Figure 2.3a. STUDY ERROR: An Example from a Sample Survey

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Return to sexual conservatism by teens a myth: survey

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The myth: Teen-agers are returning to a stricter sexual value system and their parents now have better communication with their children about sex.

The fact: Teen-agers are more liberal than ever in sexual activities, while parents are as awkward as ever about discussing sex with their children.

And the gap has fostered a tremendous problem for teen-agers in getting proper information about sex and birth control.

That's the finding of Edward Herold, a University of Guelph sociologist who recently surveyed teen-aged girls attending 10 birth-control clinics in southern Ontario.

His study of nearly 200 girls revealed that teen-agers are having sexual intercourse more frequently and at an earlier age than previous generations.

That contradicts the belief these days that kids are returning to more conservative values, he says.

Instead, he found that 90 per cent of the girls believed there's nothing wrong with premarital sex. More than one-third of them had sexual intercourse by 15 years of age and 81 per cent by 17 years.

"But most of them are afraid to discuss birth control with their parents because they believe their parents would disapprove of their sexual activities," Herold says.

"So it appears that despite all of what we hear these days about more liberated attitudes of parents, they're as reluctant as ever to discuss sex with their children."

He says most parents either have no idea of what their children are doing sexually or they don't want to know.

"It's a rather surprising finding, since so many recent surveys have shown that the adult population is now more permissive than ever before about premarital sex.

"But when it comes right down to discussions about sex with their own children, they feel embarrassed, or generally uneasy with the subject. So they behave the same way as their own parents did with them.

"This is really where the generation gap is today. Ten years ago, it was over political and social issues. Now, kids and their parents are basically in agreement on those issues. But on sex, the gap is as wide, or wider, than ever."

And Herold says schools, despite the boom in sex-education programs, aren't doing much better.

"Teachers don't have enough training in how to handle open discussions and presentation of information in classes. They're simply not given adequate training. So they tend to feel as awkward as parents."

Even the family doctor tends to fall down on the job of providing sex education and information on birth control for teenagers, Herold says.

"But the problem there is often that the girls are afraid that the doctor will tell her parents and that will create problems at home."

"The doctor is caught in the middle because he's probably had a long association with the entire family, so he feels a great deal of responsibility to the parents."

So it all leaves girls with just one last resort in their search for sex education and advice on birth control – their friends. And not friends of the male variety. Just three per cent of the girls said their boyfriends provided knowledgeable advice or could even steer them to a birth-control clinic.

So it's their girlfriends who finally come to the rescue with some first-hand advice, or at least directions to the nearest birth-control clinic.

But Herold said that assistance frequently comes too late.

His survey shows that fewer than 20 per cent of the girls were using the pill when they first had intercourse. And many had little or no information about side-effects of the pill.

"There are more and more young pregnancies all the time, and the reason appears to be that the girls simply don't know enough about methods of birth-control, or even how to get the information.

"So you end up with teen-aged mothers who aren't emotionally equipped to handle the responsibility of a child. It creates horrendous problems for the children ... and, of course, for the mothers."

Herold says the solution is obvious – teachers and parents who are better trained for sex education in schools and at home.

"It's obvious that more than a half-day workshop must be devoted to training teachers for such an important job."

"And parents could perhaps be educated through special television programs designed to help them discuss sex and birth control more openly with their children."

But meanwhile, he says, far too many teen-aged girls are left only with the oldest, and worst, source of sex education – the street corner.

"So it'll be interesting to see how they handle sex education with their own children."

1 What were the *data* in this sample survey?

2 What was the main *Answer* from the survey?
- Describe briefly *how* study error imposes a limitation on this Answer.
- Assess briefly the *severity* of the limitation imposed here by study error.

3 Apart from study error, which *other* categories of error impose a limitation on the answer from this sample survey? Explain briefly.

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