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*Factors Influencing College Students Hooking Up*

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**Key words:** college students, hooking up, casual sex, sexual behavior

**Abstract:** Hooking up is becoming common practice around college campuses these days. Many college students are putting aside the emotional and physical harm that come with hooking up to fill a sexual need. Making students aware of the damage they are causing themselves and others is an important social issue to be addressed. In order to address this, an understanding of who has the greatest chances of hooking up is important to narrow the at risk target group. In doing research it has been found that students that were raised by divorced or single parent families, lived in low income and/or high risk neighborhoods, felt strong peer pressure to engage in sexual activity and/or underage drinking, felt influenced by society's views/expectations and/or had a strong desire to earn a favorable status, run a substantially greater chance of hooking up.

## **Introduction**

College students are at the point in their life generally regarded as their “so-called ‘sexual prime’” (Chambers 2000:1). “Surveys suggest that 80 percent of college students are sexually active, and 60 percent engage in casual sex” (Chambers 2002:1). Casual sex is a component of the common practice hooking up, which ranges “from kissing to having sex, with no expectations of anything further” (Davis 2001:1).

There are several detriments to hooking up, both emotionally and physically. Kelleher feels “hooking up is a lousy replacement for cultural courtship rituals and...hookups are void of emotional connection” (2001:2). There is also the imminent danger of transmitting STDs and conception, which is often overlooked during the act of hooking up. Studies have found that “hookup partners usually don’t talk about sexual histories or take precautions against STDs or pregnancy” (Kelleher 2001:1). Of the 80 percent of college students that are sexually active mentioned above, “55 percent admit to practicing unsafe sex” (Chambers 2000:1).

Promoting “sexual, physical, and psychological health and safety and support(ing) positive sexual identity development” (Paul and Hayes 2002:640) are important social issues to be addressed with college students actively hooking up. But in order to address it efficiently it would be helpful to understand which college students have a higher likelihood of hooking up. By targeting college students who are actively hooking up, we can aim to make them “aware of the real threats that exist so that they stop their reckless

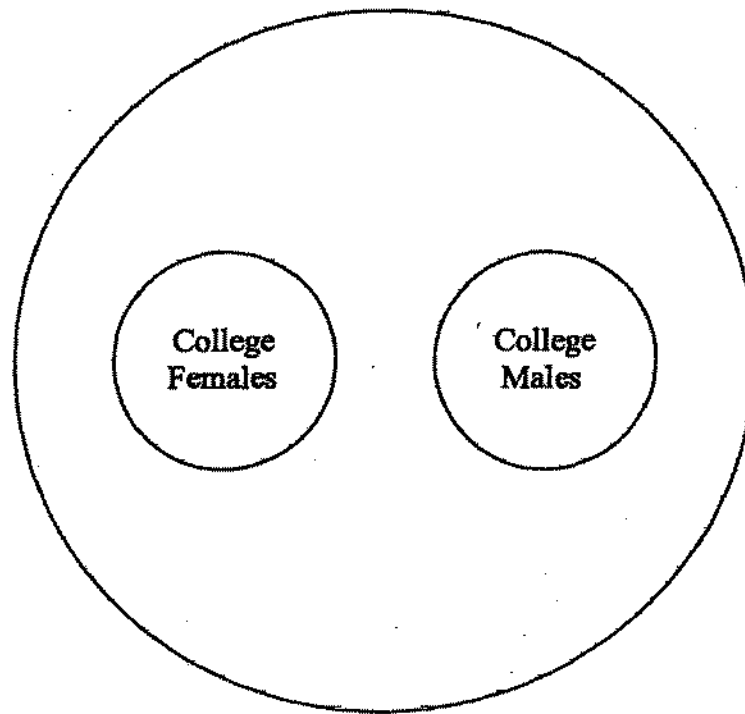
and irresponsible behaviors” (Torres 1997:2). Or at least we can hope they will approach the behavior with more caution.

