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EDITORIAL: Songs influence sexual behavior

It should be no surprise that researchers have found that teenagers who prefer popular songs with degrading sexual references are more likely to engage in intercourse or in pre-coital activities. Since there are more than 750,000 teenage pregnancies each year, with up to 25 percent of all female adolescents in the United States having sexually transmitted infections, this is a finding of much more than mere academic interest.

The survey of 711 9th grade students at three large urban high schools, described in the April issue of the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, found participants were on average exposed to over 14 hours each week of lyrics describing degrading sex - pretty shocking in itself. The article's author, Dr. Brian A. Primack of the Center for Research on Health Care at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, stated, "This study demonstrates that, among this sample of young adolescents, high exposure to lyrics describing degrading sex in popular music was independently associated with higher levels of sexual behavior. In fact, exposure to lyrics describing degrading sex was one of the strongest associations with sexual activity."

Those with the most exposure to degrading sexual lyrics were more than twice as likely to have had sexual intercourse as those with the least exposure, whether they were boys or girls. Among those who had not had sexual intercourse, the pattern was the same - those in the highest third of exposure to the lyrics were nearly twice as likely to have progressed along a non-coital sexual path compared to those in the lowest third. Relationships between exposure to lyrics describing non-degrading sex and sexual outcomes were not significant, the study also found. The results build on previous studies indicating that exposure to

sex in media messages may be a risk factor for early sexual progression, Dr. Primack pointed out.

There should be little doubt of the validity of this study or the consequences of the message these teenagers receive. It is widely accepted that - in many cases, at least - babies respond to stimulus, abuse causes resentment, love intoxicates, rejection hurts, motivational speeches excite and diatribes inflame, great literature or art or films or views of nature inspire. The mind absorbs; people act out; teens with raging hormones and libidos even more so. Why should hours upon hours of degrading sexual songs not have a pernicious effect?

It is perhaps unrealistic to expect young teenagers to voluntarily turn over a new leaf. Nor will the purveyors of the filth willingly abandon producing it without extreme public pressure. Parents need to be extremely vigilant and inquisitive. Congress and state legislatures have a role to play in combating popular song availability to youngsters (though we don't have much hope this will work very well). This should not be cast as a free speech issue. It's responsible protection of children in a battle against misogyny and defilement that is diminishing the future of many youths and cheapening the nation.