Correlates of Early Adolescent Peer and Personal Substance Use in Rural Northern Michigan

Paul D. Sarvela¹ and E. J. McClendon²

Received January 25, 1983

Data were collected from 181 middle school students in rural northern Michigan during May 1982. Student responses concerning peer and personal use of alcohol and nicotine were analyzed. The results suggest that peer substance use is highly correlated with personal substance use, and increases significantly with age. Sexual differences were also noted. This article describes the powerful correlates between peer and personal alcohol and nicotine use (i.e., cigarette smoking), and suggests some hypotheses for this phenomenon.

INTRODUCTION

Peer pressure plays an important part in many youth decisions including the decision to use both licit and illicit substances. Recent television, radio, and print media reports all point to the "peer reference group effect" as a significant factor in adolescent substance use. The early adolescent usually has several friends who are currently using licit and illicit mood-modifying substances; associating with such friends is thought to influence behavior considerably in terms of drug-taking opportunities (e.g., Andrews and Kandel, 1979; Huba and Bentler, 1980; Jessor and Jessor, 1977).

This research was supported in part by a University of Michigan, School of Education research grant.

¹Doctoral candidate, The Department of Development, Curriculum, and Teaching; Program in Health Education; School of Education; The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
²Professor, Health Education, School of Education, Department of Health Behavior and Health Education, School of Public Health, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
Some researchers have argued that peer influence on drug-taking decisions is more influential than parental authority in these matters, while others claim that peers are of equal or less importance in inducing this behavior (Stephens, 1980). One hypothesis suggests that deficient socialization and inadequate parenting are the reasons why peer pressure is more influential than parental authority (Levine and Kozak, 1979). Regardless of the reasons, it is clear that young adults often want to use drugs to be perceived as acting like adults, in other words, to engage in "adult" behaviors. These "adult" behaviors are not confined to substance use, but may also be reflected in the early adolescent decision to engage in other socially disapproved behaviors such as premarital sexual intercourse (Sarvela and McClendon, 1983).

Despite the often assumed influence of peer pressure on substance use, few studies have examined the topic directly; rather, it is usually examined through post hoc analysis of self-reported recall behaviors and mentioned as an additional finding. More importantly, basic research and programs dealing with rural and small town populations are essentially nonexistent; however, there is a great need for research that can be generalized to this population, since it accounts for fully one-third of all Americans. The few studies (e.g., Napier, Carter, and Pratt, 1981; Tolone and Dermott, 1975) aimed at rural groups have emphasized high school or older populations. Few studies have focused on the early developmental stages of this problem, and these have been primarily of a descriptive nature, avoiding the psychosocial etiologic elements. Such issues as the influence of religiosity, peer pressure, and substance use health beliefs and attitudes are not explored. Because of lack of data in this area, the present investigators examined a preadolescent and early adolescent rural/small town population to determine the impact of peer pressure variables on experiences and beliefs relating to use of alcohol and nicotine, two drugs whose potential for further health problems is dramatic.

METHOD

The survey was conducted in a small town (population approximately 10,000) in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The closest metropolitan area is some 60 miles away and across the state boundary. Traditional rural employment (e.g., farming, mining, and logging) provides the usual occupations of the area, although light industry is also found (chiefly paper mills). The unemployment rate in the county surveyed at the time of the study was 16.0%. The Upper Peninsula's total unemployment rate for the year of 1981 was 13.3% (Michigan Employment Security Commission, 1982).