



Short Communication

The effects of employment among adolescents at-risk for future substance use

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HIGHLIGHTS

- We examine the association between work intensity and alcohol and other drug use.
- Understanding this relationship among at-risk youth is critical to informing policy.
- Work intensity may be associated with negative alcohol-related consequences.
- Work intensity may be associated with more contact with risky co-workers.

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This paper explores the association between work intensity, alcohol and/or other drug (AOD) use, and related risk factors and consequences among an at-risk youth sample that has received a first-time AOD offense. This study extends previous research focused primarily on school-based samples.

Method: We examined the association between work intensity, AOD use, AOD-related consequences, and social environment among adolescents referred to a diversion program called Teen Court (N = 193). Participants were surveyed prior to the start of the Teen Court program. Mean age was 17 (SD = 1.1), 67% of the sample was male; 45% Hispanic or Latino/a; 45.1% White; 10% Other.

Results: Greater work intensity among these youth was related to greater alcohol-related negative consequences and greater contact with co-workers who engaged in risky behaviors, but it was not significantly associated with past month AOD use.

Conclusions: Understanding the relationship between work intensity and AOD use among youth who are at-risk is critical to informing clinicians and public officials about the potential effects of employment in this population. Findings suggest that work intensity may be associated with negative consequences from alcohol use and increased contact with risky co-workers, all of which could contribute to the development of problems in the future.

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1. Introduction

Alcohol and marijuana use among adolescents is a large public health problem. Adolescents who drink at earlier ages have been found to be four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence in their life than those who delay initiation (D'Amico, Ellickson, Collins, Martino, & Klein, 2005; Hingson, Heeren, & Winter, 2006). Adolescents who use marijuana at earlier ages are at higher risk of experiencing school problems (e.g., not graduating from high school), delinquency, and problems with cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana in later adolescence than teens that do not use (Brook, Balka, & Whiteman, 1999). Thus, it is essential to identify characteristics that can curb progression from at-risk alcohol and marijuana use to more chronic use among youth.

Work intensity, or the number of work hours, may be an important characteristic to monitor among adolescents. Studies evaluating work intensity have shown both positive and negative associations with behavior (Mortimer, 2010). Employment may help adolescents sharpen their responsibility, time management skills, and resilience to stress (Mortimer & Staff, 2004; Steinberg & Cauffman, 1995). Increased work intensity (working 20 + hours/week during the school year) has also been associated with heavy alcohol use, tobacco, and drug use (McMorris & Uggen, 2000; Ramchand, Jalongo, & Chilcoat, 2007; Safron, Schulenberg, & Bachman, 2001; Wu, Hoven, & Fuller, 2003). Researchers have speculated that teens who work more hours may also receive less parental monitoring, have more income to spend on alcohol and other drugs (AOD), work in riskier environments, have greater opportunities to use AOD, and have greater exposure to older teens and adults who use AOD (Godley, Passetti, & White, 2006; Mortimer & Staff, 2004; Staff & Uggen, 2003; Wu et al., 2003).

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Existing studies evaluating work intensity and AOD use have focused primarily on school-based samples (Mortimer, Finch, Ryu, Shanahan, & Call, 1996; Paschall, Flewelling, & Russell, 2004; Ramchand et al., 2007; Staff & Uggen, 2003; Steinberg, 1991) and may not be applicable to an at-risk sample that is just beginning to experience AOD-related problems. Teens that have a first offense for AOD use may be different from a school-based sample because teens who have an offense have an increased risk of poorer health, social and economic outcomes than non-offending teens (Lipsey & Derzon, 1998). Understanding the relationship between work intensity and AOD among youth who have already experienced some consequences is critical because providers, administrators, and officials may actively encourage employment among this population, in the hope that employment will foster enhanced responsibility (Mortimer, 2010).

We examine the association between work intensity, AOD use and consequences, and exposure to teens and co-workers who use AOD while controlling for characteristics that have been shown to be associated with work intensity and AOD use.

2. Method

2.1. Setting

The study was conducted in collaboration with the Santa Barbara Teen Court, a diversion program operated by the Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse. The program is offered to adolescents who commit a first-time AOD offense and are not deemed in need of more serious intervention by the local probation department. Study protocols were approved by the institution's review board.

