

Exposure to neighborhood violence leads some Denver teens to use tobacco and alcohol earlier, new study shows

Anna Maria Santiago, Professor of Community Development, Michigan State University

Published: December 10, 2025 8:33am EDT



Denver teens who experience violence start using tobacco and alcohol earlier than their peers.

BSIP/Getty Images

High levels of neighborhood violence increase the risk of Latino and African American teens in Denver starting to use alcohol and tobacco, according to our recent study.

In the U.S., approximately 2 in 10 adolescents between the ages of 12 and 20 drink alcohol. About 1 in 10 smoke cigarettes. For teens living in neighborhoods with high levels of disadvantage and social disorganization, the odds are 35% to 72% higher. Disadvantaged neighborhoods generally have higher levels of economic hardship, poorer educational opportunities and limited resources. Those factors weaken the social fabric of a community.

Although alcohol and tobacco use among adolescents has declined in recent years, both remain the most commonly used and abused substances compared to cocaine or heroin. Alcohol and tobacco use have been linked to substance dependence in adulthood, sexual victimization, some cancers and premature death.

One of us – Anna Maria Santiago – studies neighborhood effects, or how where children and adolescents live affects their health and well-being. Iris Margetis is a Ph.D. candidate in economics and co-author of the study.

Why it matters

Exposure to neighborhood violence has been thought to trigger adolescent alcohol and tobacco use as a way of coping with the heightened levels of stress associated with that exposure. However, previous findings have been mixed.

Seventeen percent of survey participants started smoking as teens. The average age of first use was 15.6 years. Fifteen percent started drinking as teens when they were 16.1 years old, on average.

Greater exposure to neighborhood violence prompted teens in our study to start drinking and smoking two to eight months earlier than their peers. Girls started using both substances earlier than boys. Latino teens started earlier than African Americans.

We controlled for other potential individual, household and neighborhood risk factors such as family size, household stressors and level of neighborhood disadvantage. The risk of starting to use alcohol still increased 32% for all teens residing in neighborhoods with greater violence. The risk of tobacco use in those neighborhoods was 1.3 to 1.5 times higher for boys, Latino and African American adolescents.

How we do our work

We analyzed administrative and survey data originally gathered from a natural experiment involving a policy change in Denver for approximately 1,100 Latino and African American teens. The teens lived in 110 census tracts across metro Denver.

To measure exposure to violence, we used our survey data to create a neighborhood problems index that measured several factors. Those included the presence of people selling drugs, gang activity, homes broken into by burglars, people being robbed or mugged, people getting beaten or raped, and children and youth getting into trouble. We defined the presence of three or more of these as high exposure to neighborhood violence.

What still isn't known

We still don't know what community interventions work best. But research suggests that caregiver and community-level action is crucial. According to study participants, caregivers monitored their adolescents closely. They limited unsupervised time outside or with friends, especially in neighborhoods with higher exposure to violence.

Study findings suggest that neighborhood youth clubs, sports teams, community centers and parks may serve as powerful deterrents to substance use initiation among teens. Community-led, evidence-based programs such as Rise Above Colorado support efforts promoting positive youth development and fostering positive community norms as prevention and early intervention strategies.

The state of Colorado says preventing or delaying initiation of both alcohol and tobacco use remain key public health goals.

However, additional work is needed to develop programming and activities that facilitate these efforts in Latino and African American communities.

The Research Brief is a short take on interesting academic work.

Anna Maria Santiago previously received funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation; the Ford Foundation; the Annie E Casey Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

Iris Margetis does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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