

Adolescent Risk-Taking Has Major Consequences When It Comes To Marriage

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UB sociologist Sampson Blair studies marriage and family. His latest research shows that delinquent teens marry earlier in life, while teenage girls who smoke marijuana marry later than peers.

(PhysOrg.com) -- A national study of data collected over 12 years finds that delinquent teens marry earlier than their peers, while substance-abusing teens -- especially girls who abuse marijuana -- marry later than peers, if at all.

"The Influence of Risk-Taking Behaviors on the Transition into Marriage: An Examination of the Long-Term Consequences of Adolescent Behavior" by University at Buffalo sociologist Sampson Lee Blair, Ph.D., is a rare look at the long-term effects of teen delinquency and drug abuse on adult role attainment.

Delinquency was defined as anti-social behavior, including frequency of running away, arrests, physical fights and behavioral problems in school.

The study analyzed data from a U.S. Department of Education survey collected from a nationally representative sample of 9,813 young adults from 1988 to 2000. The results were presented at the March conference of the Eastern Sociological Society in Baltimore, Md.

The results are significant, says Blair, associate professor of sociology at UB, because in the U.S. marriage is commonly regarded as offering substantial economic, social and health advantages for individuals. The vast majority of high school girls -- much more so than boys -- tend to view marriage as "extremely important" to them.

But adolescent substance abuse and delinquent behaviors, he says, clearly have far-reaching consequences for the marital status of young adults, particularly girls.

"Most previous studies have focused on the relatively short-term effects of adolescent substance use and delinquency," he says, "but here we find good evidence that, for both sexes, delinquent behavior is linked to an increase in the likelihood of marriage and a lower age at first marriage. On the other hand, adolescents with relatively high levels of abuse of alcohol and marijuana have a lower likelihood of marriage even by their late 20s.

"The likelihood of marriage by that age is substantially lower among female adolescent substance abusers, particularly if the substance abused is marijuana."

He says the results suggest that delinquency and substance abuse may influence adolescents' orientation toward other adult roles as well.

The analyses employed data from 5,331 females and 4,482 males participants in the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS), a nationally representative sample of high school students that collected

information from respondents over a 12-year period.

NELS, conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, collected data from surveys of students, parents, teachers and school administrators in 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994 and 2000, at which time most of the students in the sample were in their mid- to late-20s, had completed their educational goals and had already entered into marriage.

Adolescent respondents were asked about the frequency of their alcohol use and marijuana use; delinquent and anti-social behavior, including frequency of running away, arrests, physical fights and school problems (cutting classes, skipping school, getting into trouble for violating rules, suspension or probation, transfer for disciplinary reasons).

The study also assessed data relative to family income, parental expectations about college attendance and the importance peers placed on various activities like going to parties, drinking alcohol, having sex and using drugs. Control measures for the race/ethnicity of respondents were used as well.

"It is certainly the case that many of these variables had an effect on the timing of the participants' marital experience," Blair says.

"Nevertheless, this analysis clearly suggests that even when all of them are considered, adolescent substance abuse and delinquent behaviors have far-reaching consequences for the marital status of [young adults](#)," he says.

"Additional research is needed to learn how developmental processes of adolescence are affected by delinquent behavior and substance abuse and the relative influences of these sex-based differences on other forms of adult status attainment."

Blair is a widely published expert in the sociology of the family, child and adolescent development, gender and ethnicity. He is the former editor of the journal Sociological Inquiry and former associate editor of Social Justice Research Journal of Family Issues and Marriage and Family Review.

Provided by University at Buffalo ([news](#) : [web](#))

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