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## Child Abuse & Neglect



# Family violence and risk of substance use among Mexican adolescents<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Determine the relationship between psychological and physical violence, exerted by fathers and/or mothers, and inter- or extra-familial sexual violence with risk for consuming tobacco, alcohol and drugs among adolescents.

**Method:** A cross-sectional study was carried out with students in two secondary schools in Mexico City. A total of 936 students participated: 54.3% males and 45.7% females, ranging between 12 and 16 years of age. A self-administered questionnaire was applied. This included Straus' Parent–Child Conflict Tactics Scales, as well as instruments to evaluate sexual violence and substance use, among other components.

**Results:** Over half of the adolescents reported psychological or physical violence exerted by their parents, and 1 in 10, sexual violence. The proportion of use of the 3 substances was similar in both sexes. Logistic regression analysis for males showed that psychological violence, exerted by either parent, implied twice the risk for the victims to use tobacco. For males, having suffered sexual violence increased the risk of consuming drugs various times. For females, being a victim of multiple forms of violence within the family increased the risk of consuming tobacco, alcohol and drugs notably, in comparison to non-victims.

**Conclusions:** Treatment programs for young people who have suffered family violence should consider adolescence not only as a stage of vulnerability for substance use but also as a critical time to implement preventive measures. For these measures, a joint strategy for both parents and adolescents should be considered, not only to stop the violence but also warn the parents about the serious consequences of the same.

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### Introduction

It is known that the various types of violence occurring within the familiar environment may have mental health repercussions on its victims. In the particular case of children and adolescents, suffering violence in the family has been associated with problems such as depression (Pelcovitz, Kaplan, DeRosa, Mandel, & Salzinger, 2000; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2006), post-traumatic stress disorder (Pelcovitz et al., 2000), eating disorders, suicidal behavior (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002), and social isolation (Elliott, Cunningham, Linder, Colangelo, & Gross, 2005) as well as high-risk behavior, such as the consumption of alcohol and drugs (Heise, Pitanguy, & Germain, 1994; Krug et al., 2002). Nevertheless, further studies that allow for the identification of variations and specificities to help understand family violence and its consequences are needed, given that these are complex phenomena. To this end, we were interested in studying the relationship

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that exists between suffering certain types of violence within the family, specifying the perpetrator, with substance use in adolescents.

The above is important because it has been documented that having experienced violence is a factor which has a strong relationship with contact and use of drugs (Vermeiren, Schwab-Stone, Deboutte, Leckman, & Ruchkin, 2003), particularly when the violence occurred during childhood or adolescence (Bensley, Spieker, Van Eenwyk, & Schoder, 1999; Dube et al., 2003; Freeman, Collier, & Parillo, 2002; Krug et al., 2002; Ramos, Saldívar, Medina-Mora, Rojas, & Villatoro, 1998; Ramos, Saltijeral, Romero, Caballero, & Martínez, 2001), and which is also related to younger age at first consumption (Kilpatrick et al., 2000). The literature also indicates that the severity of exposure to violence may be directly associated to substance use (Clark, Lesnick, & Hegedus, 1997; Dube et al., 2003; Freeman et al., 2002).

In Mexico, the first studies on family violence focused on violence exerted toward children, and centered on the documentation of extreme cases such as violent physical shaking and its consequences (Loredo et al., 1986; Loredo, Carbajal, Reynés, & Rodríguez, 1993). In addition, sexual abuse in childhood and the survival of this type of abuse have been studied, making evident that family members perpetrate this type of violence to an important degree (González, 1995; Ramos et al., 1998). At the same time, spousal violence against women has been researched (Alvarado, Salvador, Estrada, & Terrones, 1998; Ramírez & Patiño, 1997; Saltijeral, Ramos, & Caballero, 1998; Valdez & Juárez, 1998), including sexual violence (Ramos et al., 2001) and the severity of resulting injuries, according to emergency room reports (Híjar, Flores, Valdez, & Blanco, 2003; Ramos, Borges, Cherpitel, Medina-Mora, & Mondragón, 2002). Nevertheless, little research has studied the problem of family violence within the adolescent population (Caballero, Ramos, González, & Saltijeral, 2002) and particularly its relationship to mental health problems (Caballero & Ramos, 2004).

