

Improving Adolescent Health: Research to Guide Action

During the past few decades we learned much about a critical transitional stage in human development that we call adolescence. We watch with mounting concern as too many of our young people fail to make this transition between childhood and adulthood successfully. We watch as they suffer from the consequences of violence, suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, increasingly virulent sexually transmitted diseases including human immunovirus infection, and teenage pregnancy. As a nation, we could continue to address these categorical health problems only as isolated and independent epidemics; or we could recognize the interdependency of these problems and the need to establish a more intensive, coordinated effort to help our young people make a more successful transition between childhood and adulthood. Solid, practical research such as that described in this special supplement of *Public Health Reports* should guide our efforts.

The first nine articles in this supplement set forth the rationale for the specific behaviors measured by the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS). The YRBSS was designed to focus the nation on, and systematically track, the prevalence of unprotected sexual intercourse, cigarette smoking, weapon carrying, and other behaviors that have the greatest impact on the health status of adolescents and the adults they will become. Education and health officials nationwide are using YRBSS data to identify the essential foci of adolescent health promotion programs, to educate the public on the need for effective health education and health services, and to modify curriculums and teacher-training programs to better meet the needs of adolescents.

The final four articles in this collection describe innovative research projects with high-risk adolescents and demonstrate at least two important principles. First, many adolescent risk behaviors are interrelated. A particular behavior may be both a cause and an effect of the developmental turbulence experienced by many adolescents. This implies that, to be effective, health promotion programs for youth should be comprehensive and linked to appropriate health services.

Second, formative evaluation research can illuminate strategic actions necessary to improve the health of youth. All programs—school-based, community-based,

and mass media—rest on assumptions that must be tested with the population for whom they are developed. These articles remind us that young people can be a remarkable resource for their own well-being.

As a group, adolescents represent one of the nation's largest underserved populations. With research to systematically monitor critical risk behaviors over time and to help us understand how to reach youth more effectively, we can and must develop ever more successful prevention programs. The stakes for our young people and for our nation could not be higher.

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