

Calhoun County Adult Attitude Study

Final Report

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Recognition

The investigators would like to thank the Calhoun County Health Department, the Arcus Foundation, Planned Parenthood, and other contributors for their support of this project.

We also would like to thank the various volunteer research assistants who helped throughout this project. Most of all, we thank the residents of Albion, Battle Creek, and Marshall who took the time to participate in this study. Without your feedback this project would not have been possible.

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Overview

The Calhoun County Adult Attitude Study was conducted by researchers from the Department of Communication at Michigan State University. Between September 2007 and January 2009, data were collected from residents in Albion, Battle Creek, and Marshall. Residents were randomly selected from voter registration lists, and participation was voluntary. Participant identity was completely protected – the data were collected in a way that rendered all responses anonymous.

This was a scientific study of adult attitudes regarding sex education in Calhoun County, and bears no resemblance to commonly-conducted “opinion polls” or “phone surveys.” Respondent anonymity was ensured, scientific sampling procedures were followed, and scientific scaling was utilized to measure attitudes. The results are of the highest scientific integrity, and will be published in scientific journals and presented at national and international scholarly conferences.

Final analysis was based on 199 respondents, distributed across the three cities of interest. Respondents ranged in age from 19-90, were ethnically diverse, and ranged in education from “middle school” to “doctorate.”

Respondents were asked the degree to which they supported educating children regarding a host of specific issues, including: anatomy, reproduction, abstinence, sexually transmitted diseases, contraception, and gay/lesbian/bisexual/trans-gendered identity. Respondents also were asked the degree to which they supported education regarding these issues in the home, at school, and within community programming.

Findings

- 1) Across all communities, results indicate strong support for a “blended” approach to sex education that emphasizes *both* comprehensive sex education *and* abstinence, in schools, from parents, and in community programming. Residents support education on all topics, including sexually transmitted diseases and contraception. These results perfectly match findings from previous studies done in other mid-Michigan communities, including Battle Creek.
- 2) Across all three communities, residents express strong support for easy access to contraception on the part of teens. Women, younger adults, and those who perceive teen pregnancy as a problem more strongly support such access.
- 3) Although respondents from all three communities expressed strong support for educating teens about sex and abstinence in schools and community programs, support was higher in Albion and Battle Creek than within Marshall.
- 4) Across the three communities, residents expressed divided opinions on whether gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered issues should be taught within schools or community programs, but strongly agreed that this issue should be discussed by parents to their children.

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Historical Background

In April of 1998, Minority Program Services, a youth development and counseling agency, initiated an action research project entitled, “The Calhoun County (Michigan) Teen Pregnancy Learning Team.” Comprised of faculty from Albion College, along with numerous local volunteers, the Teen Pregnancy Learning Team conducted interviews and focus groups with teens, parents, teachers, counselors, health professionals, religious leaders, and other focal people within the Battle Creek community, related to the dilemma of teen pregnancy. The resulting research report, issued in the spring of 1999, underscored the enormity of the problem that exists within Battle Creek and Calhoun County. In particular, the results bolstered several important facts that previously had only been speculation. These included:

- (1) Battle Creek community members agree that teens currently are not receiving the information they need to cope with sexual decision-making in a responsible fashion from public service providers (schools and public programs).
- (2) Battle Creek community members agree that although parents continue to be the most influential people in shaping teen attitudes and knowledge about sex, teens and parents experience great difficulty and dissatisfaction regarding communication about teen sexuality within the family.
- (3) Battle Creek community members support the creation of comprehensive public service programs designed to educate teens (and parents) about sexuality, ethics and values, abstinence, contraception, and communication.

Importantly, these sentiments mirrored national norms. The majority of Americans favor more comprehensive sexuality education over abstinence-only education. At least 75% of parents surveyed say that in addition to abstinence, sexuality education also should cover how to use condoms and other forms of birth control, pressures to have sex, and the emotional consequences of having sex.

