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Racial Differences
in the Use of Drugs and Alcohol
Among Low Income Youth and Young Adults

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This study examines the use of drugs and alcohol among 284 youth and young adults of a low income urban community. Racial differences in the use of drugs and alcohol are examined for four age groups between 12 and 25.

Overall, the findings show significant racial differences in the use of both drugs and alcohol. Black youth and young adults have lower drug use and alcohol use rates than their white peers. The differences hold for the four age groups examined. Implications of the findings for drug prevention programs are discussed.

This study describes the use of drugs and alcohol among the youth and young adults of Chester, Pennsylvania. Chester is often characterized in negative terms. It is the most economically depressed community in Pennsylvania and in the 1980s it was ranked second on the Federal government list of most distressed cities in the nation (Baker, 1980). Fifty percent of the households receive some form of government assistance (Obenhouse, Schwartz, and Gray, 1984). About 34% of those on AFDC are long-term (four or more years) welfare recipients (Poulin, King, Greenberg, and Keating, 1987). Approximately 26% of the residents and 36% of the children are living below the poverty line (Baker, 1980). Chester also has the highest rate of single-parent families in Pennsylvania and out-of-wedlock births to teenage mothers (Poulin et al., 1987). It has a population of about 50,000 people of which about 66% are minorities (Census, 1980).

Chester has been characterized in the media as a center for drug activity in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware. It was the site of the largest drug raid in the history of the State of

Pennsylvania. In that raid, more than 50 high school students were arrested for possession and the selling of drugs (Maitland & DiGiacomo, 1989). Fastman and Merlino (1989) found that many of Chester's minority youth have become caught up in the selling of drugs. Key informants from the justice system of Delaware County, Pennsylvania estimate that over 40% of the criminal justice cases derive from Chester, with a very high incidence of drug dealing arrests (Wasilchick, 1990).

Recent media attention has tended to focus on the drug problems of the urban underclass. Unfortunately, news coverage of the drug problem has tended to equate the problem with minority populations. Contrary to the prevailing stereotypes, the limited data available suggest no racial differences in the use of drugs and higher alcohol use rates for whites than for Blacks (NIDA, 1988; Poulin, 1990).

Drug and alcohol use varies by age. Young adults aged 18 to 25 have the highest use rates followed by teenagers aged 12 to 17 (NIDA, 1988). Substance use by America's youth has received considerable attention in the media. Gleaton and Gowan (1985) state that during the past decade, the United States experienced the highest rates of drug abuse by youth and young adults in the industrialized world. Macdonald (1986) states that American youth have the dubious honor and hold the unfortunate record of leading the world's industrialized nations in the use of drugs. Drug and alcohol use by low income youth and young adults and by racial groups among the poor have not been previously examined. Therefore, this article examines racial differences in the use of drugs and alcohol among the low income youths and young adults of Chester, PA.

Methods

Sample

Four hundred and ninety three residents of Chester, PA were interviewed for this study. A nonrandom stratified sampling plan was used to obtain subjects for the survey. A four way stratification based on gender and age was employed. The plan called for approximately equal proportions of males and females

age 20 and under and 21 and over. This article reports the findings for those aged 12 to 25 ($N = 284$).

Eleven interviewers conducted the interviews during the months of May and June 1990. Four of the interviewers were students at a local university and seven were community residents. Four of the interviewers were Black, the remainder were white. The interviews took place throughout the Chester community. Interviews were conducted at twelve social service agencies in the community and on the streets of Chester. Participants were selected on a first come basis. The interviewers were instructed to determine if the subjects lived in the Chester community. If so, they were asked to participate in a confidential survey. Five hundred and fifty-two community residents were asked to participate in the study. Fifty-nine declined. Thus, 89.3% of the community residents who were asked to participate in the study completed interviews.

Demographic Characteristics

Among those aged 12 to 25, 56% (159) are between the ages of 12 and 17, and 44% (125) are aged 18 to 25. Almost 54% (153) are male and about 39% (111) are white. About 95% (270) of the subjects have never been married, 2.8% (8) are currently married and the remainder (6) are separated/divorced. About 67% (190) are currently in school, with 63% (120) of those in school attending high school. About 33% (94) are not currently in school. About 87% (82) of those not in school have completed high school. About 37% (105) live in two parent families, 37.7% (107) in single parent families, 4.2% (12) live with spouses or significant others, and almost 21% (60) have some other living arrangement. Most of those in the other category live with relatives.

The demographic characteristics of the study population appear for the most part to be representative of the Chester population. The percentage of minority subjects is close to the percentage reported in the 1980 Census. Also, the high percentage of the study subjects who live in single parent families or who live with relatives is characteristic of low income urban communities. The percentage of those not in school who have completed high school, however, is quite high. The study

population appears to under-represent youth and young adults who have dropped out of school; a population often associated with substance use and abuse. The under-representation of school dropouts could significantly lower the findings on drug and alcohol use reported in this study. The extent to which this occurs is unknown. However, caution in interpreting these data is warranted.

Measurement

The interview schedule consisted of three major components. The first section contained basic demographic information on the subjects. The second section asked questions about the family members' past substance use. The third section of the interview schedule contained questions about the respondents' substance use. The following thirteen substances were included on the interview schedule: liquor, beer, wine/wine coolers, marijuana, cocaine, crack, ice, methadone, amphetamines, barbiturates, heroin, inhalants, and prescription drugs.

