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COVERWALL



John Oliver Eviscerates American Sex Ed – But the Reality Is Even Worse

Oliver only touches on the fact that federal tax dollars are poured into inaccurate, religious sex ed programs around the country

■ BY DIANNA ANDERSON | August 13, 2015

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John Oliver tackled abstinence-only sex education on the

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most recent episode of 'Last Week Tonight.' Frederick M. Brown/Getty



John Oliver's HBO show *Last Week Tonight* has made a name for itself in part by producing digestible 15-minute segments about current affairs that are both funny and poignant – and that often spread like wildfire around the Internet on Monday mornings. The **latest such segment** is focused on the state of sexual health education in the United States, and how purity culture – the idea that virginity is a state of moral accomplishment – pervades sex ed.

SIDEBAR



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instance. Oliver is also right that only 13 states have in place legal standards requiring sex ed students to be taught medically accurate information. The

The video gets several aspects of America's broken sex ed system dead on: the likening of people (especially young women) who have sex to trampled roses, dirty shoes and chewed-up gum, for

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information presented in most sex ed seminars and classes – which are often insufficiently long to begin with – has to make it through a gauntlet of upset parents, community advisers and conservative teachers before getting to young people. As a result, school boards often choose to outsource their sex ed curricula to organizations that are already vetted and approved by the Department of Health and Human Services.

But what John Oliver only spends one sentence on in his segment is arguably the most important part of our broken sexual health education system: the fact that federal money is often used to fund unscientific, inaccurate and religiously oriented abstinence-only education programs. This is all thanks to a federal law signed by Bill Clinton.

Title V provides funding to school districts wishing to bring in outside organizations to promote abstinence-only or so-called “abstinence-plus” sex ed. You’re probably familiar with abstinence-only education. Not having sex is presented as the only real way to prevent pregnancy; if contraceptives and barrier methods are mentioned, their failure rates are featured prominently, and LGBT orientations are not discussed.




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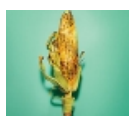
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Abstinence-plus programs, meanwhile, focus on abstinence, but acknowledge other alternatives. Religious organizations tend to prefer the former.

There are a few funding streams for abstinence-only education. School boards receive money to bring in abstinence-only organizations through Title V. In other cases, school boards aren't up for fighting the battle for comprehensive sex ed, and their money goes to these same programs practically by default. The coordinated lobbying campaign abstinence-only organizations engage in ensures that even money not specifically earmarked through Title V still often ends up in abstinence-only educators' hands.

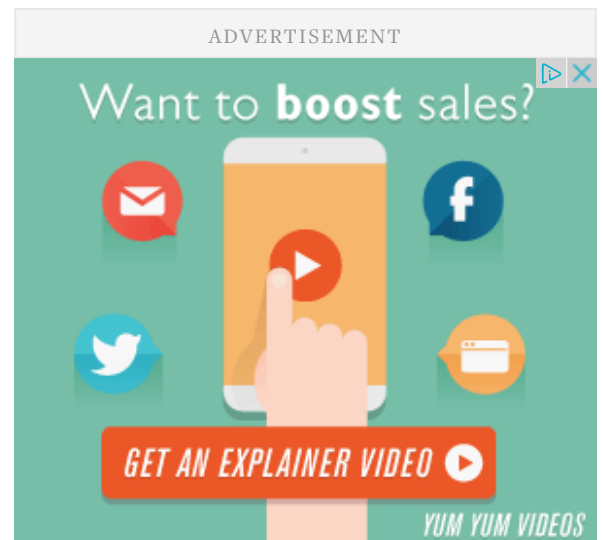
How much money are we talking about? According to [a 2007 study](#) from Mathematica Policy Research, the federal government allocates some \$50 million for abstinence-only education under Title V; states' grants match those funds at 75 percent, resulting in nearly \$100 million total in government money going to abstinence-only education each year.

Sarah Jones, a spokesperson for

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Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, tells *Rolling Stone* that parents who want comprehensive sex ed for their kids often have to fight against both the inertia of school boards and behemoth organizations like Focus on the Family and the National Abstinence Clearinghouse, which publishes pamphlets and novella-length guides for parents wishing to start an "abstinence revolution" in their area. The NAC advocates agitating school board officials and using its specially curated information to make the case for abstinence-only sex ed at school board meetings.

Jones' group helps parents and students bring suits against schools that bring in explicitly Christian abstinence-only speakers. (It is illegal for publicly funded schools to use public funds for religious speech of any kind.) In 2009, Americans United stopped a school district in Mississippi from endorsing the Abstinence Works program, which instructs teens about "God's command" for them to stay abstinent, and in 2006 it stopped a Texas district from busing students to local churches to learn about "True Love Waits," a religiously oriented abstinence-only program popular

among evangelical church groups across the U.S.

