

Americans Speak Out:

National Survey Indicates That Most American's Support Sexual
Risk Avoidance (SRA) Education

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Executive Summary

Americans Speak Out is a commissioned study of Americans on a topic that is unnecessarily contentious: sex education. The survey asked Americans a series of questions about their general views of sex education and the topics they felt were essential to be included in sex education classes.

The results confirmed previous findings which showed that support for the themes essential to Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA) education is strong, sustained, and ubiquitous. When it comes to sex education, most Americans agree that the goal should be optimal health for our youth. In particular, the primary findings of the study include the following:

- The holistic nature of the SRA message is strongly supported by most Americans.
- Americans think waiting to have sex is the best way for students to improve their future success.
- Americans think sex education classes should focus on healthy outcomes, not on controversial topics.
- Americans favor waiting for sex rather than LARC in order to give teens the healthier path to avoiding poverty.

In the midst of an ever-increasing cacophony of special-interest-advocacy voices demanding that sex education classes should be co-opted for their favorite issues, most Americans disagree. They say: keep it focused on the topics that are most critical for youth success and thriving – both now and in their futures. We agree. Youth deserve the information and skills that best prepare them for a healthy adolescence, avoiding all sexual risks so that they are in the best place to build healthy families and communities in the future.

Background

Americans Speak Out is a national survey of Americans that was conducted by *Barna Group*. The survey was commissioned by *Ascend* and the results are distributed by both *Barna Group* and *Ascend*. The survey asked Americans a series of questions about their general views of sex education and the topics they felt were essential to be included in sex education classes. The results were stratified by age, gender, ethnicity, religious, ideological, and political views.

The *Americans Speak Out* research builds upon earlier research findings gathered in the 2012 *Parents Speak Out* research conducted by *Pulse Opinion Research*. This earlier research revealed that the majority of parents, regardless of political party affiliation, gender, age, or race, all agreed that Sexual Risk Avoidance (SRA) education was the kind of sex education that they supported for their own children. But *Ascend* wanted to know more.

We wanted to know if Americans, in general, were equally supportive of SRA education. We wanted to know which topics Americans thought were essential to be included in sex education classes. The reality is that the cultural conversations about sex have changed – even since 2012. Topics that were deemed too controversial to discuss in sex education classes for middle and high school students in 2012 are now being debated before school boards across the nation, with advocates demanding a “no-holds-barred” approach to content for even the youngest sex education students. We wanted to know if these demands represented a small, but vocal, minority opinion, or if these demands actually reflected the majority of Americans.

Of course, a side-by-side comparison of the two survey results is not possible, since the questions and the cohort samples differ, but the information we gained in the *Americans Speak Out* survey helps us increase our understanding of what American’s want to be included in sex education. This new information greatly informs sex education policy and implementation content strategies.

Key Findings

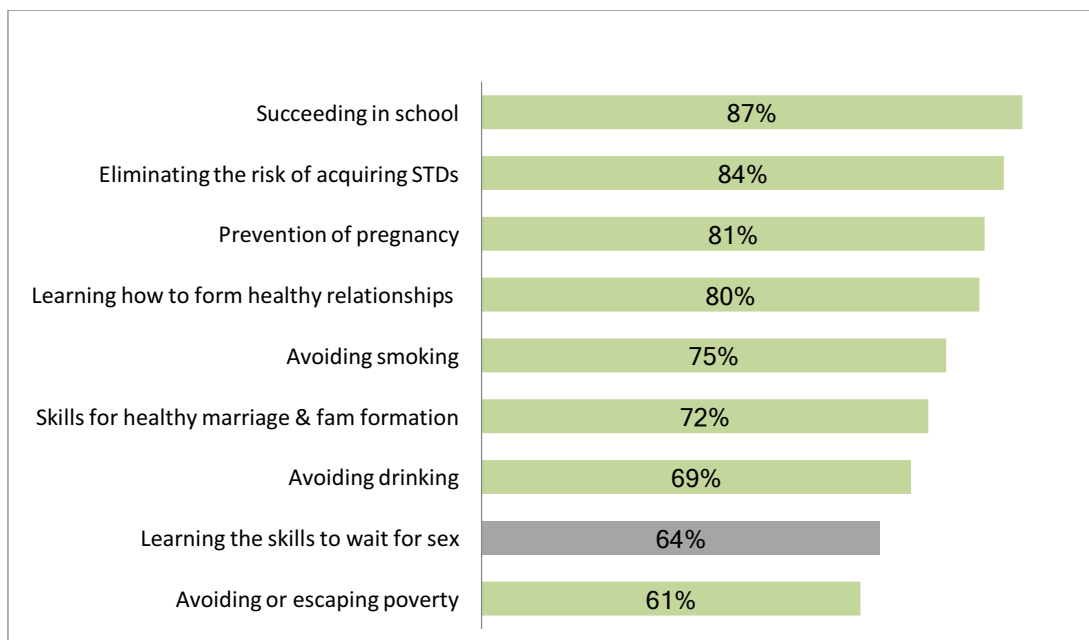
The key findings are described below:

