

# **“I want to be cool”: Peer Influence on Sexual behavior, Consumption of Alcohol and Smoking of Cigarettes among High School Students in Ghana**

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## **Abstract:**

This study used a unique data set of high school students in Ghana to analyze the effect of peers on adolescent engagement in sex, consumption of alcohol and smoking of cigarettes. The study used both school and zone fixed effects to control for endogeneity. Results from the study indicated that peers have a significant effect on adolescent engagement in sex, consumption of alcohol and smoking of cigarettes. The study also finds that the effect was greatest with sex and smallest with smoking. Other factors such as living with both parents reduced the probability of the adolescent engaging in risky behaviors. Adolescents who reported to be sometimes lonely were more likely to drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes. A policy implication of our study is that increasing awareness on sex, and other risky behaviors among adolescents will help curb the high incidence of substance use and risky sex behaviors in the country.

## **1. Introduction**

Adolescent sex is often characterized by multiple partners and low condom use. As this risky sexual behavior increases the chance of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, it is of significant concern in both developed and developing countries. Furthermore, risky sexual behavior may lead to unwanted pregnancies, high maternal and infant mortality and increases school drop-out rates. Babies born to adolescents are often unhealthy and are less likely to get any education especially when their parents are drop outs (WHO 2012). This issue is of particular concern in sub-Saharan Africa where health services are low and HIV/AIDS prevalence is high.

Adolescence is generally considered as a period of experimentation, where the adolescents learn mostly from each other and also engage in behaviors to be considered as part of the pack. This period therefore is an important stage in the development of adolescence and habits formed during this period will lead to adulthood. Substance use and sexual behavior are two major behaviors that are of concern to most parents and policy makers during adolescence. These behaviors have impacts on the adolescent education, decisions and also their future choices. Peers are known to form an important aspect of adolescent decision during this period.

In a country where there are weak laws on minors drinking and smoking or even sex with a minor, it is crucial to understand the relationship between these behaviors. The purpose of this study is to analyze how peers influence engagement in sex, consumption of alcohol and smoking of cigarettes by adolescents.

### **Method and data**

We first used a single equation probit model to estimate the effect of peers on drinking and smoking cigarettes or use of other tobacco products on engaging in sex, based on the assumption that peer behaviors are exogenously determined in the model. In the second analysis, we used a 2 stage probit model to simultaneously estimate adolescent peer effect on smoking, drinking and sex. In order for estimates of the two stage probit to be valid we need to use the appropriate instruments. This study utilized unique instruments which are based on the culture of people in the Ghanaian society. We used different procedures to test for the validity of the instruments. We

analyzed the complete data first without controlling for gender differences. We also conducted a second stage that looked at gender differences of per effect. This study used a nationally representative Global School based Student Health Survey 2008. This consisted of a total of about 73 senior high schools in Ghana. There were a total of 5000 students who participated in this study.

### **Relevance of study**

Since heterosexual relationships are the main means by which HIV/AIDS spreads, a study on adolescent sexual behavior cannot be overstated. Information on the how peers influence sexual relationships will help in policy design in that a reduction in these factors will ultimately mean a reduction in sexual behavior. Furthermore, peers are important since they define behaviors which are considered acceptable or not. Additionally, adolescents spend more time with their peers than with their parents and peer effects have multiplier effects on the peer group. This means that a policy measure on one could have an effect on all other peers especially when the peer effect is endogenously determined.

Ghana, like most countries in sub-Saharan Africa, differs from developed countries in various respects. Most sub-Saharan African countries do not have any laws that prevent substance use by minors. There is little or no enforcement of these laws even in countries that have them. Rather, substance use by adolescents is usually governed by societal norms. These norms have varying effects on gender. For example, while society frowns on girls smoking, drinking and premarital sex, boys receive the opposite treatment. Production and consumption of homemade alcoholic beverages in Ghana contributes to high level of drinking by minors in the country. This study will therefore highlight the extent to which smoking and drinking in a country with weak regulations on these behaviors are influenced by peers.

### **Tentative results:**

Significant results from our study indicate that peers do influence adolescence engagement in sex, drinking and smoking of cigarettes. We find that peer influence was more prevalent in sex, followed by consumption of alcohol then smoking of cigarettes. We also find that other factors, such as living with both parents reduced the probability of engaging in risky behavior compared with adolescents who lived with a single parent or other family members. We further controlled

for variation across zones in Ghana and find that this did not have any significant influence on the peer effect. We also tried to see if there were significant differences between gender on peer influence and this is reported in the rest of the paper.

**Policy implications:**

Adolescents in many ways want to be part of the norms of the society which also implies that they are more likely to be influenced by their peers. Since peers do play an important role in the decision of the adolescents, it is important that efforts be made to provide peers with the right knowledge so that they would also transfer this information to peers. Implementing more education and campaigns in schools and communities will help to educate more adolescents on the dangers of engaging in risky behaviors. This could also mean that these adolescents will be able to transmit this information to others of their age in the society.