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Substance Use and Risky Sexual Behavior: Attitudes and Practices Among Adolescents and Young Adults

Teens and young adults face many pressures and decisions involving alcohol, drugs, and sexual activity—decisions that often occur simultaneously. Research has shown that many health risk behaviors occur in combination with one another, yet it is often unclear which behavior comes first¹. Substance use increases the probability that an adolescent will initiate sexual activity, and relatedly, sexually experienced adolescents are more likely to initiate substance use². Alcohol and drug use by young people may lead to earlier sexual initiation, unprotected sexual intercourse, and multiple partners as well as putting young people at risk for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), unintended pregnancy, and sexual violence. There is still much to learn about the attitudes and knowledge of youth toward the intersection of substance use and sexual activity, including how conscious they are of the connection between the two.

Following is a detailed summary of findings based on the Kaiser Family Foundation's *Youth Knowledge and Attitudes on Sexual Health: A National Survey of Adolescents and Young Adults* that includes interviews with 998 teens (ages 15 to 17) and young adults (ages 18 to 24). This summary provides insight into youth's attitudes toward and experiences with substance use and sexual activity.

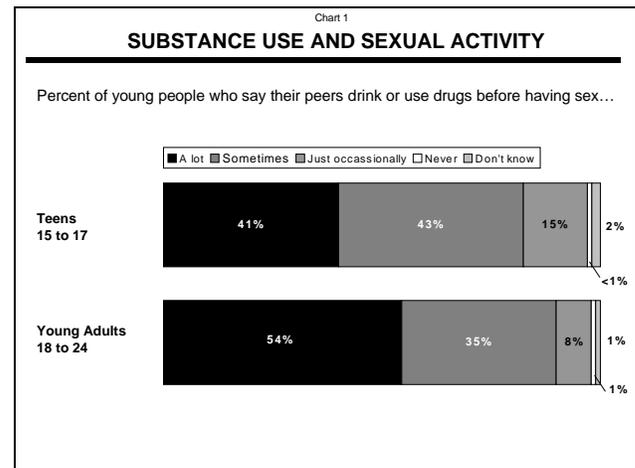
Summary of Findings

For many teens and young adults alcohol and drug use are closely linked to sexual decision-making and risk-taking. Nearly nine out of ten say that their peers use alcohol or drugs before having sex at least some of the time and many young people report that condoms are often not used when people are drinking or using drugs. In spite of the risks, a fifth of teens and young adults are unconcerned that their peers often make decisions about sex while they are under the influence.

Many young people report that they themselves have engaged in risky behaviors because of substance use. More than a third of sexually active young people report that alcohol or drugs have influenced their decisions about sex. Almost as many have "done more" sexually than they had planned while under the influence. Because of decisions they made while drinking or using drugs, young people also report having unprotected sex and worrying about STDs and pregnancy.

Perceptions of Risk and Personal Concern

Young people say that alcohol and drugs often go hand-in-hand with sexual activity among their peers. Almost nine out of ten (88%) 15- to 24-year-olds say that people their age drink or use drugs before having sex at least "sometimes" — including 50 percent who say this happens "a lot." (See Chart 1).



Seven out of ten (73%) young people 15 to 24 also agree that condoms often don't get used when people are drinking or using drugs. Girls and young women are more likely than boys and young men to report that their peers are having unprotected sex under the influence (79% vs. 65%, respectively).

In spite of the risks, one in five (21%) young people 15 to 24 say it is not a big deal if their peers make decisions about sex while drinking or using drugs.

When it comes to *their own* decision-making, many young people are worried about the influence of substance use. Forty-three percent of young people 15 to 24 say they are *personally* concerned that they "might do more sexually than [they] had planned because of alcohol or drugs." Teens are more likely than young adults to express personal concern—almost half (49%) of teens 15 to 17 compared to 40 percent of young adults 18 to 24.

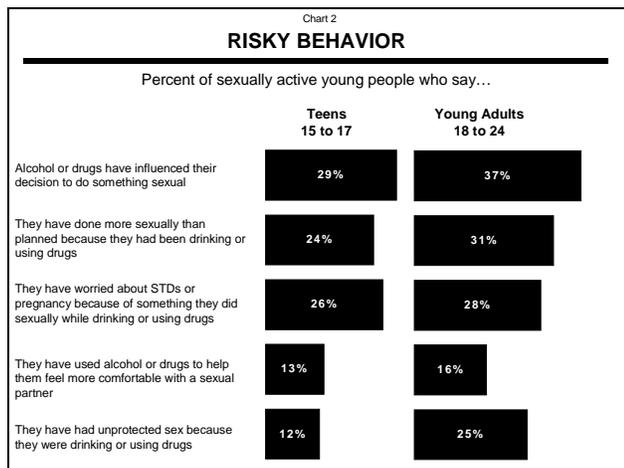
Sexual Activity While Drinking or Using Drugs

