

Out of school youth

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Summary

Global alcohol and tobacco use account for over 4 and 2.5 million deaths, respectively, every year (1). Adolescents are more prone to use alcohol and tobacco and are therefore at higher risk to alcohol and tobacco related morbidity and mortality (9, 10). According to the Youth Risk Behaviour Survey, school-going learners (aged 13 to 20 years) reported past month smoking and alcohol use as 21% and 35%, respectively (9). While there is data that have focused on school-going learners and risky behaviours in South Africa, little research has been conducted on Out of School Youth (OSY) (5, 11). OSY are those between 13-20 years who have not completed formal schooling, and are not currently enrolled in school. Globally, approximately 124 million children are out of school, with almost half (45%) residing in sub Saharan Africa (12). Students who fail to complete their schooling may experience negative social, health and economic issues such as unemployment, delinquency, and poor mental and physical health (5, 11, 133). Furthermore, OSY are also more vulnerable to the experimentation and uptake of alcohol and tobacco use, as they do not have the protective factor of the school environment, such as supervision and positive mentoring by teachers and peers (5, 15-18). These high rates of dropout combined with increased risks of alcohol and tobacco use call for the investigation of the social and cognitive correlates of early school leaving and alcohol and tobacco use among OSY.

The studies reported in this thesis focus on three main goals. The first is to understand why young people in South Africa leave school. The second aim is to explore the relationship between reasons for leaving school and alcohol and tobacco use. The third is to gain insight into the social environment of OSY. Specifically, the nature and quality of relationships with family and friends and its association with early school leaving, alcohol and tobacco use in the South African context was explored. Results described in a study in Chapter 2 indicated that young people cited a number of reasons for leaving school, which were broadly categorised as school performance and vocational aspirations, social interactions at school, and family-related reasons for leaving school. In chapters 3 and 4, reasons for leaving school such as making somebody pregnant or the school fees being unaffordable were associated with alcohol or cigarette use, but the strength and direction of these associations were dependent on gender, geographical area (urban, peri-urban or rural), as well as the province in which participants resided. OSY reported that their social network usually consists of their peers (friends, partners and friends' family) and family (parents, siblings and extended family). In addition, the social environment plays a role in educational attainment among OSY (Chapter 2) as well as facilitates the uptake and spread of alcohol and tobacco use, with friends playing a major role (Chapter 5 and 6). Lastly, this thesis took into consideration gender and racial differences in early school leaving and alcohol and tobacco use. Gender differences were found in the reasons for leaving school (Chapter 2) as well as the association between reasons for leaving school and alcohol and tobacco use (Chapters 3 and 4). In Chapter 5, racial differences were found in the association between OSY tobacco smoking and the smoking of their OSY friends.

Several conclusions can be drawn from the findings reported in this thesis. The findings suggest that individual and environmental level interventions involving the school and community are needed to target those who are at risk of dropping out as well as those who have already dropped out to return to school. Given that financial difficulties and pregnancy was a major contributor of early school leaving, these findings highlight the need for interventions to be grounded within a framework of poverty reduction and social upliftment of young people. The gender, racial and geographical differences found in the social and cognitive correlates of early school leaving and alcohol and tobacco use allows programme developers to identify vulnerable subgroups and therefore develop tailored interventions to retain students in school and reduce alcohol and tobacco use.