2.2. Participants

Youth referred to Teen Court between 2008 and 2011 that met inclusion criteria (i.e., referral for a first-time AOD offense; 14–18 years old; and English proficient) and did not meet exclusion criteria (i.e., referral to another program; possession of a medical marijuana card; or multiple offender status) were invited to the study. Of those eligible ($n = 216$), 23 (10%) were either not interested or unable to participate, leaving a sample of 193.

2.3. Procedures

2.3.1. Data collection

Youth completed a survey administered by trained staff before they started their Teen Court program, which consisted of a court hearing in front of a peer jury and sanctions including payment of a fee, psychoeducation group sessions, and jury service.

2.4. Measures

2.4.1. Individual characteristics

Demographic information included age, gender, and race/ethnicity (Hispanic/Latino/a, White, Other). Participants were asked about number of hours worked per week (work intensity) and occupation. Work intensity was a nine category variable (0 = 'None' to 8 = 'More than 30 h per week'). Occupation was defined as one of three categories (independent, restaurant industry, office/retail). Independent jobs included lawn work, childcare, housecleaning or painting. Restaurant jobs included work in fast food or as a waiter/waitress. Office and retail positions included jobs as a store clerk or salesperson. Employed teens were asked about their weekly income using a 1 to 9 scale where a score of 1 referred to \$1–\$5 per week and a score of 9 referred to \$126 or more per week.

2.4.2. Outcomes

Offense (alcohol or marijuana/other) information was collected from court records. Past 30 day drinking, including heavy drinking

(5+ drinks within a few hours), and marijuana use were assessed using an 8-point scale to indicate the number of days used (1 = '0 days' to 8 = '21 to 30 days'). Past 30 day stimulant and prescription drug use were dichotomized due to their highly skewed distributions (0 = no use, 1 = any use). Participants reported their drug of choice. Six items assessed negative consequences of alcohol use (e.g., 'felt really sick because of drinking alcohol', $\alpha = 0.81$) and five items assessed similar consequences of marijuana use ($\alpha = 0.77$) in the past 30 days (Tucker, Orlando, & Ellickson, 2003). Both scales were rated on a 4-point scale (1 = 'Never' to 4 = '3 or more times'). Items were averaged with a higher score indicating more severe consequences. Three questions asked about time spent around teens that use alcohol, marijuana and other drugs to assess the respondent's risk environment (Tucker et al., 2003). Each item was rated on a 4-point scale (1 = 'Never' to 4 = 'Often').

Teens who worked in the past year completed the work environment risk scale that comprised of four items asking how many of the co-workers they regularly worked with were involved in illegal activity, got drunk weekly or had 5 or more drinks in a day, used any drugs during the past 90 days and shouted, argued or fought most weeks (Dennis, Ives, & Funk, 2006; Dennis et al., 1995). Each item was rated on a 5-point scale (1 = 'None' to 5 = 'All', $\alpha = 0.74$) and were summed for a total score where higher scores indicated a more risky work environment.

2.5. Statistical analyses

We examined the entire sample to understand whether work intensity was associated with any demographic characteristic or outcome. We included teens that did not work and classified their work intensity as 0 h. Mean and modal imputation was used to account for the minimal amount of missing data (for most variables this was <1%). For each outcome, we estimated a regression model that included work intensity (treated as continuous), gender, ethnicity, and age as predictors. Continuous outcomes were modeled using linear regression models. Dichotomous outcomes were modeled using logistic regression models. The categorical outcomes were modeled using a cumulative logit model. Seven (3.6%) teens reported no use and were excluded from the AOD analyses.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive analyses

3.1.1. Overall sample

The mean participant age was 16.6 years ($SD = 1.1$). Sixty-seven percent of teens were male, 44.6% identified as Hispanic or Latino/a, 45.1% White and 10.4% reported another race. Sixty-eight percent reported not working.

3.1.2. Employed adolescents

Of those teens who worked ($n = 62$), 77.4% ($n = 48$) teens worked 1 to 20 h per week and 22.6% ($n = 14$) worked more than 20 h per week. The mean weekly income was 6.9 ($SD = 1.9$) on the scale from 1 (\$1–5/week) to 8 (\$126 or more/week). Employed teens reported working independent (39%), office/retail (34%) and restaurant industry jobs (27%). Table 1 shows participant characteristics by employment status.

3.1.3. Work intensity

Age was a significant predictor of work intensity, with older respondents working more hours ($p < .001$). Work intensity did not differ significantly by gender ($p = .626$) or race/ethnicity ($p = .509$). For teens that worked, work intensity did not differ by job type ($p = .151$) (Table 1).

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