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Rural Schools

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Rural Schools

Jody Lieske and Susan M. Swearer

Nearly one in three public school students in the United States (U.S.) attends school in a rural area. A rural area is defined as an area with a population of 25,000 people or fewer. Rural America has often been portrayed as an idealized life that involves intact families, close ties with neighbors, low crime levels, and relatively stress free in comparison to the fast paced life of those who reside in urban areas. Although many benefits of rural living hold true, many factors such as poverty, mental health problems, substance abuse, and limited access to services create a more accurate picture of the challenges that students and school personnel experience in rural American schools.

Poverty, Mental Health Problems, and Substance Abuse

Poverty poses a serious threat to students who attend schools within rural communities. A disproportionately higher number of rural families live in poverty in comparison to their urban counterparts. The increase in economic problems experienced by rural families is often accompanied by stress and isolation, which is correlated with a rise in mental health problems. Such family stress can have a devastating impact on young people's motivation for success and school achievement and are precursors to dropping out of school, drug use, crime, and early childbearing.

In conjunction with poverty and mental health problems, youth who attend rural

schools can also experience substance abuse issues. Alcohol is one of the most widely abused substances among rural teens. Data from the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse show that, when compared with urban students, eighth graders living in rural areas are 104% more likely to use amphetamines. This includes methamphetamine, a highly addictive substance which can result in unpredictable, paranoid, and aggressive behavior and can cause brain damage. Rural eighth graders have also been found to be 83% more likely than those in urban areas to use crack cocaine; 34% more likely to smoke marijuana; 29% more likely to drink alcohol; and 70% more likely to get drunk.

Limited Access to Services

Because of economic instability and isolation, rural schools often face the problem of accessing adequate school services. Since many rural schools are geographically isolated, the cost of program delivery is typically higher compared to non-rural schools. Funding inequities in many states often favor schools in metropolitan areas vs. those in rural areas. This restricts the amount of dollars that are allotted to rural schools. Furthermore, local funding can be unstable and sparse since such funding is often tied to the community's economy which may fluctuate and be limited in rural areas.

Because of the instability of school funding, rural schools face difficulty with school staff recruitment and retention of qualified teachers. Rural education employees encounter challenges such as lower salaries and benefits, lack of access to professional development opportunities, professional isolation, and the expectation to serve multiple roles within the school system and community.

Attracting and maintaining education and health professionals who specialize in treatment programs for young people remains a key issue in providing accessible services in rural areas. Only 6.6% of substance abuse treatment providers who serve rural youth specialized in the areas of drug or alcohol abuse, as opposed to 17.8% of providers based in urban areas. Unfortunately, many rural communities not only lack appropriate mental health services, many families often can not afford treatment since they lack appropriate insurance. Furthermore, a disparity of access to mental health services within the rural school setting compared to urban schools presents a significant problem for the psychological well being of children and youth who attend rural schools.

See also: Access and utilization of health care; Community schools; Substance abuse; Teacher burnout.

Suggested Reading

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