

Volunteering might prevent substance abuse for female student-athletes

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More than 180,000 student-athletes from 450 colleges and universities compete in Division III sports, the largest NCAA division; nearly 44 percent are female. As substance abuse continues to be a health concern in colleges and universities across the U.S., a social scientist from the University of Missouri has found that female student-athletes who volunteer in their communities and engage in helping behaviors are less likely to partake in dangerous alcohol and marijuana use.

"Past research has demonstrated that prosocial behaviors such as comforting or assisting others has long-term benefits for young people," said Gustavo Carlo, Millsap Professor of Diversity in MU's College of Human Environmental Sciences. "For this study, we were interested in understanding how female [student-athletes](#) might be impacted by community [service](#) because they make up a growing number of the [college](#) population."

Carlo and Alexandra Davis, former doctoral candidate from MU and current assistant professor of family and child studies at the University of New Mexico, led a research team that investigated Division III women student-athletes' social and [health behaviors](#) over a five-year period. Participants in the study self-reported their helping behaviors such as willingness to volunteer as well as their individual alcohol and marijuana use. The researchers found that student athletes with a tendency to help others were less likely to abuse alcohol or use marijuana.

"Female student-athletes experience increased demands while in college from coaches and professors to family and friends," Davis said.

"Because student-athletes occupy multiple roles simultaneously, they could be at an increased risk [substance abuse](#) to cope with stress. Our findings suggest that community service might be a tool to reduce substance abuse among female student-athletes."

Carlo and Davis believe these findings highlight the importance of community service and engagement and say that colleges, athletic departments and families should encourage all student-athletes to spend time providing a community service that they care about.

"For student-athletes, helping others is a win-win situation," Davis said. "Community service not only reduces the risk of substance abuse, but also creates positive change in the community."

"Bidirectional relations between different forms of [prosocial behaviors](#) and substance use among female college student athletes," was published in the *Journal of Social Psychology*. Sam Hardy, associate professor at Brigham Young University; Janine Othuis, assistant professor at the University of New Brunswick; and Byron L. Zamboanga, professor at Smith College, were co-authors of the study.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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