

The Influence of Personal, Family, and School Factors on Early Adolescent Substance Use

Teen substance use is a serious public health problem in the United States. Substance use during adolescence has been linked with violent behavior, early sexual activity, and greater odds of substance abuse in adulthood. Prior research has shown that some teens are more prone to substance use than others, especially in early adolescence. Yet we still have limited insight into the factors that may influence substance use during the middle school years, when risk of initiation is greatest, and how these factors may vary for young teens from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

To shed more light on these issues, a team of RAND Health researchers examined alcohol, cigarette, and marijuana use among a racially and ethnically diverse group of 7th and 8th graders. The team surveyed approximately 5,500 students at 16 middle schools in Southern California in 2008.

The study found that substance use among youth in the sample matched rates reported in national studies of adolescent substance use, and that levels of use varied by racial and ethnic group: Hispanic youth reported the highest rates of substance use, whereas Asian youth reported the lowest.

Youth Rates of Self-Reported Substance Use (lifetime, %)

	Alcohol	Cigarettes	Marijuana
African American (n = 212)	21	9	6
Asian (n = 1,026)	10	5	1
Hispanic (n = 3,270)	27	13	10
Caucasian (n = 954)	18	7	4
All youth (n = 5,462)	22	10	7

Researchers probed further to determine what might explain these variations. They assessed how three sets of factors influenced adolescents' substance use: personal (susceptibility to peer pressure and expectations about the consequences of substance use), family (respect for parents, and adult or older-sibling substance use), and school (youth perceptions of peer substance use and actual use at the school as measured by aggregated self-reports). Findings showed the following:

- Relative to Caucasian and African American youth, Hispanic youth were more likely to be influenced by personal factors. Hispanic youth who expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to resist peer pressure and who were less likely to expect negative consequences from substance use were more likely to report substance use.

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This fact sheet is based on Shih R, Miles J, Tucker J, Zhou, A, and D'Amico E, "Racial/Ethnic Differences in Adolescent Substance Use: Mediation by Individual, Family, and School Factors," *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, Vol. 71, No. 5, September 2010.

Funding for this study was provided by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

- Also relative to Caucasian and African American youth, Asian youth were more likely to be influenced by all three factors. Lower rates of substance use among Asian youth were influenced by their views about the likelihood of negative outcomes from substance use, respect for parents and lower rates of substance use among older siblings, and their perceptions of lower rates of substance use by school peers.

Implications

The researchers caution that the results apply to a specific set of middle school students in Southern California and may not generalize to the broader population of American middle schoolers. Nonetheless, the results offer insights into racial and ethnic disparities in substance use among younger adolescents and how these disparities can be explained by individual, family, and school factors. Emphasizing specific factors, such as building skills to resist peer pressure, for example, may be particularly important for Hispanic youth in helping them to make healthier choices.

The findings provide important information that can help clinicians and public health experts work more effectively with youth during the earliest years of adolescence, when the risk of starting to use alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana is greatest.

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