



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 18
Issue 3 *September*

Article 11

June 1991

Racial Differences in the Use of Drugs and Alcohol Among Low Income Youth and Young Adults

John E. Poulin
Widener University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons, and the Substance Abuse and Addiction Commons

Recommended Citation

Poulin, John E. (1991) "Racial Differences in the Use of Drugs and Alcohol Among Low Income Youth and Young Adults," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 3 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol18/iss3/11>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

Racial Differences
in the Use of Drugs and Alcohol
Among Low Income Youth and Young Adults

JOHN E. POULIN

Widener University
Center for Social Work Education

This study examines the use of drugs and alcohol among 284 youth and young adults of a low income urban community. Racial differences in the use of drugs and alcohol are examined for four age groups between 12 and 25.

Overall, the findings show significant racial differences in the use of both drugs and alcohol. Black youth and young adults have lower drug use and alcohol use rates than their white peers. The differences hold for the four age groups examined. Implications of the findings for drug prevention programs are discussed.

This study describes the use of drugs and alcohol among the youth and young adults of Chester, Pennsylvania. Chester is often characterized in negative terms. It is the most economically depressed community in Pennsylvania and in the 1980s it was ranked second on the Federal government list of most distressed cities in the nation (Baker, 1980). Fifty percent of the households receive some form of government assistance (Obenhouse, Schwartz, and Gray, 1984). About 34% of those on AFDC are long-term (four or more years) welfare recipients (Poulin, King, Greenberg, and Keating, 1987). Approximately 26% of the residents and 36% of the children are living below the poverty line (Baker, 1980). Chester also has the highest rate of single-parent families in Pennsylvania and out-of-wedlock births to teenage mothers (Poulin et al., 1987). It has a population of about 50,000 people of which about 66% are minorities (Census, 1980).

Chester has been characterized in the media as a center for drug activity in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware. It was the site of the largest drug raid in the history of the State of

Pennsylvania. In that raid, more than 50 high school students were arrested for possession and the selling of drugs (Maitland & DiGiacomo, 1989). Fastman and Merlino (1989) found that many of Chester's minority youth have become caught up in the selling of drugs. Key informants from the justice system of Delaware County, Pennsylvania estimate that over 40% of the criminal justice cases derive from Chester, with a very high incidence of drug dealing arrests (Wasilchick, 1990).

Recent media attention has tended to focus on the drug problems of the urban underclass. Unfortunately, news coverage of the drug problem has tended to equate the problem with minority populations. Contrary to the prevailing stereotypes, the limited data available suggest no racial differences in the use of drugs and higher alcohol use rates for whites than for Blacks (NIDA, 1988; Poulin, 1990).

Drug and alcohol use varies by age. Young adults aged 18 to 25 have the highest use rates followed by teenagers aged 12 to 17 (NIDA, 1988). Substance use by America's youth has received considerable attention in the media. Gleaton and Gowan (1985) state that during the past decade, the United States experienced the highest rates of drug abuse by youth and young adults in the industrialized world. Macdonald (1986) states that American youth have the dubious honor and hold the unfortunate record of leading the world's industrialized nations in the use of drugs. Drug and alcohol use by low income youth and young adults and by racial groups among the poor have not been previously examined. Therefore, this article examines racial differences in the use of drugs and alcohol among the low income youths and young adults of Chester, PA.

Methods

Sample

Four hundred and ninety three residents of Chester, PA were interviewed for this study. A nonrandom stratified sampling plan was used to obtain subjects for the survey. A four way stratification based on gender and age was employed. The plan called for approximately equal proportions of males and females

age 20 and under and 21 and over. This article reports the findings for those aged 12 to 25 ($N = 284$).

Eleven interviewers conducted the interviews during the months of May and June 1990. Four of the interviewers were students at a local university and seven were community residents. Four of the interviewers were Black, the remainder were white. The interviews took place throughout the Chester community. Interviews were conducted at twelve social service agencies in the community and on the streets of Chester. Participants were selected on a first come basis. The interviewers were instructed to determine if the subjects lived in the Chester community. If so, they were asked to participate in a confidential survey. Five hundred and fifty-two community residents were asked to participate in the study. Fifty-nine declined. Thus, 89.3% of the community residents who were asked to participate in the study completed interviews.

Demographic Characteristics

Among those aged 12 to 25, 56% (159) are between the ages of 12 and 17, and 44% (125) are aged 18 to 25. Almost 54% (153) are male and about 39% (111) are white. About 95% (270) of the subjects have never been married, 2.8% (8) are currently married and the remainder (6) are separated/divorced. About 67% (190) are currently in school, with 63% (120) of those in school attending high school. About 33% (94) are not currently in school. About 87% (82) of those not in school have completed high school. About 37% (105) live in two parent families, 37.7% (107) in single parent families, 4.2% (12) live with spouses or significant others, and almost 21% (60) have some other living arrangement. Most of those in the other category live with relatives.

