

Drug use and discrimination among Phoenix area Mexican heritage youth

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Perceived ethnic discrimination among Mexican and Mexican American students from Phoenix-area middle schools places them at risk for increased stress when trying to acculturate with mainstream U.S. culture, according to a new study. As the students experienced acculturation stress related to discrimination, they were at a higher risk for alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana use. The study is in the December issue of *Prevention Science*, a peer-reviewed journal of the Society for Prevention Research.

"As levels of perceived discrimination and acculturation stress increased with age, so did the risk for [substance use](#)," said lead author, Jennifer Kam, PhD, Assistant Professor in the School of Communication at The Ohio State University. The study followed 1,106 youth of Mexican heritage in 29 public middle schools in Phoenix, AZ through surveys in six waves from the 5th through the 8th grades.

"Acculturation stress is often associated with anxiety, anger and depression. It is a complex process that involves challenges and troubles that often stem from tension between one's native culture and the mainstream culture. These associations are particularly stressful when they involve discrimination, and youth may cope with the stress by turning to alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana," Kam explained.

"These findings emphasize the importance of addressing discrimination and may partially explain why national data on adolescent [drug use](#) has found that Latino students report some of the highest alcohol, cigarette,

and other drug use rates in the country," Kam said. (Editor's note: This is based on 2007 data. NIDA will release 2010 data today)

Funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), the findings of this study are in line with what experts call "general strain theory," which states that individuals encounter strains (e.g., discrimination) when they are subjected to experiences that they dislike or feel are unjust. These experiences often lead to negative psychological or emotional reactions (e.g., acculturation stress). Individuals, especially those with limited personal or social resources, often cope with such strains by engaging in unhealthy behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use.

"In addition to developing prevention programs to reduce discrimination; acculturation stress; and alcohol, cigarette, or other drug use, this study's findings suggest that prevention efforts identify and encourage more effective coping strategies for Mexican-heritage youth," according to Kam. For example, there is already some evidence showing that parents, friends, and school educators may be influential in adolescents' decision to engage in risky behaviors such as substance use. Prevention programs may encourage these people to play a protective role.

The study did not find any difference in levels of perceived discrimination among students who were born in the US and those born in Mexico. However, this study found that the amount of time spent in the US and language preferences played an important role in the initial levels of perceived discrimination. Mexican-heritage youth who spoke in English with friends were more likely to experience lower levels of discrimination in the initial stages of their school life, but the language spoken with family members was not a factor related to levels of perceived discrimination. Similarly, the longer they lived in the U.S., the less likely they were to feel discriminated against, according to this study.

Perceived [discrimination](#) was measured by asking students: "Thinking about your ethnic group, (race or culture), do you agree or disagree with the following?" Sample items included: "People don't like me because of my ethnic group" or "Kids my age exclude me from their activities or games because my ethnic group is different."

Alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana within the last 30 days were measured on a 1-7 point scale: alcohol (1=none to 7=more than 30), cigarettes (1=none to 7=more than 20), and marijuana (1=none to 7=more than 40 hits). Sample items included "How many drinks of alcohol have you had in the last 30 days?" or "How many cigarettes have you smoked in the last 30 days?"

Provided by Society for Prevention Research

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