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Background

Approximately 1.6 million US youth under age 18 experience housing insecurity annually. These adolescents are at higher risk for negative reproductive health outcomes than their sheltered peers. Few studies have examined the relationship biopsychosocial factors have with sexual activity and contraception use in this population. This study aimed to address this gap. We hypothesize that biopsychosocial factors have relationships with sexual activity and contraceptive utilization among homeless adolescents.

Methods

An IRB-approved, retrospective cohort study was conducted on adolescents who presented between 2/21/2015-8/27/2019 for state mandated physical exams at a youth crisis shelter in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Statistical analyses were performed using univariate and multivariable techniques to describe the population and determine the relationship age, gender identity, substance use, and childhood trauma history have with sexual activity and contraceptive utilization.

Results

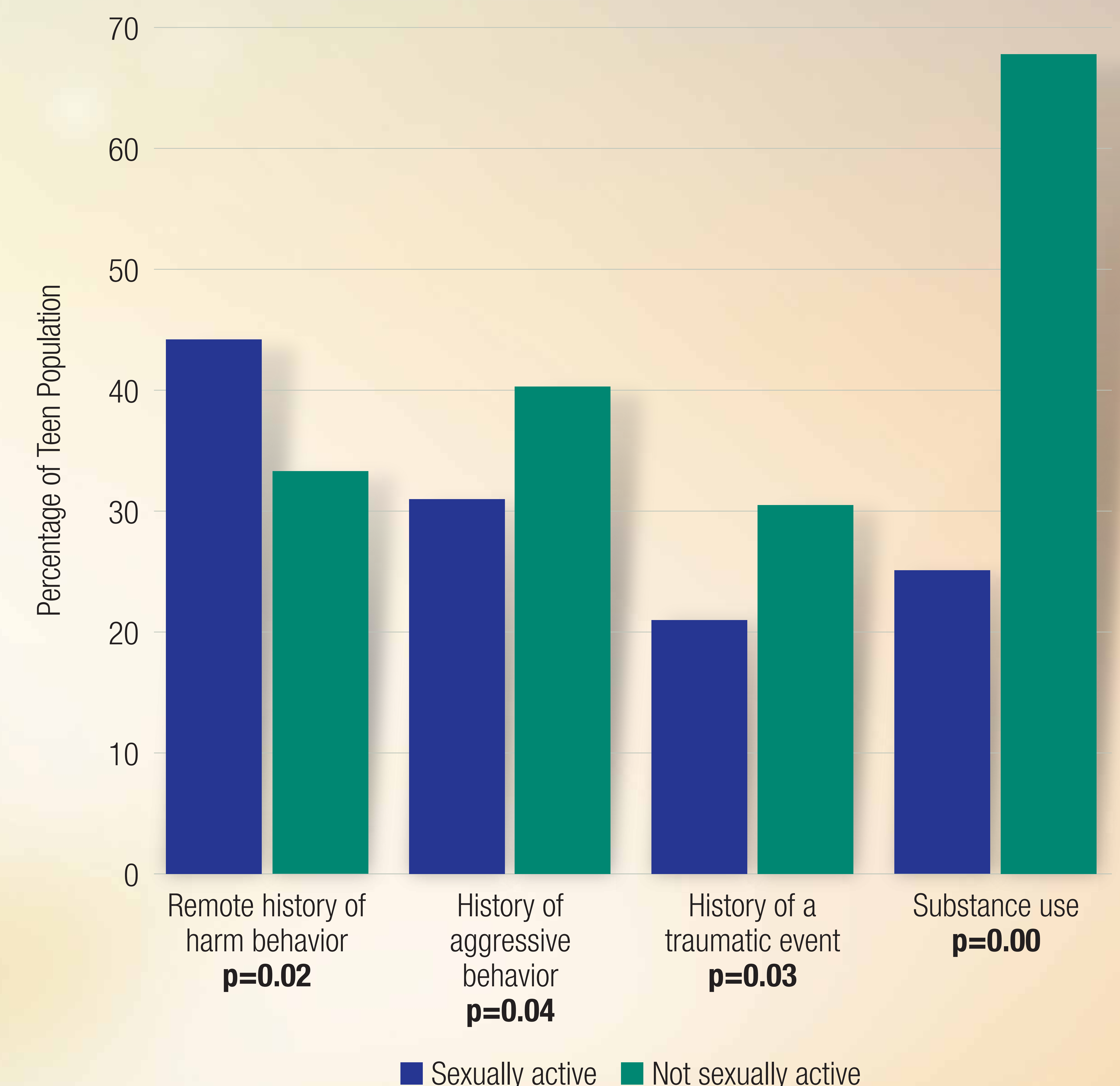
Records for 440 adolescents were reviewed. Of those, 53.7% (n=233) reported sexual activity and 65.2% (n=148 of 227) of sexually active youth reported using contraception. Sexual activity was significantly related to age (mean age 15.8+1.4 years in sexually active vs. 14.7+1.6 years in not sexually active youth,

p<0.001); remote history of self-harm behavior (RR 1.23 [95% CI 1.03-1.46]; p=0.02), history of aggressive behavior (RR 1.21 [95% CI 1.01-1.46]; p=0.04), history of trauma (RR 1.24 [95% CI 1.04-1.48]; p=0.03), and substance use (RR 2.27 [95%CI 1.86-2.77]; p<0.001) (Figure 1). Gender identity was related to contraceptive utilization, with 55.68% of sexually active females vs. 42.50% of sexually active males reporting contraception use (p=0.01). After adjusted analysis, older age and substance use remained significantly associated with sexual activity (AOR 1.58 [95% CI 1.36-1.84]; p<0.001 and AOR 5.25 [95% CI 3.33-8.28]; p<0.001, respectively).

Conclusions

Adolescents experiencing homelessness face challenges engaging in safe sex practices and are at higher risk for poor reproductive health outcomes compared to their housed peers. This analysis demonstrates that specific characteristics have significant relationships with sexual behaviors in this population. Substance users were two times more likely and older adolescents were one and a half times more likely to be sexually active. Further, a significant gap in contraceptive use existed between female and male-identifying youth. Understanding the potential risk factors for unsafe sex practices can inform interventions, careful history taking and further inquiry into methods to reduce poor outcomes and facilitate safe sexual behaviors in this at-risk population.

Biopsychosocial factors and sexual activity among homeless adolescents



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