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## **RACE DIFFERENCES IN ADOLESCENT DRUG USE: RECENT FINDINGS FROM NATIONAL SAMPLES**

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A number of stereotypes exist regarding America's "drug problem." Perhaps one of the most prominent stereotypes is the notion that the use and abuse of drugs (both licit and illicit) is rampant among African American youth relative to White youth (Bachman and Wallace, 1991). Contrary to public perception, the extant research indicates that Black youth are less likely than White youth to have used drugs in the past or to be current users of licit (i.e., alcohol and cigarettes) or illicit drugs (e.g., marijuana and cocaine) (Bachman et al., 1991, Wallace and Bachman, 1991; Johnston, O'Malley, and Bachman, 1993). The present article highlights and summarizes findings from a series of recent studies on race differences in drug use among American youth.

### **THE DATA**

The data used in these studies are drawn from the Monitoring the Future Project, a large, nationally representative study of 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students. Data from 12th graders have been collected annually by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center since 1975. The first collection of data from 8th and 10th grade students took place in 1991.

The study uses a stratified cluster sampling procedure which results in samples representative of 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students in the 48 coterminous states. First, particular geographic areas are selected. Next, schools are selected. Finally, students are selected in each school. Approximately 160 schools are selected for 8th graders, 135 for 10th graders, and 135 for seniors. The final samples include about 18,000 8th graders, 16,000 tenth graders, and 16,000 seniors each year.

The students complete machine readable, self-administered questionnaires during a normal class period. Questionnaire response rates are about 90 percent for 8th graders, 87 percent for 10th graders and 83 percent for seniors. Absence on the day of data collection is the primary reason that students are missed; additionally, about one percent refuse to complete the questionnaire.

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## PREVALENCE OF DRUG USE

Table 1 presents the prevalence of lifetime, annual, and monthly (30 day) alcohol, cigarette, marijuana, and cocaine use among Black and White 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students. Not surprisingly, the prevalence of drug use tends to increase with age (grade level). For example, while slightly more than three-fifths of Black 8th graders have had alcohol at some point in their lives, four out of five Black twelfth graders have done so. Similarly, 7 percent of 8th graders report that they have ever used marijuana compared to over 23 percent of seniors. In general, the pattern of higher use among older students is consistent across drugs and recency of use (i.e., lifetime, annual, and 30 day). The pattern is also consistent across race; older White students are more likely than their younger counterparts to have ever used drugs and to have used them in the last thirty days.

Turning to race differences, "Is drug use more prevalent among Black youth than among White youth?" The data presented in Table 1 suggest that the answer is no. In fact, Black youth are considerably less likely than White youth to have ever used or to be current users of alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana, or cocaine. Black youths' lower prevalences of those drugs that are legal for adults to use, alcohol and cigarettes, are particularly pronounced. For example, White students are more than three times as likely as Black students to have smoked in the last thirty days across all three grade levels. Although race differences in thirty day marijuana, and lifetime and thirty day cocaine use are not large, higher prevalences among White youth still exist, thus disconfirming the notion that Black youth are more likely than White youth to use drugs.

## RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF THE FINDINGS

Given, what is to some, the counterintuitive finding that drug use is, on average, less prevalent among Black youth, relative to White youth, questions might be raised concerning the reliability and validity of the results. In the scientific community, reliability refers to the extent to which a given finding is replicated across different studies. Virtually all of the past research that has examined race differences in drug use has found results consistent with those reported here; White youth report higher prevalence of drug use than do Black youth (see Prendergast et al., 1989 for a review). Further evidence of the reliability of the findings can be garnered from examination of the trends in Black and White high school seniors' drug use. These data indicate that licit and illicit drug use have been lower among Black youth than among White youth for over a decade (Bachman et al., 1991).

