

## Commentary

February 23, 2010

### *Connecting Substance Use and High School Dropout Rates; The Impact of Alcohol and Drug Use on Academic Achievement*

Pre-adolescence and adolescence are high-risk years for alcohol and drug abuse. Early initiation of alcohol and drug use is associated with more problem-generating behavior and more sustained use.<sup>1</sup> Early drug and alcohol use is also a primary risk factor for dropping out of school.<sup>2</sup> While the dropout rate in the United States continues to make headline news, the connection between alcohol and drug use and dropping out is being ignored, not only by the media but by virtually all of the experts who study -- and lament -- the nation's high dropout rate.

In his address to the Joint Session of Congress on February 24, 2009 President Barack Obama expressed grave concern about high school dropout rates. He pointed out that the U.S. has one of the highest dropout rates of industrialized nations, with just over half of American citizens completing the requirements for a high school diploma.<sup>3</sup>

The lifetime marginal cost in the U.S. for a single youth who drops out of school ranges between \$243,000 and \$388,000 and when combined with heavy drug use and associated crime ranges from \$1.7 to \$2.3 million.<sup>4</sup> The more a young person is involved in substance use, the more likely he or she is also involved in crime.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, alcohol and drug use play an integral role in this growing gap in achievement and increases in costs.

A review of literature published between 1990 and 2006 found a strong relationship between substance use and dropping out of high school despite differences between studies in measurements and definitions of the term "dropout".<sup>6</sup> In a study of American students in southwestern states, rates of lifetime substance use were much higher (1.3 to 3.0 times) among high school dropouts than for students who remained in school. Rates of current drug use were 1.2 to 6.4 times greater for high school dropouts than students who stayed in school.<sup>7</sup>

In another study comparing adolescent students at high risk for dropping out to students at low risk, high risk students reported more substance use and easier access to drugs. High-risk students also exerted less control over their substance use and reported experiencing more adverse consequences due to their use.<sup>8</sup> Once again, drug users have demonstrated higher rates of dropping out of school than non-users.<sup>9</sup>

Once within the age range of 18 to 24, substance use rates among high school dropouts are generally similar to those of students who remain in school. According to a 2002 report from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), 22% of dropouts and 21% of non-dropouts

reported current drug use.<sup>10</sup> Both white and black dropouts reported higher rates of 30 day drug use than non-dropouts while no differences were found among Hispanic youths.

From ages 18 to 20, rates of current drug use were higher among dropouts (27%) than non-dropouts (22%). Rates were similar between dropouts (19%) and non-dropouts (20%) when ages 21 to 24. Males and females who dropped out reported similar rates of current drug use to males and females who stayed in school.

This research shows that drug use is an important risk factor for dropping out of high school. However, it is also clear that higher levels of drug use do not always continue after dropping out compared to students that do not drop out. Once high school dropouts reach ages 18 to 24, their drug use becomes similar to their non-dropout counterparts. At this age they are likely to be working to support themselves although by then it is much more difficult for them to get back on track to obtain high school diplomas. Dropouts are at greater risk for not obtaining academic or career success due to the limitations of education. Targeted, effective prevention of alcohol and drug use by teenagers, including early intervention efforts of identified high-risk students, is needed in schools.

Preventing alcohol and drug use by teens is not the only element of successful programs to target potential teen dropouts, but it is a significant component that is being swept out of sight today. Alcohol and drug use is an easily identifiable marker of being at high-risk for dropping out of school. Our nation must act far more effectively to reduce teenage alcohol and drug use to improve the nation's competitive position in the global economy and to save and improve the lives of our youth.

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<sup>1</sup> National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2003). Preventing drug use among children and adolescents: A research-based guide for parents, educators, and community leaders. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. NIH Publication No. 04-4212(A)

<sup>2</sup> Select Comm. on Narcotics Abuse and Control, 99th Cong., 2d Sess., *Drugs and Dropouts 2* (Comm. Print 1986). Dropping out not only harms the students dropping out, but our entire society costing the nation billions during their lifetimes. See also, Subcommittee on Econ. Growth, Trade, and Taxes, 102d Cong., 1st Sess., *Doing Drugs and Dropping Out 52* (Comm. Print 1991). See Tetsuji Yamada, et al., *The Impact of Alcohol Consumption and Marijuana Use on High School Graduation* 13 (National Bureau of Econ. Research Working Paper No. 4497, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Remarks of President Barack Obama – as prepared for delivery. (2009, Feb 24). Retrieved November 23, 2009 from [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/remarks-of-president-barack-obama-address-to-joint-session-of-congress/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/remarks-of-president-barack-obama-address-to-joint-session-of-congress/)

<sup>4</sup> Cohen, M. (1998). The monetary value of saving a high-risk youth. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 14(1) 5–33. in Snyder, H.N., & Sickmund, M. (1999). *Juvenile offenders and victims: 1999 national report*. National Center for Juvenile Justice. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Retrieved <http://www.ncjrs.gov/html/ojjdp/nationalreport99/toc.html>

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Greenbaum, *Drugs, Delinquency, and Other Data*, Juvenile Justice, Spring/Summer 1994, at 2, 3, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Townsend, L., Flisher, A.J., & King, G. (2007). A systematic review of the relationship between high school dropout and substance use. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 10(4), 295-317.

<sup>7</sup> Swaim, R.C., Beauvais, F., Chavez, E.L., & Oetting, E.R. (1997). The effect of school dropout rates on estimates of adolescent substance use among three racial/ethnic groups. *American Journal of Public Health*, 87(1), 51-55.

<sup>8</sup> Eggert, L. L. & Hertin, J. R. (1993). Drug involvement among potential dropouts and "typical" youth. *Journal of Drug Education*, 23, 31-55.

<sup>9</sup> Friedman, A. S., Glickman, N., & Utada, A. (1985). Does drug and alcohol use lead to failure to graduate from high school? *Journal of Drug Education*, 15, 353-364.

<sup>10</sup> The National Survey on Drug Use and Health. (2003, Nov 28). Substance use among school dropouts. *The NSDUH Report*. Office of Applied Studies Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Retrieved November 23, 2009 from <http://www.oas.samhsa.gov/2k3/dropouts/dropouts.htm>