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Study: Pop Culture References May Lead Youth to Smoke

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A study by the city of Berkeley released last week found that about half of popular song lyrics and music videos contain smoking references, possibly reflecting an increase in the popularity of smoking in a younger generation.

The study, which came from a project by the city's Tobacco Prevention Program, showed that 51.3 percent of the top-played songs on local radio stations popular amongst 12- to 24-year-olds featured smoking imagery in their videos. Songs were evaluated by high school students in the Berkeley Unified School District.

District spokesperson Mark Coplan said the district has the lowest tobacco usage in the state, as was shown in the 2008 California Healthy Kids Survey.

Although tobacco usage is low, drug and alcohol rates in the district are nearly double the national average, according to the survey and another study by the city's Joint Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs Task Force.

Coplan said funding for tobacco and alcohol prevention programs in the district has been "drying up" over the past years, causing the district to cut hours for at least one employee who leads the district's prevention programs.

Officials from the city's Public Health Department also showed concern that "a number of contemporary artists mention and glamorize tobacco use, including cigars, blunts and cigarettes in their song lyrics and videos" because of the "serious health impacts" that could be caused by this imagery.

According to the study, 30 percent of music videos show smoking scenes, even though the songs themselves make no reference to tobacco use.

"(Drug references) could influence kids because the artists are role models," said UC Berkeley sophomore Konnor La.

He said while most people "don't take advice from people on the street," the widespread appeal of artists such as Tupac Shakur and Bob Marley - whose music popularized the use of marijuana - could easily influence youth.

"Research has determined that viewing even a modest level of music videos may result in substantial exposure of glamorized depictions of tobacco and alcohol use," according to the department's press release for the study. UC Berkeley junior Claire Seifert said song lyrics do not necessarily make people want to smoke and use drugs, but instead cater to a population that already engages in those activities.

Berkeley Health Officer Janet Berreman said the study confirmed what other regional and national

studies have previously shown about the influence of popular culture on youth.

"We know that kids spend a lot of time listening to their music and watching videos," she said. "The more glamorized images of tobacco use that teenagers see, the more they are going to smoke. These (issues) are real and very much present in our local community for our youth."

In the upcoming months, the program hopes to determine what kind of policies could be created to counteract the influence of these images, Berreman said.

Tags: Berkeley High School, Berkeley Unified School District, Public Health Department

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