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## **Risky Behaviors in Male versus Female College Students: A Modern Day Paradigm Shift**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Risky behaviors such as dangerous driving, substance use and unprotected sex have been plaguing adolescents of all genders and ethnic groups for generations. While adolescent risk-taking has had much attention in previous research, the current study explored whether findings regarding gender differences hold up across different ethnic groups. Contrary to previous research, which has found that men are generally riskier than women, our investigation sought to examine a possible paradigm shift where young women are potentially just as risky as young men. The current study also investigates ethnic group differences and predicted that risky behaviors would be seen less in Latinos than other ethnic groups. Participants provided demographic information and information on risk-taking behaviors. Results indicated no significant gender differences in substance use, sexual behaviors, or overall risk behaviors. Male students were only significantly riskier in driving behaviors. Results from this study also confirmed the hypothesis that Latinos would not display risky behaviors to the extent that Caucasians and African Americans do. Future research is warranted to investigate whether young women are engaging in these types of behaviors in much the same way as men across different contexts.*

## INTRODUCTION

Risky behaviors such as smoking, drinking, use of illegal drugs, and unprotected sex are problems that have plagued adolescents of all genders and ethnic groups for generations. Statistics provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 1998 indicate just how shocking and serious risk taking is for adolescents. Statistics show that “50% of teenagers are sexually active, 43% reported not using a condom during their most recent sexual intercourse experience, an only 10-20% use condoms consistently” (Johnson, McCaul, & Klien, 2002, p. 68). Moreover, when focusing on high school seniors, one of every five reported daily tobacco use. Risk-taking behaviors during adolescence can lead to long-term, negative consequences such as pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, automobile accidents, debilitating illnesses and even death (Rolison & Scherman, 2002). Clearly, this is a critical issue that has spurred many researchers to investigate the origins of adolescent risk-taking and to take an epidemiological approach to investigate why certain risk behaviors are so prevalent among youngsters from certain genders and ethnicities.

### *Risky Populations*

The preponderance of studies investigating risk-taking has included participants that were high-school-aged students, and those under 18 years old. Fewer studies on risk have included college-aged, older adolescents. Researchers who have studied this specific population have been quick to point out that college is a time when there are more opportunities for risky behavior to occur and a time for experimentation.

Arnett (1988) pointed out that according to the U.S. Department of Transportation, rates of auto accidents and fatalities are nearly as high among people in their twenties as among people in their late teens, and rates of alcohol-related accidents and fatalities are even higher when people are in their twenties than in the teens. One of the explanations put forth concerns the lack of parental supervision and the newfound freedom of being away from home (Rolison, 2003). Behaviors that have typically been considered risky for the younger adolescent population may be different when considering college-age, older adolescents.

Risk-taking behavior is described by Jessor and his colleagues as “conditions or variables associated with a lower likelihood of positive or socially desirable outcomes and a higher likelihood of negative consequences” (Jessor, Turbin, & Costa, 1998). The study of risk taking behaviors in college students is significant when efforts are being sought to decrease the amount of accidents and fatalities that correlate with risky driving behaviors, for example. In addition to focusing on this older and perhaps riskier population, it is also very important to examine the trends in gender and ethnic group differences in order to ultimately provide alternative outlets for risky behavior for populations from varying backgrounds. In essence, a goal in this line of research should be to customize any prevention-based programs to better fit the needs of the clients they serve while simultaneously taking into account possible variations by gender and ethnic background. Gender and ethnicity are said to be crucial in finding the precursors of risk and have been described by Jessor’s in his most recent work on the psychosocial model of risk behavior co-occurrence (Weden & Zabin, 2005). As such, risky behaviors as they relate to both ethnic/cultural background and gender will be discussed further.