Although previous studies exist, principally at the international level, on family violence and its probable link to substance use, certain considerations need to be taken into account. For example, it has been pointed out that the bulk of studies have focused on the adult female population (MacMillan & Munn, 2001; Widom & Hiller-Sturmhofel, 2001); and have highlighted the need of carrying out further research in populations other than those in legal and clinical environments. Results of research with solely these samples, which concentrate the most serious cases possibly generating an important bias, cannot be applied to the wider population (Bensley et al., 1999).

At the same time, research is often intended to investigate the effects of only one dimension of violence, be it physical, sexual, or psychological, and not necessarily the combined effects. In other words, little research has been carried out on what happens when one is a victim of multiple forms of family violence and particularly, if this could increase the risk of substance use in adolescents. The above is important given that studies such as that of Perez (2000) have found that although physical and sexual violence are by themselves strong predictors for the use of illegal drugs by adolescents, the probability of consuming drugs, and doing so at an earlier age, is increased considerably when these two types of violence are reported concurrently. This occurs independently of control factors such as academic level, family structure and low-income levels. In this same vein, Moran, Vuchinich, and Hall (2004) found that if physical and sexual violence are reported, the risk of consuming tobacco, alcohol and illegal drugs increases various times in adolescents, compared to those reporting only one form of violence. It is interesting to observe that although this study includes emotional mistreatment, which has been associated principally with the use of tobacco and alcohol by adolescents, it does not include a combined measure of violence to understand the joint effects, along with the other forms of violence.

In addition, in the above-mentioned studies, although they distinguish between the types of violence suffered and add a combined measure of violence (physical and sexual), they did not include who had been the perpetrator of the violence. In fact, in research on family violence and substance use, it is more common to differentiate the sex of the victims but not necessarily that of the perpetrator, due to which its probable implications are unknown. Harrier, Lambert, and Ramos (2001), in their study of physical and sexual abuse suffered by adolescents, did not set apart who had been the perpetrator of this violence, although they did distinguish, interestingly enough, the role and influence that substance use by the father or mother played. Their results showed that physical abuse, sexual abuse, family violence and parental history of alcohol or drug use predicted substance use by adolescents. Perhaps it is in this sense that Howells and Rosenbaum (2008) observed that there is little research directed toward understanding if the sex of the perpetrator, in addition to that of the child, has some relationship on the negative effects of physical abuse in childhood, although their study associated depressive symptomatology and aggression. For example, they found that young people who reported physical abuse in childhood by both parents or only the mother presented higher levels of aggressive conduct, and if females had been victimized by both parents or only the father, they presented more depressive symptoms. The above reflects on the convenience of differentiating the perpetrator of the violence as well as the sex of the victim, given that the effects differ according to the specificity of the case.

Considering the above, the need to examine the role that family violence may play in adolescents' substance use is evident, particularly if data from the last Mexican National Survey on Drugs are taken into account. This survey reported noteworthy increases in at least once-in-a-lifetime consumption of illicit drugs, principally marijuana, cocaine and inhalants, the drugs most used among adolescents 12–17 years of age (Medina-Mora et al., 2003). In the particular case of Mexico City, according to surveys among secondary and high school students, drug use has increased and levels of consumption between males and females are increasingly comparable, especially for alcohol and tobacco (Villatoro et al., 2005).

As such, the objective of the present study was to attempt to determine the relationship between family violence—be it psychological or physical, exerted by the father or mother, or inter- or extra-familial sexual violence—with tobacco, alcohol and drug use, in a sample of adolescent students. On one hand, analysis was carried out to evaluate if differences in risk of

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