

# Dangerous Connections: Substance Abuse and Sex Among Adolescents

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## **Abstract**

*This paper looks at three major adolescent risk behaviors: substance use and abuse, involvement in violence and unsafe sexual practices. Using data from the 2002 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study, the paper reveals the nature and extent of these risk behaviors among Filipino adolescents and how these vary across selected background characteristics. Through the multiple risk approach, the analysis explores the extent of interconnections among risk behaviors in the hope of providing a better understanding of the challenges facing today's generation of adolescents and young adults.*

This paper takes special interest in the risk or problem behaviors that young people engage in. Such behaviors are defined as those behaviors that depart from both the social and legal norms of the larger society. They are socially disapproved by the institutions of authority and tend to elicit some form of social control response, whether mild reproof, social rejection, or even incarceration (Donovan, 1996).

This paper endeavors to unravel the nature and extent of the risk behaviors that have profound impacts on the health, social, and economic well-being of the current generation of Filipino adolescents. Particularly, the paper examines a) the incidence of sexual, non-sexual, and violent behaviors of the young, and b) these behaviors'

variances across selected background characteristics. Where possible, the paper also highlights the trajectory of change of these risk behaviors in recent years. Through a multiple risk approach, it examines the extent of the interconnections among these risk behaviors, in the hope of providing a better understanding of the dynamics of the risk behaviors that challenge our young generation.

The study revisits three major areas of concern insofar as the adolescent risk behaviors are concerned, namely: substance use and abuse, involvement in violence, and unsafe sexual practices. The first dimension delves on the three risk behaviors of smoking, drinking, and drug use, while the second examines the extent to which the adolescents engage in or are victims of violent behaviors. The latter covers a wide range of behaviors, including sexual and physical violence experienced by the youth either as a recipient or as a perpetrator of the act. Violence from a mental health perspective, measured in terms of the experience of suicide, is likewise explored. Adolescent mental health, an issue largely unexamined in the past, is one of the areas where the 2002 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFS3) is attempting to blaze new trails. Such explorations are in keeping with global efforts towards a more comprehensive approach to human development, and with current concerns on enhancing the role of adolescents in national development.

The third dimension of risk behaviors that this paper examines covers the sexual risks that may result in HIV infection, other STDs, and unintended pregnancy. Three indicators of sexual risks were identified: early sex, unprotected sex, and multiple sex partners. Because the data on the timing of sex is not yet available, this study examines early sex by focusing on the sexual behavior of those in their late teens (15 – 19 years old). Multiple partner sex was determined by asking the respondent if s/he has ever had a sexual partner other than her/his first premarital sex (PMS) partner. Unprotected sex was inferred vis-à-vis the respondents' contraceptive practice during the first and last PMS.

The YAFS3 is the major source of data for this analysis. The 1994 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study (YAFS2) was also used to establish trends in the youth's risk behaviors. These two data sources represent the most extensive nationally representative sample of data about Filipino adolescents on the issues of sexuality and reproductive health. Both data sets were collected by the Demographic Research and Development Foundation, and the University of the Philippines Population Institute, together with partner research and academic institutions all over the country. YAFS3 has funding support from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation while YAFS2 was funded by a research grant from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

## **Youth Risk Behaviors: Levels, Differentials, and Trends**

### **A. Substance use and abuse**

#### *Smoking*

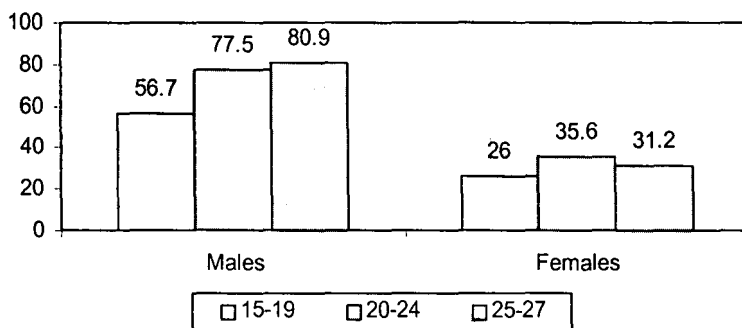
The ill effects of smoking cannot be underestimated given its significant association with mortality and morbidity events. The established linkage between smoking and lifestyle diseases including cancer and emphysema triggered efforts to combat this dreaded epidemic. In fact, no less than the World Health Organization (WHO) is currently leading the efforts to reduce/control tobacco consumption. In these efforts, particular attention is given to curbing adolescent smoking because the younger onset of smoking is strongly associated with heavy smoking and the experience of smoking-related diseases later in life.

