

Despite lower levels of drinking, African-Americans encounter more problems

February 25 2014

A theoretical paper with lead author Tamika Zapolski, Ph.D., assistant professor of psychology in the School of Science at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), examines a paradox in African American drinking. African Americans report initiation to drinking at an older age, lower rates of use and lower levels of use in nearly all age groups. Nonetheless, the group encounters higher levels of problems related to alcohol when compared to European Americans. The paper is featured this month by the American Psychological Association on the Office of Ethnic Minority Affairs' African American Heritage Month website.

"So much research has compared drinking habits and effects between African Americans and European Americans, but no one is truly investigating the reasons," Zapolski said. "Understanding the reasons for these differences can ultimately improve diagnoses and intervention plans."

Zapolski examined all current research on African American drinking to build a cohesive theory pulling together genetic, historical and sociocultural factors. The paper aimed to explain why African Americans are more likely to abstain or drink less compared to European Americans; why those who do drink encounter more negative consequences; and which African American population is at the greatest risk for alcoholism or other alcohol problems.

Findings include:

- African American have historically abstained or restricted use of alcohol, dating back to preslavery culture. This continues to be the cultural norm with religious beliefs and societal disapproval as factors.
- Historically, African American culture condones heavy alcohol use or intoxication at any age. Alternately, the dominant culture doesn't view drinking as a young adult or moderate drinking as problematic as what is generally found within the African American culture.
- The higher frequency of negative consequences is due in part to these social sanctions within the African American community. While this protects against some drinking, it also means that when individuals do drink it's viewed as more of a problem and results in negative social consequences.
- African Americans experience a higher response to alcohol at lower levels, resulting in less drinking because the effects are felt with less consumption. This also means [moderate drinking](#) may result in signs of intoxication.
- African American communities encounter a higher police presence, which results in more problems with public [alcohol](#) consumption.
- Very low income African American men encountered the highest risk for problematic drinking and faced the most problems. This group also had less access to positive life influences that would discourage drinking, such as steady well-paying jobs, family responsibilities and stable support systems.

"As a whole, the research shows the strength of the community," Zapolski said. "African Americans are drinking less and the problems are not due to high [drinking](#), but the sanctioning outside and within the community. Still, there are subgroups who are facing problems, and continued research can help address these issues."

Provided by Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis School of Science

Citation: Despite lower levels of drinking, African-Americans encounter more problems (2014, February 25) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-02-african-americans-encounter-problems.html>

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