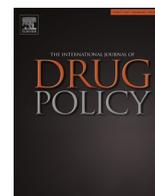




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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Drug Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/drugpo

Research paper

Vocational education paths, youth activities, and underage drinking in Russia: How early does the trouble start?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 November 2016

Received in revised form 13 April 2017

Accepted 9 May 2017

Keywords:

Underage drinking

Vocational training

Prevention

ABSTRACT

Working-class educational paths tend to be associated with elevated drinking. Little research has examined whether disproportionate alcohol use among vocationally oriented youth begins before or after the start of their vocational education. The present study analyzes a large sample of Russian middle-school students (N = 1269; mean age = 14.9), comparing the patterns of drinking among middle-schoolers oriented towards vocational educational, and their peers who do not plan a vocational education path. Results suggest that the orientation towards vocational education is associated with disproportionately high alcohol involvement among Russian middle-school students, even before they enter vocational schools. We studied if such difference could be partially explained by how youth orient towards extracurricular activities: discretionary peer time in risky contexts, reading for pleasure, working for pay, and religious activities. Reading demonstrated the strongest (negative) association with alcohol use, while religious activity unexpectedly revealed a positive (though weak) association with drinking. Research and policy implications are discussed.

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Underage drinking remains a pressing public health problem globally (DeWit, Adlaf, Offord, & Ogborne, 2014; Roberts, Siegel, DeJong, Naimi, & Jernigan, 2015). Extensive research has examined adolescent alcohol behavior as a function of a wide range of variables, including alcohol-related expectancies and attitudes (Turrisi, Jaccard, Taki, Dunnam, & Grimes, 2001), cultural norms and customs (Guilamo-Ramos, Jaccard, Johansson, & Turrisi, 2004), and youth exposure to alcohol advertising (Collins, Ellickson, McCaffrey, & Hambarsoomians, 2007). Much less research has examined underage drinking in association with adolescents' choice of educational and career paths. One exception to this is the substantial literature that documents increases in drinking by college students, mostly undergraduates at four year institutions in the U.S. (e.g. Slutske, 2005). Longitudinal data suggests that college drinking tends to be a temporary phenomenon in most youths' lives (White, Labouvie, & Papadaratsakis, 2005); in the long term, higher education trajectories, tend to predict less, not more, pervasive alcohol use, as follows from a number of U.S. longitudinal studies (Blanco et al., 2008; White et al., 2005).

By contrast, long-term patterns of problematic alcohol use are considerably more likely to develop among adolescents around the world who pursue working-class educational paths, e.g. students in vocational/trade schools (VTSs) (Chaveepojkamjorn, 2012; Hanke et al., 2013; Holmberg & Hellberg, 2007). The terms "vocation" and "trade" have been used interchangeably in the context of working-class occupations; so we will use the term vocational/trade schools (VTS) to include all types of schools providing training for blue-collar careers. For example, according to Chaveepojkamjorn (2012), lifetime alcohol consumption among vocational school students in Thailand exceeded that among general population peers by over one third. Similarly, according to Hanke et al. (2013), VTS students in Germany are about 30% more likely to engage in unhealthy drinking compared with their general-population peers. Several studies have linked vocational-school backgrounds to lifelong trajectories of health risk behaviors in many countries including Russia (Cockerham, 2000) and Netherland (Schrijvers, Stronks, van de Mheen, & Mackenbach, 1999). In a survey of over 15,000 Dutch residents, Schrijvers et al. (1999) found that VTS graduates had significantly higher prevalence of untimely deaths compared to university graduates, and higher indices of hazardous risk behaviors, including alcohol use.

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Little research has examined mechanisms linking working-class educational trajectories to alcohol problems. One important question is whether underage drinking is enabled by the context of vocational training institutions, or whether youths who enter VTSs tend to already be disproportionately involved in alcohol use. The latter would suggest that the decision to dedicate one's life to a blue-collar career is somehow associated, in at least some cultures, with a set of beliefs and attitudes conducive to elevated drinking independent of actually attending vocationally oriented schools. The present study for the first time empirically addresses this critical question.

In Russia, a country long affected by notable alcohol-related problems (Leon et al., 2007; Razvodovsky, 2015), underage drinking has been pervasive for many generations (Koposov, Ruchkin, Eisemann, & Sidorov, 2005). Research suggests that underage drinking is high among Russian adolescents and that drinking is initiated earlier than by adolescents in the United States and Western European countries (Gunning, Sussman, & Rohrbach, 2009; Koposov et al., 2005; Pokhrel, Massagutov, Kniazhev, & Sussman, 2012; Ruchkin, Koposov, Eisemann, & Hägglöf, 2002). Especially problematic are patterns of alcohol consumption among students of Russian VTSs, who account for about 4.2 million students or over 25% of Russian youth (Cherednichenko, 2005; Savitskaya & Davydova, 2006). According to Egorov and Sofronov (2009), lifetime use of alcohol and other substances among St. Petersburg VTS students is three times higher than among regular middle school students of the same age. Mortality from lifestyle-related causes, such as heavy drinking, is substantially greater among Russian male industrial workers, largely VTS graduates, than any other segment of society (Cockerham, 2000; Tomkins et al., 2007). No studies to date, however, have examined mechanisms associated with Russian VTS experiences that contribute to alcohol use, and no research has specified the developmental stage at which Russian VTS-bound youths start developing tendencies for elevated drinking.

