NEWTON COUNTY CSR: ARE RURAL YOUTH AT RISK?

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Community Systemwide Response (CSR) is a “grass roots” effort to unite community leaders in developing programs to meet the needs of local youth and families. The goal of CSR is for community leaders to take responsibility for identifying and communicating to citizens the problems facing youth and families in their county.

In Newton County the CSR Steering Committee includes County Cooperative Extension Educators, juvenile court judges, probation officers, law enforcement officials, church leaders, school teachers and administrators, and counselors.

The Newton County CSR team surveyed youth in all of their primary and secondary schools to get their views about the pressures they face on a daily basis. In total, 1062 students in grades 7-12 and 632 students from grades 4-6 participated. This represents over 95% of all the 4th-12th grade youth in Newton County. This Focus Report summarizes the survey results.

Several demographic indicators for Newton County are presented below. These statistics suggest that Newton County’s profile is quite typical of rural counties across Indiana.

Newton County Profile:
- population 15,000/400 square miles
- 2 school corporations/high schools
- largely manufacturing jobs
- 3.4% unemployment
- per capita income: $15,176
- 9% poverty
- 66% maternal employment
- families: 87% intact; 10% female-headed

Two surveys were developed: one for grades 4-6 and another for grades 7-12. The survey for primary school students included items on the use of illicit drugs and alcohol, and a general overview of lifestyle pressures. The survey for the junior/senior high school students covered similar topics, plus sexual, educational goals and career goals. Students also provided information regarding factors that might either place them at risk or protect them from potentially unhealthy lifestyles such as substance abuse, early sexual activity, and delinquent behaviors.

According to students’ reports, factors that seem to serve a protective function include:
- Earning good grades, involvement in extra school and community activities (like sports and/or music), and church attendance.

Students at risk seem to engage in more of the following:
- Threatening others and/or getting in trouble at school, gang activity, and trouble with police.

Some students indicated that they experienced victimization at school, including:
- fear of being hurt (12%) or actually being hurt (8%) by students.

Next we examined the educational aspirations of the junior/high school students. As the pie chart shows, most students plan on a college education. Students with higher educational goals were more likely to report earning better grades, and more involvement in school and church, while students with lower educational aspirations were more likely to report involvement in delinquent activities (trouble at school and/or with police).

Surprisingly, students with higher educational goals were also at greater risk for contemplating suicide, which suggests these students may have difficulty coping with the increased pressure to achieve academically.
An alarming finding was the number of junior/senior high school boys and girls who reported that they had thought about committing suicide. Students who reported more frequent thoughts of suicide were more likely to have experienced delinquency, victimization, and talking with friends about drugs and alcohol. Conversely, students whose parents talked with them about problems related to using drugs and alcohol were less likely to report having suicidal thoughts. As the graph below indicates, more girls than boys reported contemplating suicide.

Students also reported how often they used drugs and alcohol. The lower-use substances included cocaine, uppers/stimulants, downers/depressants, inhalants, and hallucinogens. The higher-use substances included cigarettes, beer, wine coolers, liquor and marijuana. The following graphs show the percentages of 4th thru 12th grade boys and girls who reported at least monthly versus ever using beer, cigarettes, and marijuana in the past year. Students who reported more frequent use of these three substances were also more likely to report involvement in delinquent activities, and thoughts of suicide.

Students also provided information regarding their involvement in sexual activities. Factors associated with increases in the number of sexual partners included beer/cigarette/marijuana use and delinquency. Decreases were associated with parental discipline (setting clear rules and consequences for violating rules).

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Finally, students who reported being involved in a pregnancy were also more likely to have experienced being fearful of or actually being victimized at school, as well as using beer, cigarettes, or marijuana more frequently. On the other hand, students who were more involved in school, community, and church activities were at lower risk for experiencing a pregnancy.

These results suggest that rural youth in Newton County have a profile of health risks that is quite similar to national-level indicators. Most important perhaps is the finding that students who are successful academically, and more involved in school and community activities are least likely to be at risk for the problem behaviors described above. The challenge for the future is to find ways to encourage increased involvement of rural youth in these protective, health-promoting activities.

Dr. Hess is an Assistant Professor of Child Development, and Director of the Newton County CSR project within the Center for Families. Her research focuses on the development of social- and self-competence from late childhood through early adolescence. She is particularly interested in the family and peer relationships of typically developing students and of students with special needs, and in aggression/victimization in schools.

The following people have been instrumental to the success of the Newton County CSR project. For leadership on the Newton County CSR Steering Committee: Sue Frischie and Chris Bittle, Newton County Extension Specialists; and Robert Smart, Newton County Circuit Court Judge. For coordination of CSR data entry at Purdue: Shelley MacDermid, Center for Families Director. Finally, the following students have contributed to the project as Research Assistants: CSR data entry--Jenny Bandyk, Min Li, Phillip Mamalakis, and Mary Ann Rombach; data analysis, literature searches, and collaboration with CSR Steering Committee--Jenny Bandyk, Sue Bartholomew, and Eric Gass.