The Philippines is one of the countries where smoking has reached epidemic proportions. Statistics indicate that almost three quarters of the country's adult male population is smoking, exceeding the recorded level for the Third World countries in general (Quitsmoking Philippines, 2001). Disturbing still is the fact that the high prevalence of smoking in the country has not spared the younger sector of the population. YAFS3 findings reveal that about one of five (22%) of youth 15-27 years old is currently smoking. The proportion currently smoking is higher for males (40%) than for females (6%). Likewise, among those who have ever tried smoking, the males (66%) significantly outnumber the females (30%). The males' proclivity to try smoking consistently increased with advancing age (i.e., from 57% among 15-19 year-olds to 81% among those aged 25-27 years). In contrast, the incidence of smoking dropped slightly among females in the oldest age group (Figure 1).

The good news is that while many adolescents try smoking, only half retain the habit. Significant drop-out rates are particularly noted among the older females aged 25-27 (79%); the corresponding figure among the males is 40%. The significant proportion who eventually turn away from the practice suggests that initiation to smoking may have been prompted by curiosity and the desire to experiment with new things, an outlook that is consistent with young people's adventurous nature. Meanwhile, the higher retention rates noted among the males may be attributed to the strong and pervasive cultural pattern of double standards, which gives greater latitude and accords tolerance to males than females.

Adolescents do not constitute a homogeneous group when it comes to smoking, as evidenced by the significant differentials across various background characteristics. Specifically, higher levels of smoking are found among the males, those in their 20s,

**Figure 1.**  
Percentage Distribution of Youth who ever-ried smoking,  
by age and sex



currently out of school, with low educational attainment, and who are divorced/separated/widowed (Table 1). Higher incidence of smoking is also found among the Muslim youth than in other ethnic groups.

Its ill effects notwithstanding, smoking seems to be gaining popularity among the youth. This manifests particularly in the increasing proportion who have ever-ried smoking between 1994 and 2002 (Table 2). The trend is more pronounced among the females and the younger cohort (15-19 years old), suggesting not only a feminization but also a “younging” trend in the smoking behavior of adolescents in the recent decade. Data reveal an almost doubling in the proportion who have ever-smoked among females, from 16% to 30% for the same period considered.

### *Drinking*

Another problem behavior which is increasingly being associated with adolescence is drinking alcoholic beverages. The seriousness of this problem is heightened in the light of research findings that the earlier the age young people begin drinking, the more likely that they are to become alcohol dependent later in life. It has also been found that continued and heavy alcohol use will lead not only to dependence but also to death and disability, resulting mainly from traffic accidents. Needless to say, it is imperative to have a better understanding of this particular behavior as a component of a comprehensive package of programs for youth development, and as a basis for identifying interventions that will help reduce alcohol consumption among young people.

YAFS3 data reveal that there are twice as many Filipino adolescents who are drinking (42%) than smoking (22%). This may be explained by the lower drop-out rate among

drinkers. Furthermore, while there is a dominance of males among smokers, there is an even gender distribution among drinkers, indicating the greater acceptability of drinking among females compared to smoking.

Drinking is almost universal among the males, with 93% of those in their 20s admitting they have ever-tried drinking alcoholic beverage. A lower but still significant proportion (72%) of the younger males admitted to the same practice. While the corresponding figures for the females may be lower, reported levels are still substantial particularly among those in their early 20s, of whom 70% admitted to have ever-tried drinking alcoholic beverages (Figure 2).

While drinking is generally prevalent among the Filipino youth, it is lower among the Muslim youth. Only one out of four of them had ever-tried it, and among those who did try drinking, only one-fourth are current drinkers. The lower incidence of drinking is still, however, not consistent with Islamic teaching that declares alcohol as ‘haram’ or forbidden (Table 1).