## *Risk and Culture*

Jessor and Jessor (1977) conducted some of the first research on health and risk related behaviors in adolescents and sparked further interest in the co-occurrence of “problem behaviors”. Research involving adolescent risk behaviors which were initially confined to a particular subset including delinquency, drug use, alcohol abuse, and early sexual activity, now has expanded the domain of risk behaviors to include tobacco use, risky driving, and other health-compromising behaviors (Jessor et al., 1998). While there exists a substantial body of literature examining the reasons behind risk-taking behaviors in adolescence, general conclusions have been drawn in an effort to gain a fuller, more complete understand the motivations and behaviors. One such conclusion is that the association between risky behavior and adolescence is more complex than originally thought, and that simply using a two-dimensional model to fully understand why adolescents engage in such risky behavior is inadequate. When looking at reasons for risk-taking behaviors, it is critical to understand that adolescents behave differently according to the culture to which they have been exposed (Weden & Zabin, 2005) as well as the multiple contexts in which youth live, work, and play (Graber, Brooks-Gunn, & Galen, 1998).

Although the present investigation examined gender differences, which are regularly studied, it is of specific interest to examine whether past findings regarding gender differences are robust across different ethnicities. In 1979, Zuckerman reported findings that males across several cultures report greater sensation seeking or risky behavior (Hirschberger, Florian, Mikulinger, Goldenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002). Many cultures value bravery and courage; characteristics exemplified by risky behavior. For many, the consequences that may follow risky behavior tend to be underestimated because people tend to focus on the positive outcomes rather than the negative consequences (Hirschberger et al., 2002).

Also important to consider are potential protective factors when interpreting results from risk studies. In a study on cigarette smoking, for example, high school students were surveyed and asked to report whether they considered themselves to be smokers or nonsmokers and to give reasons for smoking or not smoking. Data were analyzed to determine any ethnic group differences. The overall results indicated that white students composed 39.7% of the people who smoked, which was a greater percentage than 34% that were Hispanic, and 22.7% of the students that were black. The differences in ethnicity were more salient when examining females versus males (Mermelstein, 1999). Some of the reasons that were reported to account for the differences in smoking were in part due to protective factors (Mermelstein, 1999).

Protective factors are defined as factors that prevent or protect people from self-destructive behavior (Almodovar, Tomaka, Thomson, Mckinnon, and O’ Rourke, 2006). Some protective factors that have been known to help with decreasing or preventing risk-taking behavior is having a closer relationship parents, strong perceived social support from parents, and having strong religious beliefs (Harker, 2001). Different protective factors vary across differing ethnic and cultural backgrounds. For example, in general African-American parents were said to discourage their children from smoking more than Caucasian parents (Mermelstein, 1999). Specifically, there were strong differences between white youth and the ethnic minorities about the appropriateness of girls' smoking. Among the non-white groups, smoking was

uniformly viewed as 'not right' for a girl: "Girls don't look right smoking." "It's not ladylike." Ethnic minority females, notably Hispanics and African-Americans, discussed the notions of respect and 'reputation,' and made comments like: "You won't get a job..." or "They won't think you're worthwhile..." Ethnic minority girls were further set apart from all other groups by seeing smoking as 'risky.' African-American females in particular, reported viewing smoking as the first step down a slippery slope, and therefore incompatible with a promising and healthy future (Mermelstein, 1999). Interestingly, other research findings indicate that African-Americans are said to begin smoking at an older age as a form of rebellion against their parents' strict upbringing (Robinson et al., 2006). This line of thought propels researchers to investigate risky behaviors in varied populations to further investigate the potential mediating or moderating effects of these behaviors across ethnic groups and across gender.

Children of different cultures all experience variations in the way they are raised. Some children face more challenges growing up and rebel once they are adults or vice – versa. Immigrant families, for example, try to instill interdependence in their children as opposed to U.S. ideologies which instill independence. According to some researchers, differences in interdependence and independence have shown to affect risk-taking behaviors (Tseng, 2004). Tseung suggests that children raised to be independent may take more risks than those raised to be interdependent since they do not have the family support to teach them right from wrong. Tseung also pointed out that families with open communication within the family are less likely to display risky behavior, and that communication styles vary by ethnicity (Tseng, 2004).