Research concerning hooking up was done to discover relationships affecting the elements and boundaries of the social system model (see Figure 1: Social system model of college students and hooking up). The resources used include journal articles and internet searches, which will be discussed in further detail in the following section: Methods. The article by Baumer and South (2001:540-554) was not valuable to my research and will not be mentioned to any further extent.

### **Method**

Research was obtained by examining studies done recently that address hooking up among college students. Both credited, peer reviewed journal articles and internet articles and studies dedicated to the topic of hooking up amongst college students were explored to reach conclusions on the topic. The elements of this social system are reasonably basic and straightforward. The boundaries were chosen because students younger than 19 are generally not enrolled in college and students over the age of 24 are at a different stage in their life and would require separate research. The relationships were derived from factors that repeatedly showed up in research done on the topic. These relationships include being raised by a divorced or single parent family, living in a low income and/or high risk neighborhood, feeling peer pressure regarding sexual activity

**Social System: College Students**



**Elements:** College Females  
College Males

**Boundary:** College Students age 19-24

**Relationships:** Raised by divorced or single parent families  
Living in low income and/or high risk neighborhoods  
Feeling peer pressure to engage in sexual activity or underage drinking  
Pressure from society's views/expectations  
Striving to achieve favorable social status

**Figure 1:** Social system model of college students and hooking up

and/or underage drinking, internalizing society's views/expectations, and striving to obtain a favorable status. Any one, or combination, of these factors has been found to influence college students' decision to hook up, as illustrated by Figure 1: Social system model of college students and hooking up.

## **Results**

Research supports that "on today's campuses sex is anything but taboo – it is practically a given" (Chambers 2002:1). In a study done by Paul and Hayes (2002), they found that 70 percent of the participants "reported having participated in a hookup during their college years" (p.644). Further research allows us to focus on several specific factors in college students' lives that influence their chances of actively hooking up (see Figure 2: State/Process model of college students and hooking up). These factors include being raised by a divorced or single parent family, living in a low income and/or high risk neighborhood, feeling peer pressure regarding sexual activity and/or underage drinking, internalizing society's views/expectations, and striving to obtain a favorable status. Examining in greater detail each factor individually will allow us to better understand its overall importance in influencing college students' decision to hook up.

The first factor studied is being raised by a divorced or single parent family. It has been found that stable and satisfactory marriages play a key role in the proper socialization and overall wellbeing of children. Yet, there has been a startling trend in