- **Americans understand “sexual risk avoidance” better than they understand “abstinence education.”** The majority of Americans understand that “sexual risk avoidance” education is a strategy that is associated with health. Nearly six in ten Americans (57%) understand this association. For years, *Ascend* has been privileged to represent the portion of the sex education field that advocates for optimal health. This approach is clearly in sync with public health protocols, yet many Americans did not understand its overriding emphasis on health and science, until the description moved from the too-often-maligned term “abstinence” education to “sexual risk avoidance,” a term used by public health entities like the Centers for

Disease Control (CDC). Because of successful misinformation campaigns by pro-teen-sex advocates, seven out of every ten (70%) Americans do not link the term “abstinence” to health. But finally there is a term to accurately describe the holistic and healthy approach being provided by educators and professionals across the nation. The term “sexual risk avoidance” helps to clear away the misinformation surrounding this hopeful, relevant and health-filled approach. It begins a new conversation so that youth have a better chance to thrive both now and in the future.

- **The holistic nature of the SRA message is strongly supported by most Americans.** SRA education contextualizes the sex education discussion around a practical conversation that is designed to help students see the importance of avoiding negative risk behaviors as an important component for improving their chances for a successful future. Teens want to know how to develop healthy relationships both now and in the future. In the survey, most Americans agree that these topics are *very important*. The key topics shared in SRA classes all were deemed very important by at least 60% of Americans, an important sign that the SRA message resonates with what most Americans find important for teens to learn in their sex ed classes.

TABLE 1 RESPONDENTS BELIEVE THESE TOPICS ARE VERY IMPORTANT FOR TEENS TO LEARN

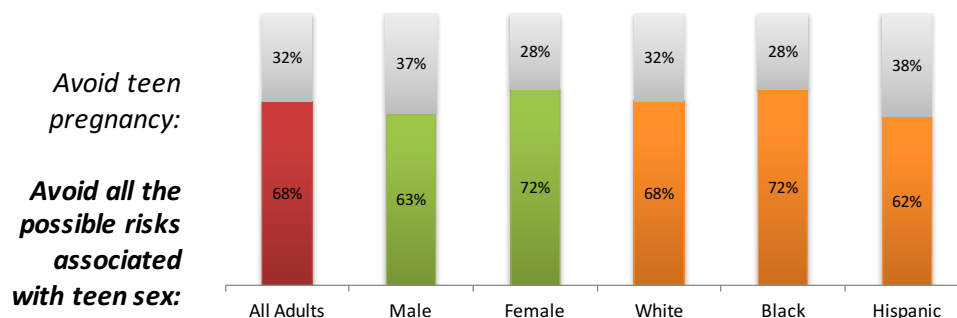


- **Americans think waiting to have sex is the best way for students to improve their future success.** Six in ten Americans (59%) think it is better that high school students be “taught to avoid pregnancy and thereby improve their chances to succeed as adults” by *waiting to have sex*. Even more, 75%, believe this to be important for middle school students. Only 41% believe that using contraception gives high school students the best chance to avoid pregnancy and only 25% believe it to be the case for middle schoolers. This result confirms that the majority of Americans understand that the current emphasis on “teen-pregnancy-prevention-through-contraception” is misguided, simplistic and wholly inadequate, especially as

a directive given to the near exclusion of a realistic “wait-for-sex” skill-building message. The majority of every age group, every race, and both males and females believe that it is more important for high school students to learn the importance of – and the practical skills for – waiting for sex. For high schoolers, males were slightly more supportive of the “wait for sex” message than females and African Americans were more supportive than either white or Hispanic Americans.