Significant numbers of young people—including underage teens who cannot legally drink alcohol—report engaging in risky sexual behaviors because of alcohol or drugs. More than a third (36%) of sexually active young people 15 to 24 say that drinking or drug use has influenced their decisions about sex—including more than a quarter (29%) of teens 15 to 17 and 37 percent of young adults 18 to 24. Twenty-nine percent of sexually active young people 15 to 24 say they have “done more” sexually than they had planned while drinking or using drugs.

Reporting Personal Behavior: Underestimating the Frequency of Sexual Behavior Under the Influence

Young people’s reporting of their own activities may underestimate how frequently sexual behavior and substance use are actually combined. There is often some disconnect between what young people report their *peers* are doing and what they report *they themselves* are doing. For example, 74 percent of sexually active young people 15 to 24 say their peers “often do not use condoms when they are drinking or using drugs,” but only twenty-three percent say they *personally* have had unprotected sex because they were drinking or using drugs. While one in ten (11%) sexually active teens and young adults 15 to 24 acknowledge that they had been drinking or using drugs the most recent time they had sex, significantly more say their peers are doing so. Eighty-nine percent of sexually active young people 15 to 24 say people their age are mixing substance use and sexual activity.

Many teens and young adults admit they have put themselves at risk because of alcohol or drugs. Almost one quarter (23%) sexually active young people 15 to 24 report having had unprotected sex because they were drinking or using drugs—including 12 percent of teens 15 to 17 and twenty-five percent of young adults 18 to 24. Because of something they did while drinking or using drugs, 26 percent of sexually active teens 15 to 17 have worried about STDs or pregnancy as have 28 percent of sexually active young adults 18 to 24 (See Chart 2).



Information Needs

Almost four out of ten (37%) young people 15 to 24 want more information about the effects of alcohol and drug use on their sexual decision-making. Teens are more likely

to say they would like to learn more than young adults with 48 percent of teens 15 to 17 expressing interest compared to 32 percent of those 18 to 24.

Sexual Activity

Sixty-seven percent of 15- to-24-year-olds report having had sexual intercourse. Eight out of ten (81%) young adults say they have had intercourse (or are currently married, living as married, or have ever been married). Nearly four out of ten (37%) teens ages 15 to 17 report they have had sex. Young males are more likely to have had intercourse than their female counterparts (44% vs. 31%, respectively among teens 15-17), although gender differences diminish somewhat as youth age (85% vs. 77%, respectively among young adults 18 to 24).

Methodology

The data reported here are from the Kaiser Family Foundation’s *National Survey of Youth Knowledge and Attitudes on Sexual Health Issues*, a national random-sample survey of 1200 adolescents and young adults, including 202 13- to 14-year-olds, 296 15- to 17-year-olds, and 702 18- to 24-year-olds. The findings reported here reflect the behaviors and attitudes of 15- to 24-year-olds. The questionnaire was designed by staff at the Kaiser Family Foundation and Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA) and analysis was conducted by staff at the Foundation.

Fieldwork was conducted by telephone by PSRA between November 13, 2001 and January 20, 2002. Interviews were completed both in English and Spanish according to the preferences of the respondent. The final response rate was 57%. The data have been weighted by age, sex, race/ethnicity, region, and education to be representative of national samples of youth and to account in part for nonresponse.

Questions on personal sexual experience were only asked of youth ages 15 and older. Overall, 67% of youth 15 to 24 have had sexual intercourse (or are currently married, living as married, or have ever been married) including 37% of those 15 to 17 and 81% of those 18 to 24. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 4% for all 15- to 24-year-olds, plus or minus 7% for 15- to 17-year-olds, plus or minus 4% for 18- to 24-year-olds, plus or minus 5% for females and 5% for males 15 to 24, plus or minus 4% for sexually active 15- to 24-year olds and 6% for those not sexually active and may be larger for certain subsets presented in this analysis.

This special analysis was prepared for *Dangerous Liaisons: Substance Abuse and Sexual Behavior*, a one day conference sponsored by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University, the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA).

References

1. Eisen M et al., *Teen Risk-Taking: Promising Prevention Programs and Approaches*, Washington DC: Urban Institute, September 2000.
2. Mott FL and Haurin RJ, *Linkages between sexual activity and alcohol and drug use among American adolescents*, *Family Planning Perspectives*, 1988, vol. 20.