

People, places and adolescent substance use: Multiple dimensions of drug use

November 6 2013, by Taylor Beck

Addiction is not just biological – there is a social dimension to understand. And how a teenager's friends, favorite hangouts and feelings and moods all interact to influence substance use can say a lot.

This is the focus of research by Virginia Commonwealth University psychologist Michael Mason, Ph.D, associate professor of psychiatry and director of the VCU Commonwealth Institute for Child and Family Studies.

Mason's research uses mobile technologies to collect information, map movements and interpersonal dynamics of [teens](#) and to provide cutting-edge substance use interventions.

"We are trying to understand teens by synching with their social lives," Mason said.

"It is like we are conducting a social fMRI with teens. We use mobile technology to capture real-time social, psychological and geographic data and to insert relevant interventions within teens' natural contexts," he said.

In one study, funded by the National Institute of Drug Addiction (NIDA), he is collecting survey, real-time location and real-time measures of mood and drug consumption (called "Ecological Momentary Assessment" or "Daily Life Research") via cell phone, over a two-year period in a sample of 300 inner-city Richmond adolescents.

Mason also focuses on developing better psychotherapies for treating addiction. Specifically, he is testing the usefulness of a 20-minute intervention, called "Motivational Interviewing Integrated with Social Network Counseling," which seeks to curb the drug use trajectory among urban teens in primary care settings.

Thirdly, Mason is testing the strategy of text-messaging teens to stop them from smoking. Funded by the Virginia Foundation for Healthy Youth, through a three-year grant, he has set up an automated text-messaging system that activates teens' motivation to stop smoking through personalized, interactive and supportive texts.

Friends' attitudes toward drinking, smoking and drug use are likely to influence a teen's likelihood of becoming a user. Many teenagers learn about alcohol, cigarettes and drugs from their peers, and without some kind of exposure or access to substances, nobody would become addicted. What Mason wondered recently is whether the influence of peers on a teenager's substance use varies across race and gender groups, even when controlling for known predictors of substance use such as age, income, family structure and adolescents' own attitudes of risk of substance use.

His lab used data from the 2010 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which included 17,865 teenagers from across the U.S. What they found is that peers' attitude matters, and that they matter more for some groups than for others and for some [substances](#) more than for others. Across the board, teens believed that their peers disapproved of their tobacco use more than marijuana or alcohol use. Different drugs also differed in how much peer indifference was associated with substance use—marijuana being the most peer-influenced substance, and alcohol the least. Finally, whites were more influenced by peers than were blacks or Hispanics, and white females were the most influenced

by their friends' attitudes, particularly toward tobacco and marijuana.

Mason and his co-authors suggest their findings may help inform treatment and prevention plans. White female teens, for example, could be targeted with counseling about friends' attitudes, whereas interventions for blacks or Hispanics might focus on the family. In this way, cutting-edge research from the psych lab at VCU may soon make its way into medical practice.

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

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