher and varies. Unfortunately, there are several other possible sources of error in all polls or surveys that are probably more serious than theoretical

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calculations of sampling error. They include refusals to be interviewed (nonresponse), question wording and question order, and weighting. It is impossible to quantify the errors that may result from these factors. This online sample was not a probability sample.

*These statements conform to the principles of disclosure of the National Council on Public Polls. J W26225 Q 750, 756*

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