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Issues in Statutory Rape Law Enforcement: The Views of District Attorneys in Kansas

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Context: The 1996 federal welfare reform law calls for the reduction of adolescent pregnancy rates through aggressive enforcement of statutory rape laws at the local and state level. Yet there are few quantitative data on district attorneys' attitudes toward enforcement and related issues.

Methods: Anonymous surveys were mailed to all 105 Kansas district attorneys in 1997; 92 surveys were returned. In-depth telephone interviews were conducted with seven of the attorneys.

Results: Most of the respondents (74%) favored aggressive enforcement, but just 37% believed the public would support aggressive enforcement. Only 24% believed enforcement would reduce adolescent pregnancy. Fifty-seven percent supported the <http://pre-dev.guttmacher.org:8080/workflow/profile/story/container/edit.html#current> legal age of consent in Kansas (16 years). Fifty-three percent thought the law should not specify age differences between the partners. Most (77%) believed the law should protect sexually active minors, and that paternity acknowledgments should be admissible evidence in prosecutions (78%). Only 17% believed that enforcement would discourage adolescents from seeking health care.

Conclusions: The potential impact of statutory rape prosecution on reproductive and psychological health should be considered in each case. Educating law enforcement officials about adolescent health care issues and encouraging them to consult with professionals in health and psychological fields may help to minimize the potentially negative effects of enforcement on adolescents' reproductive health.

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- » [article in pdf](#)
- » [table of contents](#)
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