What is this research about?

Stigma towards drug addiction is a research field largely untouched. Even fewer studies look at what stigmas adolescents hold towards drug addiction. A teenager’s developmental stage, their personal experiences, and peer pressure make this period an unpredictable one. Add immigration experiences to those factors, and teenagers’ perceptions and attitudes will vary even more. How do teens from different immigration backgrounds stigmatize drug addiction?

What did the researchers do?

Ontario researchers analyzed information gathered from 4078 students who participated in the 2005 Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey. Students were 12-19 years old attending public schools in Ontario (grades 7-12). The students were asked how they felt about drug addiction and people addicted to drugs, and were asked about their own experience with drugs. Students were grouped according to immigration status:

- **first-generation youth** are foreign-born
- **second-generation youth** are Canadian-born with at least one parent who is foreign-born
- **third generation youth** are Canadian-born with Canadian-born parents

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found that there are some differences between the ways the groups perceive drug addiction. For example, first- and second-generation youth hold greater stigmas against drug addiction than third-generation youth. However, this difference can be explained by a teen’s experience with drugs. Third-generation students are more likely to use drugs or have friends who use drugs than first- or second-generation youth. In fact, the major influencer on any teen’s attitude towards drug addiction seems to be their personal experience with drugs or with friends who use drugs. Still, this doesn’t fully explain the difference between stigmas held by second-generation and by third-generation youth.

What you need to know:

Adolescents from different immigration generations (first-, second-, third-generation) stigmatize drug addiction differently. However, their attitudes towards drug addiction are shaped more by their own use of drugs or their friends’ use of drugs than by their immigration status.
How can you use this research?

This study looks at what stigmas teens have against drug addiction and what factors lead to these attitudes. Educators may be interested in these findings because most drug prevention programs make use of stigmas and direct their anti-drug messages at young teens.

The researchers point out that stigma can be both a good and bad thing. On the one hand, stigma can prevent adolescents from engaging with drugs. On the other hand, youth who are addicted to drugs may be more hesitant to seek help and might feel more stress because of this stigma. Future studies can examine how to shape stigma in order to prevent drug use while also encouraging young people to seek help.

About the researchers

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