



# Extracurricular activities and teens' alcohol use: The role of religious and secular sponsorship

Amy Adamczyk\*

John Jay College and the Graduate Center, City University of New York, NY 10019, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Much research has found that more religious youth are less likely to engage in riskier health-related behaviors. However, very little research has examined the role that religion may play in shaping the health-related behaviors of secular youth. There is reason to think that more and less religious youth may gain some health-related benefits from involvement with religious organizations through activities such as basketball and volunteering. Using two waves of data from the National Study of Youth and Religion, this study finds that involvement in religion-supported secular activities is associated with less alcohol use for all involved teens. The number of friends who belong to a religious youth group, in part, explains the relationship. Conversely, network overlap between parents and teens, the number of friends who drink or use drugs, and having an adult confidant from a religious group are not mechanisms that mediate the relationship.

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## 1. Introduction

A major social problem in the United States is the high prevalence of alcohol use among adolescents. In a recent survey of US high school seniors, 45% reported that they drank alcohol and 30% reported having gotten drunk at least one time in the past month (Johnston et al., 2007). Heavy drinking is associated with a number of negative outcomes, including physical health problems, car accidents, suicide, drowning, and risky sex.

Religion has increasingly received attention as a factor that is associated with lower levels of underage drinking. More religious and religiously active young people are less likely to use a variety of substances, including alcohol, drugs, and cigarettes (Chu, 2007; Jang et al., 2008; Jang and Johnson, 2001; Bahr and Hoffman, 2008; Cochran, 1993; Bahr et al., 1998, 1987; Hadaway et al., 1984; Brown et al., 2001; Chitwood et al., 2008). While almost all of the research on religion and substance use has focused on the influence of personal religious beliefs and behaviors, there is reason to think that even youth who are not personally religious may reap some of religion's health-related benefits.

Many religious organizations offer both secular and religious activities to local youth (Twombly, 2002; Cnaan et al., 2004; Netting et al., 2005). Whereas the religious activities might include Bible study, Sunday school, and youth group, the secular activities might include volleyball, homework groups, volunteering, and so forth. While religious youth may be interested in both types of activities, even youth who are not very religious may be interested in the secular activities sponsored by religious organizations. Religion-supported secular programs may provide health-related benefits to all involved youth.

This study investigates whether teens who are involved in secular activities that are supported by a religious organization are less likely to drink alcohol than teens who are not engaged in these activities. It also assesses whether involvement in

\* Address: John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, 899 10th Ave., Suite# 520.02, New York, NY 10019, United States. Fax: +1 212 237 8941.

E-mail address: [aadamczyk@jjay.cuny.edu](mailto:aadamczyk@jjay.cuny.edu)

religion-supported activities is more likely than involvement in secularly supported activities to be associated with lower levels of alcohol use. Drawing on research from the sociology of religion (Smith, 2003a,b; Smith and Denton, 2005), this study assesses the roles that positive and negative role models and network overlap may have for explaining the relationship between involvement in religion-supported secular activities and alcohol use for secular and religious youth.

## 2. Religion and substance use

It is well established that religiosity and spirituality are associated with a reduced risk of substance use for both teenagers and adults (Chitwood et al., 2008). Researchers typically find that more religious individuals are less likely to drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, and use drugs (Chu, 2007; Jang and Johnson, 2001; Bahr et al., 1993; Cochran, 1993; Bahr et al., 1998; Ellison et al., 2008; Hadaway et al., 1984; Brown et al., 2001). Most major religions encourage moderation and discourage participation in behaviors that are considered immoral and/or illegal (Hitlin and Vaisey, 2010). More religious teens are less likely to use illegal substances, in part, because they are more likely to internalize religious precepts that discourage illegal behaviors and encourage moderation (Smith, 2003c; Longest and Vaisey, 2008). Additionally, regular interaction with other religious people is likely to increase exposure to norms against substance use, social sanctions associated with smoking and drinking, and limit opportunities to obtain alcohol and attend parties where other teens are drinking and smoking (Benda and Corwyn, 2001; Burkett and Warren, 1987).

While many religions encourage behaviors that would be considered moral and legal (Hitlin and Vaisey, 2010), conservative Protestants and some “strict religions,” such as the Latter Day Saints, have placed a particularly heavy emphasis on discouraging substance use. In contrast, other less strict religious groups, like Catholics, discourage participation in illegal behaviors, like underage drinking, but do not proscribe adults’ alcohol use, as long as it is in moderation. Research (Adamczyk and Palmer, 2008; Brown et al., 2001; Bock et al., 1987) has found that teens who identify with these stricter religious groups are less likely than other teens to use substances, like drugs and alcohol.

Along with religious activities, many religious organizations also provide secular activities for local youth (Twombly, 2002; Cnaan et al., 2004; Netting et al., 2005). The secular activities oriented toward teens resemble the typical extracurricular activities that schools and other (secular) community organizations offer, including team sports, mentoring, tutoring, and opportunities to volunteer. Although religious organizations have long offered secular activities (Chaves, 1999), beginning with the Clinton administration several initiatives (e.g. Charitable Choice), were put forward to make religious organizations eligible to compete for government funds to provide these services (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2004).

Compared to participation in activities and programs offered by schools and other organizations, the level of participation in religion-supported secular activities is likely to be low. However, because of the availability of government funding, opportunities for youth to participate in religion-supported activities may be increasing. No research has yet been done on the influence of involvement in religion-supported secular programs on substance use. Religion-supported secular activities provide an opportunity to study the extent to which more and less religious youth receive health benefits from involvement with religious organizations.

## 3. Extracurricular involvement and substance use

Much research has examined the relationship between involvement in extracurricular programs and teen outcomes (for a review, see Feldman and Matjasko, 2005). In general this research tends to find that youth who are more involved in organized extracurricular activities have higher educational trajectories (Eccles and Barber, 1999), better academic outcomes (Crosnoe, 2002; Feldman and Matjasko, 2005), and a decreased risk of dropping out of school (Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney and Cairns, 1997). There is, however, considerable inconsistency in extant research on the relationship between involvement in extracurricular activities and substance use. While some studies (Borden et al., 2001; Mahoney and Stattin, 2000; Abbey et al. 2006; Elder et al., 2000) have found that teens who are more involved in extracurricular activities are less likely to engage in antisocial behaviors, a number of studies (Jenkins, 1996; Metzger et al., 2009; Eccles et al., 1999; Crosnoe, 2002) have also shown that teens who are involved in extracurricular activities are more likely than other youth to drink, smoke and use drugs.

While much research has found a positive relationship between sports and alcohol use, there is a lot of disagreement about whether or not the relationship is linear, what factors drive it and whether the relationship is the same for boys and girls. For example, in his research on high school students, Crosnoe (2002) found an interaction between athletic involvement and gender for explaining alcohol use. Girls who were not involved in athletics drank less than boys, but girls who were involved with athletics drank as much as boys. Eccles and Barber (1999) also found a relationship between sports and drinking alcohol, but they seem to have found it for both boys and girls. Finally, in her study of United Kingdom youth, Davies (2009) found that males’ involvement in sports was associated with plans to drink and get drunk. The relationship was even stronger for boys who correctly identified alcohol advertising sponsors, suggesting that sports bring boys into a culture where alcohol plays a significant role. In contrast to the cultures that appear in at least some school/community-based sports activities, we might expect that religion-supported activities would foster cultures and opportunities that are less conducive to underage drinking.

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