

Public health researcher examines link between discrimination and drug abuse

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A study about the correlation between discrimination and drug abuse by Haslyn E. R. Hunte, Ph.D., assistant professor in the West Virginia University School of Public Health Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, and San Diego School of Public Health professor Tracy L. Finlayson has been published online in the *Journal of Urban Health*.

In the study titled, "The Relationship between Perceived Discrimination and Psychotherapeutic and Illicit Drug Misuse in Chicago, IL, USA," Dr. Hunte and Finlayson found that more experiences of [discrimination](#) by a person are related to higher levels of drug use.

"One of the interesting findings of this study is that discrimination is harmful to all groups of individuals, not only racial or ethnic minorities," Hunte said.

Hunte and Finlayson analyzed data from the 2001 Chicago Community Adult Health Study, a random sample of 3,105 face-to-face interviews with African American, Hispanic and Caucasian adults living in Chicago. The data was used to examine the relationship among lifetime everyday discrimination, occurrences of major discrimination and the use of illicit and psychotherapeutic drugs for nonmedical reasons. Approximately 17 percent of the respondents reported using one or more [illicit drugs](#) and/or misusing one or more psychotherapeutic drug. Marijuana was found to be the most frequent drug reported.

"The results suggest that major discrimination like being pulled over unfairly by the police is associated with increased drug use. However, we are unclear as to the exact nature of the relationship: how much discrimination is needed to see a statistically significant association and what is the highest threshold?" Hunte said.

Hunte explained that various kinds of stress have

negative impacts on a person's overall health, and discrimination produces stress for those individuals experiencing it.

"The continued perception that we are being treated unfairly due to some personal characteristic that we cannot control (discrimination) is believed to be one of these psychosocial stressors," Hunte said.

Hunte hopes that studies like this will bring more attention to various risk factors of addiction.

"Mental health and substance abuse providers should consider treating experiences of unfair treatment/discrimination as a risk factor for drug use as they do other experiences of stress, such as the death of a love one," he said. "They should also not assume that discrimination is only a problem for racial/ethnic minorities."

Provided by West Virginia University

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