

★ Guest editorial

Teens need to understand ramifications of taking health risks

As a graduate student in health and medical journalism, I'm used to reading statistics regarding risk.

But for public health nurses like Elbert County Health Department Nurse Manager Mary Champion, the numbers are real.

A study published in the *Journal of Rural Health* showed that teens in rural areas gamble with their health by making unwise choices about sex, smoking, drinking and other risky behaviors.

Although this hardly comes as a shock, experts say documenting behavioral risks among rural teens is essential. In the absence of such data, it's easier for cash-strapped communities to put programs that promote healthy behaviors – including the Boys and Girls Club – on the chopping block.

"It's just stuff we know, but we need the data to be able to say it," said Alexa Curtis, lead author and assistant professor of nursing at California State University, Sacramento.

The study used phone interviews to quiz 663 rural 12- to 17-year-olds about behaviors that

affect health.

The researchers found that seven percent of teens were habitual smokers and 42 percent had consumed more than a few sips of alcohol.

Sixteen percent of teens said they are sexually active, and of these 34 percent had multiple partners and 13 percent had sex without a condom.

The researchers believe these findings apply to rural adolescents elsewhere in the United States, as one-tenth of American teens live in California.

The survey results are no surprise to Champion, except that the numbers are off.

"The statistics in this study about the numbers of teens engaging in sex, those with sexually transmitted infections and those who smoke, use drugs or alcohol would be considered low in comparison to Elbert County," said Champion.

According to Elbert County's most recent Behavior and Risk for Teens (BART) report, about 23 percent of participating teens say they smoke and about 30 percent admitted to drinking.



Chelsea Toledo

★ My view

About 50 percent of Elbert teens say they are sexually active; of these, 67 percent had multiple partners and 25 percent hadn't used condoms.

The main author of the California study, who worked as a nurse in rural San Bernardino County, says that the design of the California Health Interview Survey (CHIS) causes risky behaviors to be underreported.

For one thing, Curtis says, people don't always tell the truth.

For another, CHIS surveyors call only home phones, not mobile numbers, and interview

teens only if a parent gives permission for them to answer questions.

The BART survey also relies on self-reporting from teens with parental permission.

The last time the survey was administered in Elbert County was in 2003.

"Getting information on children is very difficult," said nursing professor Angeline Bushy, a professor at the University of Central Florida in Daytona and author of a textbook on rural nursing.

When little is known about the risks kids are taking – whether the risk is getting too many calories and too little exercise or engaging in unsafe sex—it's possible for communities to ignore the need to act.

According to Curtis, preventative services include not only public health efforts geared for teens, but also programs that keep them active, both mentally and physically, in safe settings.

"The cuts in government spending to programs like the Boys and Girls Club and others have taken away the few things that Elbert County youth had to give them something to do

outside of school," said Champion.

The teen program at Elberton's Boys and Girls club shut down two years ago due to lack of funding, according to Mike Hackett, president of the Boys and Girls Club of Athens. Hackett believes that having current data could help nonprofits like his argue for their survival.

"It's difficult to track information other than grades," Hackett said.

If more data were available about the consequences of having teens with too much time on their hands, he would be able to make stronger appeals to donors about specific aims their support can accomplish.

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Chelsea Toledo is a University of Georgia graduate student studying Health and Medical Journalism, which is the only professional graduate program offered through the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication. As a first-year student, she has been assigned Elbert County to research local public health-related issues in rural areas.