

How to survey 18–29-year-olds about their affective and sexual life

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The period of youth has undergone profound changes in recent decades. First of all, it has been prolonged under the influence of longer schooling. It has also become more precarious, due to the difficulties of job market integration and insecurity. Finally, it has become diversified as the stages of entry into adult life have become less synchronized and more reversible.

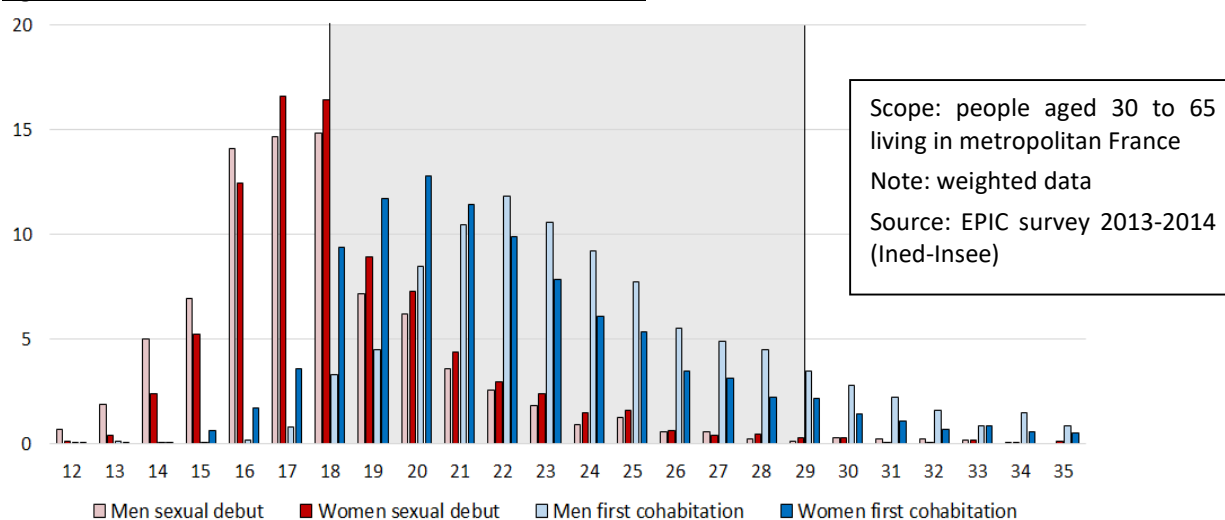
These changes have been well documented in the fields of work, housing and resources. Much less attention has been paid to changes in intimate life. Yet the socio-economic transformations affecting young people coincide with profound modifications of their sexual and relational lives. One major change is the postponement of couple and family formation. In France, as in other European countries, since the 1960s, the age at first sexual intercourse has been decreasing, especially for women, while the age at first cohabitation has been postponed (Bajos et al., 2016). In between these two events, we see the emergence of a period of sexual experimentation, as both women and men have multiple partners (Toulemon, 2008).

The survey on the affective life of young adults (the ENVIE survey in French) was conducted in 2022-2023 by the French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED). The project is part of LifeObs¹, the French Life History Observatory. This is the first French survey to focus specifically on the sexuality and conjugality of young people between the ages of 18 and 29. Its objective is to capture the diversity of relational and sexual experiences during youth. Except from the first sexual partner and the first spouse, little is known about young people's relationships that are more or less lasting and more or less institutionalized. The survey includes questions on 4 types of relationships in the last 12 months: couples, 'one-night stands', other intimate relationships, and interests. People are also asked about their experiences over the course of their lives.

1- A topic and a target population suitable for mobile phone data collection

Why 18-29-year-olds? The scope of the ENVIE survey corresponds to the ages at which both men and women already have some sexual and relational experience, and many will start cohabiting with a partner. These ages thus allow for studying the diversity of young people's intimate relationships.

Age distribution of sexual debut and first cohabitation



¹ LifeObs, the French Life History Observatory, is a research infrastructure aimed at developing innovative longitudinal survey programs on family behavior, improving the dissemination of data, as well as training new and existing users of data. Eight major and representative national surveys will be conducted covering all stages of life, from childhood to old age. Three of these surveys are part of European research infrastructures. <https://lifeobs.site.ined.fr/en/>

Why use the telephone as data collection method? Research shows that telephone surveys are well suited for interviewing about sexuality for various reasons. First, it allows for a certain anonymity (making it better suited than face-to-face interviews) and the presence of an interviewer increases the probability of completing the survey (making it more efficient, although more costly, than a web survey). Second, telephone platforms are equipped with eavesdropping systems to monitor fieldwork activity and interviewers, thus ensuring the quality of the collected data (Leridon and Bozon, 1993). Also, the telephone (CATI) has become the standard mode of data collection for surveys on sexuality in France. Choosing this mode of collection thus makes the ENVIE survey comparable to other surveys on the same topic in France

However, conducting a survey among young adults raises several methodological issues, starting with the lack of a sampling frame containing enough information to contact directly these individuals. In France, the sampling frame used for most telephone surveys is called 'Fidéli' and is based on information used by the French tax authorities for the collection of various taxes. However, this source poorly captures young people, either because these are 'hidden' in their parents' tax households, or because they have moved out but are still counted as living with their parents. Tax files provide parents' contact details, but not those of their children (Charrance, 2023).

