



# Testing three pathways to substance use and delinquency among low-income African American adolescents☆



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 21 September 2016

Received in revised form 7 February 2017

Accepted 7 February 2017

Available online 9 February 2017

### Keywords:

Peer norms

Parental monitoring

Future orientation

African American youth

Substance use

Delinquency

## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Mounting literature suggests that parental monitoring, risky peer norms, and future orientation correlate with illicit drug use and delinquency. However, few studies have investigated these constructs simultaneously in a single statistical model with low income African American youth. This study examined parental monitoring, peer norms and future orientation as primary pathways to drug use and delinquent behaviors in a large sample of African American urban adolescents.

**Methods:** A path model tested direct paths from peer norms, parental monitoring, and future orientation to drug use and delinquency outcomes after adjusting for potential confounders such as age, socioeconomic, and sexual orientation in a sample of 541 African American youth.

**Results:** Greater scores on measures of risky peer norms were associated with heightened risk of delinquency with an effect size that was twice in magnitude compared to the protective effects of future orientation. Regarding substance use, greater perceived risky peer norms correlated with the increased likelihood of substance use with a standardized effect size 3.33 times in magnitude compared to the protective effects of parental monitoring.

**Conclusions:** Findings from this study suggest that interventions targeting risky peer norms among adolescent African American youth may correlate with a greater impact on reductions in substance use and delinquency than exclusively targeting parental monitoring or future orientation.

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## 1. Introduction

In the United States (U.S.), African American adolescents relative to their other ethnic counterparts experience a disproportionate burden of juvenile justice involvement (United States Department of Justice: Office of Justice Programs. Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency and Prevention, OJJDP, 2015). During 2013, while accounting for <13% of the U.S. population, African American adolescents represented >35% of persons ages 13 to 18 years who had juvenile justice contact (Hockenberry & Puzanhera, 2015). A high proportion of juvenile justice contacts come from stiffer surveillance, prosecutorial discretion in charging decisions, and inequities in sentencing for delinquency and

substance use incidents (Armour & Hammond, 2009; Henning, 2013; Kahn & Martin, 2016). Official statistics suggest that disproportionate minority contact with African American adolescents occurs most severely in juvenile arrests compared to detention or placement. Compared to whites, African American adolescents have higher rates of juvenile arrest (63.6 vs. 26.0 per 100,000), and detention (24.9 vs. 20.9 per 100,000) (United States Department of Justice: Office of Justice Programs. Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency and Prevention, OJJDP, 2015). A better understanding of pathways leading to substance use and delinquency can not only ameliorate such incidences but might also inform programmatic and policy efforts to curtail these risks and the heavy personal costs which come to bear upon African American youth. Consequently, the major aim of this study is to explore direct pathways correlated with substance use and delinquency in a sample of African American adolescents.

### 1.1. Pathways to substance use and delinquency

There is a high correlation between youth substance use and delinquent behaviors (Elliott, Huizinga, & Menard, 2012). However, knowledge of common antecedents of these behaviors are sometimes

☆ Funding for this study was provided by the Center for Health Administration Studies and the STI/HIV Intervention Network at the University of Chicago awarded to Principal Investigator Dexter Voisin. The study was also partially supported by a T-32 Training Grant by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, Grant #: 1T32DA037801-01 awarded to Phillip L. Marotta.

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limited by studies that often assess substance use (Abram et al., 2015; McClelland, Elkington, Teplin, & Abram, 2004; Teplin, Abram, McClelland, Dulcan, & Mericle, 2002; Tobler & Komro, 2010) or delinquency (Farrington, Ttofi, & Piquero, 2016) with fewer studies exploring both (Griffin, Botvin, Scheier, Diaz, & Miller, 2000; Monahan, Rhew, Hawkins, & Brown, 2014). Parental monitoring, negative peer norms and future orientation are social cognitive constructs with strong empirical support as pathways to youth substance use and delinquency.

A large body of evidence supports an empirical relationship between inadequate parental monitoring styles and heightened risk for the development of adolescent substance use (Dishion, Nelson, & Kavanagh, 2003; Kelly, Comello, & Hunn, 2002; Tobler & Komro, 2010) and delinquency (Fosco, Stormshak, Dishion, & Winter, 2012; Keijsers, Branje, VanderValk, & Meeus, 2010). Griffin et al. (2000) conducted research with urban African American youth and found more parental monitoring was associated with lower rates of delinquency and substance use among a sample that was 87% African American in New York City. African American youth in households with parents that engaged in more monitoring behaviors were less likely to engage in delinquency, smoke cigarettes and use alcohol. Additionally, Tobler and Komro (2010) found that inconsistent parenting techniques were associated with substance use in a sample of predominantly African American and Hispanic urban youth. Social control theory would support these findings. According to social control theory, positive bonds to and monitoring from parents can have significant implications for restraining risk behaviors and promoting healthy behaviors on the part of youth (Hirschi, 1969; Voisin, Jenkins, & Takahashi, 2011).

