



Drug Use and Risk Among Youth in Different Rural Contexts

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Residential context, rural, substance use, farm, adolescence, risk factors, protective factors

POPULATION GROUP

Rural youth

STEPPING UP THEMES

Health and Wellness

RESEARCH ORIGIN

United States

SOURCE

Academic Article (peer reviewed)

1. What is the research about?

Young people who use drugs early in life are at greater risk of developing dependence and related physical, mental, and social conditions later in life. Drug use and abuse among rural youth is equal or greater than use in urban areas. The increase in drug use among rural youth may be attributed to limited access to fewer services and opportunities, greater stigma associated with accessing services, and socio-economic challenges related to lower educational achievement and fewer working class job opportunities. This research examines geographic differences related to youth drug use patterns. The study compares the incidence of drug use of youth who live on farms, to youth who live in rural areas, but not on farms. The prevention of youth drug use is a priority and this research examines drug use rates among rural youth, in addition to the protective and risk factors present in the lives of farm-dwelling youth to determine appropriate intervention strategies.

2. Where did the research take place?

This study took place in 24 rural, small to medium-sized towns in seven states in the United States.

3. Who is this research about?

The research is about adolescent youth between the ages of 11 and 18, who live in rural contexts. Youth in this study lived either on a farm, or in the country, but not on a farm. All of the youth lived in communities of less than 50,000.

4. How was the research done?

18,767 youth completed the self-administered “Communities That Care Youth Survey”. The survey was administered in the classroom. Researchers obtained an 83.2% completion rate.

Youth were asked to identify their place of residence, their drug use patterns, and to identify which of 32 protective and risk factors were present in their lives. The researchers used statistical regression models to distinguish between residential setting, risk and protective factors, and drug use.

“Because levels of drug use and risk are elevated among farm-dwelling youths, concerted efforts to reach these youths and their families with preventive interventions are warranted.”

5. What are the key findings?

Drug use varies for high-school aged youth in different geographical contexts. Youth living on farms were significantly more likely than youth living in towns to use alcohol, smokeless tobacco, inhalants, and other hard drugs in the 30 days previous to completing the survey, as well as over their lifetimes.

Youth living on farms had more community, peer-individual, school-based and family risk factors than youth who lived in town. However, youth living on farms also had an increased exposure to protective factors in their communities.

Youth across all contexts were less likely to use drugs over the previous 30 days or over their lifetime when their school context provided elevated protective factors such as opportunities and rewards for prosocial involvement.

Overall, however, this study demonstrates that the more rural the context, the higher the likelihood of drug use.

6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

This study has important implications for preventative interventions. The research shows that youth living on farms are more likely to use drugs than those who live in rural areas but not on farms.

Addressing youth drug use in rural locations is not without complications; youth living on farms have a greater sense of a shared identity, more meaningful relationships and community interconnection. However, this works against them because these increased protective factors cover-up community norms and a peer culture that favors drug use. The researchers posit that there is higher community tolerance for drug use in rural communities.

In order to reduce risk-factors and increase protective factors, interventions need to address the broader socio-economic challenges rural youth faces, as well as reframe community narratives around the acceptability of drug use.



Rhew, I, Hawkins, D, Oesterle, S (2011). Drug use among youth in different rural contexts. *Health and Place*, 17, 117-783.

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