Specifically, Latino families present researchers with a quagmire of sorts. When considering risky sexual behaviors and parent-child communication, Latino parents are generally raised in a culture not supportive of open discussions about sex in the home, yet they recognize the risks their adolescents experience in an urban U.S. environment (Guilamo-Ramos, Jaccard, Dittus, & Collins, 2008). Further research by Guilamo-Ramos and his colleagues has indicated that when examining parent-adolescent communication regarding tobacco use, findings indicate that Latina mothers were comfortable discussing smoking-related issues with their children. Adolescents expressed a desire to discuss tobacco-related issues with their mothers, although some feared parental punishment (Guilamo-Ramos, Bouris, Dittus, & Jaccard, 2008). However, as Tseung indicates, the Latino culture also has strong connections regarding family that tie together people from various Latin American cultures such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Cuban.

Enduring traditional values for Latino families typically include a deep sense of family loyalty; extended family and social support networks; and an emphasis on interpersonal relatedness, relationships, and mutual respect (Fitzpatrick & Travieso, 1980; Garcia Coll, Meyer, & Brillion, 1995; Vega, Hough, & Romero, 1983). Because much of the past research on risk-taking behaviors has focused on high school populations and has produced interesting results with respect to ethnic differences, more research including older adolescents and populations from different ethnic groups is clearly warranted.

### *Risk and Gender*

Gender differences in the context of risk-taking behaviors have been the focus of several investigations. Many studies reveal that men display riskier behavior than women, but Weden

and Zabin (2005) suggested that one reason for this generally consistent finding is that women simply tend to report risky behaviors less than men. Women may under-report because of fear of societal judgment and rejection. In traditional Western society, it is accepted and almost expected for males to behave in risky and promiscuous ways. Society portrays them as being typical males who are considered “cool” or “boys just being boys”. Young women, on the other hand, are judged by a different set of standards and oftentimes feel the brunt of societies’ labels when engaging in the same risky behaviors as their male counterparts. One finding that supports the theory that men are indeed riskier than women claim that men obtain instant “relief from existential anxieties” after demonstrating risk-taking behaviors (Hirshbeger, Florian, Mikulinger, Goldenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002, p. 134). Although this double standard represents long-held societal beliefs and has withstood many years, there seems to be a paradigm shift of sorts presently occurring in our society.

Today, videos such as “Girls Gone Wild” (Francis, 2008) have had great success and popularity. Young women now seek the kind of attention displayed by these videos. They are more willing to engage in what would have previously been blatantly unacceptable behavior such as flashing their breasts and participating in overtly sexual acts. It seems as though this behavior, at least in certain populations like college-aged students, has become somewhat socially acceptable and almost revered. Researchers have noted that gender differences vary between cultures, and that in the Western society, men are more risk-oriented than women (Hirshbeger, et al., 2002).

A survey administered to college students by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that 44% of young men were considered to be heavy drinkers, while only 27% of young women fell into this category. It also indicated that 17% of men in college were regular marijuana smokers compared to the 12% of women in college (“Survey details”, 1998). Moreover, a more recent CDC study concluded that the prevalence of having smoked more than 10 cigarettes per day was higher among male (14.2%) than female (7.2%) students; and prevalence of having driven when they had been drinking alcohol was also higher among male (11.7%) than female (8.1%) students. Finally, this nationwide survey also indicated that the prevalence rates for having had sexual intercourse with more than four persons was higher among male (16.5%) than female (12.0%) students (“Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance” - United States, 2005). Clearly findings regarding gender differences in risky behaviors have been robust in past years, with males consistently being significantly riskier than females on a myriad of risky behaviors. However, recent anecdotal evidence based on young women’s behaviors in college populations specifically suggests that attitudes and behaviors among college-aged young women are shifting to be more reflective of their male counterparts’ behaviors. Our study sought to investigate gender differences in various risk-taking behaviors.

The purpose of the present study was to further investigate the differences in risk-taking behaviors between genders in college-aged adolescents in a small, private university setting. Further, the study investigated whether gender differences exist across different ethnic groups on a variety of risk factors. In keeping with previous studies, we expected that males in the current investigation would display more risky behaviors than women, although we also explored the possibility of women’s behaviors shifting to be more like their male counterparts. We also

predicted that because of family dynamics and existing support systems within the Latino culture, this pattern would be seen less in Latino students than other ethnicities.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

This study surveyed 235 college students attending a small, private university, in central Texas. The convenience sample included 50% White, 44% Latino, 5% African American, and 1% non-response. The gender breakdown was 30% male, 66% female, and 3% non-report. This breakdown is in concordance with the larger university population.

