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# EARLY COITAL BEHAVIOR AND SUBSTANCE USE AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE ADOLESCENTS

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## Introduction

Recent empirical research suggests that early adolescent sexual activity and substance use are linked behaviors and that girls who engage in these behaviors are at-risk for premature childbearing and poor health outcomes, such as HIV (Fullilove, et.al, 1993; Smith, 1997). A review of the literature, however, reveals that there is limited investigation of the context in which early coital behavior and substance use occur, especially among Black female adolescents. An investigation of 108 sources (books, chapters and journal articles) written between 1980 and 1996 revealed that only eleven addressed in any detail the co-occurring phenomenon of early coital behavior and substance use. If, however, we are to develop effective prevention programs we must, as Smith (1997) argues, understand the ecology or social world that many Black females experience in their early adolescent years. Toward this aim, this article summarizes the current state of our knowledge regarding the relationship between substance use and premature sexual activity and suggests directions for future research.

## Substance Use and Sexual Activity

The most compelling and consistent finding in the adolescent substance use literature is that drug use is higher among whites than Blacks and Hispanics (Oetting & Beauvais, 1990). While a number of hypotheses, such as the underreporting of deviant activities by Blacks, have been offered to dispute these racial differences, researchers have concluded that based on the empirical data, the racial/ethnic differences are valid (Wallace et. al, 1995).

Engagement in sexual activity under the age of sixteen years of age is generally considered deviant behavior. As in the substance use field, empirical research consistently confirms that race is a strong predictor of early coital behavior (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1994). Early sexual activity is more prevalent among Blacks than whites, especially among Black males. The average age at which Black females initiate coital behaviors is 16.5, two years earlier than their white counterparts. Researchers suggest that sexually permissive norms explain this race-specific effect (Udry & Billy, 1987). Until recently, however, studies investigating the context in which adolescent

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sexuality occurred were seriously lacking. In fact, recent research suggests that early timing of coital behavior is *not* a race-specific effect, but a response to the structural constraints of economically impoverished neighborhoods (Brewster, 1994).

### **Adolescent Problem Behavior: Jessor's Explanatory Model**

The most widely used theoretical model for understanding the etiology of adolescent deviant behaviors—substance use and early sexual activity—is Jessor's (1977) problem behavior theory (Ensminger, 1990, Newcomb, 1995). Its core suppositions are: the equivalency of deviant behaviors, their functionality, and the universality of norms. The theory proposes that problem behaviors deviate from social norms, they occur frequently, and they exist to accomplish personal goals. Jessor's model has increasingly been criticized, however, in that all unconventional behaviors are not equivalent. Moreover, norms are contextually dependent and are influenced by factors such as race, ethnicity and gender. Finally, deviancy is difficult to change if it is functional (Ensminger, 1990; Rosenbaum & Kandel, 1990). Given these weaknesses, Jessor's model may have limited explanatory power for understanding the complexities and ecology of adolescent behaviors.

### **Adolescent Problem Behavior: Risk-Related Factors**

Increasingly, researchers explore adolescent problem behaviors by examining risk-protective factors through epidemiological studies (Kagen, 1992). These studies suggest that clusters of risk-related behaviors result in poor youth outcomes and specific risk behaviors place adolescents in jeopardy for other risk behaviors. Black urban adolescents are overrepresented among crack users, a group especially susceptible to a cluster of sexual risk factors. The majority of crack users report having friends and relatives who use drugs, thus supporting an ecology of a risk phenomenon (Fullilove, et al., 1993). Psychosocial factors found to be associated with adolescent early sexual activity and/or substance use include poor school adjustment, role model deprivation, and negative patterns of family communication (Newcomb, 1995).

### **Early Coital Behavior and Substance Use: Its Co-Occurrence**

The few studies that specifically investigated the co-occurrence of early coital behavior and substance use have contradictory results. Using retrospective data from a large national survey of 12,600 respondents between 14-22 years, interviewed annually since 1979, a sample (N=10,846) of those at least 19 years old at the end of 1983 were selected to examine the use of illicit substances (alcohol and marijuana) in relationship to early sexual activity up to age 19. Mott and Haurin (1989) found that for minority youth (Hispanic and Black), unlike their white peers, early sexual initiation and substance use were not linked behaviors, rather they were separate events. Re-

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ardless of race and ethnicity, almost two thirds of younger female teens (under age 16) and half of young male teens neither used substances or engaged in sexual intercourse. Approximately 15% of younger male teens were more likely to have sex only, while among female teens 6% were likely to only have sex. At age 19 years approximately 49% of the male teens had engaged in all three behaviors (sex, alcohol, and marijuana), while 32% of female teens had indulged in these behaviors. Mott and Haurin's study did *not* support the view that adolescent deviant behaviors are symptomatic of a behavioral syndrome involving large number of teens.