Differential analysis likewise highlights the greater association of drinking with being out-of-school than being currently in-school. While higher educational attainment is associated with greater exposure to drinking, those in the lowest educational strata are more likely to retain their drinking practices.

As in smoking, an upsurge in drinking was also noted among the youth, particularly among women and teenagers (Table 2). Within a span of eight years, the proportion of those who have ever-drunk alcohol increased from 54% to 70%. The increase is mostly traced among the females and the younger cohort, suggesting a feminization and a “younging” pattern in the drinking behavior of adolescents in more recent years.

**Figure 2.**  
Percentage who ever-tried drinking alcoholic beverages,  
by age and sex

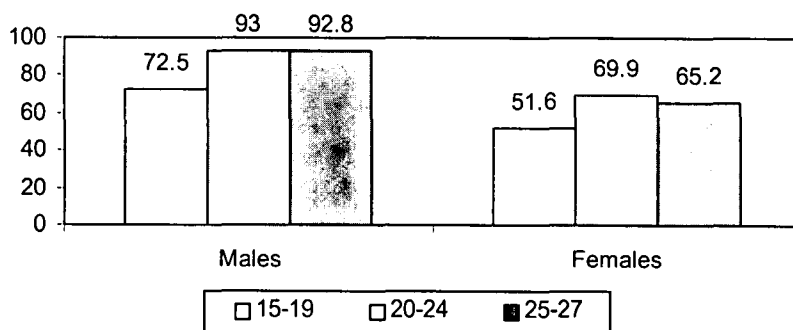


Table 1: Risk Behaviors by Selected Background Characteristics: Philippines 2002

Background Characteristics	SUBSTANCE USE/ABUSE						Rape/ Forced Sex  % whose first sexual inter-course was against will
	Smoking		Drinking		Using Drugs		
	% ever smoked	% currently smoking* among those who ever smoked	% ever drank	% currently drinking* among those who ever drank	% ever tried drugs	% currently using drugs* among those who ever used drugs	
<b>Marital Status</b>							
Never married	46.9	46.8	69.6	62.6	11.0	25.9	1.5
Currently married	42.4	43.5	69.5	47.5	11.3	14.8	2.2
Currently living-in	57.8	47.8	77.7	50.4	19.7	14.2	3.2
Div/Sep/Widowed	67.6	51.4	81.0	55.8	20.0	(30.0)	(6.9)
<b>Schooling Status</b>							
In school	38.6	35.3	63.0	55.9	7.2	27.4	1.4
Not in school	53.3	52.5	75.6	61.4	15.1	21.3	2.2
<b>Highest Educational Attainment</b>							
NS/Elem.	52.2	63.6	64.3	63.6	11.9	29.6	3.4
High School	45.8	45.7	67.2	57.8	11.2	22.0	2.1
College+	47.3	40.0	78.7	60.4	12.7	21.8	1.4
<b>Employment Status</b>							
Worked before but not currently	49.4	42.3	75.6	54.6	13.2	21.7	2.8
Currently working	58.9	57.9	79.2	68.7	17.9	20.3	1.5
Never worked	37.0	37.6	59.9	54.9	6.3	29.8	1.5
<b>Religion</b>							
Catholic	48.1	47.0	72.9	60.9	12.1	23.8	2.0
Other Christian	40.3	38.8	63.2	51.2	9.6	15.3	2.2
Islam	47.0	54.2	26.6	25.9	7.6	14.6	(2.7)
Others	45.7	53.5	61.9	58.1	12.7	21.5	(1.1)
<b>Ethnicity</b>							
Tagalog	49.2	45.6	73.8	57.8	10.1	21.6	1.6
Visayan	44.4	47.9	70.2	62.0	14.4	26.2	2.3
Muslim	46.0	56.1	24.8	25.5	7.8	16.7	(3.6)
Others	47.5	44.1	67.8	58.6	10.0	16.1	2.7

Notes: \* - Includes those regularly and not regularly smoking or drinking or using drugs.  
( ) - Figures in parentheses are based on less than 10 cases.

