

Protective communities may reduce risk of drinking in teens

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Living in a caring community may help curb teenage alcohol use, while hanging out with antisocial peers can have the opposite effect, according to Penn State researchers studying substance abuse patterns.

The researchers evaluated how seven different categories of risk and protective factors predicted teen alcohol use. [Risk factors](#) included antisocial attitudes, antisocial behaviors, association with antisocial peers and family risk. Protective factors were positive community experiences, positive school experiences and family strengths.

Damon Jones, research assistant professor in the Prevention Research Center for the Promotion of Human Development, and colleagues analyzed which factors were more or less likely to predict eighth and tenth graders' reports of how much alcohol they drank during the past month. The researchers reported their findings in a recent issue of the [American Journal of Public Health](#).

"We found that when you put all of the major risk and protective factors into the same [predictive model](#), certain risk factors, such as antisocial peer risk, tended to be more highly predictive of alcohol use than other factors like positive school experiences," said Jones.

The researchers looked at results for over 200,000 students from five large [datasets](#) to assess how these factors predicted alcohol use. They discovered that individual, family and peer risk factors as well as the community protective factor each moderately predicted alcohol use.

However, family and school protective factors had less influence than the other factors when all were considered together.

Their analysis also showed that the impact of teens' own antisocial attitudes and friendship with antisocial peers depended on the wider context. Those two risk factors were not as strongly associated with alcohol use when teens reported positive experiences in the community. These findings suggest that positive experiences in the community at large can help sever the link between risk factors and underage drinking.

Jones's findings fit hand-in-hand with the work of Mark E. Feinberg, research professor in the Prevention Research Center for the Promotion of Human Development. Feinberg worked on this study and also authored a recent article in the *American Journal of Public Health* that discussed new ideas for helping communities find the best and most effective strategies for preventing adolescent substance use.

"If we're talking about teenagers and their initiation of substance use, we want to know which kids are most likely to start using drugs, drinking alcohol or binge drinking," said Feinberg. "We want to know if the kids who are most likely to start drinking have risk factors that distinguish them from the rest of the population—in terms of their family life, the [peers](#) that they hang out with, their own individual attitudes, and perhaps their own social-emotional adjustment and confidence to manage their emotions and tolerate frustration.

"If we can understand which of those factors are the most important predictors, we can target our prevention resources in a more effective way. Right now we really don't know in a causal sense, or even in a considered correlational sense, which factors are key. Are they all equal? If not, we should apportion our prevention dollars accordingly."

Feinberg also said that an important next step for the field, which his

team has already been working on, is to determine if some risk factors are more or less important given certain kinds of community contexts.

"We have already found that the relation of risk and protective factors to underage drinking depends in part on the community a kid is living in," said Feinberg. "We now want to examine whether certain risk factors are more important in certain types of communities, such as rural versus suburban versus urban or high versus low income. If we can drill down to that level, we can become even more precise in how we target precious prevention resources by targeting the most important risk factors in each community."

Understanding which teenagers are at risk will allow for more effective prevention strategies.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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