The TP3

In the fall of 2000, The Teen Pregnancy Partnership (or “TP3,” for short) was formed to begin to address Battle Creek and Calhoun County’s high teen pregnancy rates. The general mission of the TP3 (which still exists) is to reduce the teen pregnancy rate in Calhoun County, by developing multiple teen pregnancy prevention strategies, engaging the community, sustaining related activities, and evaluating progress. The specific goals of the TP3 are as follows:

- (1) reduce the number of teenagers who are sexually active
- (2) increase access to family planning care/information for teens who are sexually active
- (3) through education, encourage abstinence as an option for sexually active teens
- (4) increase the number of parents/significant adults who understand their role in preventing children’s early sexual activity
- (5) increase the implementation of programs demonstrated to reduce teen pregnancy
- (6) increase the number of organizations who participate in teen pregnancy prevention initiatives

In August of 2000, the Collaboratory for Community Support (based out of Ann Arbor, Michigan), released a report sponsored by the United Way of Battle Creek,

entitled “Comprehensive Community Based Teenage Pregnancy Prevention.” As one of their critical “recommendations for Battle Creek to consider,” the principal investigators argued that, “Battle Creek must find out how parents and teens, service providers, and community leaders feel about the issues surrounding teen pregnancy and about the community’s present response to the problem.”

As noted previously, focus group data hosted by the Teen Pregnancy Learning Team suggested that many community residents were supportive of new programs designed to reduce teen pregnancies. However, many community leaders argued against this, claiming that “Battle Creek is too conservative a community” to pursue and enact such programs.

In response to these rival viewpoints, and to answer the call for *scientific* data on resident attitudes regarding teen pregnancy and teen pregnancy prevention, a study of Battle Creek residents was conducted in the Fall of 2003, designed to measure residents’ attitudes regarding the programs for change suggested by the TP3.

The Battle Creek Adult Attitude Survey, 2003

In the fall of 2003, an age-, ethnicity-, and education-diverse sample of Battle Creek registered voters was surveyed. Respondents completed an extensive scientific questionnaire designed to measure adult attitudes regarding the problem of teen pregnancy and strategies for teen pregnancy prevention. Results suggested that Battle Creek residents desire aggressive and blended approaches to sex education within families, schools, and community programs that incorporate *both* abstinence and knowledge-based sex education. Specifically, the results suggested the following:

- (1) residents recognized that teen pregnancy was a substantial problem within the community
- (2) residents believed that parents and caregivers bore the primary responsibility for educating children about their sexuality
- (3) residents strongly supported active and aggressive approaches for dealing with teen pregnancy, especially those that involve reaching out to parents and families
- (4) residents strongly supported approaches to sex education that begin before the teen years
- (5) residents strongly supported abstinence as a solution for dealing with teen pregnancy
- (6) residents strongly supported knowledge-based sex education, within families, schools, and community programs
- (7) residents strongly supported ease of contraceptive access for sexually active teenagers.

Taken as a whole, these findings provided strong, scientific support for the previous focus group findings generated by the 1999 Learning Team report.

Nevertheless, the data were challenged by individuals who disagreed with the findings, largely along two lines of contention. First, some claimed that the sample size was “too small,” despite the fact that it met scientific standards for sample size. Second, residents within *other* communities in Calhoun County – most notably Marshall and Albion – claimed that the findings didn’t necessarily generalize to *their* communities; but instead, were merely reflective of the attitudes of Battle Creek residents.

The Calhoun County Adult Attitudes Study

The Calhoun County Adult Attitudes Study was conducted in response to the concerns expressed by residents following the release of results from the Battle Creek Adult Attitudes Survey. Specifically, it was designed to address the two concerns identified previously: sample size, and generalizability of findings to other communities. To address the concern of sample size, the sample was substantially enlarged. To address generalizability, data were collected from residents within three Calhoun County communities: Albion, Battle Creek, and Marshall. In addition, at the behest of one of the funding agencies, items were added measuring community attitudes regarding gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgendered issues. These latter items were added gather preliminary data on community climate regarding gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons.

