

Gender and race influences when teens start drinking, smoking and doing drugs

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Cigarette use among white teenagers is substantially higher than among black and Hispanic teenagers, especially at 18 years old, according to Penn State researchers. Alcohol and marijuana use are also higher in white teenagers, and the numbers continue to increase until age 20. Throughout their 20s, blacks and Hispanics are more likely to pick up a cigarette-smoking habit, while the numbers start to decrease for whites.

At 18.5 years old, 44 percent of whites surveyed smoked cigarettes, 27 percent of Hispanics did and 18 percent of blacks. However at 29 years old, 40 percent of whites were using cigarettes, 30 percent of Hispanics and 31 percent of blacks smoked.

"I think that the most important point is that there are big age-related differences in substance use by gender and race/ethnicity," said Rebecca J. Evans-Polce, postdoctoral fellow, Bennett Pierce Prevention Center. "In particular, African Americans show an increased prevalence in cigarette use much later than white adolescents. We need to think about tobacco prevention interventions that are targeted towards young adults, when use is increasing among African Americans, instead of just for younger adolescents."

Evans-Polce and colleagues also found that use of alcohol was higher for males than for females during adolescence. Cigarette and marijuana use were similar between males and females, although slightly higher for male adolescents, the researchers report in a recent issue of *Addictive Behaviors*.

The researchers looked at four sets of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, a survey conducted beginning in 1994, and repeated in 1996, 2001 and 2008 with the same individuals.

"Our research corroborated previous research showing differences in when individuals use [substances](#) depending on their race/ethnicity and gender," said Evans-Polce. "But seeing the large difference particularly in cigarette use by race/ethnicity was surprising and being able to see this all graphically really brought the point home in a novel way."

The researchers used an innovative statistical method to plot the prevalence of substance use among whites, blacks and Hispanics on graphs that tracked the individuals by age and separately plotted the substance use of males and females.

"This research is important for targeting interventions for substance use at the right ages and for the right socio-demographic groups," said Evans-Polce. "In order to better understand why these disparities in substance use behavior exist, we need to look at how risk and protective factors for substance use change as individuals age and for different racial/ethnic and gender groups."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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