While many abstinence-only sex ed programs manage to skirt the line of legality, some – including popular speaker Pam Stenzel, featured in Oliver’s segment – cross the line into proselytizing about “God’s plan” for people’s sexual lives. In 2013, the religiously conservative principal of a high school in Charleston, West Virginia, brought in Stenzel to speak on “**God’s Plan for Purity.**” The student body vice president, a young woman, filed a complaint with the ACLU, arguing that the school had violated religious liberty laws by bringing in Stenzel as a speaker and advertising her in such a way. The principal retaliated against the student by threatening to call the college she was planning on attending to report her for “bad character.” This incident demonstrates the barriers students and parents face when it comes to advocating for comprehensive sex ed, and the lack of accountability for schools that violate the law.

Other young people have fought back as well. In 2013, students at a Texas high school responded to an overtly religious talk by Christian speaker and author Justin Lookadoo by

starting the [#Lookadouche](#) hashtag on Twitter. Lookadoo continues to work as an abstinence-only speaker, funded by many federally subsidized programs.

Indeed, with Title V still on the books, federal funds are still being poured into religiously tinged abstinence-only programs across the country. With federal funds specifically earmarked for abstinence-only education under the law, and with other funds going to abstinence-only organizations via conservative school boards and principals, explicitly religious abstinence-only educational programming is now a massive industry.

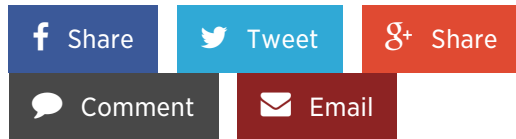
All yet, data show that abstinence-only education does not [make a difference in the sexual behavior of teenagers](#). In comprehensive studies of CDC data and on the effects of sexual health education in different communities, comprehensive sex ed delayed sexual activity by an average of 18 months, while abstinence-only education had little to no effect on the beginning point of sexual activity. What's more, studies have shown that states that heavily promote abstinence-only education have [higher teen birth](#)

rates overall, and higher incidences of STI/STDs.

Abstinence-only organizations and proponents tend not to care about these numbers. Their real goal is convincing students to believe in a conservative, evangelical version of Jesus. The vast majority of abstinence-focused speakers identify as evangelical Christians. They prepare two talks: one that legally passes muster at public schools, where God is eliminated from the discussion and holiness isn't a factor in remaining pure. Then the speakers often will ask students to visit them at a church, perhaps that very night, to hear a second talk – one containing an altar call to come to Jesus. These church talks often are advertised alongside public school appearances. This model is central to how these speakers approach their work, as evidenced by Justin Lookadoo's press kit.

So while John Oliver was correct about the inaccurate information and purity culture that have permeated America's sex ed programs, he may have underestimated just how bad the situation is. Public school students across the country are at risk – not only from unscientific abstinence education, but from the

right-wing religious industry that keeps such forms of education the status quo.



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Alan Schmukler · 6 hours ago

John Oliver is usually a good muckraker, but his trashing of Dr. OZ was so ill informed that it helped the Pharmaceutical companies and Monsanto, who were trying to silence OZ. If he ever apologizes for that, I'll watch his show again.


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zplonk → Alan Schmukler · 4 hours ago

dr. Oz is a selfish swindler, so no.


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Joined for this comment · 7 hours ago

Spirit of 58. If you knew anything about john Oliver you would know he is not a journalist. He's a satirical comedian.

^ | ▾ · Reply · Share ›



spirit_of_58 · 7 hours ago

Yeah the show's quite amusing - but it's the left wing equivalent of bear-baiting. Just jump on the populist gravy-train & don't really risk saying anything controversial. Case in point - there's a desperately tragic church shooting in the South. So does Oliver go after guns that actually were the implements used to commit the killings? No - he goes after a flag. It's lazy crowd pleasing satire & frankly I'd expect better from an alumnus of The Daily Show. Could do better... MUCH better.

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 **Blain Dester** → spirit of 58

Plain Dealer ↗ spirit_of_58
· 3 hours ago

@spirit_of_58 Have you noticed all of the "crazed, lone gunman" that have been popping up in the United States, but also overseas these last few years? You've noticed the relentless march of technology all around you, right? Cell phones, electric cars, lighting technology, etc. Did it ever occur to you that the science of psychology and sociology is rapidly marching forward also? Before you decide that disarming the law abiding population is the answer to solving the crime problem (of course outlaws don't obey laws, so laws restricting gun use only impacts the LAW ABIDING citizens), I dare you to get an update on the practical application of psychology and sociology on modifying human behavior: Google: "Thanks_for_the_Memories.pdf" (without the quotes). It should be disturbing, but you will be better informed for the effort!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›

John Adams ↗ Plain Dealer
· an hour ago

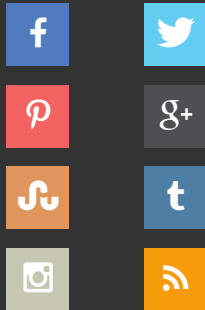
I think your onto something with your first point, mass shooting are not the direct result of access to firearms, personally i think it has more to do with alienation than anything else and if you really wanted to decrease mass shootings is for communities to come together, identify individuals who are isolated and finding ways to engage and make them feel like a stakeholder where they live. However, it frustrates me when pro-gun folks wont acknowledge that while guns dont kill people, they do make it easy and for all the different

variables that line up for a tragedy to occur, if you took

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