

Study: Empowering Black girls may help to reduce drug use

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Black girls make up a relatively small portion of the overall drug-using population. But their health consequences are more severe than most: Reproductive issues, fertility issues, sexually transmitted infections and

trauma exposure are all obstacles they face at statistically higher rates compared to their peers.

And when confronted with overlapping issues such as oppression and powerlessness, Black girls may engage in more risk taking and addictive behaviors like drug use, researchers have found—all while existing mentoring programs and [prevention strategies](#) are rarely tailored to their experiences.

A new study led by the Yale School of Public Health suggests that empowering Black girls to feel in control of their social environment and proud of their identity may help to reduce these trends.

"I wanted to change the narrative of Black girls in prevention research by highlighting protective factors such as sociopolitical control which consists of leadership competency and policy control, ethnic identity and social support and how these concepts have a great impact on preventing risky behaviors such as drug use," said Ijeoma Opara, assistant professor at the Yale School of Public Health and the study's lead author. "Drug-use prevention research has overwhelmingly focused on the etiology of drug use—which is valid, however, we miss opportunities if we are not learning from youth that are not engaging in drug misuse, especially if they are exposed to the same risk factors that have been known to predict drug use."

For the study, published in the *Journal of Ethnicity in Substance Abuse*, the researchers surveyed Black girls from eight high schools in New Jersey on their perceived [social support](#), ethnic identity and recent marijuana use. They also asked the girls a series of questions about their confidence in leading groups or motivating people.

After analyzing the responses, the team found that girls who had higher opinions of their sociopolitical control abilities reported lower levels of

drug use, and that girls with a stronger [ethnic identity](#) had a similar association.

The findings fill large gaps in substance use prevention researchers' understanding of the indirect effects of intersectional oppression on Black girls in urban environments and provides important suggestions for improving prevention tools. Since the data suggests that Black girls who feel more confident about their ability to influence policies in their community reported using drugs less often, teaching them advocacy strategies may be an effective way to build resilience and reduce drug use, the researchers wrote.

The researchers were unable to use the data to conclude that empowerment had a direct effect on [drug use](#), however, they suggested in their study that further research should seek to solidify this connection among a broader community of Black [girls](#) throughout the United States.

More information: Ijeoma Opara et al, Sociopolitical control as a mediator between ethnic identity and social support on 30-day drug use among black girls, *Journal of Ethnicity in Substance Abuse* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/15332640.2021.1975007](#)

Provided by Yale University

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