### *Measures*

Participants were given a survey that was based on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The survey consisted of five different sections which included questions regarding demographics; religious beliefs; perceived social support from family; attachment to parents; as well as a section on risk-taking behaviors. For the purposes of this specific study, only demographic information and risk-taking behaviors were examined. Demographic questions assessed participants' gender, age, and ethnicity. Risk questions examined risky driving behavior, drug and alcohol abuse, and risky sexual behavior. Sample questions include: "During the past year, how many times have you: Driven while intoxicated; Smoked marijuana; Had sex without contraception..." The survey had a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  level of .82. The section specifically pertaining to risky driving had a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  level of .78, the substance abuse section had a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  level of .76, and the risky sexual behaviors had a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  level .72. The range for possible scores for risky behaviors was 0 being the least and 44 was the riskiest. The highest possible score in risky driving was 20, for substance abuse and risky sexual behaviors it was 12. (see Appendix for full measure).

### *Procedures*

Students were informed of the purpose of the study and were given verbal assent, and given instructions on the survey. They were also told that their participation was completely voluntary and therefore would not be penalized if they did not complete the survey. All participants were briefed on confidentiality, anonymity and on the importance of answering honestly.

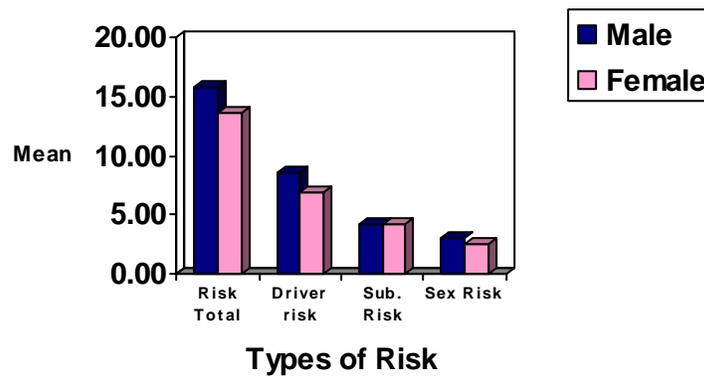
## RESULTS

In order to investigate possible gender differences in overall risk, a one-way analysis of variance was conducted. Results revealed no significant statistical gender differences in overall risky behavior,  $F(2, 235) = 1.48, p = .17$ . Despite the hypothesis, when comparing overall total risk scores, males were not significantly riskier than women. Examination of the sub-categories of risk revealed that driving risk was significant,  $F(2, 235) = 4.10, p < .05$ , with men scoring significantly higher ( $M = 9.56, SD = 5.51$ ) than women ( $M = 7.67, SD = 4.50$ ). In examining substance risk and sexual behavior, results indicated no statistical significance  $F(2, 235) = 1.52, p = .15$ , and  $F(2, 235) = .89, p = .53$  respectively. Results are displayed in Figure 1 below.

When examining differences across ethnic groups, multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were conducted. Results indicated significant ethnic group differences,  $F(3, 183) = 5.76, p < .001$  with Caucasian and African American students scoring significantly higher on overall risk behaviors than Latino students (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations and Figure 2 for a graphic representation). When examining the subcategories of risk, results indicated a trend toward significance in driver risk,  $F(3, 189) = 2.56, p = .056$  with Caucasian and African American participants scoring higher than their Latino counterparts. Similarly, there was a significant group difference in substance risk behaviors,  $F(3, 189) = 7.77, p < .01$  with Caucasian and African American participants scoring higher than Latinos. And finally there

**Figure 1**

**Risky Behavior As Displayed By Gender**



were significant group differences in risky sex behaviors,  $F(3, 189) = 3.47, p < .05$  with African American students scoring significantly higher than Latino or Caucasian students. It is worth noting that upon examination of all of the means, men are generally higher than females in all categories except the substance risk (see Table 1).