When asked if they thought it would “be better for high school students to receive skills to avoid teen pregnancy – or avoid all the possible risks associated with teen sex,” they agreed that teen pregnancy prevention is an insufficient approach – and that it is important for students to receive skills to avoid all the risks of teen sex. SRA is the only approach that prevents all the risks associated with teen sex and nearly 7 in 10 (68%) agreed that this risk avoidance approach trumps pregnancy prevention (32%). This overwhelming support transcended all demographics, with females significantly more supportive than males (72% v 63%) and African Americans slightly more supportive than either White or Hispanic Americans. The support for the risk avoidance approach jumps to 72% for middle school students.

TABLE 2 IN HIGH SCHOOL HEALTH CLASS, WOULD IT BE BETTER FOR STUDENTS TO RECEIVE SKILLS TO....



- Americans think sex education classes should focus on healthy outcomes, not on controversial topics.** Increasingly, SRA critics are calling for more and more areas of discussion and instruction to be included in sex education classes. Even federally funded sex education programs are placing a much greater emphasis on these controversial topics, making them a required or encouraged topic for discussion. One area of controversy involves how sex education classes should communicate messages to reduce teen pregnancy. As a way to avoid pregnancy, should youth be encouraged to avoid all sexual activities that put them at risk or should they be encouraged to experiment sexually so long as they don't engage in intercourse? Americans were very clear. By a 68% to 32% margin, they believe that “it is better for teen sex education in high school to communicate that it is healthier to avoid sexual experimentation as teens” – a message that is not typically communicated in a large number of taxpayer-funded sex education programs. Support for avoiding sexual experimentation increases to 77% for middle school students.

TABLE 3 DO YOU THINK IT IS BETTER FOR TEEN SEX EDUCATION IN HS TO COMMUNICATE..

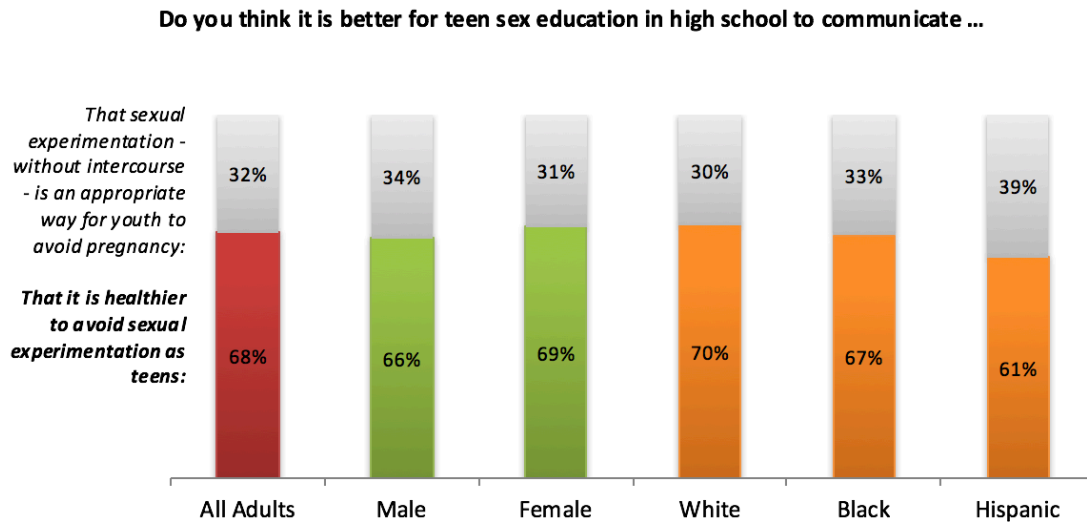
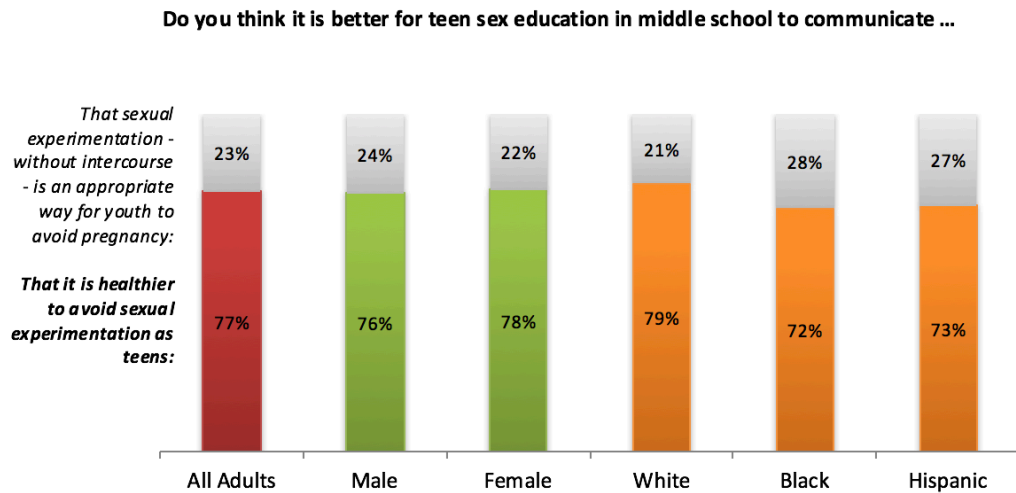


