

## Helping Rural Youth Live Healthier

This article highlights the Saskatchewan Rural Youth Healthy Lifestyles and Risk Behaviour Project.

People in rural regions were becoming increasingly concerned about drug and alcohol use amongst their youth. Also, little information was available about the health issues facing rural youth in Saskatchewan or Western Canada. Diane Martz, PhD, and a team of researchers began assessing the health needs of youth in rural Saskatchewan in order to encourage healthy lifestyles and reduce risky behaviours in this population.

### WHAT DID WE DO?

The project involved a number of initiatives including:

- **Interviews with key informants.** Key informants were professionals from health, education, justice, and social services whose work included providing services to rural youth dealing with substance abuse.
- **A survey of youth.** We administered this survey to 954 youth in Grades 7-12 attending 34 schools in rural Saskatchewan communities with populations less than 5,500.
- **Focus groups.** Twenty-five rural youth from three high schools participated in focus groups.
- **Community information nights.** We publicly presented results from the interviews, surveys, and focus groups to communities and discussed the issues with community members.
- **Planning sessions.** We held sessions with communities and groups interested in developing strategies to encourage healthy lifestyles and reduce risky behaviours in rural youth.
- **Publications.** We shared the findings of the project in various publications useful for different audiences.

### OUR FINDINGS

The survey found significant relationships between how rural youth assess their own health and how much they engage in healthy or risky behaviours:

- Rural youth who described themselves as underweight or the right weight were more likely to rate their health higher than heavier youth.
- The more time youth spent participating in physical activity, the more likely they were to rate their health as excellent or very good.
- Youth who noted that they felt sad to the extent that it affected their activities were more likely to rate their health more poorly.
- Youth who had considered suicide rated their health more poorly.
- Youth who smoked or had tried smoking rated their health as poorer compared to those who had not tried smoking.
- Self-rated health declined with the number of days in a month that youth smoked.
- Youth who reported higher levels of drinking (e.g. binge drinking) rated their health more poorly.
- Youth who smoked marijuana rated their health as poorer compared to those who had never used the drug.
- Youth with healthier eating habits tended to rate their health as better.

In all the data that was gathered, alcohol emerged as the primary issue demanding attention. It was identified as the substance that youth used the most and that caused the most problems for them.

The youth in the focus groups spent more time discussing alcohol use than any other subject. In the survey, over 75 per cent of youth

identified alcohol as either a small or a large problem in their schools. Statistics from the survey indicate high rates of alcohol use, binge drinking, and drinking and driving.

The rates of alcohol use among the rural youth in this study are considerably higher than national rates for both Canada (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2006) and the United States (Office of the Surgeon General, 2007).

High rates of alcohol use were linked to higher rates of participation in other risky behaviours such as sexual activity, violence, smoking, and marijuana use.

### SHARING OUR FINDINGS

We produced a series of posters and fact sheets based on the information collected from the survey, focus groups, and interviews. The 12 fact sheets include:

- 1) project overview
- 2) general health
- 3) personal safety
- 4) sad feelings and attempted suicide
- 5) gambling
- 6) tobacco use
- 7) alcohol use
- 8) illegal drug use
- 9) prescription and over-the-counter drug use
- 10) sexuality
- 11) weight and eating habits
- 12) physical activity

The posters are an accessible way to portray the findings in community meetings, conferences and workshops. We have found the fact sheets to be effective in a wide variety of settings, from high school classrooms to the university.

The fact sheets and posters can be found at [http://www.pwhce.ca/program\\_rural\\_youth.htm](http://www.pwhce.ca/program_rural_youth.htm). For detailed reports and recommendations, contact the Saskatchewan Population Health & Evaluation Research Unit (SPHERU) (contact information at bottom of page).

### PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

We are just beginning the action phase of this project, but the results have already given the Humboldt and Area Drug Action Committee, the Saskatoon Health Region, service providers, parents, and the general public a better understanding of the issues facing youth in rural communities.

Having first-hand knowledge of the issues has led to community discussions about alcohol use and its role in rural culture. This new-found knowledge is also fostering an emerging collaboration among the health, justice, and education sectors in east central Saskatchewan. Together they are looking for workable solutions to the problem of alcohol use and other risky behaviours among Saskatchewan youth.

*Diane Martz, PhD, Research Faculty Member of the Saskatchewan Population Health and Evaluation Research Unit (SPHERU) and Director of the Research Ethics Office at the University of Saskatchewan. With the assistance of Bonnie Zink, Communication and Knowledge Exchange Officer with SPHERU.*

*This research was funded by Health Canada through the Drug Strategy Community Initiatives Fund and the Saskatoon Health Region. It was also supported by the Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence, SPHERU and St. Peter's College.*

