

SPECIAL ARTICLE

THE PREVALENCE OF ILLICIT-DRUG OR ALCOHOL USE DURING PREGNANCY AND DISCREPANCIES IN MANDATORY REPORTING IN PINELLAS COUNTY, FLORIDA

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Abstract Florida is one of several states that have sought to protect newborns by requiring that mothers known to have used alcohol or illicit drugs during pregnancy be reported to health authorities. To estimate the prevalence of substance abuse by pregnant women, we collected urine samples from all pregnant women who enrolled for prenatal care at any of the five public health clinics in Pinellas County, Florida ($n = 380$), or at any of 12 private obstetrical offices in the county ($n = 335$); each center was studied for a one-month period during the first half of 1989. Toxicologic screening for alcohol, opiates, cocaine and its metabolites, and cannabinoids was performed blindly with the use of an enzyme-multiplied immunoassay technique; all positive results were confirmed.

Among the 715 pregnant women we screened, the overall prevalence of a positive result on the toxicologic tests of urine was 14.8 percent; there was little difference in prevalence between the women seen at the public clinics (16.3 percent) and those seen at the private offices (13.1 percent). The frequency of a positive result was also

similar among white women (15.4 percent) and black women (14.1 percent). Black women more frequently had evidence of cocaine use (7.5 percent vs. 1.8 percent for white women), whereas white women more frequently had evidence of the use of cannabinoids (14.4 percent vs. 6.0 percent for black women).

During the six-month period in which we collected the urine samples, 133 women in Pinellas County were reported to health authorities after delivery for substance abuse during pregnancy. Despite the similar rates of substance abuse among black and white women in our study, black women were reported at approximately 10 times the rate for white women ($P < 0.0001$), and poor women were more likely than others to be reported.

We conclude that the use of illicit drugs is common among pregnant women regardless of race and socioeconomic status. If legally mandated reporting is to be free of racial or economic bias, it must be based on objective medical criteria. (*N Engl J Med* 1990; 322: 1202-6.)

PREVIOUS estimates of the frequency with which illicit drugs and alcohol are used by pregnant women have relied on data collected in hospital-based populations before, at the time of, or after delivery.¹⁻³ In addition, the majority of hospitals involved in such studies have served urban populations composed largely of minority-group members of relatively low socioeconomic status. We undertook a population-based study of the prevalence of the use of illicit drugs and alcohol by pregnant women who received prenatal care in Pinellas County, Florida, either at public health clinics or in private obstetrical offices.

Pinellas County is an urbanized area with a population of 860,000. Located on a peninsula on the west coast of Florida, it is the most densely populated and most developed county in Florida, with over 3100 persons per square mile. Its major cities are St. Petersburg (population, 243,000) and Clearwater (population, 101,082). Pinellas County is contiguous with Hillsborough County, in which the major city is Tampa. The Tampa-St. Petersburg standard metropolitan statistical area has a population of 2 million people. The population of Pinellas County has increased approximately 18 percent per year since the 1980 census. The minority population has increased

by 25 percent over the same 10-year period. Overall, minority groups currently make up 9 percent of county residents. Approximately 27 percent of the residents are 65 years of age or older, 55 percent are between 18 and 64, and 18 percent are 17 or younger.⁴

The major public-assistance programs that affect children in Pinellas County are Aid to Families with Dependent Children, the food-stamps program, and Medicaid. During the fourth quarter of 1988, an average of 6256 families per month were receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children.⁵ Prenatal health care services are available for indigent women at five public clinics throughout the county. In addition, 49 physicians (46 M.D.s and 3 D.O.s) in the county provide private prenatal care in 20 individual or group practices. The birth rate in the county has remained steady. From January 1, 1989, until June 30, 1989, there were 5178 live births; 793 of these infants were born to black women, 38 to Asian women, 2 to American Indian women, 55 to Hispanic women, and 4290 to other white women (Cushing B, Pinellas County Health Unit, Pinellas County, Fla.: personal communication).

In March 1987, a statewide policy was adopted in Florida that required the reporting of births to mothers who used drugs or alcohol during pregnancy. Hospitals were required to notify local health departments when such cases were suspected. Chapter 415.503(8)(a)2 of the Florida Child Abuse Statutes defines reportable "harm" to a child's health or welfare as including "physical dependency of a newborn infant upon any . . . controlled drug." The Florida

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