The demographic characteristics of the study population appear for the most part to be representative of the Chester population. The percentage of minority subjects is close to the percentage reported in the 1980 Census. Also, the high percentage of the study subjects who live in single parent families or who live with relatives is characteristic of low income urban communities. The percentage of those not in school who have completed high school, however, is quite high. The study

population appears to under-represent youth and young adults who have dropped out of school; a population often associated with substance use and abuse. The under-representation of school dropouts could significantly lower the findings on drug and alcohol use reported in this study. The extent to which this occurs is unknown. However, caution in interpreting these data is warranted.

Measurement

The interview schedule consisted of three major components. The first section contained basic demographic information on the subjects. The second section asked questions about the family members' past substance use. The third section of the interview schedule contained questions about the respondents' substance use. The following thirteen substances were included on the interview schedule: liquor, beer, wine/wine coolers, marijuana, cocaine, crack, ice, methadone, amphetamines, barbiturates, heroin, inhalants, and prescription drugs.

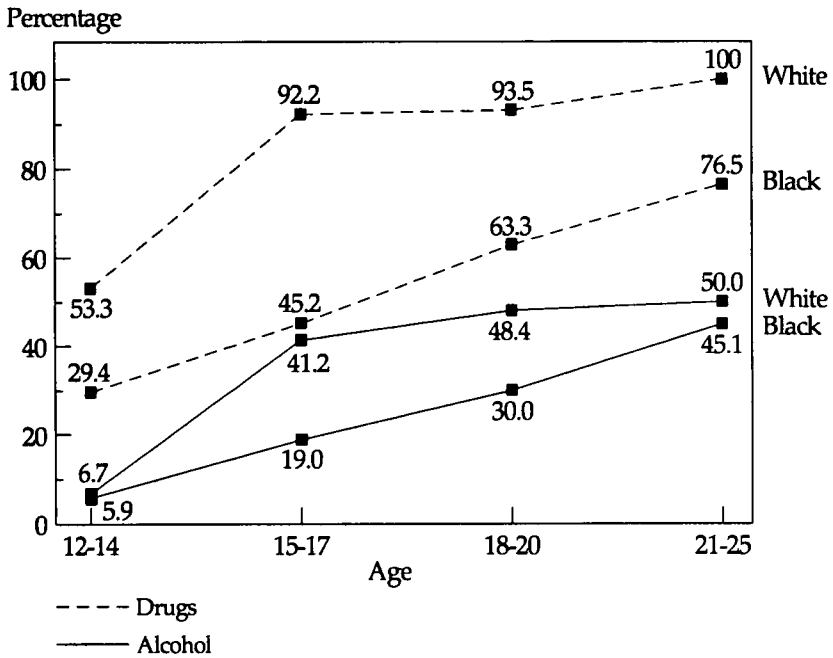
Findings

There are racial differences in the use of drugs and alcohol among the youth and young adults in this study (not shown). About 88% of the white subjects had used alcohol within the past three months compared to about 53% of the Black subjects ($X^2 = 35.67, p < .001$). The difference between whites and Blacks in the use of drugs is also statistically significant. About 39% of the white subjects had used drugs within the past three months compared to about 25% of the minority residents ($X^2 = 6.20, p < .01$). A significantly larger percentage of the white youths and young adults use drugs and alcohol than their minority counterparts.

Figure 1 contains the percentages of drug and alcohol use for four age groups by race. Whites youths in all the age groups have higher percentages of drug and alcohol use than Black youths. Over 92% of the white youths and young adults aged 15 to 25 had used alcohol within the past three months compared to about 45% of the Blacks aged 15 to 17, 63.3% aged 18 to 20, and 76.5% aged 21 to 25.

Figure 1

Drug and alcohol use by race by age



Among the 12 to 14 year olds there are only slight differences in the percentages using drugs (6.7% vs. 5.9%). However, there are substantial racial differences in the use of drugs among those aged 15 through 20. Between 41.2% and 48.4% of the white youths in these age groups had used at least one type of drug during the past three months compared to 19% of the African American youths aged 15 to 17 and 30% aged 18 to 20. After age 20 radical differences in the use of drugs decrease substantially. Fifty percent of the whites in this age group had used drugs compared to 45.1% of the minority subjects.

Discussion

There are two limitations associated with these data. The first is that the information on substance use is based on self-reporting. As with all drug and alcohol studies based on

self-reports, there is the possibility of under-reporting. The interviewers were trained to stress that the interview would be strictly confidential and that the respondents would not be identified in any way. Nevertheless, it is possible that the use percentages obtained in this study are lower than the respondents' actual use of drugs and alcohol.