Although Rosenbaum and Kandel (1990) used the same national data set as Mott and Haurin (1989), they reached a different set of conclusions regarding the relationship between early sexual activity and substance use. In part, these differences in findings may reflect differences in the investigator's variables of interest. Rosenbaum and Kandel, for instance, found that for both white and Hispanic youth- unlike their Black cohorts- prior engagement in delinquent activities and use of all substances were strong predictors of early sexual coital behavior. For Blacks, only prior use of marijuana was associated with an increase risk of premature sexual activity. The authors conclude that while higher involvement in drug use increases the risk for early coital behavior for Blacks, sexually permissive norms may also be predictors of sexual activity. Rosenbaum and Kandel's data revealed significant racial differences in predictors of female adolescents' engagement in early sexual behavior. White and Hispanic females were more influenced by family structure and composition, and attitudinal and behavioral variables than their Black female counterparts.

Similarly, Zabin, et. al. (1986), using retrospective data from a sample (N=2600) of inner city Black and white high school juniors and seniors, report significant interactions between age and sexual activity and between race and sexual activity relative to substance use. Compared to Black youth, whites tended to use more drugs and at earlier ages, especially among females. At age 13, 47% of the white females had used alcohol whereas only 20% of the Black female teens had used alcohol when 13 years old. Harder drug use as well was greater among white teens. Among white females approximately 20% had used hard drugs at age 15; while among their Black cohorts less than 5% had used hard drugs. Marijuana use showed few racial and age differences. At age 15, 37% of Black females and 40% of white females had used this illicit substance. Notwithstanding the fact that substance use was clearly associated with early coital onset, where sexual activity was lowest—among white females—drug use was the highest. Although approximately 18% of white adolescent females were sexually active at age 14, 55% had used alcohol. Conversely, Black males who had the highest rates of sexual activity, even more so than Black females, had the lowest rates of substance abuse. Eighty-two percent of Black males were sexually active at age 14, although only 17% reported alcohol use. Forty-five percent of Black females initiated sexual intercourse at age 14, but they were less likely to indicate alcohol use (25%) than their white female cohorts.

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Ensminger's (1990) longitudinal study of the frequency of several problem behaviors—sexual activity, substance use, and physical assault—among 705 Black urban adolescents also supports the co-occurrence phenomenon. Results indicated that for both males and females sexual intercourse was significantly correlated with substance use. Ensminger's analysis suggests that problem behaviors occur sequentially, that is, one behavior serves as a bridge to other deviant behaviors, and that problem behaviors share mutual influences. For example, poor school achievement and excessive truancy may influence both early sexual initiation and substance use. Also, study results suggest that sexual activity has a different meaning for females than for males, but only when it does *not* occur with other problem behaviors.

### Conclusions

Research findings consistently document that Black adolescents initiate sexual intercourse earlier than both whites and Hispanics. However, Black teens have lower substance use rates than their white and Hispanic cohorts. These data suggest that for Blacks there are some unanswered questions. While preliminary data suggests that adolescent risk-taking behavior co-occurs or occurs sequentially, in the case of Black adolescents empirical findings are equivocal. This ambiguity may be the result of ill-defined study designs or theories used to investigate this phenomena may not be valid for Black adolescents. Or, perhaps existing models thus far are unable to explain certain phenomena. In instances where sexual activity and substance use occurs, research data suggest that there are significant health risks. Hence, this remains an important area to investigate. Additional research is needed to learn more about the contextual factors related to adolescent substance use and early coital behavior among Black adolescent females. Accordingly, ethnographic research is well suited for such social ecological investigations. The ecological domains of family, peers, and neighborhood are critical in the lives of adolescents. Demographic or survey research simply cannot provide the "thick description" data needed to understand the social context of adolescent experiences. Moreover, emic data is needed to develop effective intervention-prevention programs that address the risk-protective factors present in the lives of Black female teens.

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