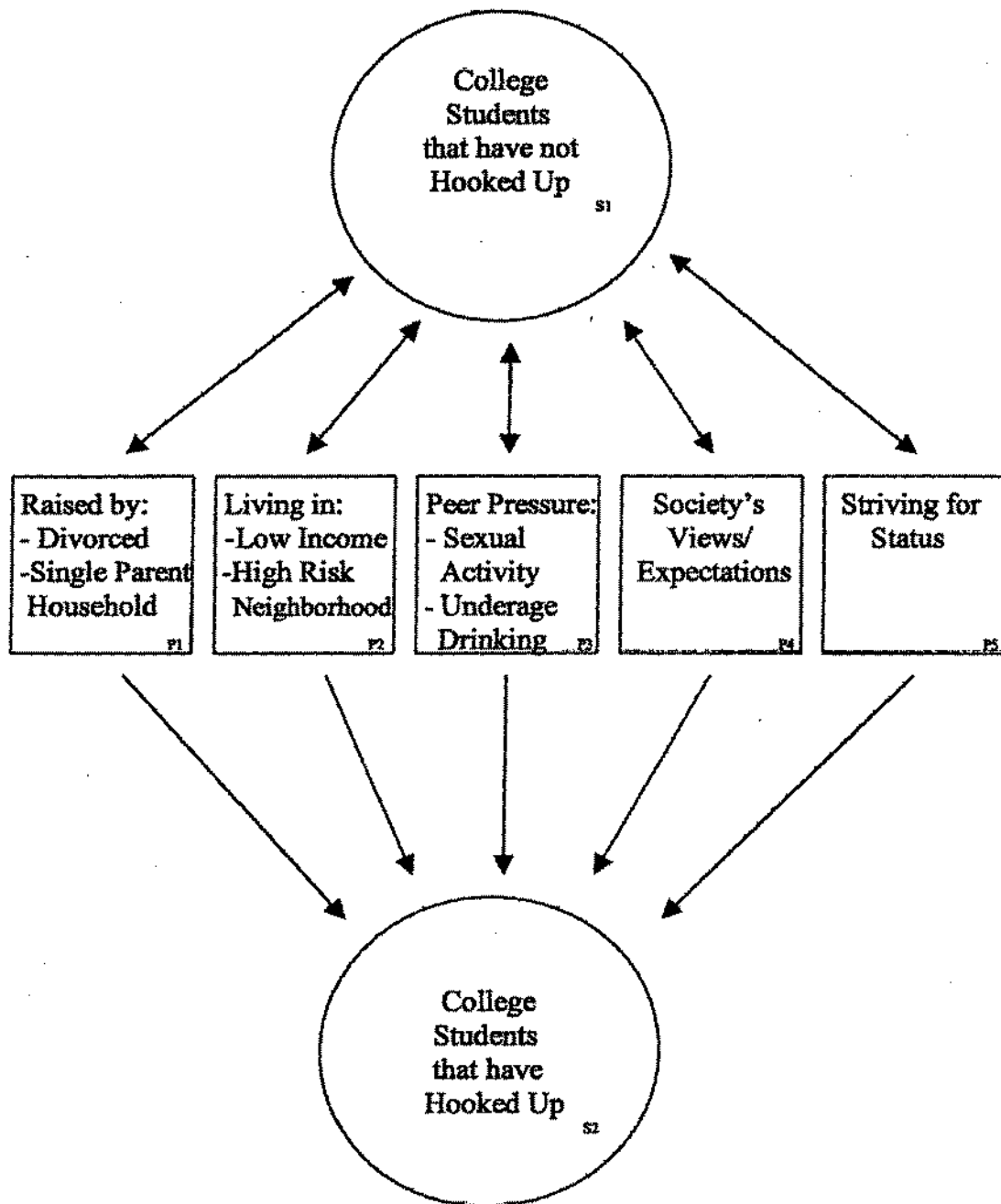
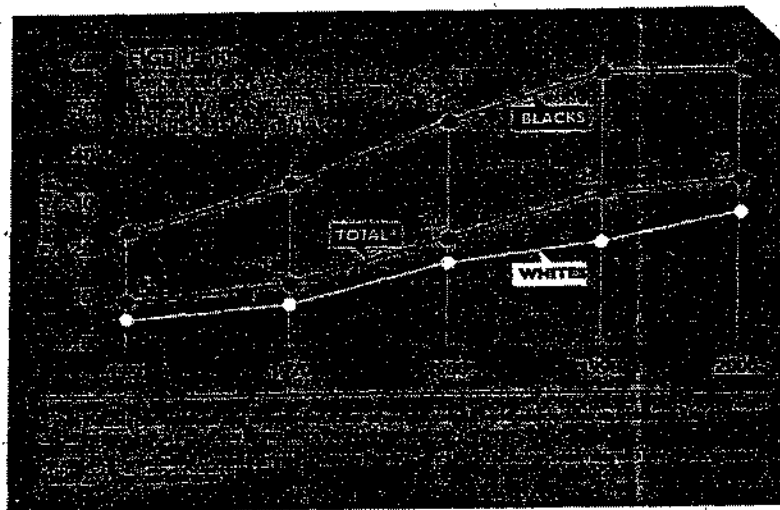


