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Letters

Seeing is believing

If sexual statistics are needed to stop the spread of AIDS ("Desperately Seeking Sexual Statistics," SN: 7/8/89, p.28), we can stop worrying about the population explosion. Questionnaires and interviews are subject to major error and will not get the job done.

Observational evidence is the only scientific approach to gathering statistics, and the "Wild World of Animals" approach to humans is subject to question. Sorry, but there can be no epidemiologic prediction of the spread of AIDS if it requires sexual statistics.

K. R. Jewett
Marina del Rey, Calif.

The House Appropriations Committee apparently agrees with you. On July 25 it deleted from next year's budget the \$11 million earmarked for the controversial survey. Meanwhile, Health and Human Services Secretary Louis W. Sullivan has yet to approve spending the \$2 million that Congress has already authorized for a pilot survey.

— R. Weiss

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Cover: While Howard Johnson of the New York Mets goes for a hit, physicist N. David Mermin ponders whether he can help the team by watching them on TV. Mermin's ruminations on baseball and quantum mechanics lead to a unique way of looking at the famous Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen correlations — the "spooky" behavior of paired photons of light. (Photo: Marc S. Levine/© The New York Mets)

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The power of peer pressure

A sociologist might challenge Dorothy Otnow Lewis' contention that the gang of youths who beat and raped a woman in Central Park "were violent and most likely came from violent homes" ("Adding up violent vulnerabilities," SN: 5/20/89, p.318; Letters, SN: 6/24/87, p.387). As evidence, she cited a study of youths arrested for violent crimes, who had come predominantly from violent homes.

If the youths she studied committed their crimes as individuals, I would suggest that the fruits of her study might not apply to the Central Park incident at all. That was a gang or peer-group incident. The differences are not trivial. People do things in groups that they would never do as individuals. Peer pressure is powerful, especially among adolescents. It causes members to reject, albeit temporarily, the standards of their parents and adopt those of the peer group. If the leader or an influential member is a Bundy or an Attila, the gang can turn to raping or to serious van-

dalism, given the right setting and peer-group dynamics. Thus, not every member of a raping gang is necessarily a Bundy. Many a decent and once-promising young man is sitting in prison today because he let himself be led by a vicious peer-group member.

Adult peer groups can also be antisociety, but in more limited fashion. Having greater responsibilities and more experience, their members are more careful in their group behavior. Their behavior is more predictable and less volatile than youth behavior because the group's aims are more limited — to protect their common interests. They have "arrived" in society; they "belong." The common interest among adolescents is to have fun, but the best fun can be defiance — the flouting of society's injunctions. They harbor a generalized resentment against society, which denies them the rights and privileges of adults, although physically they are mature.

Stanley A. Bowes
Savannah, Ga.



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