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Report Points to Racial & Ethnic Differences in Substance Use and Sexual Behavior Among CT Youth

*First analysis of CT high school survey data by race & ethnicity
recommends better targeted youth interventions*

Alcohol and cigarette use is more common among white teens in Connecticut than among black and Hispanic youth, according to a new study on youth well-being from Connecticut Voices for Children, an organization focused on policy-relevant research. Connecticut youth of color, by comparison, are more likely than white adolescents to engage in risky sexual behaviors, be depressed, fail to wear seat belts, and be overweight. Connecticut Voices for Children recommends that the findings of the report be used to more effectively target health prevention initiatives.

The report is based on a new analysis of data from the 2005 Connecticut School Health Survey, a survey of health behaviors among Connecticut high school students in grades 9 to 12. This study is the first analysis of racial and ethnic differences among Connecticut youth using the Connecticut high school survey data.

“Some risk taking is a normal part of adolescent development,” said Priscilla Canny, Ph.D., Director of Research at Connecticut Voices for Children and a co-author of the study. “Knowing more about the unhealthy risk behaviors of different communities of youth will help to more effectively target our education and prevention programs.”

The study found that alcohol and cigarette use is more common among white adolescents in Connecticut than among black and Hispanic youth. Specifically:

- White students were more likely than black and Hispanic youth to smoke cigarettes, binge drink and drive while under the influence of alcohol.
- White students were twice as likely to drive drunk and 1.6 times more likely to binge drink than non-white teens.
- The percentage of white students who smoked cigarettes was twice as high as the percentage of black students and 1.5 times higher than Hispanic students.

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Connecticut youth of color are more likely than white teens to engage in risky sexual behaviors, be depressed, fail to wear seat belts, and be overweight.

- Black and Hispanic teens were more likely than white teens to have had sexual intercourse, had four or more sexual partners, had sexual intercourse before the age of 13, and had an older first sexual partner.
- About 32% of Hispanic and black students report feeling depressed as compared to 22% of white students.
- Black and Hispanic students in Connecticut were more likely to be overweight or at risk of overweight. About one-third of black and Hispanic students were overweight or at risk of overweight compared to about one-quarter of white students.
- Black and Hispanic students were about twice as likely to not wear a seatbelt when others drive as compared to white students.

Three positive “protective” factors were associated with reduced risk taking among all three racial/ethnic groups: parental awareness of students’ whereabouts, academic achievement, and living with two parents. For example, students whose parents knew their whereabouts were significantly less likely to smoke, binge drink, have early sex and engage in fighting. Students earning mostly C’s, D’s, and F’s were more than twice as likely as students earning mostly A’s and B’s to have had 4 or more sexual partners.

Connecticut Voices for Children recommends that these findings be used to more effectively target health promotion initiatives. Although all youth benefit from basic information about health risks, a program encouraging delayed childbearing is of higher need in communities of color, while alcohol and tobacco prevention programs are of particular importance for white youth. Moreover, this report highlights the error of a “one-size fits all” approach. Consider motor vehicle accidents, the leading cause of mortality among adolescents. To reduce motor vehicle fatalities, programs in communities of color should work to increase seatbelt use, as black and Hispanic youth are twice as likely to not wear seatbelts, while initiatives in white communities should focus more on driving while intoxicated, since white teens are twice as likely to drive after drinking.

“I applaud Connecticut Voices for Children for examining, in detail, the social issues facing our children,” said State Representative Toni Walker. “I agree that these issues need to be addressed.”

The Connecticut School Health Survey, which is administered by the Connecticut Department of Public Health and the State Department of Education, explores health behaviors among high school students in grades 9-12. There were 2,256 students who were surveyed in 2005. The 2007 Connecticut School Health Survey is currently being administered.

Connecticut Voices for Children is a statewide, research-based policy and advocacy organization for children and families. Funding for the study was provided by the Seymour L. Lustman Memorial Fund. The report, *Do Health Behaviors of Connecticut Youth Differ by Their Race and Ethnicity?: The Connecticut School Health Survey 2005*, is available on the Connecticut Voices Web site at www.ctkidslink.org.

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