The present research analyzes a large sample of Russian middle school students aged 14–15 (N = 1269) to examine whether VTS-oriented youth are disproportionately involved in drinking while still attending regular middle school, before the actual transition to the VTS. Alcohol consumption among VTS-oriented middle-schoolers is compared to alcohol use among their middle school peers with non-VTS education aspirations.

We test a model of the effect of VTS-related educational intentions among middle school students on their current patterns

of underage drinking and how these are related to a number of theoretically relevant extracurricular activities, namely (a) unstructured peer activities in risk-inducing environments (“hang-ing-out”); (b) working for money, (c) religious-related activities, and (d) reading for pleasure (per Fig. 1).

Educational intentions and alcohol consumption

Mid-adolescents' long-term academic intentions tend to predict, with reasonable accuracy, future educational paths that students end up taking (Eccles, Vida, & Barber, 2004). As noted, little research examined association between mid-adolescent educational intentions/aspirations and patterns of alcohol use, with existing evidence being inconsistent (Barry, Chaney, & Chaney, 2011; Crum, Storm, & Antony, 2005). Barry et al. (2011) linked adolescents' low educational aspirations to elevated drinking in a predominantly White U.S. sample. In contrast, Crum et al. (2005), analyzing a sample of mostly Black U.S. middle-schoolers', reported no association between college aspirations and alcohol consumption. Apparently, the association between educational intentions and drinking may vary across cultures. Little research has identified mechanisms that link adolescent educational intentions and alcohol use, especially in Russian middle-school students.

Russian middle-school graduates have a choice of two further academic paths: (1) two more academic years of regular “general-educational” school, potentially leading to college enrollment, or (2) transition to a VTS, which reduces the likelihood of later college admission (Bolotnikov, 2007; Cherednichenko, 2005). Russian VTSs are associated with lower social prestige (Bolotnikov, 2007). The present study tests a hypothesis that mid-adolescents in Russian middle schools who are planning to transition to a VTS, will report, on average, more pervasive alcohol behavior relative to peers whose educational plans exclude VTS. To evaluate this hypothesis, we analyzed data from a sample of 1269 middle-school students in a large Siberian city, Tomsk. Youth were classified by their educational intentions, yielding a taxonomy of four groups: (1) adolescents who reported no articulated educational intentions (No Intent group); (2) youth who intend to transition to VTSs without long-term college plans (VTS Only group); (3) those who plan to attend VTS after regular school and later transition to college, or are open to both VTS and college paths (VTS-College group); and (4) students who intend to proceed to college without ever attending VTS (College Only group). Alcohol use differences

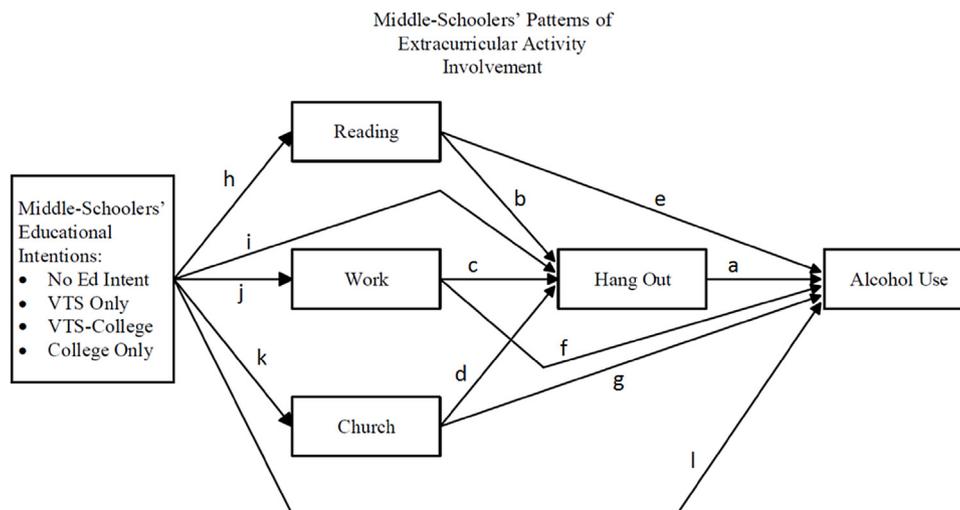


Fig. 1. Main model.

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