Method

Over approximately a 15-month period (September 2007 through January 2009), a cross-section of 1900 registered voters in three cities (Albion, Battle Creek, and Marshall) within Calhoun County, Michigan, was surveyed. Each participant received a questionnaire designed to measure their attitudes regarding a host of issues related to teen sexuality, teen pregnancy, and family communication. Each questionnaire was labeled with the resident's city of residence (i.e., Albion residents received a questionnaire entitled "The Albion Adult Attitudes Survey;" Battle Creek residents received "The Battle Creek Adult Attitudes Survey," etc.). Residents were provided with stamped, addressed return envelopes, which were sent directly to the Department of

Communication at Michigan State University. Residents were allowed to decline participation.

Sample

Of the 1900 surveys distributed, 210 were returned as non-deliverable. Of the remaining 1690 surveys, 199 were successfully completed and returned, for a response rate of 12% (matching previous studies of this type).

Participants in this study were age-, sex-, ethnicity-, and education-diverse. Specifically, respondents ranged in age from 19 to 90; the average participant being 51.68 years old. Respondents included 69 men and 130 women; and ranged in education completed from “middle school” to “doctorate,” with the modal (most frequent) educational level being “some college.” There were 57 Albion residents, 62 from Battle Creek, and 80 from Marshall; and 82% of respondents were Euro-American, 9% African-American, 4% Hispanic, 4% Native American, and 1% Asian-American.

Results: Part I

As noted previously, residents were asked a series of questions regarding teen pregnancy, support for education regarding teen sexuality, and perceptions of community climate regarding gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons. In this section of the report, we describe results related to teen pregnancy and contraception.

Perceptions of Teen Pregnancy Problem

Perceptions of the scope of teen pregnancy within Calhoun County communities were measured in two different ways. First, residents were asked to describe the size of the teen pregnancy problem within their home city. Using a series of 7-point scales, residents rated their perception of the scope of the teen pregnancy problem. Results for

these scales were then summed and divided, to create a single index of problem perception ranging from 1 (small) to 7 (large). Importantly, these results do not in any way represent the actual magnitude of the problem. Instead, they indicate whether Calhoun County residents *perceive* there to be a substantial problem. Results are reported below, in Table 1.

Table 1. Calhoun County Residents' Perception of Teen Pregnancy Problem

City of Respondent	Perception of Problem
Albion	5.87
Battle Creek	6.20
Marshall	5.08**

1 = Small, 7 = Large
**** Significantly Different**

Second, residents were asked to estimate the percentage of teen girls in their community who get pregnant during their teen years. Again, these numbers represent *perceptions* of the problem; *not* actual pregnancy rates. Responses are reported below, in Table 2.

Table 2. Teen Pregnancy Percentage Estimate

City of Respondent	Estimated Percentage of Teens who get Pregnant
Albion	38.1%
Battle Creek	38.1%
Marshall	23.5%**

**** Significantly Different**

Taken together, these results clearly suggest two things regarding Calhoun County residents' perceptions of the problem of teen pregnancy. First, *residents across cities perceive there to be a substantial problem with teen pregnancy*. Although some may

believe or argue that “residents don’t realize the scope or significance of the problem,” these data clearly suggest that residents *do* recognize this fact. Second, *residents of Marshall perceive the teen pregnancy problem within their community to be significantly less substantial than residents of Albion and Battle Creek.*

Teen Access to Contraception

Our second set of questions targeted residents’ support for easy access to contraception for sexually-active teens. Residents were asked to rate “the importance of teens having easy access to various forms of contraception and birth control, including condoms,” using a series of 7-point scales, and an index was calculated measuring residents’ perceptions, ranging from 1 (unimportant) to 7 (important). Results are reported below in Table 3.