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VIOLENT BEHAVIORS				SEXUAL BEHAVIORS			
Violence		Suicide		Early Sex	Unprotected Sex		Multiple Sex Partners
% who ever experienced being physically injured by someone during the past 3 months	% who ever physically hurt someone in the past 3 months	% who ever thought of committing suicide	% who ever tried to commit suicide among those who ever thought of committing suicide	% who had sex before marriage among 15-19 years old	% who used contraception during first premarital sex	% who used contraception during last premarital sex	% who had more than one sexual partner
13.0	13.6	11.5	22.5	9.7	30.0	27.6	47.2
8.2	10.2	15.2	26.8	53.3	12.1	22.7	15.3
14.5	13.7	18.5	47.3	55.8	10.9	17.3	24.6
21.9	15.2	21.9	43.5	(33.3)	18.9	22.2	23.2
12.9	13.7	11.5	20.0	6.9	31.5	29.2	46.0
12.0	12.7	13.4	29.7	21.6	17.2	23.4	31.0
15.0	12.5	11.5	35.3	14.5	12.2	19.1	27.6
13.5	14.5	12.5	23.5	10.9	17.8	21.6	33.1
8.9	10.3	13.2	27.4	12.8	24.2	31.2	37.1
12.4	12.9	16.1	31.3	18.4	16.2	23.3	29.0
13.5	13.6	11.5	25.8	15.7	22.4	23.7	39.9
11.6	12.9	10.8	20.3	8.1	20.9	28.1	32.4
12.7	13.5	12.4	26.2	12.2	19.5	24.5	34.1
11.4	11.6	13.3	23.6	9.0	16.8	24.5	29.4
7.5	10.0	13.8	30.1	7.6	29.3	25.0	51.5
12.7	11.8	16.5	23.2	11.6	(17.8)	20.7	30.5
13.6	13.9	12.3	33.4	13.0	19.4	24.7	33.1
11.6	12.4	13.1	20.8	11.1	20.8	26.1	33.9
6.2	9.5	14.6	27.3	6.0	(23.3)	(17.0)	50.0
12.3	13.3	12.0	20.5	10.8	14.7	21.1	33.9

Table 2. Trends on Risk Behaviors among Adolescents 15-24 by Sex and Age: Philippines (Except ARMM)

Risk Behaviors	1994								
	Male			Female			Both Sexes		
	15-19	20-24	Total	15-19	20-24	Total	15-19	20-24	Total
<b>A. Substance Use/Abuse</b>									
1. Smoking									
% ever smoked	47.5	77.8	60.1	12.4	22.3	16.5	29.4	49.0	37.6
% currently smoking* among those who ever smoked	59.0	74.8	67.5	25.1	25.4	25.2	51.7	63.1	57.9
% currently smoking* among all respondents	28.0	58.1	40.4	3.1	5.6	4.2	15.1	30.7	21.6
2. Drinking									
% ever drank	61.4	90.7	73.6	29.2	46.5	36.5	44.8	67.7	54.4
% currently drinking* among those who ever drank	76.4	88.4	82.6	43.0	45.3	44.2	65.2	73.0	69.3
% currently drinking* among all respondents	46.7	80.0	60.5	12.4	20.9	16.0	29.0	49.2	37.4
3. Using Drugs									
% ever used drugs	6.0	17.7	10.9	0.6	1.5	1.0	3.2	9.2	5.7
% currently using drugs* among those who ever used drugs	33.0	22.5	25.8	(31.6)	(14.3)	20.4	32.8	21.8	25.4
% currently using drugs* among all respondents	2.0	4.0	2.8	(0.2)	(0.2)	0.2	1.0	2.0	1.4
<b>B. Violent Behavior</b>									
1. Rape/Forced Sex									
% whose first sexual intercourse was against will <sup>2</sup>	-	-	-	11.9	9.3	9.9	-	-	-
<b>C. Sexual Behaviors</b>									
1. Early Sex									
% who had sex before marriage among 15-19 years old	12.5	-	12.5	4.0	-	4.0	8.1	-	8.1
2. Unprotected Sex									
% who used contraception during first premarital sex	23.0	24.4	24.0	(7.7)	(7.8)	7.8	21.0	21.9	21.6
% who used contraception during last premarital sex	31.9	34.6	34.0	(8.6)	14.1	13.0	22.2	25.4	24.7
3. Multiple Sex Partners									
% who had more than one sexual partner	37.1	45.4	43.1	(3.3)	3.8	3.7	28.6	32.8	31.7



