7.3: Social Patterning of Drug Use

Learning Objectives

1. Outline the nature of gender differences in drug use.
2. Understand whether racial and ethnic differences in drug use exist.
3. Explain whether education and religiosity are related to drug use.

It is a sociological truism that our sociodemographic backgrounds—gender, race and ethnicity, social class, and so forth—influence many of our behaviors and attitudes. Drug use is no different. By examining the social patterning of drug use, we can see which kinds of people, in terms of their sociodemographic backgrounds, are more or less at risk for using drugs. And by understanding these sociodemographic differences, we begin to understand why some people are more likely than others to use drugs. Our examination of these differences will rely heavily on data from the SAMHSA survey discussed earlier and focus on past-month differences in alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drug use (all illegal drugs combined).

Gender

In the study of crime and deviance, gender is an important predictor: Males are more likely than females to commit the more serious forms of crime and deviance, such as homicide, robbery, and burglary. This pattern generally holds true for drug use of various types. Figure 7.2 "Gender and Prevalence of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Illegal Drug Use, Ages 26 and Older, 2010 (Percentage Using in Past Month)" shows that men are more likely than women to use alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs. In related data, men are also more than twice as likely as women to engage in binge drinking (30.7 percent compared to 13.8 percent) and heavy drinking (9.7 percent compared to 2.8 percent) as defined earlier.

Figure 7.2 Gender and Prevalence of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Illegal Drug Use, Ages 26 and Older, 2010 (Percentage
Why do these gender differences exist? A common thread underlines gender differences in criminal behavior and in drug use of various kinds, and that is masculinity (Lindsey, 2011). Compared to girls, boys are raised to be more active, assertive, and daring, and to be less concerned about the effects of their behavior on others. As they grow older, these traits make them more likely to use drugs and also to commit various types of crimes. Ironically, the way that most parents raise their sons helps make their sons more likely than their daughters to drink, smoke, and use illegal drugs once they reach adolescence and in the many decades of their adulthood.

On the average, males drink alcohol more often and more heavily than females, and they are also more likely to use other types of drugs.

In an important exception to the general gender difference just discussed, females are more likely than males to use prescription drugs for nonmedical reasons (Ford, 2009). The reasons for this counterintuitive finding are unclear, but scholars speculate that because girls and women obtain more prescription drugs than do boys and men, their greater nonmedical use of prescription drugs reflects the fact that they have more access to these drugs in the first place.
Race and Ethnicity

Racial and ethnic differences in drug use of various types exist to some extent but are less clear-cut than the gender differences we just examined (see Figure 7.3 “Race/Ethnicity and Prevalence of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Illegal Drug Use, Ages 26 and Older, 2010 (Percentage Using in Past Month”). For alcohol use, whites have the highest rate of drinking, and Native Americans, despite the popular image that they have alcohol problems, have the lowest rate. For tobacco use, Native Americans have the highest rate of use, and Asians have the lowest rate. For illegal drugs, Native Americans again have the highest rate of use, and Hispanics have the lowest rate. Note that African Americans have roughly the same illegal drug use rate as whites, and have lower rates of alcohol and tobacco use than whites do. Although many people believe that African Americans are more likely than whites to use drugs, research data show that this belief is a myth.

Figure 7.3 Race/Ethnicity and Prevalence of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Illegal Drug Use, Ages 26 and Older, 2010 (Percentage Using in Past Month)

Ethnicity and Prevalence of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Illegal Drug Use, Ages 26 and Older across races. Interestingly enough, white people drink the most, but native americans use the most tobacco and illegal drugs


The illegal drugs category includes many types of drugs. We do not have space to illustrate racial/ethnic differences in the use of each of these drugs, but we will examine differences in marijuana and cocaine (including crack) use. Figure 7.4 “Race/Ethnicity and Prevalence of Marijuana and Cocaine Use, Ages 26 and Older, 2010 (Percentage Using in Lifetime)” shows these differences for lifetime use. Despite some minor differences, African Americans, Native Americans, and whites have the highest lifetime use of marijuana, while Asians and Hispanics have the lowest use. Turning to cocaine, Native Americans have the highest lifetime use, and Asians have the lowest use. Note again that African Americans have a lower rate of lifetime use than whites; this racial difference will be relevant for our discussion toward the end of the chapter of the racial impact of the legal war on drugs since the 1970s.

Figure 7.4 Race/Ethnicity and Prevalence of Marijuana and Cocaine Use, Ages 26 and Older, 2010 (Percentage Using in Lifetime)

Ethnicity and Prevalence of Marijuana and Cocaine Use, Ages 26 and Older, 2010 (Percentage Using in Lifetime)