

Patterns of Drug Use among Cuban-American, African-American, and White Non-Hispanic Boys

ABSTRACT

This study examined initiation into drug use during grade school years in a sample of Cuban-American, Black, and White non-Hispanic students in the greater Miami, Fla, area. Findings indicate that first use of alcohol occurs in fifth grade and cigarettes in sixth grade for all subgroups except White non-Hispanics, who peak in the fifth grade. White non-Hispanics had the highest lifetime levels of alcohol and cigarette use. Foreign-born Cuban Americans had a lower lifetime prevalence of alcohol and cigarette use than US-born Cuban Americans. Higher acculturation level was related to first use of alcohol. One important implication of this study is that alcohol interventions should begin no later than third grade and smoking interventions no later than fourth grade. (*Am J Public Health*. 1993;83:257-259)

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Introduction

This paper describes preadolescent patterns of drug use in a sample of Cuban-American, African American, and White non-Hispanic male students from the greater Miami, Fla, area. Retrospective data were used to identify group differences in grade level of first use of alcohol and cigarettes. Comparisons were made of drug use patterns among students of Cuban heritage in order to detect possible influences of acculturation on drug use.

One of the important goals of this study was to identify appropriate grade levels for intervention to prevent initiation of drug experimentation, or at least to delay first use, since it is well established that early drug experimentation represents "gateway" drug use and is an important risk factor for later experimentation with illicit drugs.¹⁻³ However, patterns of initiation to alcohol and cigarettes during grade school may differ by ethnic-racial group. For example, four studies have shown earlier initiation of smoking among White non-Hispanics than among Blacks during adolescence.⁴⁻⁷ Differences could also be occasioned by birthplace/acculturation level in the case of Hispanic adolescents, owing to both acculturation stress and socialization into norms favoring alcohol or cigarette use in American society.⁸⁻⁹ Although no differences in alcohol consumption among adult Mexican-American men of differing acculturation levels were reported in the Hispanic Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, data for Hispanic children have not been available.¹⁰

Grade school could represent a strategic window for initiating early preventive interventions, but more information is needed about variations in patterns of use for children belonging to multiple ethnic groups.

Methods

The data were taken from the baseline survey of a longitudinal study of early deviance and drug use among boys in

Dade County, Florida. Therefore, the baseline data ($n = 6760$) used for this study involve only sixth and seventh graders, mostly between 11 and 12 years of age. Because this paper focuses on patterns among African Americans, Cuban Americans, and White non-Hispanics, the other student respondents were eliminated from the foregoing analyses. A series of questions specific to each drug established grade at time of first use and use in the previous year or the past 30 days. Acculturation level was assessed with a 5-item language preference inventory adapted from a widely used measure.¹¹ All male students attending entry-level classes (sixth or seventh grade) were given parental consent forms; students who returned these forms and were present on the day the questionnaire was administered, or at later makeup sessions, were included in the baseline sample. The final consent and participation rate was 67%.

Results

Table 1 presents subsample sizes, prevalence levels, and confidence intervals for lifetime alcohol and cigarette use in the four subgroups. White non-Hispanics had the highest rates of lifetime alcohol and cigarette use (52.3% and 27.9%, respectively), and African Americans the lowest (32.4% and 11.6%, respectively). Foreign-born Cuban-American students had significantly lower levels of lifetime alcohol use and lifetime cigarette use than did US-born Cuban Americans. In a separate analysis, no statistically significant

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TABLE 1—Racial/Ethnic Composition of the Sample and Lifetime Prevalence of Cigarette and Alcohol Use

	Sample, % (n)	Cigarette Use, % (95% Confidence Interval)	Alcohol Use, % (95% Confidence Interval)
US-born Cubans	35.4 (1226)	23.8 ± 2.4	49.8 ± 2.8
Foreign-born Cubans	13.7 (474)	15.1 ± 3.3	39.5 ± 4.2
African Americans	25.2 (872)	11.6 ± 2.2	32.4 ± 3.1
White non-Hispanics	25.6 (887)	27.9 ± 3.0	52.3 ± 3.3

