

Summary of key findings

Sexual health and life of Poles aged 18–49 in 2017: Research study in the context of changes since 1997

In 1997, eight years after the system transformation in Poland, as part of the project Evaluation of National Programme of AIDS, a social survey on the *Knowledge, social attitudes towards HIV/AIDS and sexual behaviors* was carried out. The survey initiated a unique research project focused on issues of sexual behaviors in Poland. Its consecutive editions in the years 2001, 2005, 2011 and 2017 provided a multidimensional analysis and diagnosis of the image of the sexual life of Poles, significant from the social, sociological and medical point of view.

The uniqueness of the project on the Polish and international scale is proved within at least a few areas, i.e.

- systematicity of the assessment,
- representativeness and size of samples,
- comprehensiveness of the approach to the subject with the human being and their health being holistically perceived,
- taking into account the social and cultural changes over 20 years.

The report presents selected topics, which provide a current diagnosis for 2017, and sheds light on the changes in Poles' customs in the last 20 years. It was assumed that sexual behaviors impact directly or indirectly on the general health condition or that they are determined by it.

The introduction to the report (Chapter 1) presents **the wider context of the research cycle**. While the first rounds were closely related to programs of HIV/AIDS prevention, now a much stronger emphasis is put upon a comprehensive assessment of sexual and reproductive health, and new, current subjects are constantly introduced.

In Chapter 2 of the report, **the demographic and health situation of the society** is depicted on the basis of external data sources. The focus was on people younger than 50, which is reflected in the title of the report.

It was emphasized that, from the time perspective of the recent years, several adverse demographic phenomena may be spotted. They are related to the manner of functioning of contemporary families. Among those worth mentioning are a low birth rate, adverse changes in the pattern of women's fertility and in the age structure of the population of women at procreative age. Fewer and fewer people live in lawful marriages, and older and older people enter into marriages. More and more children are born from informal relationships. The data pertaining to divorces show that nearly a third of marriages are dissolved, which may result in a growing trend towards remarrying. The duration of marriage becomes shorter and shorter among those who divorce.

Other demographic processes which are worth mentioning include ageing of the society, outflow of people from cities and transformation of Poland from an emigration country into an emigration-immigration one.

While depicting the health situation, attention was paid to a growing trend in HIV infections which was stanching as late as in 2018, and a growing trend in the number of cases of some malicious neoplasms which may be detected early (breast carcinoma in women and testicular cancer in men). The data from the National Cancer Register were juxtaposed with the low percentage of people who have preventive tests done. Indicators concerning health-related behaviors presented by adults up to 50 years of age revealed that 24.6% of them smoked cigarettes, 22.7% of the respondents drank alcohol every week, while merely 27.8% of the respondents declared doing sports.

At the end of this chapter, several key documents were listed which concern sexual and reproductive health and treat these two areas as a part of public health. The latest document of the WHO, *Sexual health and its linkages to reproductive health: an operational approach*, may be an important reference for the entire report.

Chapter 3 of the report deals with **the research methodology**. The analyses pertain to 1,746 individuals aged 18–49, chosen from a group of 2,500 adults surveyed in 2017. Two research tools were applied, i.e. an interview questionnaire and a confidential questionnaire to be filled out by the respondents themselves. In the case of several indicators, the latest findings might be referred to the previous four rounds of surveys on the sexuality of Poles of the years 1997, 2001, 2005 and 2011.

The applied procedure conformed to the ethical principles of carrying out social research. Each respondent voluntarily expressed their will to take part in the survey, having learned about the objectives of the survey, the questionnaire and any possible burdens.

In total, in the years 1997–2017, the number of surveyed adults not older than 50 years of age amounted to 12,635. The group consisted of 49.6% of men and 50.4% of women. The proportion of the respondents residing in rural areas was 37.5% in the entire period of the survey, which is close to the official national statistics.

Chapter 4 of the report includes the **analysis of the health condition of people aged 18–49** in the light of the author's research. The issues presented are: the

general characteristics of physical and mental health, behaviors advantageous and disadvantageous for health, and several issues related to reproductive health, including the HIV/AIDS problems. These are the areas in which the findings may be summarized.

