

Family Structure, Father Closeness, & **DRUG ABUSE**

A Report from National Fatherhood Initiative



**National
Fatherhood
InitiativeSM**

Executive Summary

The thesis of this study is that children and adolescents who grow up in intact families are generally less likely to smoke, to drink, or to try illegal drugs than children and adolescents who grow up in non-intact families, which, for the purposes of this paper, are defined as single-parent families, blended or stepfamilies, and no-parent families. Using both a bivariate regression model and several multiple regression models, the paper sets out to test the hypothesis that family structure has a significant impact on the level of risk of adolescent drug use even when controlling for other factors that encourage or inhibit initiation into drug use.

Further, the paper, unlike previous studies tackling this same issue, explores why family structure is important in determining drug use among adolescents. Namely, it explores the role of “father closeness” both in accounting for the importance of an intact family as an inhibitor of drug use, and as an important factor inhibiting drug use in its own right, independent of family structure. Previous studies have lumped the effect of mothers and fathers together, or have even entirely ignored the role of fathers. This study sets out to separate these effects, and on the way to analyzing the independent role of father closeness, the report also explores the importance of mother closeness and peer influence on adolescent drug use.

The data used in the study was taken from the public-use sample of the North Carolina Population Research Center’s ADDHEALTH Database, which was funded by over 18 Federal agencies. The database contains survey data on a nationally representative sample of thousands of middle and high school-aged students.

Methodologically, the paper uses regression models to test for relationships between the main independent variable, family structure, and the dependent variable, adolescent drug use, broken down into four categories: smoking, drinking, hard drugs, and inhalants.

Some of the significant findings are as follows:

- In the initial bivariate test between family structure and drug use, it was found that in nearly all cases, family structure was a statistically significant predictor of drug use. In addition, the hypothesized pattern of drug use for different types of family structures was verified – specifically, the levels of risk for drug use run,

from highest to lowest, as follows: no-parent, single-parent, blended, and intact.

- To control for extraneous and potentially confounding variables and to begin to infer causation between family structure and drug use (not just correlation), a multiple regression was run to control for factors such as age, IQ, sex, race/ethnicity, parental occupation, parental education, and church attendance. The results of the bivariate test were replicated, confirming the hypothesis further.
- To begin testing the independent effects of father closeness, another multiple regression was run, adding both father closeness and the number of friends who use drugs as independent variables. Family structure still had direct effects, except in the case of inhalants. Father closeness was a statistically significant predictor of all four categories of drug use, as was the “friends” variable.
- To further clarify the importance of father closeness, mother closeness was added as an independent variable on top of the previous regression to test if the effects of father closeness were simply a function of mother closeness, which is frequently assumed. Here, the hypothesis was strongly confirmed, as father closeness remained significant for every category except hard drugs, and mother closeness was not statistically significant in any of the categories. “Friends” was still strongly significant in all categories.

Taken together, the results of the four regression models establish the following points:

- Despite the predictable weakening of the direct effects of family structure on drug use (due to the insertion of several additional independent variables into the regressions), family structure still played a direct effect in some categories of drug use and a very important indirect effect – namely by providing differing levels of both mother and father closeness and by acting as a regulator of potentially harmful peer relationships. Statistically speaking, a chain of variables in the recursive model can be followed to provide an interpretation of the results in the multiple regression models. Specifically, there is a chain of causation from independent variable (family structure) to intervening variable (father or mother closeness) to dependent variable (adolescent drug use). Intact families, on average, provide more father and mother closeness and more protection from negative peer influences than do non-intact families. Since peer influences and father and mother closeness have direct effects on adolescent drug use, family structure plays a crucial indirect role in preventing adolescent drug use.
- Father closeness is independent in its effects. When controlling for all other variables including mother closeness and family structure, father closeness has statistically significant, independent effects on adolescent drug use. Specifically, for smoking, drinking, and the use of inhalants, father closeness is a statistically significant and robust predictor. Interestingly, the variable for mother closeness, when controlling for all other variables including father closeness and family structure, is statistically significant only for drinking (but in the wrong direction,

implying there is no real relationship), and it is not statistically significant for smoking, hard drugs, and inhalants. Most importantly, however, the study finds that in intact families there are consistently higher levels of father closeness. Therefore, intact families are the best avenue with which to ensure that adolescents benefit from the powerful, unique, and irreplaceable effects of fathers.

- Intact families have another indirect influence in preventing drug use: adolescents in intact families have fewer friends who use drugs. The study shows that for all types of drugs, the relationship between usage and number of friends using is strongly statistically significant. Children in intact families are closer to both their mothers and fathers. Therefore, they have less need to seek affirming relationships outside the family, and tend to have fewer peers who are involved in risky behavior. Thus, adolescents from intact families have closer relationships with their parents **and** have fewer negative peer influences, both significant predictors of lower levels of drug use.

Given these results, programmatic focus should be on finding ways of ensuring as much “closeness” between adolescents and their fathers as possible, regardless of the particular situation a family may be in at a given point in time. Given that the study finds that there are relatively low levels of father closeness outside of the intact family structure (resulting in higher levels of drug use), public policy should support programs that work to improve the relationships between all types of fathers, including noncustodial/nonresident fathers, and their children.

Ultimately, the goal of family-oriented programming and social services should be to encourage the formation and maintenance of the structure which provides the greatest opportunities for fathers and their children to form close, strong bonds. The results of this paper suggest that the ideal structure is the “intact family,” or more accurately, a married, two-parent household. Marriage not only provides the highest levels of father closeness, but also the highest levels of mother closeness (which has its own independent, positive effects on adolescents), and the lowest levels of negative peer influence, resulting in the lowest levels of adolescent drug use as measured in this paper.