**TABLE 3.** Per cent who engage in various risk behaviors:  
comparison between smokers and non-smokers

	<b>Smokers</b>	<b>Non-smokers</b>
Drinking*	90.4	48.1
Using Drugs*	23.3	1.8
Thought of suicide*	14.8	10.8
Been physically abused*	16.1	9.1
Physically hurt someone*	17.1	9.7
Suspended from school*	14.7	4.2
PMS*	36.6	14.2
Paid for sex*	6.2	0.8
Been paid for sex*	3.4	0.4

\*Significant at .05 level

**TABLE 4.** Per cent who engage in various risk behaviors:  
comparison between those who ever-trying drugs and those who have never tried drugs

	<b>Drug users</b>	<b>Non-drug users</b>
Smoking*	91.9	40.2
Drinking*	97.4	63.8
Thought of suicide*	15.9	12.2
Been physically abused*	18.6	11.5
Physically hurt someone*	22.6	11.9
Suspended from school*	25.8	6.8
PMS*	63.0	19.5
Paid for sex*	14.8	1.8
Been paid for sex*	9.1	0.8

\*Significant at .05 level

**TABLE 5.** Per cent who engage in various risk behaviors: comparison between those with PMS experience and those who have no PMS experience

	<b>With PMS</b>	<b>Without PMS</b>
Smoking*	68.8	38.9
Drinking*	87.4	61.3
Using drugs	30.1	5.8
Thought of suicide*	15.3	11.8
Been physically abused*	15.7	11.3
Physically hurt someone*	17.7	11.6
Suspended from school*	17.3	6.3

\*Significant at .05 level

### Summary and Conclusions

The results of this study indicate the substantial and increasing prevalence of problem behaviors among Filipino adolescents. Smoking, drinking, drug use, and early PMS are realities that confront young people and society today, which if not properly handled might compromise the health and future development of the youth. It does not help that these problem behaviors appear to be part of a constellation of problem behaviors which include the experience of violence, suicide, and unsafe sexual practices.

Accompanying the high and rising trends is the apparent interconnectedness of the risk behaviors. That adolescents are involved in multiple risk behaviors portends the gravity of future consequences that can very well set a toll on the youth's present and future well-being. The interconnectedness of the problem behaviors also poses a great challenge for identifying and implementing the appropriate interventions, programs, and policies for and in behalf of the youth. The complex nature of each risk behavior, as well as the complex interrelationships among the various risk behaviors, must first be threshed out before any effective intervention, program, or policy could be formulated. Failure to understand said complexities could lead to superficial and conflicting intervention efforts.

The apparent trends towards the feminization and "younging" of risk behaviors are quite disturbing, especially when one considers the lack of proper information and

services that could help protect young people from the negative consequences of these behaviors. As more young people venture into what was once considered the adults' domain, and as more women become less inhibited to engage in experiences that were once considered the privilege of men, it becomes imperative for stakeholders to reassess their perspectives so as to be able to design programs and interventions that accommodate these emerging trends.

Literature suggests that a closer scrutiny of the factors that instigate (risk) and control (protective) problem behaviors can shed much light in explaining the trends and patterns in problem behaviors among adolescents. The findings of this study point to the relevance of looking at different systems of influence: the adolescent's personality system and her/his environment (family, community, and larger society), which seem to exercise joint roles in instigating or controlling adolescent-specific behaviors.

This paper is only the beginning of more research efforts directed at gaining a better understanding of the nature, extent, and trends pertaining to the youth's risk behaviors, as well the interconnections among these behaviors. Given the gravity of these problems, and their equally grave consequences, it is important that these issues be studied and resolved for the benefit of the Filipino youth and the future of Philippine society.

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