For these reasons, random digit dialing (RDD) appears to be the more appropriate sampling technique for carrying out a telephone survey among young adults about their intimate lives.

Why a restricted RDD to mobile phones? It's a fact that survey response rates are falling, even by telephone. In metropolitan France, people increasingly avoid answering landline calls. We also know that French 18–29-year-olds are particularly poorly equipped in terms of landline phones, whereas 99% of them own a mobile phone. So, focusing on mobile phones leads to only a very slight bias (Pôle société du Crédoc, 2022).

2- Classical and innovative cleaning procedures to reduce random digit dialing costs

The survey on young adults' intimate relationships was realized by Random Digit Dialing (RDD). However, using such a sampling method entails significant costs. First of all, a large proportion of the generated numbers are non-existent or unassigned numbers, but also a significant proportion of the individuals contacted do not correspond to the survey scope (Bondon and Cochet, 2023).

To overcome these difficulties, we used all the classical techniques to optimize the initial sampling. One example is the detection of the PSTN (public switched telephone network²) signal by automatic call machines, which can determine whether the generated mobile number is connected to the telephone network.

We also used two new methods that are not yet widely used in RDD, although already described in the literature (Kunz and Fuch, 2012; Steeh et al. 2007). The first one consists in sending a text message to all generated numbers. If the text message is not correctly delivered, the number is considered invalid and excluded from the sample. The second method is to use HLR (Home Location Register) queries. For each number, by querying the HLR register, which contains all the numbers in activity within a country, we obtain an indicator on whether the number actually exists. These two methods were tested during the pilot phases of the ENVIE survey, yielded conclusive results and were therefore implemented.

While these methods allow us to reduce invalid numbers, they do not maximize the proportion of individuals aged 18 to 29 in our sample. To do this, we used another method: matching numbers with tax databases (Fidéli) held by the national statistics bureau of France. For each number we checked if it belongs to a person aged 30 or over. If so, the number was excluded.

² PSTN is the name given to the network in which a telephone line is connected to a telephone switch, enabling it to make and receive telephone calls.

These different methods can reduce costs by 40% without affecting the quality and representativeness of the obtained sample.

3- A specifically designed contact phase for the early detection of ineligible respondents

The cleaning procedures of the mobile phone database did not create an 'only 18-29-years-olds database'. The next challenge was to call all the remaining telephone numbers in the database, knowing that many of these numbers belonged to non-eligible individuals.

Data collection for the ENVIE survey took place in 2022-2023, but there had been previous tests and pilots. Such methodological tests and survey 'rehearsals' are very important for designing a survey, as they make it possible to adjust the protocol as much as possible before the actual data collection. Considerable adjustments were required when it comes to the contact phase. Before starting the actual questionnaire, we needed to know the respondent's age, or at least if their age was in the survey age range, in order to determine the eligibility of the individual.

First, we wanted to be able to quickly exclude individuals who were 'out-of-scope' because either too young or too old. At this early phase, there is no point of presenting the survey, or asking people whether or not they would agree to participate, as many of them are not eligible. Second, we also had to find a way of asking about age, but without saying why or which ages we were interested in. Indeed, in order to avoid answering the survey, respondents could have declared themselves out of scope if asked '*Are you currently between 18 and 29 years old?*' Third, we couldn't reveal the topic of the survey too quickly in the contact phase. Indeed, given the sensitive nature of the subjects raised (relational experiences, sexual practices), it would once again have been easy for respondents to declare an age out of scope in order to hide their reluctance to answer the survey because of the topic.

The final design was a result of several tests. In a first version of the survey, we presented the survey as a general public survey and ask people if they had time for a quick eligible questionnaire. The main question (age) came quite late, after other methodological questions related to the RDD testing. In another version of the questionnaire, age was asked too quickly, without really presenting the survey beforehand. Finally, for the actual survey, the feedback of the interviewers led us to choose a general but short opening presentation of the survey, followed by an open-ended question on age, and also a catch-up question on age range. The complete presentation of the survey was made only to the eligible respondents.

4- What about the representativeness of the sample achieved in this way?

In order to calculate the various survey quality indicators (contact rate, response rate, etc.) we need to know the proportion of eligible individuals in our sample, or at least an estimate. Moreover, we know that people who respond most promptly to surveys are often people with particular socio-demographic characteristics which make them particularly receptive to the survey's subject and facilitate their interrogation (Legleye et al, 2013).

For these reasons, we called back a part of the sample for which we did not have information on the eligibility. This methodological sample allowed us to interview approximately 550 people, i.e. almost one person out of twenty in our final sample.

As we intend to analyze the ENVIE survey's paradata by the time of the EPC conference, we already have hypotheses based on the eavesdropping carried out. In particular, we suspect that LGBTQ+ people respond more easily and more quickly to the survey. We expect to statistically objectify this result, as well as other hypotheses to come, in order to present recommendations on how surveys on sexuality and intimate relationships among young adults might be conducted.

Keywords: survey, phone, mobile phone, RDD, representative sample, youth, relationships, sexuality

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