General health condition:

- In this surveyed group, 11.4% of the respondents indicated that they had one of the listed chronic diseases.
- The average level of mental feeling was 10.09 points (on the scale of 0–15 points based upon three questions).
- Overweight or obesity were found in 37.3% of the respondents.

Health-related behaviors:

- Every third respondent (32.9%) engaged in physical activity on the level defined as at least high-moderate.
- Physical activity appeared to be a factor preventing excessive body mass. While comparing the people with low activity to those classified as intensively active, the proportion of the excessive body mass was found to be decreased from 45.7% to 23.0%.
- The average level of the proposed scale of taking care of one's health was 13.30 points (on the scale of 0–24 points based upon five questions).
- A positive correlation was found between the scale of taking care of health and the scale of mental feeling; $r = 0.231$.
- In the surveyed group, 22.9% of the respondents regularly smoked traditional cigarettes.
- 13.6% of the respondents used to drink alcohol a few times a week.
- 6.0% of the respondents currently used narcotics, most often marijuana or amphetamine.

Reproductive health:

- In the surveyed group, 7.5% of women had never visited a gynecologist.
- The recommendation of checking their own breasts every month was followed by merely 15.9% of the respondents; about one-third of the respondents had had a mammographic (30.5%) or an ultrasound (37.2%) breast test done, and 81.7% of the surveyed women at reproductive age had had a cytological test for cervical carcinoma done at least once in their lifetime.
- In the surveyed group, nearly two-thirds of the surveyed men (63.7%) had never tested their testicles themselves; 85.9% had never had their prostate

gland tested by a physician, and only 3.2% of the respondents were sure they had had the PSA level tested at some point in their lifetime.

- 12.4% of the respondents had been tested for sexually transmitted diseases (the so-called venereal diseases) at least once in their lifetime, and 5.2% of the respondents had been infected with a sexually transmitted disease at some point in their life.

HIV/AIDS issues:

- In the surveyed group, 15.8% of the respondents had earlier considered to have an HIV test done, and 10.3% of the respondents had such a test done at least once.
- Comparison of the data from the past 20 years shows that only women had the HIV test done more and more often, which influenced the improvement of the general frequency.
- Opinions on HIV/AIDS hazard are still very diversified. 13.6% of the respondents agreed with the statement that a risk of infection is very low, 52.2% of the respondents were of the opinion that one can prevent infection, and 48.8% of the surveyed believed that one may live for any number of years with HIV.
- While observing the trends in changes of the opinions, it is alerting that there is a growing proportion of people who have no firm opinion on the selected topic related to HIV infection, which may prove a lack of awareness of the problem.

The foregoing health issues are often diversified among genders, age groups and features related to place of residence, education and wealth. People of older age more often suffer from chronic diseases, excessive body mass and lowered mental well-being. Social factors strongly diversify the trend to have preventive tests done, and some opinions on HIV/AIDS as well as the will to have a test done.

Chapter 5 of the report is a link between the part dedicated to health and the one on sexual life. It discusses the issue of **sex education at school and in the family**, in retrospection of the respondents, and presents an analysis of their opinions concerning the purposefulness of sex education.

More than half of the respondents (55.3%) aged 18–49 had attended such classes. In this group, again more than half (51.5%) considered the knowledge they had acquired to be useful; however, only 8.7% of them chose the option „very useful”. Nearly 80% of the respondents stated that sex education classes should be taught.

The majority of the respondents (51.0%) were of the opinion that school should present various attitudes to engaging in sexual activity, love and relations in a relationship, and provide reliable knowledge about contraception and risky sexual behaviors. Only a small proportion (6.6%) of the respondents declared that

school should present a religious point of view and encourage sexual abstinence prior to getting married.

Less than half of the respondents aged 18–49 (47.6%) remembered that parents used to talk to them about matters related to sexuality when the respondents were in their adolescence. They talked to the mother (43.1%) more often than to the father (23.1%). Nearly one in every five respondents used to talk about such matters to both parents (18.6%). Most frequent topics were pubescence, adolescent love and contraception. Masturbation and sexual satisfaction were the most seldom discussed topics.

