

What That Survey Didn't Say

Last year on cable television, I saw a sex and hypocrisy double-header: "Peyton Place" followed by "Return to Peyton Place." The first movie begins with shots of the village churches, which do a brisk business on Sunday morning. Then it shows what the sanctimonious churchgoers do the rest of the week—the drunken lout who rapes his stepdaughter; the unwed mother who invents a dead husband to legitimize her child; the self-deluding mother whose refusal to acknowledge incest in her family leads first to murder, then to suicide.

I thought of "Peyton Place" when I read the University of Chicago's National Health and Social Life Survey, which has just been published as a hardcover book called "Sex in America" and purports to be a definitive account of American sexual habits—in the 1990's. This study, distinguished from other sex surveys because it investigates a "random sample" of respondents, suggests that the sexual revolution never happened. It presents Americans as a faithful bunch—85 percent of married women and more than 75 percent of married men say they engage in sex exclusively with their spouse.

It also shrinks the figure for gay men and women in the general population from Alfred Kinsey's 10 percent for men to 2.8 percent for men and 1.4 percent for women. And it suggests that conservative Protestant married ladies have better sex lives than their secular counterparts—a phenomenon linked without irony to Marabel Morgan's 1973 best seller *The Total Woman*, the basis of a marriage enrichment course taught in church-affiliated work shops that cited scripture to justify adventurous marital sex.

Is it just me, or are these results so foreign as to be almost other-worldly? Is it hard to take such statistics at face value? From *The Scarlet Letter* and *Ethan Frome* to *Rabbit, Run* and *Revolutionary Road*, Americans in literature have maintained the appearance of propriety while surreptitiously indulging their passions. Is it odd to think that real-life Americans might do the same? Would the burghers of Peyton Place have confessed to a researcher from the University of Chicago what they couldn't tell their spouses, clergymen or closest friends?

"People might find it hard to tell the truth in a face-to-face interview because they feel that to confess behavior that seems bad or degraded is to risk being unlovable," Ellen Handler Spitz, who writes on esthetics and psychoanalysis, said to me recently. Not only do they conceal their behavior from others, "they seem not even be able to admit it to themselves."

True, the University of Chicago team made every effort to glean the truth from its 3,432 participants. In their face-to-face interviews the researchers asked the same question different ways, and allowed written answers in response to potentially embarrassing questions.

But quantifying sexual practices is not as innocuous as charting the brand of soap people prefer, even when the sexual behavior seems to have the soaplike attribute of being 99 44/100 percent pure. Statistics can be used to influence public policy. This is not to tar the Chicago team as a dupe of cultural conservatives; when Senator Jesse Helms accused the project of being anti-family in 1991, it lost Federal financing and had to apply for private grants.

But the alleged return to marital fidelity can be used to "prove" that heterosexuals are at relatively low risk for contracting AIDS and thus to justify cutbacks in research financing. (Back to the study: can you imagine a husband mindful of his image telling the lady from Hyde Park—most of the interviewers were middle-aged women—that he often visits prostitutes on business trips? I'd be a lot more comfortable with the Chicago study's figures if they had been obtained with a polygraph.)

A friend recently told me that when her gynecologist asked her how many sexual partners she had had in her life, she blushed and reduced the number by half. Her lie reminded me of the section in *Sex in America* on losing virginity. Allowed by the researchers to circle only one motive from a list of choices including "peer pressure," "affection for partner" and "wedding night," virtually no women "said that they wanted or went along with sex for physical pleasure." Well that's what the women said, anyway.

Op-Ed The New York Times
By M. C. Lord

Read Polls With Care

Ruth Walker
Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

With polling data as common in the news pages nowadays as box scores are on the sports pages, thoughtful readers need to approach these compiled numbers with caution.

“The first question to ask is: ‘Are the questions quoted exactly as they were put to the respondents?’” says Renate Köcher, managing director of the Allensbach Institute here.

In polling, the formulation of the questions is all-important, Dr. Köcher says. If a news article paraphrases poll questions, critical nuances can be lost. While agreeing that it can be tedious to reproduce a questionnaire verbatim, she says footnoting to the original source is a help.

“You should also pay attention to whether ‘undecided’ responses are included,” Köcher says. “The more complicated the question, the more ‘undecideds’ there should be. And if these are eliminated, and results are presented in terms of for or against, you get a distorted picture.”

Some researchers see the size of the sample—a minimum of 1,500 people, for instance—as of great importance. But for Köcher, it is less vital.

Responses to the so-called “Sunday question”—“If the election were this Sunday, whom would you vote for?”—are a staple of the weekly press in Germany. For some time they have suggested that the government of Chancellor Helmut Kohl is in trouble with voters.

But Köcher says that these data are often misunderstood. “Chancellor Kohl says, ‘Others win the polls, but I win the elections,’” she notes.

“Popularity figures for politicians are always suspect. The leader always polarizes, drawing approval from some but disapproval from others.... Someone who’s not in power has more opportunity to make a purely positive impression without the negatives.”

With the next federal elections nine months off, it is simply too early for “Sunday” data to be relevant.

“You can’t project a year ahead,” Köcher says. “At this point only about 40 percent of the electorate has decided whom to vote for.”

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Different Survey, Different Truth

The text below was excerpted from an article about crime in America (“Changing Minds,” *U.S. News & World Report*, July 30, 2001). It shows that one survey alone can give a distorted picture of the real situation. If the reader is not careful, writers or people in public a position can exploit this to support their goals.

It’s not news anymore that crime and welfare dependency are on the decline. The violent crime rate went down 31 percent from 1991 to 2000; the murder rate—the single most reliable crime statistic—fell by 42 percent. The number of welfare recipients dropped by 56 percent from 1994 to 2000—the sharpest slide in history.

But striking as those numbers are, they do not measure the full extent of the good news. For that, we need to look at numbers within the numbers. There we find vivid evidence that there has been a major change of mind among Americans, especially in groups—the poor, the black—that have been more likely than others to be convicted of crimes or be on welfare. It is a reversal of a shift in the other direction 30 years ago. And it means that the past decade’s gains in reducing crime and welfare dependency are not just temporary results of a good macroeconomy but are deeply rooted and likely to stick.

First, the numbers within numbers about crime. In May, the FBI released its figures indicating that the number of crimes held steady between 1999 and 2000—after a five-year dip. Somewhat depressing news. But just a month later, the Justice Department released the results of another survey that showed violent crime down 15 percent in 1999-2000—the biggest one-year decrease ever.

Why the different results? The FBI gets its data from police departments, the Justice Department from a random nationwide survey of 159,000 individuals. And the Justice Department’s respondents who were victims of crime in 2000 were more likely than past respondents to say they reported those crimes to the police. Hence, fewer crimes were committed, but about the same number were reported to the police.