A second limitation of this study is the way in which subjects were selected to participate in the survey. A nonrandom sampling plan was used. As noted previously, it is possible that the survey respondents do not accurately represent Chester's youth and young adult population. The magnitude of the potential selection bias in these data is unknown.

The findings of this study show significant racial differences in the use of drugs and alcohol among the youth and young adults of Chester. The Blacks in this study have substantially lower rates of drug and alcohol use than the white teenagers and young adults.

Racial differences held for all the age groups examined. Significantly higher percentages of white youths of all ages had used alcohol than Black youths. Over 90% of the whites aged 15 to 25 had used alcohol within the past three months. This is a very high percentage of alcohol use, especially for the teenagers. Black teenagers have significantly lower percentages of alcohol use than their white peers.

Black youths aged 15 to 20 also had significantly lower rates of drug use than the same aged white youths. Among those aged 12 to 14 there were no racial differences in the use of drugs and after age 20 only small differences between the white and Black respondents.

These findings suggest that Black teenagers residing in low income urban communities are substantially less involved with drugs and alcohol than their white peers. It is the white youth of Chester who are most involved in drug and alcohol use. After age 20 racial differences in the use of drugs and alcohol remain but the magnitude of the differences are greatly reduced.

Media attention tends to focus on the drug problems of minority populations. The findings from this study indicate that drug and alcohol is not just a minority problem. Indeed, the opposite appears to hold. The low income white youth and young

adults appear to be more heavily involved in substance use than their minority peers. This is not to say, however, that a substantial number of minority persons are not involved in substance use. Prevention programs need to address the high drug and alcohol use among low income teenagers and young adults, particularly the very high percentage of white teenagers who use alcohol.

The proportion of Black teenagers who use drugs is much smaller than the proportion of white teenagers. After age 20 the differences are much smaller. It appears that Blacks become involved in the use of drugs at a later age than whites. Additional research is needed to identify the factors that contribute to the lower use rate by Black teenagers. An explanation of this phenomenon could help drug prevention programs direct their efforts at keeping minority youth drug free.

References

- Baker, T. B. (1980). *Demographic distribution of poverty in Delaware County, PA*. Chester, PA: United Way of Southeastern Delaware County.
- Fastman, A., & Merlaino, L. (1990). An assessment of drug related problems among youths in Chester. Unpublished paper, Center for Social Work Education, Widener University, Chester, PA.
- Gleaton, T. J. & Gowan, S. (1985). The adolescent drug epidemic and the chronic young adult patient: Is there a link? *Psychiatry Letter*, 3, 32.
- Hawks, D. (1974). The epidemiology of narcotic addiction in the United Kingdom. In E. Josephsen and E. Carrol (Eds.), *Drug use: Epidemiological and sociological approaches*, (pp. 45-62). Carrol. NY: Wiley.
- Macdonald, D. I. (1986). Introduction. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 15, 1-3.
- Maitland, H. & DeGiacomo, M. (1989). Massive drug raid: Bust nails 63 suspected dealers, including students. *The Delaware County Daily Times*, December 6, 3.
- National Institute on Drug Abuse. (1988). *National household survey on drug abuse: Main findings 1985* DHHS Publication No. ADM 88-1586). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Obenhouse, M., Schwartz, M. & Gray, E. (1984). Living below the line (video-tape). Washington, DC: Frontline.
- Poulin, J. E. (1990). *The use of drugs and alcohol in Chester: A community survey*. Media, PA: Delaware County Department of Human Resources, Office of Drug and Alcohol.

- Poulin, J. E., King, L. M., Greenberg, J., & Keating, M. (1987). Welfare dependency: A study of welfare use in a low income urban community. *The Journal of Applied Social Sciences*, 11, 152-166.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census (1980). *Census of Population and Housing, 1980*. Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census.
- Wasilchick, L. (1990). Personal Correspondence. Office of Adult Services, Department of Human Resources, Media, PA.

