

Alcohol: The Gateway to Other Drug Use Among Secondary-School Students

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The "stepping-stone" theory of progression into drug use is examined, based on the alcohol and other drug use of over 27,000 seventh- through eighth-grade students in New York State. The data show that students do not use illicit drugs unless they also use alcohol. White, black and Hispanic students all tend to initiate the use of drugs in the following order—alcohol, marijuana, pills, and "hard" drugs. Among blacks and Hispanics, pills are not as important a transition between marijuana and hard drugs as they are among whites. Cigarettes form an important step between alcohol and marijuana use for younger students, particularly for females. Since alcohol serves as the gateway to all other drug use, prevention approaches that control and limit alcohol use among adolescents may be warranted.

INTRODUCTION

The "stepping-stone" theory evolved over 20 years ago during debates on the legalization of marijuana. In the mid-1960s, the Federal Bureau of Narcotics (1965) widely publicized the notion that marijuana use was a dangerous first step to heroin addiction, and evidence was presented showing that most heroin addicts started their progression of drug use by first smoking marijuana. Debates quickly developed, with scientists noting flaws

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in the theory, since most marijuana users do not go on to become heroin addicts (Johnson, 1973).

Kandel (1975) later included alcohol use as a necessary stage in the sequence of drug use among adolescents, with legal drugs being a necessary intermediate between nonuse and marijuana use. A number of other investigators have found that adolescents are unlikely to use marijuana unless they have used alcohol first; they are likewise unlikely to use "hard" drugs, such as heroin or cocaine, unless they have first used marijuana (Huba *et al.*, 1981; Kandel and Faust, 1975; Johnston, 1973; O'Donnell, 1979). Refinements of this basic theme have been detected. Yamaguchi and Kandel (1984), who analyzed a longitudinal study of New York State high-school students and followed-up nine years later, discovered that for females, either alcohol or cigarettes could serve as a stepping stone to marijuana use. Donovan and Jessor (1983), examining two nationwide cross-sectional student surveys, found that problem drinking was an intermediate step between marijuana use and the use of pills (amphetamines, barbiturates), which in turn formed a bridge to hard drug use.

Mills and Noyes (1984), working with a sample of Maryland students, found that drug use was not only sequential but cumulative. By comparing "ever used" with current use, they showed that when young people acquire a new drug-use habit, they do not abandon the old ones, but rather add the new drug to their repertoire.

Sequence of initiation into drug use had been shown to vary by sex and across nationality. Adler and Kandel (1981) examined samples of adolescents in Israel and France, and they concluded that while definite sequential patterns exist in both countries, the initiation into the use of illegal drugs is much more sequential in Israel. Israeli youths tend to go through three steps: beer, wine, then liquor and cigarettes. These stages are absent in France. Yamaguchi and Kandel (1984) compared male and female Americans, and they concluded that cigarettes are more important for females than males as part of a sequence from alcohol to illicit drugs.

The present study is further refinement to the stepping-stone theory. It uses data from an extremely large sample of New York State high-school students, and it includes data on the use of alcohol and a large number of other drugs. Because of the ethnic heterogeneity of New York State, this large sample allows an examination of sequential patterns of alcohol and other drug initiation among ethnic groups not previously studied, as well as for a combination of sex and age groups.

METHODS

This survey was based on a final sample of 27,335 students from randomly selected public-school districts and private schools throughout New