Various sources were also compared as for their influence upon the knowledge and opinions about human sexuality. Younger respondents more often emphasized the significant role of the Internet and stronger influence of parents, whereas the older ones stressed the role of a sexual partner (boyfriend, girlfriend) and books.

Chapter 6 presents the data concerning adult Poles' at the age of 18–49 **functioning in relationships**. It was found that only 39.6% of the respondents were in a formal marital relationship at the time when the survey was performed. The proportion of single people was 34.8%, and the remaining 25.4% of the respondents were in informal relationships, slightly more often than not sharing a household with their partner. The average duration of the relationship in this age group was 9.3 years ($SD = 7.7$). Formal relationships lasted the longest (12.4 ± 7.6 years).

In the surveyed group, 46.8% of the respondents had children, and among those 34.3% had only children at the age of up to 18 years old. Furthermore, nearly half of the respondents declared their will to have children in the future, including 18.7% of those who already had children and 69.6% of those who had no children at the time of the survey.

By comparison of the consecutive rounds of the research on the sexuality of Poles, it was found that the proportion of people who lived in any type of relationship decreased, particularly in the years 2011–2017. The proportion of people who had children was dropping systematically. However, a positive phenomenon is the better and better evaluation of the existing relationships. In the years 2011–2017, the proportion of those who considered their marriage or regular relationship as good or very good grew by 5 percentage points.

In the case of relationships lasting longer (longer than half a year), the analysis included also reasons for separation (if any). The most frequent reason was burnout of the feeling, personality clash and disappointment with the partner on getting to know them better.

The structure of the questionnaires of 2017 provided for isolating a scale of ten questions to assess the quality of a relationship. The average result was 31.8 points (79.5% of the maximum value within up to 40 points). The assessment of the relationship drops dramatically to 24.5 points ($SD = 7.9$) among those who thought about divorce as compared to 32.4 points ($SD = 7.1$) among those who did not.

On analyzing individual questions of the so structured scale, it may be assumed that the risk of entering the phase of considering separation grows when there

is a definite absence of good communication, a lack of tenderness, and when the partners cease to be sexually attractive to each other.

A separate part of Chapter 6 is dedicated to single people. The vast majority of single people believed that it was a transitional situation arising from a coincidence (49.1%) or from a temporary choice (36.3%). In the surveyed group of single people, most of them (64.3%) wait passively and hope that a partner will appear by themselves. 16.2% of the respondents had actively sought their partner at any time when they were single. The search meant scrolling dating websites or attending parties at which there was a chance to meet another single person. The most frequent cause of living as a single person is that there is no appropriate person around, and the belief that a given person prefers to stay alone and values their need for independence. Single women more often than men expressed their fear of a closer relationship with another person, and negative experience from other relationships.

Chapter 7 of the report features an analysis of questions about: **the role of sex in life and opinions on sexual life.**

It was found that:

- 55.1% of the respondents declared that sex plays an important role in their life;
- 63.4% were satisfied with their sexual life;
- 50.8% could not state whether they had big or small sexual needs;
- the proportion of the respondents who had their sexual needs unsatisfied was 15.3%.

Comparison with the previous rounds of the research on the sexuality of Poles showed a higher proportion of people who declared that sex was not important in their life (10% in 2001 as compared to 20% in 2017). The proportion of those who were dissatisfied with their sexual life grew from 8% to 11% in the years 2011–2017.

Generally, on a scale from 0 to 16 points, the role of sex was assessed on the level of 10 points. People who did not stay in a relationship scored much worse than those who lived in a relationship. The level of education is an important factor which may affect perception of the role of sex and perception of one's own needs in this sphere of life. It was also noted that people from better-off families evaluate better the role of sex in life and their own sexual needs. It was also found that religious but non-practicing people or irreligious people scored higher than more religious people. However, among married people the level of religiousness does not affect their assessment of the role of sex in life and perception of their own sexual needs. In the group of single respondents or those living in an informal relationship, more religious people scored lower on the said scale. Furthermore, a difference was found between healthy people and those with chronic diseases, a difference present in men only. A significant correlation was shown between perception of one's own sexual needs and evaluation of mental health. People

satisfied with their sexual life more seldom suffer from symptoms of depression, chronic fatigue, feeling lonely and the absence of close people around.

