

Underage drinking among close friends high indicator of future alcohol use by black teens

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Research led by University of Southern California (USC) professor Mary Ann Pentz, Ph.D., shows that black middle school students whose close friends drink alcohol are more likely to drink alcohol in high school than their white classmates.

The study, which appears in the September-October 2011 issue of the journal *Alcohol and Alcoholism*, identifies a group at high risk for alcohol use that may benefit from special prevention programs.

"As you age, both the perception of alcohol use and actual use increase," said Pentz, professor of preventive medicine at the Keck School of Medicine of USC and director of the school's Institute for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Research. "But what we found was that black students' perception of their close friends using alcohol was a stronger indicator of their use than among white students. We think the reason is that it is so unusual for [black students](#) to be using alcohol at that age."

The study confirms previous research that, overall, black students are less likely to drink alcohol and consume less alcohol than their white counterparts. Black students reported fewer close friends who drank alcohol during the seventh grade and gained fewer such friends in middle school than white students. However, the black students who reported having close friends who drank alcohol in the seventh grade were significantly more likely to use alcohol in high school than white students who reported the same.

The results help guide the design and implementation of drug and alcohol prevention programs.

"Black adolescents may be on a delayed path to alcohol use relative to white adolescents. So, in addition to [middle school](#), it might benefit black students to be exposed to [prevention programs](#) later in high school when peer influences are increasing," Pentz said.

Researchers analyzed data from 680 adolescents who participated in Project STAR (Students Taught Awareness and Resistance) of the Midwestern Prevention Project, one of the longest running drug prevention studies in the United States. Pentz was the principal investigator of that study, which she and colleagues started in the Kansas City metro area in 1984. Students were asked to indicate the percentage of their peers that they believed were drinking alcohol and the number of [close friends](#) who drank [alcohol](#). They were also asked how many alcoholic drinks they had consumed in the past month. The students' answers from the seventh and eighth grades were compared to their answers during [high school](#).

Pentz suggests future research on whether socioeconomic and cultural aspects influence underage drinking more than race.

"We need to start looking at other environmental and structural factors that drive risk," she said. "Maybe it's the ecological levels of influence that are driving this, not race."

Provided by University of Southern California

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