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Factors associated with Indigenous youths' abstinence from drinking



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ABSTRACT

The proportion of youth who abstain from alcohol use decreases during adolescence but little attention has focused on factors associated with abstinence. No research has examined this question for Indigenous youth, many of whom live in communities experiencing high rates of alcohol-related health problems. Using data from a longitudinal study of Indigenous youth ($n = 649$, ages 10–17 years) in the U.S. and Canada, the current study investigates factors associated promoting or decreasing abstaining from alcohol use. Results from generalized linear growth models demonstrate that abstinence declines significantly during adolescence. In concurrent models, caretaker monitoring and school adjustment increased the odds of abstaining, and frequency of smoking cigarettes and number of best friends who drink decreased the odds. In lagged analysis, only school adjustment, smoking, and peer drinking remained significant. Time-stable characteristics moderated several time-varying associations. This study has important implications for programs aimed at encouraging alcohol abstinence.

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Over the course of adolescence, both the quantity and the frequency of alcohol consumption increase with age and, conversely, the proportion of adolescents who abstain from drinking decreases. According to recent Monitoring the Future data, 73.2% of 8th graders reported never trying alcohol, compared to 50.7% of 10th graders and 34% of 12th graders (Miech, Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2015). The general pattern of decreasing abstinence held over time, for boys and girls, and across racial groups. Studies of American Indian adolescents differ somewhat in their estimates of abstinence from alcohol use, with some indicating lower rates of abstinence compared to their non-native counterparts. In a school-based study of American Indian youth on or near reservations across the U.S., 28% of 8th graders, 14% of 10th graders, and 7% of 12th graders had never tried alcohol (Beauvais, Jumper-Thurman, Helm, Plested, & Burnside, 2004). Conversely, Mitchell, Beals, & Whitesell (2008) found rates of abstinence among American Indian youth more similar to the nationally representative numbers in Monitoring the Future; approximately one third of their sample reported no alcohol use over a three year period (Wave 1 mean age = 16 years).

These patterns suggest that, at least on its face, experimenting with alcohol may be a normal part of adolescent development. But early drinking is not without its consequences, such as a higher risk of developing alcohol use disorder (DeWit, Adlaf, Offord, & Ogborne, 2000), and experiencing alcohol-related automobile accidents, fights, and unintentional injuries (Hingson, Edwards, Heeren, & Rosenbloom, 2009). Identifying factors that promote or reduce abstinence is a logical and necessary step in preventing those consequences. Little research has examined alcohol abstinence among Indigenous young

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people, despite the vast body of research on alcohol use in this population (May, 1994) and the higher rates of abstinence among Indigenous adults (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), 2010). To address this gap in research, the current study investigates factors associated with alcohol abstinence in a longitudinal sample of Indigenous adolescents spanning 10–17 years of age from the northern U.S. Midwest and Canada.

1. Alcohol and indigenous people

The context of abstaining from alcohol use for Indigenous youth, particularly those living on reservations or reserves, is likely very different than youth from other groups. Important variations in drinking exist across Indigenous cultural groups (Mitchell, Beals, Novins, & Spicer, 2003), suggesting different norms and availability for alcohol use (Kovas, McFarland, Landen, Lopez, & May 2008) as well as diverse patterns of consumption and abstinence over the life-course. As a group, American Indian adults abstain from drinking at higher rates than adults from other racial groups (SAMHSA, 2010), and American Indian adults over the age of 40 are also more likely than same-age adults from other groups to quit drinking (Kunitz & Levy, 1994). However, among those who consume alcohol, they are more likely to drink at problematic levels and develop substance use disorders (Beals et al., 2005; Whitbeck, Hoyt, Johnson, & Chen, 2006).

The health and social tolls that alcohol has taken on Indigenous communities cannot be overstated. Following European contact, alcohol was used as a tool of oppression and exploitation against Indigenous people (Abbott, 1996). In contemporary times, Indigenous people experience disproportionately high rates of substance use disorder, alcohol-related vehicle fatalities (West & Naumann, 2011), fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (Russo, Purohit, Foudin, & Salin, 2004), and alcohol-related violence (Perry, 2004, pp. 1–56). Importantly, Indigenous young people are not unaware of the effects of alcohol. In Whitbeck, Walls, Johnson, Morrisseau, & McDougall (2009) study of historical cultural losses with a sub-set of the sample included in the current study, almost one quarter of the youth (24.1%) and over one third of the female caretakers (36.3%) reported thinking daily or several times each day about the losses to their people from alcoholism. Only about one-third of the youth reported never thinking about those losses, suggesting widespread awareness of alcohol's consequences.

The high rates of abstinence noted above may be a result of the widespread consequences of alcohol use that many Indigenous communities experience. Yet despite the robust body of literature on alcohol use for both Indigenous youth and adults (May, 1994), very little research has examined abstinence from drinking among this population. Identifying the factors that foster abstinence for Indigenous youth can provide extremely useful information for tribal communities, educators, health practitioners, and researchers.

2. Factors promoting alcohol abstinence

In keeping with recent calls for strengths-focused research and research on positive outcomes for Indigenous people (Kirmayer, Marshall, & Phillips, 2011; Mohatt et al., 2004), emphasis is placed on factors that promote healthy behaviors, particularly alcohol abstinence. Different factors from the social domains of family and school are important for positive and prosocial development. Family is a key protective factor against substance use for youth (Dusenbury, 2000; Johnson et al., 1998). Rather than including parenting at one time point to predict substance use, recent work has begun examining the more dynamic effects of parenting by incorporating multiple observations. In their analysis of positive parenting trajectories in a diverse sample of 6th to 8th grade youth, Tobler and Komro (2010) found that level and consistency of positive parenting were important, with decreasing levels of positive parenting during early adolescence increasing the risk of adolescent alcohol use. Using growth models with time-varying parenting, Gutman, Eccles, Peck, and Malanchuk (2011) found that increases in positive family identification were associated both concurrently and predictively with less alcohol use, and increases in negative family interactions were associated with more concurrent alcohol use for both European American and African American youth (mean baseline age approximately 13 years). Regarding Indigenous-specific parenting, Mmari, Blum, and Teufel-Stone (2010) found the family to be the most important source affecting risk and protective factors for antisocial behaviors among young people using qualitative data from Indigenous youth and adults from three different tribal communities.

School is an important influence on both prosocial and antisocial behaviors. Catalano, Oesterle, Fleming, and Hawkins (2004) found school bonding to be associated with delayed initiation and lower levels of alcohol use in fifth thru twelfth grades among an intervention study sample (46% European American; 24% African American; 21% Asian American; 9% American Indian). School bonding was associated with lower levels of alcohol use in a cross-sectional study of Indigenous youth in 7th through 12th grades (Dickens, Dieterich, Henry, & Beauvais, 2012). Positive school experiences often serve as a source of resilience for youth in Indigenous communities (LaFromboise, Hoyt, Oliver, & Whitbeck, 2006; Mmari et al., 2010). For example, even among Indigenous youth who reported an earlier onset of substance use, those who remained in school instead of dropping out were more likely to desist in their substance use (Stanley, Harness, Swaim, & Beauvais, 2014).

3. Factors reducing alcohol abstinence

In addition to the positive influences, it is also important to explore key risk factors for alcohol use to determine how they impact abstinence during adolescence. Tobacco, primarily in the form of cigarettes, is one of the most common substances used by Indigenous youth, at rates exceeding the national average (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services

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