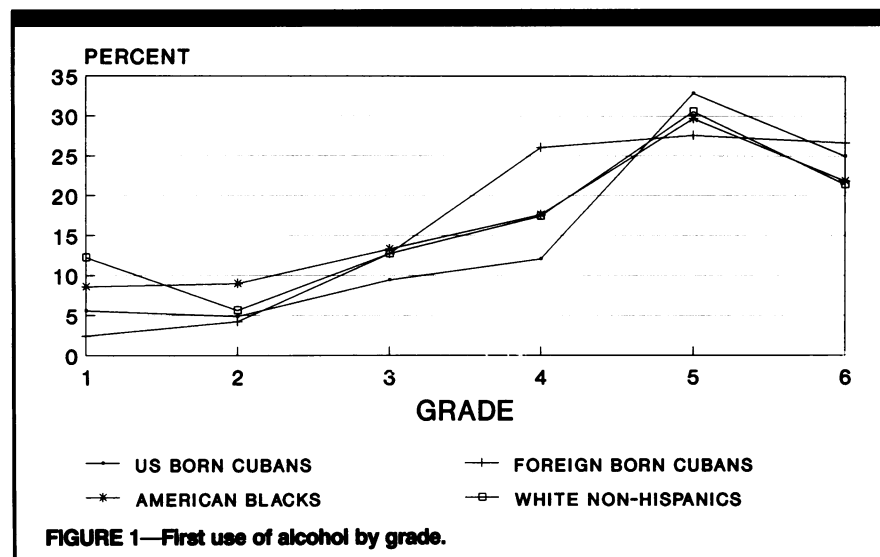


FIGURE 1—First use of alcohol by grade.

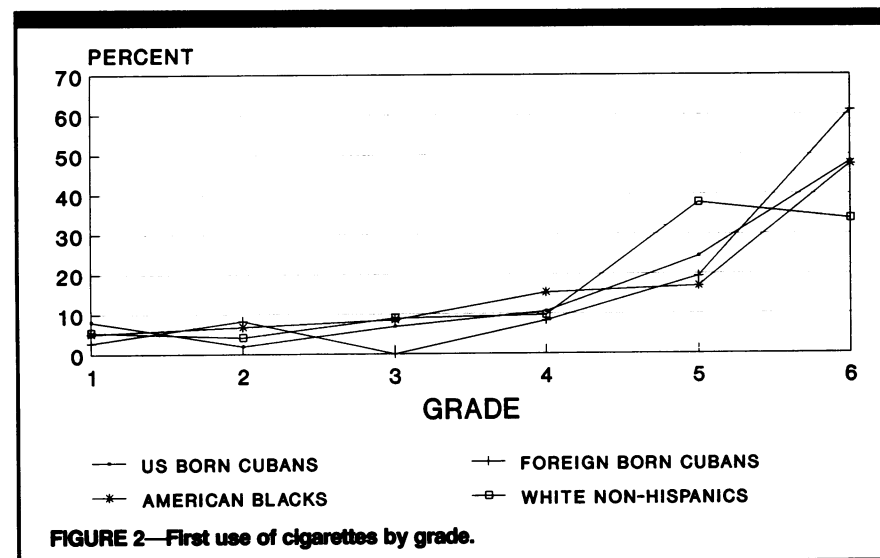


FIGURE 2—First use of cigarettes by grade.

relationships were found between parental education levels and prevalence estimates for any subgroup.