Figure 2: State/Process model of college students and hooking up

our society over the past four decades toward single parent families. In 1960 only nine percent of all children lived in single parent families; by 2000 the percentage had jumped to 27 percent (see Figure 3: Children Living in Single Parent Families). Miller (2002) has found “studies consistently show that living with a single parent is related to adolescents being more likely to have had sexual intercourse” due to “single or divorced parents’ more permissive sexual attitudes, lesser parental supervision, and parents’ own dating activity” (p.22). Based on the attitudes of their parents, children in a single parent family adopt their own “permissive attitudes and behaviors regarding premarital intercourse” (Jeynes 2001:130). Glenn and Marquardt (2001) found that “35 percent of women from intact families reported having hooked up at least once in college, compared to 42 percent of women from divorced families” (p.36). They also reported that in agreement with findings in other surveys “women from divorced families were also more likely to be sexually active” (2001:36). Parents are an important source of developing attitudes and if hooking up isn’t given a negative stigma during a youth’s developing years, they are more likely to view hooking up as normal and ok. The movement toward single parent families has been considered one of the most important of the recent family trends affecting children and adolescents, which would make it an important factor to weigh in when targeting college students that are the most at risk for hooking up.

The second circumstance playing an influential role is the neighborhood in which the college student was raised. Miller (2002) has found “in neighborhoods that are characterized by high residential turnover, poverty, and crime rates, and which are

**Figure 3: Children Living in Single Parent Families**



**Source:** Popenoe, David, Barbara Dafoe Whitehead. 2002. "The State of Our Unions."  
*National Marriage Project*. Retrieved April 13, 2003  
(<http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/SOOU/SOOU2002.pdf>).



perceived by residents to be dangerous” sexual activity begins at a younger age (p.22). Youth engaging in sexual activity at a young age carry that practice with them and continue to hook up frequently during their college years. While the research available on this variable indicates that it is an important aspect to study, the amount of research existing at this time is minimal.

The third important factor is feeling peer pressure to engage in sexual activity and/or underage drinking. According to Paul, McManus and Hayes (2000) “adolescents’ perceptions of their friends’ liberal sexual attitudes and sexual activity influenced their own sexual choices” (p.4). Many females entering college “feel the pressure from their need to be desired by members of the opposite sex” (Torres 1997:1). Men also feel pressure “to win acceptance of their college friends” so they engage in sexual activity to fit in (Torres 1997:1). Paul and Hayes (2002) found that when males were comparing hookup experiences one of the main reasons they would categorize a hookup as their best hookup experience was because they had achieved a goal (see Figure 4: Explanations of Lingering Feelings from a Hook Up). The perceptions “held by both men and women in college concerning their sexuality contribute to the wide acceptance of casual sex in non-monogamous relationships” (Torres 1997:1). Studies have also found that alcohol plays a significant role in the practice of hooking up. A study of college students done by Hingson, Heeren, Winter, and Wechsler (2003) found that “generally the earlier the onset of first being drunk, the greater the likelihood of saying they had unplanned...sex because of drinking” (p.38) (see Figure 5: Percentage of College Students engaging in Casual Sex in relation to the Age First Intoxicated). Additionally, studies have found that

**Figure 4: Explanations of Lingering Feelings from a Hook Up**

**TABLE 4**  
**Participants' reasons for designating hookup experiences as best or worst (proportions)**

	Best hookup experience (%)		Worst hookup experience (%)		
	Females	Males	Females	Males	
Interest, attraction, partner was good-looking	.33	.42	Intoxication (alcohol and/or drugs)	63	58
Enjoyment of sexual behavior and partner's body	.24	.37	Forced sexual behavior against own will	43	10.5**
A relationship evolved out of the hookup	.27	.16	Used as an object for partner's physical pleasure	29	10.5*
Felt wanted and cared about	.23	.16	Regret and/or embarrassment that hookup happened	27	16
Excitement	.16	.05	No interest in partner; partner was not attractive	16	42**
Comfort, security, trust	.14	.05	Uncomfortable	13	10.5
No attachment or emotional involvement	.10	.10	Partner was too aggressive	17	0*
No alcohol or drug use	.09	0	Had intercourse with no STD/pregnancy protection	6	5
Self-confidence, felt part of the group	.09	.16	Cheated on romantic partner	4	5
Intoxication (alcohol and/or drugs)	.06	.16	Physically hurt	2.5	0
Partner was not pressuring	.06	0	I wanted a relationship to develop, partner did not	2.5	0
Achieved a goal	.04	.26***	Partner wanted a relationship to develop, I did not	2.5	5
More emotional than physical	.01	.05	Promiscuous partner	0	10.5**
Riskiness	.01	0	Sexually frustrated, partner teased/lead me on	0	21***