In addition to parental monitoring, studies suggest that youth who perceive their peers as engaging in substance use are more likely to engage in similar behaviors (Andrews, Tildesley, Hops, & Li, 2002; Brooks-Russell, Simons-Morton, Haynie, Farhat, & Wang, 2014; D'Amico & McCarthy, 2006; Urberg, Luo, Pilgrim, & Degirmencioglu, 2003) and delinquency (Haynie, 2002; Reynolds & Crea, 2015). More specifically, a longitudinal study with 2248 students in the United States and Australia, documented that youth who perceived drug use as common among their peer groups were more likely to use tobacco and marijuana than their counterparts (Eisenberg, Toumbourou, Catalano, & Hemphill, 2014). Moreover, studies have found that youth are more likely to overestimate the number of peers engaged in substance use and other problem behaviors (Eisenberg et al., 2014; Wambeam, Canen, Linkenbach, & Otto, 2014). Social learning theory would suggest that peer group affiliation would reinforce dominant peer norms and that youth are more likely to adopt such behaviors in order to gain and maintain group membership (Petraitis, Flay, & Miller, 1995).

Some developmental perspectives of adolescent behavior suggest that the effect of peer norms increases with the onset of adolescence in a normative social psychological process (Carrington, 2009; Duan, Chou, Andreeva, & Pentz, 2009). Moreover, as personality and identity develops into early to mid adolescence, future orientation emerges as a robust predictor of the development of problem behaviors (Nurmi, 1991). Alongside peer influences, the risk of initiating delinquency and substance use culminates in mid to late adolescence (Duan et al., 2009) coinciding with the developmental period where influences of peer norms and future orientation are greatest. Barnow, Schuckit, Lucht, John, and Freyberger (2002) used structural equation modeling to examine the influence of peer norms and parental monitoring and found that youth with alcohol problems were more likely to have more perceived parental rejection, less parental warmth and associate with peers who used substances than youth without alcohol problems.

Finally, adolescents who report a pessimistic outlook, who do not plan for or who are not oriented positively to the future (i.e., having low future orientation) are at a greater risk of engaging in substance use (Peters Jr et al., 2005; Allwood, Baetz, DeMarco, & Bell, 2012, delinquency (Clinkinbeard, 2014; Van Gelder, Hershfield, & Nordgren, 2013) and multiple problem behaviors (Jackman & MacPhee, 2015; Chen & Vazsonyi, 2013) than youth who are more oriented to the future.

For instance, recent analyses of African American youth provided evidence that participants reporting high versus low future orientation were three times less likely to report substance use and 65% less likely to report delinquent behaviors even after controlling for significant factors such as socioeconomic status, gender and sexual orientation (Burnside & Gaylord-Harden, 2016). Asset theory can illuminate these findings (Sherraden, 1990). This theory posits that individuals who view themselves as having human capital or valuable are more inclined to engage in protective behaviors that protect themselves and their futures.

## 1.2. Study contributions

A significant expansion in literature have examined parental monitoring, peer norms, and future orientation as correlates of substance use and delinquency. However, few studies have focused exclusively on African American adolescents, and evaluated the relative magnitude of these constructs as they may correlate to substance use and delinquency a single model. Given disproportionate contacts African American youth have with the juvenile justice systems for substance use and delinquency, additional research examining theoretical mechanisms that correlate with these behaviors is critical to advancing public health prevention interventions for African American adolescents. Guided by social control, social learning and asset theories and considerations and gaps in extant literature, this study puts forth the following aims and hypotheses.

## 1.3. Study aim and hypotheses

The overarching aim of this study is to identify common primary pathways that are correlated with youth delinquency and substance use. Specifically, this study sought to test the following hypotheses:

- 1) Increased parental monitoring, higher future orientation and lower exposure to negative peer norms will be associated with lower risk of youth delinquency and substance use.
- 2) Negative peer norms will be correlated more strongly than parental monitoring with regards to youth substance use and delinquent behavior.
- 3) The protective effects of future orientation on reducing risk of delinquency and drug use will be greater than the protective effects of parental monitoring and peer norms.

The stronger predicted effects for peer norms and future orientation over parental monitoring is based on the premise that as youth try to individuate from parents and conform to peer culture, peer and individual traits might generate stronger effects over behavioral health, especially when parental monitoring is lacking (Wood, Read, Mitchell, & Brand, 2004).

Potential confounders such as age, gender, sexual orientation, community violence and socioeconomic status were controlled for in all of the path analyses when testing these hypotheses. Compared to males, females are less likely to engage in delinquency and drug (Griffin et al., 2000; Herrera & McCloskey, 2001). Regarding sexual orientation, there is mounting empirical evidence suggesting an increased risk of substance use (Corliss et al., 2010) and non-violent delinquency among non-heterosexual identifying youth (Beaver et al., 2016). In addition to sexual orientation and gender, studies have found exposure to community violence significantly heightens risk of poor outcomes including drug use, delinquency, and sexual risk behaviors (Voisin, Tan, Tack, Wade, & DiClemente, 2012). Exposure to community violence is defined as acts of violence (e.g., witnessing or being a victim of robberies, muggings, gang-related deaths, or homicides) occurring outside the home between unrelated individuals who may or may not know each other (Krug, Mercy, Dahlberg, & Zwi, 2002). Finally, youth from communities with extreme constraints on resources may be more likely to engage in drug use and delinquency (Sirin, 2005).

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