



National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism Health Disparities Research

NIAAA's programs to address minority health and health disparities are intended to increase our understanding of the factors that contribute to ethnic differences in alcohol-related problems and to encourage and support research on minority health and health disparities by (1) building the capacity of both individual investigators and minority-serving institutions (MSIs) to conduct alcohol research and contribute to our understanding of alcohol problems, (2) transferring knowledge to practice and experiential/clinical knowledge to research, and (3) building multidisciplinary, multi-ethnic collaborating teams to address specific research areas. NIAAA's areas of research emphasis include:

Epidemiology: Detailed epidemiologic information on the patterns of alcohol use and alcohol-related problems among various racial and ethnic minorities is fundamental for developing effective efforts to address alcohol-related health disparities. Epidemiological research increases our understanding of the nature and scope of these disparities and generates hypotheses for subsequent research. NIAAA-designed and -conducted surveys, through the oversampling of Hispanics and African Americans, have been excellent bases from which to study within-group differences.

Genetics: Many population differences in responses to alcohol are not well understood. However, some areas of research, such as those investigating differences in genetics and alcohol metabolism, are yielding significant results. We now know that the risk for and protection from alcohol use disorders and the accompanying consequences of heavy drinking are linked to differences in genetic variants of certain enzymes involved in alcohol metabolism; these variants can both increase risk and provide protection against developing alcohol problems in some racial/ethnic population groups.

Prevention and intervention research: Alcohol prevention research is aimed at reducing the causes and consequences of high-risk drinking. Some standard approaches have been shown to be effective among minority populations. Exploring the benefits of targeted interventions is a current research emphasis. For example, identifying and employing resiliency within cultural groups and environmental strategies, such as altering zoning laws, are promising approaches under investigation.

Treatment and health services research: Some racial/ethnic minorities access treatment less frequently than Whites, and those who do seek treatment often are more severely affected. Understanding the factors influencing the availability of alcohol treatment across different populations is an important component of NIAAA's health disparities research. For example, lack of health insurance among Hispanics/ Latinos and African Americans and lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate care may impede the effective delivery of treatment to minority patients. Evidence exists that ethnic minorities experience significant reductions in drinking following treatment with behavioral therapies. Moreover brief interventions in primary care settings have proved to be effective in reducing alcohol consumption by high-risk drinkers. Thus, access to care early in disease progression potentially will improve treatment outcome for these vulnerable groups.