A detailed analysis of the opinions on sexual life showed that the respondents most often agreed with the statement that *Successful sex is possible if both partners want it*, and that *foreplay is as important as the intercourse*. Some of the analyzed questions form coherent indexes which may be used in future analyses. A scale was identified which includes four statements concerning stereotypes related to sexual life. A separate factor may be provided by questions about the acceptability of public display of affection.

Chapter 8 about **sexual activity** is the central part of the report. Respondents were asked about first contacts, forms of contacts, sexual partners and extra-relationship contacts (of single people and of those who decided to enter a parallel relationship).

In the group of people at the age of 18–49 surveyed in 2017, 86% of them had had their first sexual experience (i.e. passionate kisses, love caresses), and only 1% less of them had had their first sexual intercourse defined as a vaginal one. As compared to the data from 2001, the proportions decreased by 10% and 6% respectively.

While comparing the individual birth-year cohorts, it was shown that respondents of both genders took to sexual contacts earlier and earlier. In the group of respondents aged 18–49, differences in the age of sexual initiation decreased significantly. In the years 2001–2017, the period between the first experience and full initiations shortened significantly.

The analysis of the forms of sexual activity declared in 2017 showed that:

- The proportion of those sexually active in the last year was 76%, i.e. 10% less than in 1997.
- 36% of the respondents masturbate, i.e. 16% more than 20 years before.
- Oral contacts were declared by 64% of the respondents in 2017, as compared to 28% of the surveyed 20 years before.
- The proportion of those who declared anal intercourse increased from 13% to 21% in the years 1997–2017.

The analysis of sexual contacts showed that:

- In the years 2001–2017, the declared duration of a sexual intercourse became shorter by 4.3 minutes, including the foreplay which was 5.5 minutes shorter.
- More than half of the respondents always or almost always experienced orgasm, and this factor appeared stable in comparison of all the editions of the research.
- A double difference disadvantageous for women remains as for problems with achieving orgasm.

The analysis of the methods of contraception and use of condoms for the purpose of preventing sexually transmitted diseases showed that:

- The latest data prove that more than two-thirds of the sexually active respondents had used contraceptives in the last year (76.8%). In the years 2001–2017, the proportions of the respondents aged 18–49 who used any contraception method grew by 12 percentage points.
- The use of condoms as a form of preventing sexually transmitted diseases, which includes also preventing HIV infection, is worth mentioning. Among those who had a given type of an intercourse within the last 12 months, 26.5%, 6.9% and 17.5% of the respondents used condoms each time during vaginal, oral and anal intercourse respectively.

The analysis of sexual partners showed that:

- The average number of sexual partners over the lifetime was 5.02 in 2017 as compared to 4.49 partners in 2005. Every fifth respondent (21.6%) had only one partner in their life, and 84.4% of the respondents had only one partner in the last year. Comparison of the consecutive editions of the research showed that the growth of the number of sexual partners concerned only women. Fewer life partners were declared by people living in a marital relationship and those who became sexually active later.
- 95.7% of sexually active respondents had contacts only with people of the same gender, 2.8% had contacts with men and women, and 1.4% had homosexual contacts only.
- The proportion of those who declared heterosexual orientation was lower (94.4%), and still lower was the proportion of those who had never felt sexual attraction to people of the same gender (93.5%).

Furthermore, it was shown that:

- 16.0% of the respondents admitted that they had had sexual contacts outside their regular relationship which had lasted 6 months or more.
- Only a small proportion of the respondents suspected their partner of cheating (3.9%).
- Among single people, 33.6% of them used to have sexual relations.
- Circumstances and nature of sexual relations of single people and people who cheated on their regular partners are similar, with a high proportion of occasional, one-night acquaintances, and the conducive factor is trips and parties of any kind.