**DISCUSSION**

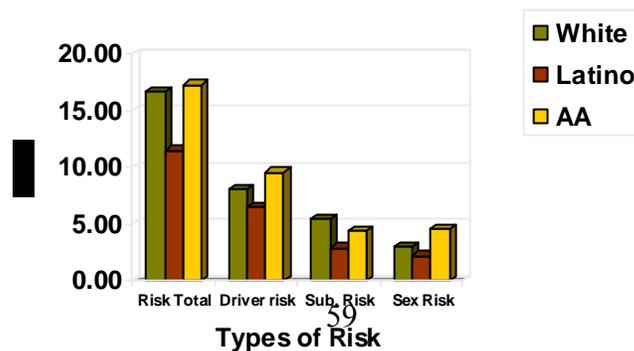
Contrary to the wide body of past research that has shown men to be significantly riskier than women, findings from the current research support the idea that, at least within this sample population, there may be a paradigm shift happening when certain risky behaviors are examined. Although in general the means indicate that participants in this study are not excessively risky, results from the current investigation do indicate that the young men in our sample were not significantly riskier than the young women in overall risky behavior. Further, upon examination of specific risk behaviors, young men were only significantly riskier in driving behaviors and not in substance use or risky sexual behaviors. In fact, upon examination of the means, young women’s scores on risky substance use behaviors are generally higher for all ethnic groups. These results are intriguing in that they suggest that the traditional ‘manly’ behaviors of driving fast or driving recklessly are still seen as ‘men’s behavior’; whereas behaviors like being more open or overt with behaviors involving smoking, drinking, or sex are now seen as behaviors that have no gender limitations. Women are engaging in these types of behaviors in much the same way as men. Young women today may indeed be realizing that the old double-standards when it comes to sex, for example, are outdated and unwelcomed. Perhaps females today are simply more honest because their risky behavior is more acceptable in society today than before. They

may operate under a new paradigm that reinforces risky behaviors such as substance use or overt sexual behaviors so as to be equal and perhaps more attractive to men. A young woman in college today no longer adheres to the societal norms of old which tell her what she can or cannot do or say. Evidence of this is clear in a two-year study of nine high school and college students, age 15 – 21 which concluded that young women are engaging in sex more often with men they are not dating or may have just met (Sessions-Step, 2007). In fact, this investigation further reported that these encounters are largely replacing dating among students across the country and that smart, ambitious young women do emotional damage to themselves by doing so. A young woman may think that she now plays by the same rules that her male counterpart does and feels as though it is now her turn to take control and begin to carve out her own notches on the bedpost. Ironically enough however, this is not necessarily behavior that will leave her feeling satisfied or happy; nor is it behavior that is healthy or safe. Findings from this study lead researchers to question whether this is something that is happening on a much larger scale and clearly warrants further investigation.

Results from this study also confirmed the hypothesis that Latinos would not display risky behaviors to the extent that Caucasians and African Americans do. Indeed, although the Latino population followed the same trends in the means as other groups, when comparing males and females in all risk categories, Latinos were lower on overall and all sub-categories of risk. It may be the case that due to family support systems and therefore familial and cultural traditions and expectations, young Latino college students do not engage in risk-taking behaviors at the same rate as their Caucasian and African-American counterparts. Interestingly, when considering the proposed paradigm shift for young women, examinations by Villanueva Dixon and her colleagues (2008) of Latina women indicate that girls’ respect for maternal authority was associated with conflict with daughters, such that Latina mothers reported more intense conflict with daughters when girls displayed lower levels of respect. The reason that Latinos in this study scored significantly lower than the other groups may therefore be a matter of respect. It could be that young Latino college students know that familial expectations are high and engagement in overtly risky behaviors could be interpreted by their family as a sign of disrespect, which could cause conflict in the family.

There were some limitations in the current study that should be addressed. First, because a convenience sample from a small private university was surveyed, a larger, more representative sample could lead to more generalizable results. Another limitation is that the numbers of males versus females were a bit skewed and therefore it would be more accurate for future studies to include similar group sizes of females and males. Similarly, a larger, more diverse sample size would lead to more robust findings. Future research in this area is clearly warranted and replications of this study could prove to be of great heuristic value in the field of risk research.

