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, we need the numbers to be able to show that teens in rural San Bernardino County, says that the design of the California Health Interview Survey (CHIS) causes risky behaviors to be under-reported.

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 under-reported.

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 Angelina 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.

Chelsea Toledo is a University of Georgia graduate student 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.

Op ed

Guest editorial

Teens need to understand ramifications of taking health risks

Chelsea Toledo

My view

About 50 percent of Elbert County youth had taken away the few things that Elbert youth had to give them something to do outside of school,” said Champion.

The teen program at Elbertton’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.

Chelsea Toledo is a University of Georgia graduate student 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.