Ten statements were also analyzed concerning masturbation (two), oral and anal sex (two), homosexual contacts (three) and loyalty in regular relationships (three statements). The data from 2017 showed that:

- Still 18% of the respondents believe that masturbation may cause health problems and mental disorders, but the proportion is 5% lower than that of the year 2005.
- 57.0% of the respondents agreed that masturbation allows one to learn about their body better, and satisfy one's sexual needs better.
- A much higher proportion believed that there is nothing wrong in oral sex (71%) as compared to a similar question about anal sex (40%).
- Depending on the question, 30.4% to 49.3% of the respondents accepted homosexual relations, but negative opinions were frequent, e.g. suggestion that homosexual people should undergo treatment (24.8%).
- Depending on the question, 56.5% to 71.8% of the respondents favored loyalty to the partner with whom one is in a regular relationship.

Chapter 9 includes a depiction of the most frequently declared **difficulties and fears related to sexual life** and opinions about sexual performance. The acquired results were correlated to physical health condition, mental well-being, health behaviors and satisfaction with bonds in marriage or regular relationship.

In the surveyed group, 37.0% of the respondents had ever noted a long-lasting period of decreased interest in sex. The most frequently declared reason was fatigue or over-strain, then hardships in the relationship and bad health condition of the respondent.

Another set of questions pertained to difficulties related to sexual life which had occurred in the last 12 months, including six questions common for both genders, seven typical for men and two questions typical for women. The chapter presents a detailed description of a group of 1,238 people who had had sexual contacts in the last 12 months, and identifies the group of those who did not declare any difficulties (77.9%), one problem (12.9%) and more problems (9.2%). Problems were more often declared by young people and those who were in informal relationships. The proportion of the respondents who declared one problem or more was 19.8% among healthy people, and 38.7% among those with chronic diseases. The proportion of the respondents with no problems in their sexual life was 83.8% among teetotalers as compared to 48.1% among those who used to drink alcohol every day or almost every day. Among those who have problems in their sexual life the assessment of the bonds in the relationship and general mental well-being deteriorate.

In the group of 1,391 sexually active respondents, factors which may impede having sexual intercourse were also analyzed. Half of the respondents (49.4%) had some fears in this matter, women definitely more often. The most frequently declared factor was fatigue and fear of pregnancy. The number of the declared fears correlated negatively with the quality of the bonds in the relationship and with mental well-being. Fears were more often declared by residents of big cities, people in informal relationships and very religious people.

As a complementary element, the chapter includes an analysis of opinions about the sexual performance of women and men (three and four statements

respectively). The respondents most frequently agreed with the statement that there is nothing wrong in using medications to improve sexual performance, and they most seldom agreed with the opinion that women are less valuable when they have problems with achieving orgasm. The men who agreed with the statement that *You may easily handle erection disorders by using appropriate pharmaceutical drugs* clearly more often did not have fears related to having a sexual intercourse as compared to those who were of a different opinion about that.

The last chapter includes a description of **sexual relations established via the Internet** and dating websites, and opinions concerning the acceptability of some behaviors in the cyberspace. It was shown that in the surveyed group of people aged 18–49:

- 28.8% of the respondents had used the Internet before to make acquaintances, most often repeatedly (22.9%).
- More often than women, men sought erotic relations, while women sought friendship more frequently.
- The main reason for seeking relations on the Internet declared by the respondents was no need to meet one another and lack of time for traditional search.
- 9.3% of the respondents had earlier been in a relationship with a person found on the Internet.
- 12.8% of the respondents had earlier used a dating website, and 8.5% used mobile dating applications.

When describing the nature of erotic experience on the Internet, it was found that:

- 16.8% of the respondents had talked about sex to a person they met on the Internet.
- Among those who had such conversations, 67.9% felt sexual arousal, 3.6% had experienced virtual sex, and 9.0% had met in the real world.

Generally, 59.9% of the respondents had had contact with pornographic material on the Internet, and erotic sites were visited more often than private sites of other users of the Internet. People who used to watch pornographic material more often sought erotic relations.

Poles' opinions about acceptable behaviors on the Internet are diversified. Nearly half of the respondents (48.6%) accepted conversations about topics related to sex with a person met on the Internet; however, only one in four respondents (27.6%) considered having virtual sex to be normal. Publishing erotic content without consent from the recipient was commonly considered reprehensible (74.8%).