A Period of Storm and Stress

The Republic of Korea is experiencing a stressful period owing to the failure of designated authorities to save hundreds of passengers of the Sewol, a ferry that recently sank: most of the victims were high school students. President Park has announced an official apology to the public and carried out sweeping reforms to improve the country’s safety standards and establish a new national emergency system to prevent further disasters from happening.

Adolescents spend a significant amount of time hanging around their schools and are influenced more around school environments. Because of their immature nature, adolescents are likely to be tempted by risky health behaviors such as smoking, alcohol drinking, or drug use. They tend to act impulsively owing to peer pressure [1].

Despite mandatory controls, adolescent smoking and alcohol drinking continue to rise in Korea. The 9th Korea Youth Risk Behavior Web-based Survey (2013) has shown that lifetime smokers usually start smoking while they are still in their first grade in middle school (21.5%). Overall, 43.9% of the smokers drink alcohol, and the average age of alcohol drinking initiation is 14.4 years, lower than 15.1 years in 1998 [2]. Adolescent alcohol drinking is not only an issue of problem alcohol drinking or alcoholism, but it may also create conflicts between these teenagers and their parents, friends, and teachers, thereby increasing the chance of unexpected violence or sexual behavior [3,4]. Children from single-parent or parentless families show relatively higher delinquency rates, and adolescents from single-parent families are more likely to engage in risky health behaviors such as smoking, alcohol drinking, and drug taking [5,6].

The Republic of Korea has introduced and implemented a system of "school environment cleanup zone" under the School Health Act, to foster more efficient student guidance, better scholastic achievement, and a more amicable emotional state among students. Despite this regulation, however, the number of harmful establishments within the school environment sanitation and cleanup zones in 2013 was reported to reach 40,531 [7], and, recently, even as regulations on harmful shops and prostitution become stronger, many new variants of these harmful shops tend to appear.

Previous studies focusing on the noxious environment that juveniles in Korea are exposed to also reported that the detrimental factors stemming from this harmful environment and other related establishments affected juveniles’ behavior [2], and that the environmental factors they perceived were associated with their deviation, violence, and criminal acts [8]. In addition, it is reported that contact with harmful shops is related to problematic teenage behavior [7,9], the environmental factors around them during adolescence is closely connected with the problems of juveniles.

In several developed countries, various systems that are aimed to protect the youth from noxious environments and preserve the educational environment around schools have been prepared and implemented [1]. In Japan, youth-oriented ordinances enacted by each local government play a role in enforcing this goal by tightly regulating the business of harmful shops located within 100 to 500 m from schools. In the UK, Germany, and France, adolescent drug addiction and prostitution have become social problems, and various measures are being implemented. In other foreign countries, adolescent delinquent behavior was also found to be affected not only by personal internal factors, family, or peers, but also by the community environment where they reside, which implies that the environmental factors around them during their adolescence are closely connected with the problems of youth [1,8,10].

Although many studies so far have reported that the noxious environment has influence on youth-related problems, most of them are research studies that focus more on the concept itself or studies on the status of adolescent problem behavior. Furthermore, most of these
research studies were not conducted on a national level, but within the environment of some local communities [8,9]. Few studies on the correlation between the noxious environment around schools and health risk factors such as smoking and alcohol drinking have been reported.

In the current issue of the Osong Public Health and Research Perspectives, a study aims to investigate the reality of middle and high school students’ access to harmful shops and the effect of the experience on smoking and alcohol drinking behaviors on a national basis [11]. The authors used a self-administered questionnaire method online via the homepage of the education ministry’s student health information center; 1888 and 1563 of questionnaires were used for middle school students and high school students, respectively, for a total of 3451 questionnaires used for the final analysis of this research. The data analysis utilized, in due course, hierarchical linear regression.

In this research, 8.3% of all respondents were found to have experienced smoking and 17.0% engaged in alcohol drinking. Regarding the types of harmful shops, 81.8% said they had been to a gaming place; 21.2%, lodging; 16.0%, sex and entertainment place; and 6.8%, sex industry harmful place. Sociodemographic variables were found to have a significant effect on adolescent smoking and alcohol drinking. Regarding environmental variables, a significant difference was observed for living with parents and school location. Among adolescent harmful shops experiences, both smoking and alcohol drinking showed a significant association with sex industry harmful place.

We agree with the authors’ conclusion that a national government-level management and supervision on this issue is necessary to prevent adolescents from having ready access to harmful shops, along with more studies exploring methods for implementation of policies with more systematic harmful shops control.

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