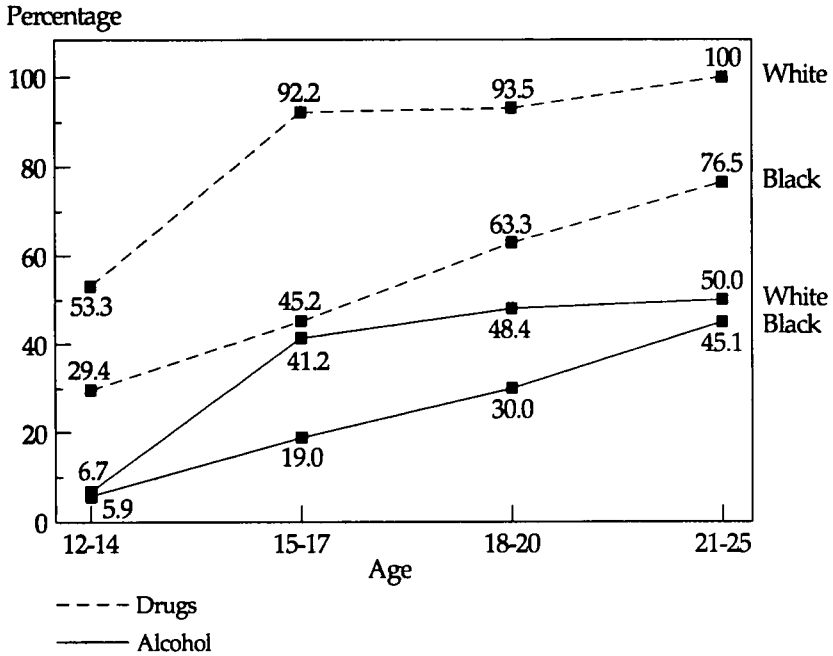
Findings

There are racial differences in the use of drugs and alcohol among the youth and young adults in this study (not shown). About 88% of the white subjects had used alcohol within the past three months compared to about 53% of the Black subjects ($X^2 = 35.67, p < .001$). The difference between whites and Blacks in the use of drugs is also statistically significant. About 39% of the white subjects had used drugs within the past three months compared to about 25% of the minority residents ($X^2 = 6.20, p < .01$). A significantly larger percentage of the white youths and young adults use drugs and alcohol than their minority counterparts.

Figure 1 contains the percentages of drug and alcohol use for four age groups by race. Whites youths in all the age groups have higher percentages of drug and alcohol use than Black youths. Over 92% of the white youths and young adults aged 15 to 25 had used alcohol within the past three months compared to about 45% of the Blacks aged 15 to 17, 63.3% aged 18 to 20, and 76.5% aged 21 to 25.

Figure 1

Drug and alcohol use by race by age



Among the 12 to 14 year olds there are only slight differences in the percentages using drugs (6.7% vs. 5.9%). However, there are substantial racial differences in the use of drugs among those aged 15 through 20. Between 41.2% and 48.4% of the white youths in these age groups had used at least one type of drug during the past three months compared to 19% of the African American youths aged 15 to 17 and 30% aged 18 to 20. After age 20 radical differences in the use of drugs decrease substantially. Fifty percent of the whites in this age group had used drugs compared to 45.1% of the minority subjects.

Discussion

There are two limitations associated with these data. The first is that the information on substance use is based on self-reporting. As with all drug and alcohol studies based on

self-reports, there is the possibility of under-reporting. The interviewers were trained to stress that the interview would be strictly confidential and that the respondents would not be identified in any way. Nevertheless, it is possible that the use percentages obtained in this study are lower than the respondents' actual use of drugs and alcohol.

A second limitation of this study is the way in which subjects were selected to participate in the survey. A nonrandom sampling plan was used. As noted previously, it is possible that the survey respondents do not accurately represent Chester's youth and young adult population. The magnitude of the potential selection bias in these data is unknown.

The findings of this study show significant racial differences in the use of drugs and alcohol among the youth and young adults of Chester. The Blacks in this study have substantially lower rates of drug and alcohol use than the white teenagers and young adults.

Racial differences held for all the age groups examined. Significantly higher percentages of white youths of all ages had used alcohol than Black youths. Over 90% of the whites aged 15 to 25 had used alcohol within the past three months. This is a very high percentage of alcohol use, especially for the teenagers. Black teenagers have significantly lower percentages of alcohol use than their white peers.

Black youths aged 15 to 20 also had significantly lower rates of drug use than the same aged white youths. Among those aged 12 to 14 there were no racial differences in the use of drugs and after age 20 only small differences between the white and Black respondents.

These findings suggest that Black teenagers residing in low income urban communities are substantially less involved with drugs and alcohol than their white peers. It is the white youth of Chester who are most involved in drug and alcohol use. After age 20 racial differences in the use of drugs and alcohol remain but the magnitude of the differences are greatly reduced.

Media attention tends to focus on the drug problems of minority populations. The findings from this study indicate that drug and alcohol is not just a minority problem. Indeed, the opposite appears to hold. The low income white youth and young

adults appear to be more heavily involved in substance use than their minority peers. This is not to say, however, that a substantial number of minority persons are not involved in substance use. Prevention programs need to address the high drug and alcohol use among low income teenagers and young adults, particularly the very high percentage of white teenagers who use alcohol.

The proportion of Black teenagers who use drugs is much smaller than the proportion of white teenagers. After age 20 the differences are much smaller. It appears that Blacks become involved in the use of drugs at a later age than whites. Additional research is needed to identify the factors that contribute to the lower use rate by Black teenagers. An explanation of this phenomenon could help drug prevention programs direct their efforts at keeping minority youth drug free.

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