



Facts on Risky Behaviors

September 1997

The Commonwealth Fund Survey of the Health of Adolescent Girls

Engaging in risky behaviors such as smoking, drinking, and using illegal drugs during adolescence can result in unhealthy habits that last through adulthood, as well as posing immediate risks to health. *The Commonwealth Fund Survey of the Health of Adolescent Girls* found that a significant minority of girls is engaging in risky behaviors, and that many of the girls at greatest risk are likely to have poor mental health or to be victims of abuse.

To examine the extent and frequency of risky behaviors among girls in comparison to boys, and to identify which adolescents were most likely to engage in risky behaviors, the survey asked adolescents in grades five through twelve about their use of cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs. The survey found that high school girls now engage in risky behaviors at rates comparable with boys, and that girls often engage in multiple risky behaviors.

A DECREASING GENDER GAP

One in seven girls in grades nine through twelve reported smoking several cigarettes to a pack or more per week, and drinking frequently. Smoking rates among high school girls now rival those for boys, and drinking rates are close: 15 percent of girls and 20 percent of boys reported that they drink alcohol at least once a month or weekly. In addition, nearly one

Older girls and boys report similar rates of smoking, drinking, and using drugs.



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Louis Harris and Associates, Inc.

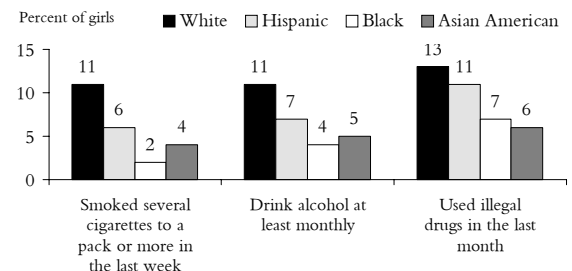
in five high school girls reported having used illegal drugs in the last month, a rate similar to that for boys.

The survey found that younger adolescents were also engaging in risky behaviors. While only 3 percent of younger girls reported frequent smoking, 6 percent said they sometimes smoke, bringing the total with any exposure to smoking to nearly one in ten. Younger boys were more likely than younger girls to report that they smoke, drink frequently, or have used drugs recently. Among all adolescent girls in grades five through twelve, nearly two in five (18 percent) reported either smoking, drinking, or using drugs in the last month.

RISKY BEHAVIORS VARY ACROSS GROUPS OF GIRLS

Rates of smoking, drinking, and drug use vary by race and ethnicity. Black and Asian American girls were the least likely to report these risky behaviors, while white and Hispanic girls were the most likely to report them. Smoking rates were lowest among black girls.

White and Hispanic girls are more likely to engage in risky behaviors.



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The survey found that socioeconomic status was also linked to adolescents' involvement in risky behaviors. Using mother's education as a proxy for family income status, the survey found that adolescent girls whose mothers had less than a high school education were more likely than girls with college-educated

mothers to have smoked several cigarettes or more in the last week (14 percent vs. 5 percent), to drink alcohol at least monthly (11 percent vs. 8 percent), or to have used illegal drugs in the last month (21 percent vs. 8 percent).

RISKY BEHAVIORS RELATED TO MENTAL HEALTH AND ABUSE

The survey found a strong association between risky behaviors and poor mental health. Adolescent girls with depressive symptoms or low self-confidence were twice as likely to report smoking, drinking frequently, or using drugs as those who indicated few symptoms of poor mental health. In addition, nearly one-third (30 percent) of high school girls with moderate to severe depressive symptoms said they binge and purge.

Abuse and violence were also found to be strongly related to increased rates of risky behavior. Girls who were sexually or physically abused or who wanted to leave home because of violence were twice as likely to report smoking, drinking, or using drugs.

Mental Health and Abuse-Related Behaviors

Percent of Girls in Grades 9-12 Reporting:	Smoking	Drinking	Using Drugs
Depressive symptoms			
No or low depressive symptoms	11%	11%	14%
Moderate to severe depressive symptoms	23%	25%	30%
Self-confidence			
High self-confidence	11%	11%	13%
Low self-confidence	20%	21%	31%
Abuse: physical, sexual, or date-forced sex			
Were abused	26%	22%	30%
Were not abused	10%	12%	13%
Wanted to leave home because of violence			
Yes, there was such a time	24%	23%	27%
No, there was not such a time	10%	13%	14%

Smoking = smoking several cigarettes to a pack or more in the last week.

Drinking = drinking alcohol at least once a month or once a week.

Used drugs = used illegal drugs in the last month.

MULTIPLE RISKY BEHAVIORS

High school girls often engage in more than one risky behavior: three in ten girls (29 percent) surveyed said they either drank or smoked frequently, or had used drugs in the past month. One in ten girls said she was currently engaged in at least two of the behaviors studied, and that roughly one in ten was engaged in all three.

REASONS FOR ENGAGING IN RISKY BEHAVIORS

The most frequent reasons given by adolescents for engaging in risky behaviors were stress relief or “being around people who do it.” Two-thirds of girls who smoked several cigarettes or more a week said they did so to relieve stress, as did 38 percent of girls who drank at least monthly, and 41 percent of girls who had used drugs recently. Half of girls who smoked said they did so because they were around other people who smoke. Recent drug use, however, may be in part experimental: more than half of girls who said they used illegal drugs said they did so to experiment.

Girls report that stress is the main reason they engage in risky behaviors.



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Girls with symptoms of poor mental health were more likely than those without symptoms to turn to risky behaviors for relief. Girls with moderate to severe depressive symptoms, for instance, were nearly twice as likely as girls with no or few symptoms to name stress as their reason for drinking alcohol (34 percent vs. 18 percent). More than half of girls (54 percent) who had depressive symptoms said they smoked to relieve stress, compared with 43 percent of girls with few or no symptoms. Girls who indicated severe depressive symptoms were more likely than girls who did not to say they used illegal drugs to relieve stress (46 percent vs. 29 percent). Victims of physical or sexual abuse were also more likely to say they smoked or drank to relieve stress than were girls who said they had not been abused.

The Commonwealth Fund Survey of the Health of Adolescent Girls, conducted by Louis Harris and Associates, Inc., from December 1996 through June 1997, consisted of in-class questionnaires completed by 6,748 adolescents—3,586 girls and 3,162 boys—in grades five through twelve. The classroom sample included a nationally representative cross-section of schools, with 265 public, private, and parochial schools participating.