Assuming the finding of lower drug use among Black youth relative to White youth is reliable, the next question is whether these findings are "real" (i.e., valid). There is a growing literature on the validity of self-reported drug use measures (e.g., Johnston

**TABLE 1**  
**Lifetime, Annual, and Thirty-Day Prevalence of Drug Use,**  
**for Black and White 8th, 10th, and 12th Graders**  
**(1991 and 1992 Data Combined)**

DRUG CATEGORY	Lifetime			Annual			30-Day		
	8th	10th	12th	8th	10th	12th	8th	10th	12th
Cigarettes									
Black	32.2	40.9	44.4	NA	NA	NA	5.3	6.6	8.8
White	45.8	57.3	65.7	NA	NA	NA	16.2	24.1	31.8
Alcohol									
Black	64.0	78.0	80.1	43.4	60.6	63.6	18.6	30.2	32.0
White	71.7	84.8	89.7	56.3	74.1	80.2	26.6	44.1	56.9
Marijuana									
Black	7.4	16.2	23.3	4.1	7.6	11.5	2.0	3.6	6.1
White	9.9	23.0	36.3	6.4	17.0	24.9	3.3	9.0	14.1
Cocaine									
Black	1.0	1.3	2.4	0.7	0.6	1.3	0.4	0.1	0.7
White	2.3	3.7	7.0	1.2	2.1	3.3	0.5	0.7	1.3

Note: Sample sizes Black: 8th 4200, 10th 3900, 12th 3900; White: 8th 21,900, 10th 19,600, 12th 21,500.

and O'Malley, 1985; O'Malley et al., 1983; Rouse et al., 1985), but relatively little of this research examines the possibility of race differences in the validity of responses to these measures. In the absence of more objective measures such as urinalysis results or analysis of hair samples, Black-White differences in responses to a number of subjective validity measures were examined (Wallace and Bachman, 1993). The subjective validity measures included high school seniors' responses to questions concerning the risk level that they perceive is associated with the use of various drugs, their disapproval of someone (18 or older) using various drugs, their perception of their friends' disapproval of them (the student) using a particular drug, the number of their friends who the student perceives use drugs, and the extent to which they are around others who use drugs.

If the Black-White differences in self-reported drug use presented above are valid, the following would also be expected: Black youth would be more likely than White youth 1) to perceive "great risk" associated with the use of drugs; 2) to disapprove of drug use; 3) to perceive that their friends would "greatly disapprove" of them (the student) using

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drugs; 4) to report that none of their friends use drugs; and 5) to report limited exposure to drug users. Overall, Black-White differences in drug related attitudes and perception measures were consistent with expectations and with self-reported patterns of use; Black youth perceived greater risk with drug use, expressed greater disapproval, perceived greater peer disapproval of their use, reported fewer friends who used drugs, and indicated less frequent exposure to users. In sum, these results and that of other research, suggest that the findings of lower drug use among Black relative to White youth are, on the whole, both reliable and valid.

If Black youth are less likely than White youth to use drugs, the next question to be answered is why this is the case. Recent efforts to account for Black-White differences in drug use suggest that they certainly are not the result of differences in sociodemographic background. In fact, the data suggest that if Black youth were as likely as White youth to live with both parents and in families in which their parents were highly educated, they would be even less likely than White youth to use drugs (Wallace and Bachman, 1991). Adding additional controls for various lifestyle measures, such as evenings out for fun and recreation, religiosity, and employment, reduced the magnitude of the race differences slightly but did not eliminate them.

Based on the extant research it is not known why African American youth are less likely than White youth to use drugs. Accordingly, future research on drug use among African American youth and on racial/ethnic differences in drug use should focus more intensively on identifying those "protective factors" that deter drug use among African American youth (e.g., fundamentalist religious socialization, strong family ties). Future efforts should also seek to develop culturally informed multi-level prevention strategies that involve not only young people themselves but also families, schools, churches, law enforcement agencies, and local, state, and federal government.

#### SUMMARY

Past research indicates that African American youth are less likely than White youth to be past, present, or current users of licit and illicit drugs. These findings of relatively low levels of drug use among African American youth are heartening. However, there is evidence that suggests that Black youth who use drugs experience significantly more problems than White youth who use drugs (Welte and Barnes, 1987). There is also considerable evidence that many "drug-related" problems (e.g., violence, family neglect, addiction, incarceration) disproportionately affect African American youth, their families, and the communities in which they live (OTA, 1991). And, although many African American youth may not use drugs, the "drug problem" is a problem with which many are acquainted intimately, and a problem with which we as a nation must continue to grapple.

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