

DRUG USE OF FRIENDS: A COMPARISON OF RESERVATION AND NON-RESERVATION INDIAN YOUTH

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Abstract: There is not much drug use at school, but reservation youth are most likely, non-reservation Indian youth next most likely, and non-Indian youth least likely to have used drugs at school. Alcohol and drugs are used most frequently at weekend parties and at night with friends. Reservation youth are twice as likely as the others to have used alcohol while driving around and three times more likely to have used drugs while driving around. Drugs are used with friends. Heavy drug users are more likely to have friends who use drugs and friends who encourage drug use and are less likely to have friends who would try to stop them from using drugs.

The single most consistent finding in all of the research on drug use by American youth is that the use of drugs is highly related to the use of drugs by friends. Peers obviously play an important role in using drugs, but is that role different for American Indian youth? The survey includes questions on where drugs are used and on the drug use and drug-related attitudes of friends that help answer this question.

Where Drugs Are Used

The survey contains several items asking students where they have used drugs and alcohol in the past year. Table 5–1 shows where alcohol has been used and Table 5–2 where drugs have been used. In order to show how many students use substances in these situations, the tables present the percentages of all students surveyed, not just those who have used drugs. The overall pattern for the three groups is clear: by far, more drug and alcohol use occurs in peer contexts, especially at weekend parties and at night with friends, than in other settings. The use “at home” is also almost entirely use with friends when parents are not around. In one sense this peer drug use is not surprising, as these are

Table 5-1
Where Students Have Used Drugs

	8th Graders			12th Graders		
	RI %	NRI %	Ang %	RI %	NRI %	Ang %
On the way to school	7	4	2	16	10	6
During school hours	7	3	1	18	10	5
During school hours away from school	10	6	2	20	13	8
Right after school	14	8	4	24	16	10
At school events	18	5	2	23	11	6
At weekend parties	26	16	7	42	30	21
At night with friends	33	18	9	46	34	22
While driving around	17	6	3	36	20	13
At home	23	11	5	27	17	10

Table 5-2
Where Students Have Used Alcohol

	8th Graders			12th Graders		
	RI %	NRI %	Ang %	RI %	NRI %	Ang %
On the way to school	10	5	2	8	11	7
During school hours	8	4	2	8	12	6
During school hours away from school	12	8	4	19	21	15
Right after school	13	12	7	21	26	19
At school events	22	9	4	37	29	24
At weekend parties	42	38	28	79	70	70
At night with friends	48	40	33	79	70	70
While driving around	20	10	5	67	39	34
At home	35	40	37	49	48	50

unsupervised circumstances and the only controls are those provided by other youth. The very name "party" in many youth cultures implies that drug and alcohol use is expected and will be promoted.

Table 5-1 belies the common notion that schools are an active site for drug use. Even the practice of conducting drug surveys in schools can reinforce this perceived association, when in fact it is simply the easiest way to access information from youth. These data make it clear that the majority of drug and alcohol use occurs in the community and not at school. Thus, although the schools are an important element in the effort to reduce adolescent drug use, the major responsibility lies with

families and other community groups. Even the relatively high rates of use at school events are not necessarily the sole responsibility of the schools, which have, for instance, very little control over youth who arrive at school functions intoxicated.

Although the majority of drug and alcohol use does not occur at school, there is nevertheless some use there. For instance, about 10% of seniors admit to alcohol use while at school, and 20% say they have used alcohol during school hours away from school. Furthermore, a significant number of 12th graders have used drugs (most likely marijuana) at school. In addition to other problems that this pattern of use may cause, drug and alcohol use in the school has to interfere with the learning process.

The generally higher endorsement by reservation youth of having used drugs and alcohol in the various settings listed in Tables 5–1 and 5–2 is expected simply because of the higher overall rates of drug use by this group. There is, however, a pattern worth noting. Nearly one-fifth of reservation Indian 8th graders and two-thirds of seniors have used alcohol while driving around. Most of this drinking and driving probably occurs at night; with the generally poor road system on most reservations, it adds up to a lethal situation. With 77% of reservation seniors having tried marijuana and one-third using marijuana while driving around, danger is further increased by the probable combined use of alcohol and marijuana. Table 3–3 in this volume shows that this situation does cause problems; 15% of seniors have been in an alcohol-related car accident.

Drug Use of Friends

In nearly all studies of the correlates of drug use, the drug use of friends provides one of the strongest relationships. This finding can be viewed in a number of different ways. Friends could, for example, be seen as a source of “infection”; adolescents could be pressured into use by friends who use drugs. Peer selection could provide another explanation; youth who use drugs simply pick friends who also use drugs. A third possibility involves social rejection; adolescents who do not use drugs reject drug users as friends, so drug users could be forced into association with each other.