Figures 1 and 2 present information on grade level at the time of first use of alcohol and cigarettes during grade school. Only those individuals who had used either alcohol or cigarettes were eligible for inclusion in the subsamples used for Figures 1 and 2. As seen in Figure 1, frequency of first use of alcohol

was highest for all subgroups in the fifth grade. Foreign-born Cuban Americans showed a sharp increase in first use during the fourth grade, US-born Cuban Americans in the fifth grade. The overall risk of first use increased in the third grade. Figure 2 suggests that first cigarette use for White non-Hispanic students was most likely during the fifth grade, 1 year earlier than for the other three subgroups. Foreign-born Cuban

Americans were much less likely to have early smoking experience, but a notable increase occurred in the sixth grade. Approximately one half of all respondents who started smoking in grade school did so in the sixth grade. These findings indicate that early preventive interventions for alcohol should begin by the third grade, and smoking interventions by the fourth grade, before the "takeoff" point of first use. Moreover, alcohol was four times more likely than cigarettes to be the respondents' first drug experience.

Figure 3 presents data on the association between acculturation level and lifetime use of cigarettes or alcohol for Cuban-American boys. There was a statistically significant difference in alcohol use; monolingual Spanish speakers had a lower prevalence than did bilinguals ($P < .001$) or monolingual English speakers ($P < .001$). Differences in cigarette use were not significantly different by acculturation level.

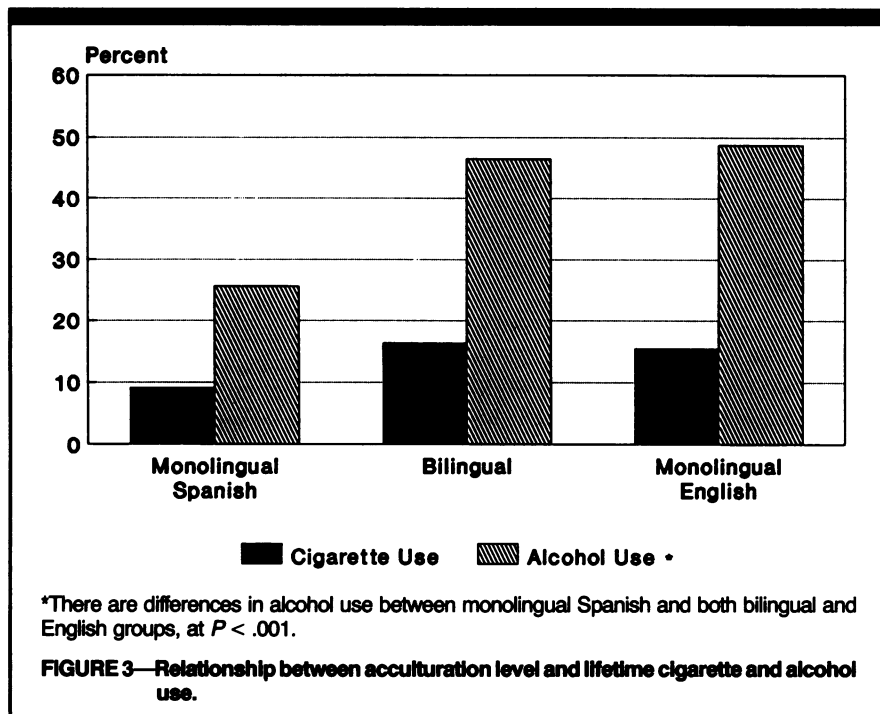
Discussion and Conclusions

This study indicates that alcohol is the most likely first drug experience in elementary school, usually occurring between fifth and sixth grades. White non-Hispanics had the highest prevalence of lifetime cigarette and alcohol use and were younger at the time of first cigarette use than were members of other ethnic-racial groups. The likelihood of lifetime cigarette and alcohol use increased with acculturation level for boys of Cuban heritage. Recent studies of Hispanic ethnic groups have shown wide variations in prevalence of adolescent drug use, indicating the importance of continuing epidemiologic studies of specific Hispanic subgroups and correlates of drug use.¹²⁻¹⁴ The findings indicate that early preventive interventions should begin between the third and fourth grades. □

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