*Note.* Sex differences assessed by a z-test for significance of the difference between two proportions.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Source:** Paul, Elizabeth L. and Kristen A. Hayes. 2002. "The casualties of 'casual' sex: A qualitative exploration of the phenomenology of college students' hookups." *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 19(5):652.

**Figure 5: Percentage of College Students engaging in Casual Sex in relation to the Age First Intoxicated**

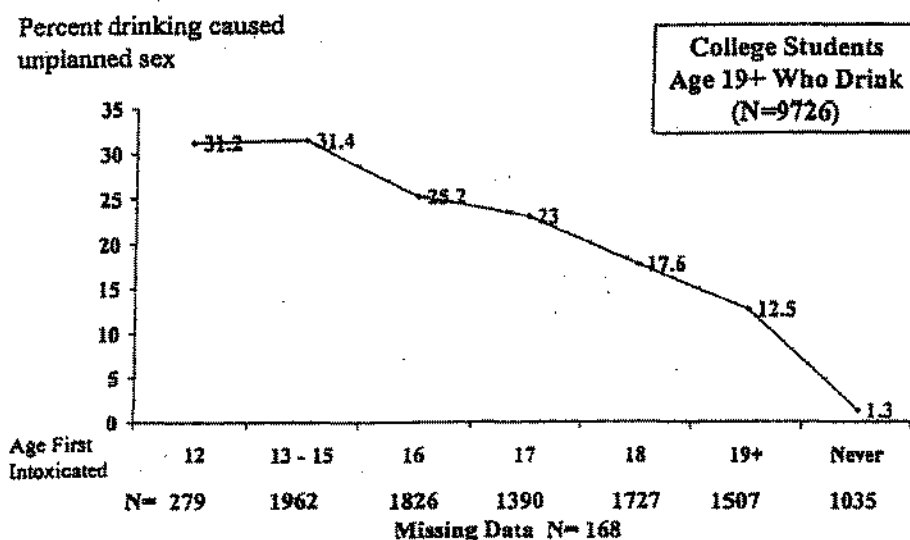


Fig 5. 1999 CAS: drinking caused unplanned sex.

Source: Hingson, Ralph, Timothy Heeren, Michael R. Winter, and Henry Wechsler. 2003. "Early Age of First Drunkenness as a Factor in College Students' Unplanned and Unprotected Sex Attributable to Drinking." *Pediatrics* 111(1):34-41.

“alcohol and drugs are typically involved” (Paul and Hayes 2002:645) in 58 percent of hookups. In a study done by Cooper (2002) it was found that “heavy episodic drinkers were nearly three times as likely to have had multiple sex partners in the past month than were non-heavy episodic drinkers” (p.10). The pressure from their peers to fit in, impress each other, and participate in activities such as drinking, affect college students’ decision to hook up.

A fourth influence on college students is factoring how society’s views/expectations match their actions. One message being advised to college students by “colleges and parents is to delay marriage and focus on their careers” (*Wall Street Journal* 2001:2). For women the median age for first time marriage was “25.1 in 2000, up from less than 20.8 in 1970” (Glenn and Marquardt 2001:7). The recommendation of delaying marriage lacks alternatives for seeking sexual pleasure interim, resulting in casual hook ups to fill the void. Levinson, Jaccard, and Beamer (1995) found that for women a “sense of physical relaxation that results from sex” (p. 361) was a significant motivation for hooking up. They also found that among both male and female adolescents there was likelihood for “positive propensity for casual sex if they valued more highly the physical pleasure of sex” (p.361). “According to Western sociocultural expectations sexual experience is a reinforced aspect of masculinity but a violation of acceptable female sexual behavior” (Paul and Hayes 2002:642). To counter societal standards, females tend to claim their primary reason for hooking up is due to interpersonal motivation. Meanwhile, men can hook up and assert that society views it as acceptable and therefore it is justified. Both male and female college students are

influenced by the views/expectations imposed by society. "It appears that dependence or over reliance on others' advice and expectations is associated with susceptibility to peer norms and influence" (Paul, McManus and Hayes 2000:4). While the views/expectations may be different per gender, both sexes can rationalize and validate the views/expectations to appropriately work for them.