TABLE 4 DO YOU THINK IT IS BETTER FOR TEEN SEX EDUCATION IN MS TO COMMUNICATE...



Despite the fact that pro-teen-sex advocates want to push the envelope on what is included in sex education classes, most Americans do not agree that these controversial issues should be an essential component of sex education. They say, in fact, that none of these topics should be a considered an essential part of a high

school sex education class, with the lack of support increasing for middle school sex education:

- Demonstration of contraception (62% say contraception demonstration is not a topic that needs to be included in high school sex education classes, although most Americans do support a discussion about contraception, which is included in most SRA programs.)
- Confidential distribution of contraception. (73% don't think this needs to be included)
- Discussion of LGBTQ lifestyles (65% don't think this needs to be included), perhaps because Americans agree with SRA providers – that, all teens need the same skills for optimal health.
- Discussion of gender identify beyond male and female (66% don't believe this needs to be included)
- Abortion as a birth control alternative (76% don't think this needs to be discussed)
- Tips on how to provide sexual pleasure to a sexual partner (88% don't think this needs to be discussed)
- Masturbation as an intercourse alternative (83% don't believe this needs to be included)

Most Americans are concerned about the health of the adolescent generation. They are concerned about their future success and disapprove of the sex education classroom being co-opted for ideological agendas – or used to discuss topics that are far from having consensus opinions among parents and the research community. While this survey did not ask “why” Americans do not believe these topics need to be included in sex ed, perhaps they believe that controversial topics are best discussed between parent and child.

Americans agree that SRA programs give teens the healthier path to avoiding poverty. Compelling research derived from Census Data¹ reveals that youth only have a 2% chance of living their adult lives in poverty if they follow the success sequence by completing these things, in order: graduate from school, get a job, and then wait until they are at least 21 and married, before having children. In an attempt to circumvent the need for teens to wait for sex, the CDC and others are suggesting that Long Acting Reversible Contraception (LARC) is the solution to teen pregnancy and birth. Lauded as the best and more reasonable solution for teens, some sex education proponents insist that LARC be the first defense against teen births. But when Americans were asked which approach they preferred, the majority of all cohorts emphasized that helping teens wait for sex is the healthiest option.

TABLE 5 WHICH IS THE HEALTHIEST WAY FOR TEENS TO AVOID POVERTY?