Our peer cluster theory takes a somewhat different slant (Oetting & Beauvais, 1986a, 1986b). It states that drug use takes place, to a large extent, within the confines of small groups of adolescents who are close friends. The peer cluster consists of a pair of best friends, a couple, or a small group of close friends who “hang out” together. The members of a peer cluster spend a lot of time communicating about attitudes, beliefs and behaviors and move toward sharing a lot of common ideas, including ideas about drug use. There is no special pressure to conform within a peer cluster; one person does not try to “push” drugs on

another. People in a peer cluster reach their decisions together about using drugs or alcohol, and everyone shares in the process of reaching those decisions.

To some extent, young people do pick friends who share their patterns of drug use, particularly young people who are heavily drug involved. The substance-using child who moves from one school to another will very rapidly find substance-using friends in the new environment. Drug users who move will join with other youth and form new peer clusters with similar types of drug involvement. Similarly, young people who are not drug involved at all will rarely make friends with heavy drug users. The drug users are not particularly interested in friendships that do not permit them to use drugs.

There are always exceptions to these patterns of friendship, as young people are often involved in more than one peer cluster. As an example, a young Indian woman who used drugs when she was with her close female friends was dating a young man who did not use drugs. She said, "He would kill me if he found out what I am doing with my friends." But these differences in friends are not typical. Drug-involved youth generally associate with other drug-involved youth.

Most drug use, in fact, actually takes place within these peer clusters. The peer cluster gains access to drugs, and the members share them, using drugs when doing things together. Peer cluster members are likely to suggest drug use and encourage drug involvement that matches their ideas about how drugs should be used. Close friends also influence drug use in other ways. Youth who do not use drugs are engaged in peer clusters where they have talked about drugs and built common ideas about them, and these youth have often established a group norm to try to stop each other from using drugs. Drug users are sharing drugs with their friends and would therefore not be as likely to try to stop their friends from using. It is typical, then, to find that drug users have friends who use drugs, that they have friends who encourage drug use and that their friends would not try to stop them from using drugs.

Use of Drugs by Friends of Drug Users

Table 5-3 compares heavy drug users to non-users, showing the percent who report having friends who use drugs. The heavy drug users either use marijuana more than once a week or use drugs other than marijuana more than once a month. The non-users may have had some alcohol, but they have never tried any other drug.

The results in Table 5-3 are clear. The contrast between users and non-users in exposure to drug-using friends is immense. From one-half to three-quarters of the heavy users have friends who used a drug other than marijuana, but only about 10% of non-users reported

Table 5-3
Percent of 8th- and 12th-Grade Students Who Have Friends Who Use
Drugs

	RI %	NRI %	Ang %
Friends who use marijuana			
Users	99	95	96
Non-users	44	31	28
Friends who use cocaine			
Users	66	71	73
Non-users	12	10	9
Friends who use stimulants			
Users	45	77	67
Non-users	12	12	11
Friends who use downers			
Users	42	72	57
Non-users	12	11	12

having friends who use cocaine, stimulants, or downers. It is evident that non-users avoid forming friendships with drug users.

Nearly all of the heavy drug users have friends who use marijuana, and a large proportion have friends who use the other drugs. The somewhat lower likelihood of heavy users having friends who use the other drugs would be consistent, as the heavy drug users are not using every one of these drugs themselves. If they are using a particular drug, it is likely that they have friends who use it. In other analyses of non-Indian youth we have found that if an adolescent had used a drug in the previous 30 days, the odds were better than 90% that he or she would report having a friend who also had used that drug. This conclusion may not hold up for Indian youth, however. Future research will have to address this question.

Non-users do have friends who use marijuana. The use of marijuana is not as deviant as the use of the other drugs, however, so non-users may be more tolerant of marijuana use. The difference between reservation and non-reservation youth in this respect is also interesting. A much higher proportion of non-using reservation youth have friends who use marijuana; as three-fourths of reservation youth have used the substance, however, it would be much harder for non-users to find friends who were not marijuana users.

There are other differences between reservation and non-reservation youth in the proportion of heavy users who have friends who use drugs. Two factors may be involved: on the one hand, there may be differences in the kinds of drugs being used by the heavy drug users; on the other, physical isolation and access to friendship networks may be involved. Further studies are needed to understand exactly what is going on.

Friends Suggest Use of Drugs

When friends ask an adolescent to use drugs, it is hard to say no. Table 5–4 shows how many heavy drug users and how many non-users have friends who ask them to use various drugs. Again, the contrast between users and non-users is extremely large. Hardly any non-users have friends who have asked them to use any of these drugs, including marijuana. It is interesting to note that about one-third of these non-users report having friends who use marijuana, but the friends apparently do not ask non-users to use it.