Finally, the fifth factor that is fundamental in understanding if college students will hook up is their quest to obtain a favorable status among their peers. Often this status is earned by hooking up on a regular basis. A study done by Paul and Hayes (2002) found that "students anticipate positive social consequences (e.g., social status) and therefore positive emotional consequences (e.g., self-esteem, self-confidence) for engaging in casual sex" (p. 656). Becoming more popular with other men "was significantly related to casual sex attitudes" (Levinson, Jaccard and Beamer 1995:361) for both sexes. "In the case of males, this belief connotes gaining social status with one's peers, whereas in the case of females, the belief connotes increasing one's attractiveness with respect to members of the opposite sex" (Levinson, et al. 1995:361). Status is very important to college students. If by practicing hooking up they can achieve a positive label and earn a prestigious status they are more likely to partake in that activity.

### **Conclusion**

Hooking up is a growing trend on college campuses. Based on the research analyzed it can be determined that all the factors - family structure,

neighborhoods, peer pressure, society's views/expectations, and status - play a unique and vital role in predicting which college students are more likely to hook up. As our research has shown us college students from a divorced or single parent family are strongly influenced by such a family composition, yet they have no direct control over that factor in their life. That would make this a variable that is important when looking for college students to study, but is not one that can be manipulated by someone trying to bring about change in a college student's behaviors. Another variable that is not determined by the college student is the neighborhood they were raised in, but it is also an important variable in the total picture of highly susceptible college students. Overall neighborhoods are a variable that could use some further research to better understand the extent to which it plays a factor. A variable that plays a huge role in influencing college students to hook up is peer pressure, specifically to engage in sexual activity and/or underage drinking. This predictor is one that college students have some control over and therefore can be focused on when trying to create change amongst college students that are hooking up. Society's view/expectation is not one that college students can control, but how they internalize what they are presented with is an issue that can be focused on to bring about change. Much of the same is true for status. While college students can't control how their peers rank them, they can find ways to feel ok with where they stand, even if it's not considered the most desirable status. The purpose of helping college students justify where others place them would be to show them that they don't need to participate in activities, such as casual sex, to gain friends and win their acceptance.

Overall the research done at this time indicates that all of the variables examined in this research paper are worth taking into consideration when determining which college students to focus on for further research. If you were in a position of working on increasing awareness of the detriments of hooking up you would potentially want to target students that have at least one of the factors examined in their life. An even more at risk target would be a college student with all the variables playing an active role in their life. I concur with Paul, McManus and Hayes (2000) in their opinion that a “longitudinal study is needed to tease apart the directional nature of relationships among social and psychological factors and hookup experience. Following adolescents from as early as junior high school through early adulthood would help to untangle triggers to hookups” (p.18). Now that previous research has been studied to determine who will hook up, further research will hopefully shed light on why hooking up has become so standard and accepted and in which direction this trend will continue.

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## Appendix

The author is a graduating senior at San Diego State University. She will graduate in the spring with a Bachelor of Art degree in Sociology. While attending SDSU, the author worked full-time as a producer of a radio morning show. Through her work she has made many connections in various media fields. One such association was with a Senior Correspondent for Time Magazine. By virtue of this contact she was part of a research piece done by Time Magazine on college students hooking up. Being a part of this story peaked her interest in learning more about the topic. At the time this research paper was written the Time Magazine article publication date had been pushed back due to America's involvement in the war and stories of greater magnitude to the public going to press instead.