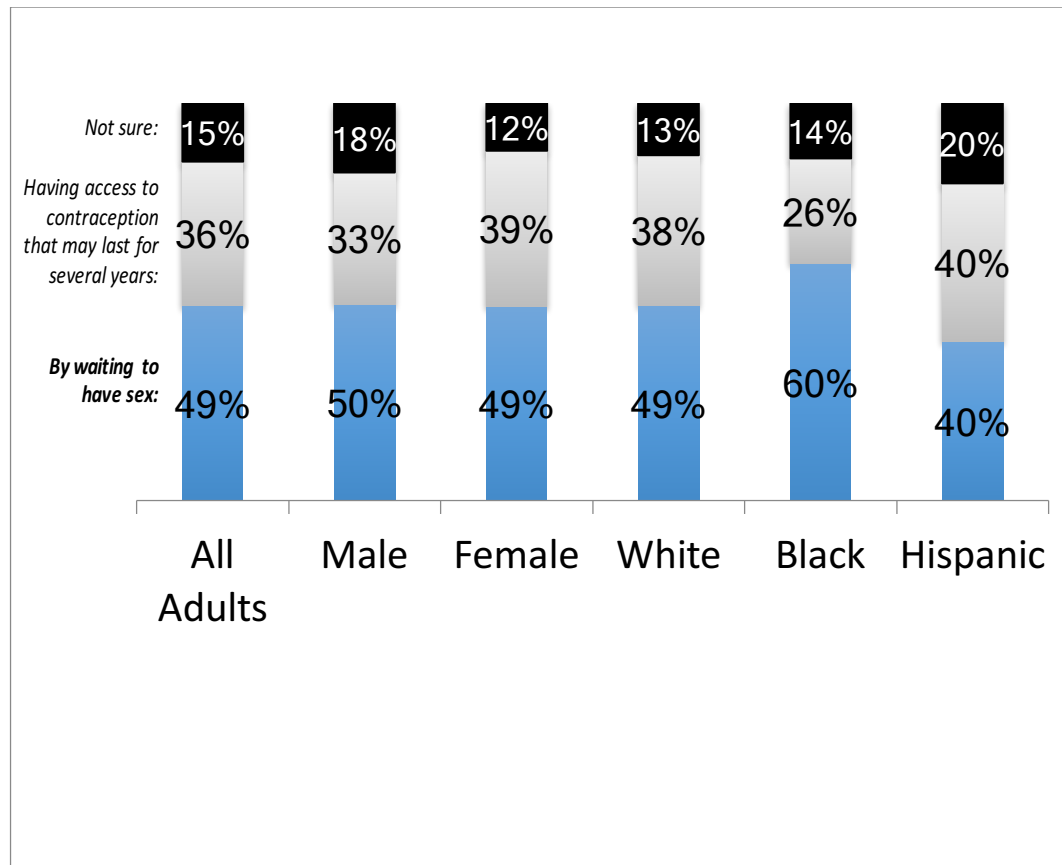


FIGURE 1 WHICH IS THE HEATHIEST WAY FOR TEENS TO AVOID POVERTY?

Observations and Recommendations

The *Americans Speak Out* survey presents a representative view of what priorities most Americans have for sex education in their communities – and in the nation at large. Though school boards are wrestling with this topic on a frequent basis, in large part prompted by small, but vocal special interest groups, the results of this research are clear. Americans want youth to be healthy. They want them to learn how to navigate adolescence successfully. They want youth to emerge as thriving, healthy adults who escape the myriad of pitfalls that often surface when teen sex is added to middle and high school life. They want them to escape poverty and build healthy relationships so they can build healthy families and marriages in the future.

The survey results paint a picture that mirrors the goals and realities of so many SRA programs across the nation. The SRA approach to sex education casts a vision for

youth to define and pursue their future goals; to help them gain the understanding that healthy habits begin early, and that avoiding all the risks associated with teen sex is an important way to clear the path for a bright future. SRA programs focus on habits that make the Success Sequence a reality in the lives of students: graduate, get a job and wait until married to become a parent. The reality is that when youth are encouraged to take ownership for their present decisions and future opportunities, positive results follow.

And SRA programs offer hope to those youth who have been led to believe that if they have engaged in sex, or other negative risk behaviors, their chances for success are gone – or compromised. For example, a sexually experienced student is typically told one of two things, depending upon the type of sex education received:

1. SRA educators remind all students that they deserve the best health outcomes and that unhealthy past decisions do not need to predict future decisions. Beginning today, sexually experienced students can choose to wait for sex and they are offered the hope, skills and encouragement to do so.
2. Pro-teen-sex (or sexual risk reduction) educators remind students that teen sex is not a problem so long as they use contraception and receive consent from their partners. This counsel ignores the compelling social science research that connects teen sexual delay to a variety of advantages – even if teens never experience a pregnancy. This advice might reduce the chance of a teen pregnancy, but it also compromises the opportunity for best health outcomes, by limiting access to the skills and counsel needed to help a teen achieve optimal health.