Table 3. Importance of Teen Access to Contraception

City of Respondent	Importance of Easy Access
Albion	6.16
Battle Creek	6.48
Marshall	5.55**

1 = Unimportant, 4 = Neutral, 7 = Important

**** Significantly Different**

These data clearly support two claims regarding Calhoun County residents’ perceptions of teen access to contraception. First, *residents of Calhoun County strongly support easy access to contraception (including condoms) for teens.* Second, *although residents of Marshall support easy access to contraception for teens, their support is less strong than the support of residents within Albion and Battle Creek.*

Subsequent correlational analyses indicated that there was a strong relationship between age, gender, perception of teen pregnancy as a problem, and support for

contraceptive access, across all three communities. Specifically, *across all three cities, younger respondents, women, and those individuals who believed teen pregnancy was a substantial problem, were more likely to report strong support for contraceptive access.*

Results: Part 2

In this section, we describe findings related to residents’ support for the teaching of specific sex education topics to children within Calhoun County. Participants were asked to describe their support for each topic being taught by parents, within schools, and within community programs. Scaling was similar to that previously used and described (for each topic, scales ranged from 1-7, with 1 = Unimportant, 4 = Neutral, and 7 = Important).

Topic #1: Sexual and reproductive anatomy (medically appropriate terms/ definitions related to reproductive and sexual body parts).

Residents first were asked the degree to which they support education regarding sexual and reproductive anatomy. Results for this topic are reported below, in Table 4.

Table 4. Importance of Parents, Schools, and Community Programs Providing Information to Children regarding Anatomy

City of Respondent	Parents	Schools	Community
Albion	6.86	6.23	6.11
Battle Creek	6.73	6.45	6.29
Marshall	6.96	5.83**	5.27**

1 = Unimportant, 4 = Neutral, 7 = Important

****Significantly Different**

These results clearly support two claims; and we will see these same trends repeated for almost all of the other topics as well. First, *residents of Calhoun County strongly support*

parents, schools, and community programs educating children about sexual and reproductive anatomy. Second, while residents of all three communities agree on the importance of parents educating children on this topic, the support for such education within schools and community programs is stronger within Albion and Battle Creek than within Marshall.

Topic #2: Sexual intercourse and human reproductive functioning (how human reproduction occurs).

The next topic residents rated was sexual intercourse and human reproductive functioning. Results for this topic are below, in Table 5.

Table 5. Importance of Parents, Schools, and Community Programs Providing Information to Children regarding Reproduction

City of Respondent	Parents	Schools	Community
Albion	6.77	6.23	6.00
Battle Creek	6.83	6.22	6.25
Marshall	6.95	5.70**	5.07**

1 = Unimportant, 4 = Neutral, 7 = Important
****Significantly Different**

Again, we see the same trend repeated as with the previous topic. That is, *Calhoun County residents strongly support education of children regarding sexual intercourse and human reproductive functioning; but the support for such education within schools and community programs is less within Marshall than within Albion and Battle Creek.*

Topic #3: Social, emotional, and physical implications of abstinence

The third topic about which residents were queried was the social, emotional, and physical implications of abstinence. Results for this topic are listed below, in Table 6.

Table 6. Importance of Parents, Schools, and Community Programs Providing Information to Children regarding Abstinence

City of Respondent	Parents	Schools	Community
Albion	6.61	6.33	5.96
Battle Creek	6.85	6.59	6.61
Marshall	6.67	6.00**	5.34**

1 = Unimportant, 4 = Neutral, 7 = Important

****Significantly Different**

Again, the same pattern as with previous topics is mirrored in these results. *Residents strongly support education regarding abstinence, with residents of Albion and Battle Creek showing stronger support for school and community programming than residents of Marshall.*

Topic #4: Social, emotional, and physical implications of sexual activity

The fourth topic measure was the social, emotional, and physical implications of sexual activity. Results for this topic are below in Table 7.

Table 7. Importance of Parents, Schools, and Community Programs Providing Information to Children regarding Sexual Activity

City of Respondent	Parents	Schools	Community
Albion	6.81	6.46	6.05
Battle Creek	6.92	6.45	6.48
Marshall	6.94	5.71**	5.21**

1 = Unimportant, 4 = Neutral, 7 = Important

****Significant Different**

The same pattern as with previous topics was observed: *residents strongly support education on this topic, with Marshall residents expressing less support for school and community programs on this topic than residents of Albion and Battle Creek.*

Topic #5: Sexually transmitted diseases (AIDS, gonorrhea, herpes); their transmission and prevention

The fifth specific topic residents were asked about was sexually transmitted diseases. Results for this topic are below, in Table 8.

