

SCHOOL DROPOUTS' ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS ABOUT SMOKING

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Abstract:

Summary.—The purpose of this study was to examine the association of beliefs and attitude related to smoking and smoking behavior among school dropouts in a national sample (weighted $N=492,352$). The self-reported smoking rate for school dropouts was 58.3%. Those who were most positive about smoking (such as smoking helps people reduce stress and relax, reduce boredom) were more likely to be smokers ($p < .051$). Smoking programs targeting this population should provide coping skills and an environment with options for relaxing, managing stress, and safe weight control.

Article:

The most recent efforts in smoking control have targeted adolescents through school-based primary prevention programs based on the results of two longitudinal studies of adolescents' smoking behavior (1, 4). While these studies have taken a desired theoretical approach to identifying the antecedents and predictors of adolescents' smoking behavior, these school-based data cannot be generalized to school dropouts. The preliminary analysis of 1993 Teenage Attitudes and Practices Survey indicated that 58.3% of school dropouts, aged 15 through 18 years, were regular smokers, compared to 18.1% of their peers enrolled in schools. Despite this striking difference, a review of smoking-related literature, including A Report of the Surgeon General: Preventing Tobacco Use Among Young People (8), showed that there is very little on smoking behavior of school dropouts. Clearly, if the stated public health goals for the year 2000 (3) are to be achieved, i.e., reduce initiation of smoking to no more than 15% of adolescents and reduce cigarette smoking prevalence to no more than 15% of adults by the year 2000, prevention of smoking must include these adolescents. The present purpose was to examine the smoking-related beliefs and attitudes among school dropouts in a national sample.

Method

The sample selected was a group of adolescents who participated in the Teenage Attitudes and Practices Survey (5): For the purpose of examining school dropouts, only those who did not finish high school and dropped out, aged 15 through 18 at the time of the survey, were included in this study (weighted $N=492,352$).

The Teenage Attitudes and Practices used computer-assisted telephone interviewing to collect data. The information obtained from the survey included measures of smoking status and smoking-related attitudes and beliefs. For this paper regular smokers were those who were currently smoking, had smoked 10 or more days in the past 30 days, and had smoked at least 100 cigarettes in their lifetimes. Nonsmokers were those who had never smoked a cigarette or had not smoked 100 cigarettes in their lifetime. The response rate was 85%.

Results and discussion

Since the Teenage Attitudes and Practices Survey used a multistage complex sampling design, the Survey Data Analysis was used to weight the sample and run chi-squared statistical procedures (7). The regular smoking rate for school dropouts was 58.3%. Cross-tabulations and chi-squared tests showed that those who believed cigarette smoking helps people reduce stress were more likely to be smokers (74.4%) than those who did not believe (40.9%) ($p < .05$). Also, those who believed that cigarette smoking helps people when they are bored, helps people relax, and helps keep their weight down were more likely to be smokers (see Table 1). Those who disagreed on "dislike being around smokers" were more likely to be smokers (78.5%).

Variables that differentiated smokers and nonsmokers among dropouts appear related to the physical functions of smoking. Smokers reported more physical benefits of smoking than nonsmokers, for instance, as a way to reduce stress, to relax, and to cope with boredom. The more substantial smoking rate for school dropouts (58.3%) than for their school peers (about 18.1%) may well suggest that school dropouts were under more stress than school peers. These findings are consistent with some previous research on the social reasons and purposes of smoking for adolescents (2, 6). The finding also suggests that the smoking-related attitudes and beliefs for school dropouts are much more positive than those for their school peers (9).

If, indeed, the physical benefits of smoking may explain why school dropouts smoke, smoking programs targeting this population should provide coping skills and environments with options for relaxing, managing stress, and controlling weight. Such preventive activities might be conducive to smokers changing their behavior.

TABLE 1
Percentages and ρ for Chi-Squared Test of Attitudes and Beliefs Related to Smoking

Beliefs and Attitudes		Smoke Rate, %	ρ
Safe to smoke for only a year or two	Yes	69.2	ns
	No	55.7	
Any harm in having an occasional cigarette	Yes	52.2	ns
	No	64.8	
Cigarette smoking helps people relax	Yes	73.4	.01
	No	31.7	
Cigarette smoking helps people when they are bored	Yes	80.0	.001
	No	54.1	
Cigarette smoking helps people reduce stress	Yes	74.4	.001
	No	40.9	
Smoking helps people feel more comfortable at parties and in other social situations	Yes	66.7	ns
	No	52.2	
Smoking helps people keep their weight down	Yes	69.1	.03
	No	54.6	
I strongly dislike being around people who are smoking	Agree	20.8	.001
	No Opinion	64.7	
	Disagree	78.5	
(If I started) I could stop smoking anytime I wanted	Agree	56.5	ns
	No Opinion	46.2	
	Disagree	60.2	

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