CONTRIBUTORS

Paul Adams
University of Iowa
School of Social Work
Iowa City, IA 55242

Christopher Brown
The University of Queensland
Department of Social Work
The University of Queensland
St. Lucia, A. 4067
Australia

Namkee G. Choi
Assistant Professor
School of Social Work
285 Alumni Arena
State University of New York
Buffalo, NY 14260

Howard Jacob Karger
Louisiana State University
School of Social Work
Long Field House
Baton Rouge, IA 70803

Jon K. Matsuoka, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
University of Hawaii at Manoa
School of Social Work
Hawaii Hall
2500 Campus Road
Honolulu, Hawaii 96822

Michael D. Parker
Southern Illinois University
at Carbondale
School of Social Work
Carbondale, IL 62901

John E. Poulin
Center for Social Work Education
Widener University
1628 Walnut Street
Chester, PA 19013

Chathapuram S. Ramanathan
Michigan State University
254 Baker Hall
East Lansing, MI 48824

Moshe Sherer
Tel Aviv University
Bob Shapell School of Social Work
Ramat-Aviv, Israel, 69978

Susie A. Spence, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
School of Social Work
The University Alabama
Post Office Box 87031
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0314

JSSW IN THE CLASSROOM

The June, 1989 issue (Vol. XVI, #2) of the *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* is devoted entirely to:

PROSPECTS FOR WELFARE REFORM

This Special Issue should be very useful to undergraduate or graduate courses dealing with Social Policy, Inequality, Poverty and Income Maintenance. It contains eleven articles and a book review which provide historical background to the present welfare situation, criticism from several political perspectives, and case studies on particular welfare problems. The authors represent a wide range of disciplines: Economics, Political Science, History, Sociology, and Social Work. For a complete Table of Contents see the next page.

You may order directly or have your bookstore place the order. The bookstore will probably add 20% to our price of \$6.00. Our price includes postage at Special Fourth Class rates. To order, complete this form:

Number of copies	Price per copy	Total price
	\$6.00	
If Michigan resident, add 4% State tax:		
TOTAL:		

Your Mailing Address _____

ZIP _____

Make checks payable to the *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* and mail to:

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare
School of Social Work
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI 49008

Unsold copies may be returned for a refund. A 10% restocking fee will be deducted.

THE TRULY DISADVANTAGED:
CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

A Special Issue of the
Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare
(Volume XVI, Number 4; December 1989)

Special Editor
ROBERT G. NEWBY

Everyone concerned with poverty, inequality, and racism in the United States must deal with the work of William Julius Wilson. There is no scholarly work more central to our debates about the creation of the "underclass" than Wilson's book *The Truly Disadvantaged*. His bold analysis and policy recommendations have commanded widespread attention.

Robert Newby has assembled an impressive group of scholars to offer a comprehensive appreciation and critique of Wilson's work. The Special Issue includes contributions from Andrew Billingsley, Edna Bonacich, Carole Marks, Bonnie Thornton Dill, Ralph Gomes and Walda Katz Fishman, Richard Cloward and Frances Fox Piven, James Geschwender, and a response by Wilson himself. It is the best single source of analysis of Wilson's research and policy recommendations so far available, and has been adopted for classroom use at institutions such as Bryn Mawr College, Georgia State University, and SUNY-Plattsburg. A limited number of copies are still in stock. You can order one by sending \$6.00 to:

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare
School of Social Work
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI 49008

Michigan residents should add 4% sales tax.

Your Mailing Address: _____

ZIP _____

ORDERING BACK ISSUES
of
THE JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY & SOCIAL WELFARE

Most back issues of the *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* are available for purchase. The price is \$6.00 for each back number of the Journal, with the exception of Vol. VII (1980), Nos. 1-3 & 4-6. There were only two printings of the Journal that year and Nos. 1-3 are bound together as a set as are Nos. 4-6. The price of each set for Vol. VII is \$8.00. All prices include handling and postage, at 4th class-book rate. If 1st class is desired, inquire for rates.

If you would like to order a back number of the Journal, indicate the numbers you would like to order by completing the "Back Order" request below. Submit the request with a check for the total amount on line 8.

BACK ORDER REQUEST

	Volume (1)	Number (2)	Year (3)	Price per Number (4)	Number of Copies Desired (5)	Total Cost (Col. 4 X Col. 5) (6)
1.						
2.						
3.						
4.						
5.						
6.	Subtotal (lines 1-5) =					
7.	If Michigan Resident add 4% of line 6 =					
8.	TOTAL (Add lines 6-7) =					

Your Mailing Address _____

 _____ ZIP _____

Make checks payable to the *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* and mail to:

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare
 School of Social Work
 Western Michigan University
 Kalamazoo, MI 49008

Journal of Sociology
&
Social Welfare

Please enter my subscription for: VOLUME XVIII (1991)

BACK ISSUES ARE AVAILABLE:

Subscription Rates:
(Includes Postage)

CHECK ONE

- | | |
|---|------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Individual (In U.S.) | \$24 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Individual (Outside U.S.) | 30 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Institution (In U.S.) | 55 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Institution (Outside U.S.) | 63 |

Your Name and Address:

Name: _____

Address: _____

_____ ZIP _____

Make checks payable to & mail to:

Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare
School of Social Work
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, MI 49008

*** THANK YOU ***