Table 8. Importance of Parents, Schools, and Community Programs Providing Information to Children regarding Sexually Transmitted Diseases

City of Respondent	Parents	Schools	Community
Albion	6.89	6.63	6.46
Battle Creek	7.00	6.67	6.73
Marshall	6.85	6.09**	5.57**

1 = Unimportant, 4 = Neutral, 7 = Important

****Significantly Different**

Again, *Calhoun County residents strongly support children receiving information on this topic; with Albion and Battle Creek residents expressing stronger support for schools and community programs than Marshall residents.*

Topic #6: Contraception (birth control) and contraceptive devices

Our sixth topic was contraception and contraceptive devices. Although we previously had measured this topic more generally (i.e., “easy access for teens”), the goal of these items was to parse out support for parental, school, and community education and programming. Results are below, in Table 9.

Table 9. Importance of Parents, Schools, and Community Programs Providing Information to Children regarding Contraception

City of Respondent	Parents	Schools	Community
Albion	6.70	6.44	6.17
Battle Creek	6.75	6.29	6.43
Marshall	6.72	5.44**	5.17**

1 = Unimportant, 4 = Neutral, 7 = Important

****Significantly Different**

These data (once again) mirror findings for previous topics. *Calhoun County residents strongly support education regarding contraception; with Albion and Battle Creek residents expressing stronger support for school and community programs than Marshall residents.*

Topic #7: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered Orientation

Our final topic measured was gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered orientation (“GLBT”). For this topic, results substantially departed from the pattern previously observed for other topics, as displayed below in Table 10.

Table 10. Importance of Parents, Schools, and Community Programs Providing Information to Children regarding GLBT Orientation

City of Respondent	Parents	Schools	Community
Albion	6.13	4.95	4.94
Battle Creek	6.03	4.73	4.97
Marshall	6.04	4.72	4.55

1 = Unimportant, 4 = Neutral, 7 = Important

These results suggest two things. First, *Calhoun County residents strongly support parents educating their children on GLBT orientation.* Second, *residents within each city*

strongly disagree with one another regarding whether this topic should be taught in schools and within community programs.

The average scores for schools and community programming regarding this topic (reported in Table 10) appear to be “neutral,” that is, clustering around “4.” However, the “neutrality” of the average scores masks a more complex trend. Specifically, for this particular topic, the variance (i.e., difference between residents’ scores within each city) jumped substantially. In simple terms, this means that unlike with previous topics, there was substantial disagreement between residents within each city regarding this issue. So, while the average scores clustered around “4,” this does not mean widespread “neutrality” on this issue. Instead, within each city, residents were *strongly* divided on this issue – with approximately half supporting education by schools and community programming, and half disapproving of such education. The result of this split was that the average score fell in the middle.

Finally, we measured Calhoun County residents overall perceptions of at what age education on each of these topics should first be introduced to children. As there were no significant differences between cities for these findings, we report them in aggregate below, in Table 11.

Table 11. Appropriate Age at which Information should first be given to Children

Topic	Appropriate Age
Anatomy	9.77
Reproduction	10.39
Abstinence	10.48
Sexual Activity	10.66
STI's	10.77
Contraception	11.15
GLBT	11.45

These findings suggest an important practical implication. *Across cities in Calhoun County, residents strongly support both sex- and abstinence-education in the pre-teen years.*

Results: Part 3

The final part of our study examined Calhoun County residents’ perceptions of tolerance within their particular communities for gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgendered (GLBT) persons. Perceptions were measured in two different ways. First, residents were asked to report the level of acceptance within their community for GLBT persons; and an overall index was created ranging from 1 (not accepting) to 7 (accepting). Results are reported below, in Table 12.