Policymakers, whether seated in the halls of Congress, or around a school board would be wise to listen to the voices of Americans on what they value for sex education:

- The holistic nature of the SRA message is strongly supported by most Americans.
- Americans think waiting to have sex is the best way for students to improve their future success.
- Americans think sex education classes should focus on healthy outcomes, not on controversial topics.
- Americans favor waiting for sex rather than LARC in order to give teens the healthier path to avoiding poverty.

The results of the *Americans Speak Out* research clearly show similar support among both men and women and among all ethnicities. It therefore demands a fresh look on what ‘culturally competent’ sex education should look like as there is unanimity among all groups that youth deserve optimal health. Period. No other agendas. Health. And we happen to agree.

The survey results provide a strong endorsement of SRA education as a preferred choice for sex education. Parents and policymakers alike should be encouraged that

this support is in good company with a deep bench of research-informed practices, theories, and implementation strategies that offer the best sexual health outcomes for America's youth.

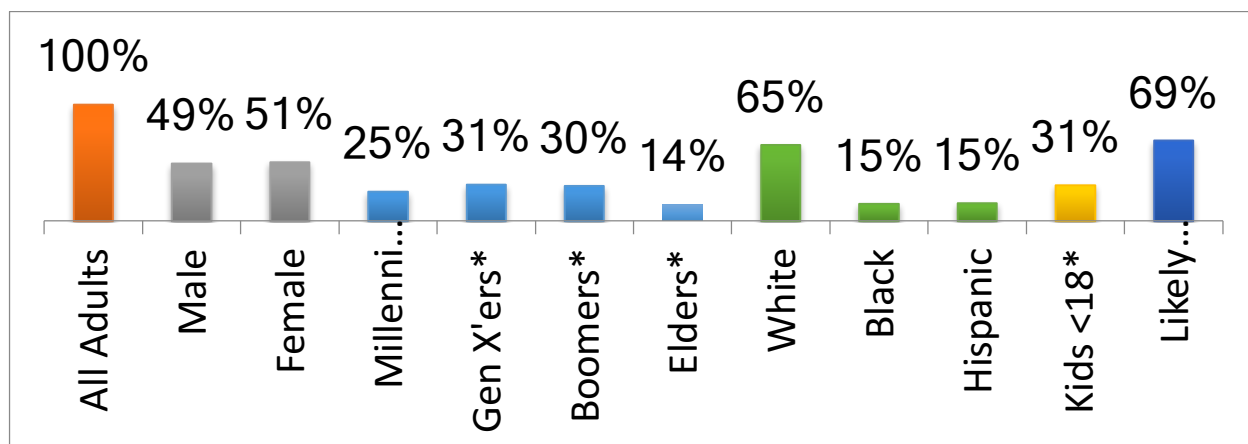
About the Survey

The findings in this report are based on a 20-minute online survey that was conducted by Barna Group with 1,237 U.S. Adults (18+) from the Research Now Panel, conducted from July 3 – 9, 2015 and a second survey of 1,000 U.S. Adults (18+) from the Research Now Panel conducted August 17 – 21, 2015. Due to the personal and sensitive nature of these topics, the confidential form of an online survey, versus phone survey, produces more reliable results. Analyses show that respondents to phone surveys exhibit "interviewer bias," in which a proportion try to give socially acceptable answers to the phone interviewer.

Headquartered in Ventura, California, Barna Group has conducted hundreds of studies and over a million interviews over the course of its 30-year history, earning it an esteemed place of regard concerning social and cultural issues. It is a respected source for understanding how Americans view and interpret culture and cultural issues that impact everyday life.

The *Americans Speak Out* data is representative of the ~200 million U.S. adults who have access to the internet in some form.² Data were weighted to represent the demographics of adults in the United States. The margin of sampling error for the full sample of 1,000+ adults is +/- 3.1 percentage points with a 95% level of confidence. This means that if the same questions were asked of other representative samplings of Americans, the results would be within 3.1 percentage points of those found in this study

The population samples were collected and weighted to align with the most recent Census Bureau data and include the following stratification:



¹ Haskins, R., & Sawhill, I. (2009). *Creating an Opportunity Society*. Washington, D.C.: *Brookings Institute*.

² Anderson, M., Perrin, A. (2015, July 28). Factank: News in the Numbers: 15% of Americans don't use the internet. Who are they?," Washington DC: Pew Research. Accessed June 1, 2016 at (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/28/15-of-americans-dont-use-the-internet-who-are-they/> /))