**Figure 2** Risky Behavior As Displayed By Ethnic Group



**Table 1. Ethnic Group and Gender Results**

<b>Risk Type</b>	<b>Ethnic Group</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>
Driving	Latino	Male	7.90	5.46
		Female	5.69	4.57
		Total	6.59	4.97
	Caucasian	Male	9.07	4.86
		Female	7.63	3.55
		Total	8.10	4.03
	Af American	Male	13.00	3.02
		Female	8.43	2.76
		Total	9.00	3.02
	Total	Male	8.63	5.00
		Female	6.84	4.08
		Total	7.48	4.46
Substance	Latino	Male	2.43	3.36
		Female	2.75	3.26
		Total	2.78	3.30
	Caucasian	Male	5.30	3.40
		Female	5.48	3.98
		Total	5.47	3.75
	Af American	Male	3.00	0.75
		Female	4.71	5.19
		Total	4.50	4.84
	Total	Male	4.13	3.55
		Female	4.26	3.96
		Total	4.26	3.81
Sex	Latino	Male	2.62	2.01
		Female	1.81	1.93
		Total	2.18	2.13
	Caucasian	Male	3.13	2.86
		Female	2.98	2.69
		Total	3.03	2.74
	Af American	Male	5.00	2.13
		Female	3.57	2.70
		Total	3.75	2.55
	Total	Male	3.02	2.50
		Female	2.51	2.46
		Total	2.71	2.51
Overall Risk	Latino	Male	12.95	9.34
		Female	10.25	8.01
		Total	11.56	8.71
	Caucasian	Male	17.50	8.70
		Female	16.10	8.15
		Total	16.60	8.23
	Af American	Male	21.00	5.65
		Female	16.71	7.65
		Total	17.25	7.25
	Total	Male	15.78	8.93
		Female	13.62	8.52

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## APPENDIX

### Risk-Taking Measure

#### **Demographic Information**

Directions: Please provide the following information about yourself.

Gender: M or F

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Marital Status: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Siblings: \_\_\_\_\_

Immigration status: U.S. Citizen? Y or N

Were you born in the U.S.? Y or N If No, Where? \_\_\_\_\_

If No, how long have you lived in the U.S.? \_\_\_\_\_

Were your parents born here? Y or N If No, Where? \_\_\_\_\_

If No, how long have they lived in the U.S.? \_\_\_\_\_

Primary language learned and spoken at home: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Risk-Taking Behaviors**

Directions:

Please report the number of times that you have engaged in the following behaviors during the past year by circling the answer that best fits. Be sure to answer the questions as honestly and thoroughly as possible, keeping in mind that all of your information is completely confidential.

How many times have you:

- |   |   |      |           |            |                    |
|---|---|------|-----------|------------|--------------------|
| 1. Driven while intoxicated                     | 0 | Once | 2-5 times | 6-10 times | more than 10 times |
| 2. Driven over 80 miles per hour                | 0 | Once | 2-5 times | 6-10 times | more than 10 times |
| 3. Driven more than 20 MPH over the speed limit | 0 | Once | 2-5 times | 6-10 times | more than 10 times |

- |   |   |      |           |            |                    |
|---|---|------|-----------|------------|--------------------|
| 4. Raced another car  | 0 | Once | 2-5 times | 6-10 times | more than 10 times |
| 5. Pass in a no-passing zone  | 0 | Once | 2-5 times | 6-10 times | more than 10 times |
| 6. Binge drinking (more than 5 drinks at one time)                                | 0 | Once | 2-5 times | 6-10 times | more than 10 times |
| 7. Smoked marijuana   | 0 | Once | 2-5 times | 6-10 times | more than 10 times |
| 8. Used other illegal drugs   | 0 | Once | 2-5 times | 6-10 times | more than 10 times |
| 9. Had Sex without contraception  | 0 | Once | 2-5 times | 6-10 times | more than 10 times |
| 10. Had Sex with someone not known well   | 0 | Once | 2-5 times | 6-10 times | more than 10 times |
| 11. Please report the number of sexual partners that you've had in the past year: | 0 | 1    | 2-5       | 5-8        | more than 8        |