Users are far more likely to have friends who ask them to use the various drugs. Over one-half of the users have friends who ask them to use marijuana, and two to three times as many users as non-users have friends who ask them to use other drugs. There are, however, large differences between the number of users who report having friends who use a drug and the number who have friends who ask them to use drugs. As users are using drugs themselves and have friends who use drugs, it would seem that surely their friends must be asking them to use.

One hypothesis is that users are denying that their friends pressure them to use when in fact it is happening. Peer cluster theory suggests another possibility. Within a peer cluster decisions are made jointly, so that friends do not actually suggest drug use, there is no peer pressure. What is actually happening is probably a combination of these two factors. There is likely a lot of common decision making, so people are not “asked” to use, and there is also probably a considerable amount of denial. Adolescents are very protective of their friends and might see this question as involving an implied criticism of their friends. By saying that they are not “asked to use,” young people protect their friends and show their own autonomy — that the decision to use drugs is their own and not a result of peer pressure.

Would Your Friends Stop Your Drug Use?

Friends are very important to adolescents and, if their friends would try to stop young people from using drugs, it would probably reduce the chances of their taking drugs. Those who are heavily involved in drug use have friends who are also using drugs; heavy users would therefore be less likely to have friends who would try to stop them from using. Non-users, on the other hand, would be much more likely to have friends who would try to stop them from using.

Table 5–5 shows the percent of heavy users and of non-users who have friends who would try to stop them from using drugs. As might be expected, hardly any of the heavy drug users have friends who would stop their marijuana use. In contrast, most of the non-users have such friends. The differences between users and non-users are not as great

Table 5-4
Percent of 8th- and 12th-Grade Students Whose Friends Ask Them To Use Drugs

	RI %	NR %	Ang %
Ask them to use marijuana			
Users	63	53	52
Non-users	4	4	4
Ask them to use cocaine			
Users	12	17	11
Non-users	3	4	3
Ask them to use stimulants			
Users	9	19	13
Non-users	3	4	3
Ask them to use downers			
Users	6	15	10
Non-users	3	4	3

for the other drugs because many heavy users do have friends who would try to stop them from using those drugs. There are, nonetheless, large differences between users and non-users for all drugs.

The differences between drug users and non-users are also quite large for all three groups, and the results for non-reservation Indian youth look much like those for Anglo youth. The pattern for Indian youth who live on reservations, however, is somewhat different. Both users and non-users on reservations are somewhat less likely than non-reservation youth to have friends who would stop marijuana use and cocaine use, and reservation non-users are less likely to have friends who would stop their use of any of the drugs. Marijuana use is so common among reservation youth that there may be fewer peer sanctions among all youth against its use, not just among the users. The findings on perceived harm suggest also that reservation youth are less likely to feel that cocaine does a lot of harm, and this finding may help explain why cocaine sanctions also seem to be somewhat low.

The sanctions against all drugs are somewhat weaker for reservation youth who are non-users than they are for other youth who are non-users. One hypothesis is that the reservation youth are more in tune with the Indian value for autonomy and are just less willing to try to impose themselves on their friends. But this hypothesis does not explain the somewhat higher sanctions among reservation drug users against stimulants and downers. Determining what is causing these differences will require further study.

The basic principle, however, holds strong despite these minor differences. In spite of the fact that they are attending the same schools

Table 5-5
Percent of 8th- and 12th Grade Students Who Have Friends Who
Would Stop Them From Using These Drugs

	RI %	NRI %	Ang %
Friends would stop the from using marijuana			
Users	4	7	8
Non-users	54	70	74
Friends would stop them from using cocaine			
Users	35	42	44
Non-users	62	78	85
Friends would stop them from using stimulants			
Users	36	22	23
Non-users	61	73	78
Friends would stop them from using downers			
Users	40	22	27
Non-users	59	74	79

and living in the same communities, drug users and non-users live in very different worlds in which their peer environments are completely different. Drug users are much more likely to associate with friends who use drugs and are much less likely to have friends who would stop them from using. The peer environment of users clearly encourages use. Non-users have some friends who use marijuana, but they are not likely to have friends who use other drugs, and they are much more likely to have friends who would try to stop them from using drugs.

References

- Oetting, E., & Beauvais, F. (1986a). Peer cluster theory: Drugs and the adolescent. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 65(1), 17-22.
- Oetting, E. R., & Beauvais, F. (1986b). Clarification of peer cluster theory: A response to Peele, Cohen and Shaffer. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 65(1), 29-30.