Table 12. Attitudes in your Community regarding GLBT Persons

City of Respondent	Community Attitudes
Albion	4.25
Battle Creek	3.84
Marshall	3.36**

1 = Not Accepting, 4 = Neutral, 7 = Accepting

**** Significantly Different**

These results suggest two things. First, *across all three communities, residents perceive a decided lack of acceptance for GLBT persons.* Although these numbers do not represent outright “disapproval” or strong “non-acceptance,” the facts that the highest reported score (Albion) was only at the “neutral” point of the scaling, and that two of the three means scores were in the 3’s, suggests that residents perceive their communities (at best) as not especially supportive of GLBT individuals. Second, *residents of Marshall perceive their community to be less supportive of GLBT individuals than residents in Albion and Battle Creek.*

We then asked residents to report *their own* attitudes regarding GLBT persons.

The results are reported below, in Table 13.

Table 13. Respondents' own Attitudes regarding GLBT Persons

City of Respondent	Respondents' Attitudes
Albion	5.24
Battle Creek	5.58
Marshall	5.18

1 = Not Accepting, 4 = Neutral, 7 = Accepting

Three things stand out about these findings. First, *residents in all three communities report being accepting of GLBT persons.* Second, *the difference between Marshall and the other two cities in the former measures (i.e., “perceptions of community”) was not observed.* Third, *these attitudes stand in sharp contrast to the scores reported in the “community perception” measures.*

Why would residents in these cities perceive their communities to be at best “neutral” and at worst “unaccepting” of GLBT persons; yet at the same time report that *they* are accepting of such persons? Keep in mind, these findings are directly contradictory: the individuals reporting on the “community acceptance” measures *were community members.* That is, community members (who constitute “the community”) reported that their “community” is “unaccepting,” but that *they* (individually) are “accepting.”

One explanation for these findings is a form of self-serving perceptual bias. That is, respondents may have felt that it was more socially acceptable to report “community intolerance” than “personal intolerance” toward GLBT persons. This finding would mirror studies of racial prejudice, in which respondents commonly report “other people” as being racially prejudiced, but “not themselves.” Alternatively, the finding may be

genuine – that is, respondents in our sample may honestly feel that their community is comparatively unaccepting, but they aren't. This latter explanation is somewhat implausible: given the sampling methods used, it is statistically unlikely that we somehow managed to sample only those people within each community who were more tolerant of GLBT persons. However, we can make no firm claims regarding the actual level of tolerance or intolerance possessed by respondents. We only can say that these two, somewhat contradictory findings form an interesting puzzle that future researchers should seek to solve.

Discussion & Conclusions

These data represent only the most recent examination of Calhoun County residents' perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes regarding human sexuality and sex education. This issue now has been repeatedly studied within Calhoun County, for more than a decade. And in each case, the findings have been the same. Calhoun County residents overwhelmingly support a “blended” approach to sex education that emphasizes *both* comprehensive sex education *and* abstinence, in schools, from parents, and in community programming. In addition, residents express strong support for easy access to contraception on the part of teens. **In our scientific opinion, there no longer can be any reasonable debate regarding “what residents in Calhoun County think about sex education.”** *Instead, the only reasoned debate that remains is what specific programs should be implemented in order to translate the overwhelmingly community support for education into action.*

Although the findings reported in this report are clear and self-explanatory, one perplexing pattern that runs throughout the data is the consistent differences in opinions

expressed by residents of Marshall, compared to residents of Albion and Battle Creek (who expressed similar attitudes across measures). Two possible explanations for this pattern exist; neither of which is mutually exclusive of the other. First, residents of Marshall could be more “conservative” in their attitudes regarding these issues – a finding bolstered by the differences found for the GLBT items. Alternatively, Marshall residents may be less emphatic regarding the importance of school- and community-based sex education programming than residents of Albion and Battle Creek because unlike the latter two communities, Marshall has had (for many years) such programming in place. Regardless of the cause, *the differences between communities are small, when compared with the overwhelming trend of support for education across all communities.*

To conclude, these findings represent a valid, reliable, and trustworthy scientific glimpse into the attitudes of adults within Calhoun County regarding human sexuality and sex education. We leave it to residents and community leaders to decide how these findings can best serve the communities observed.