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**Medical News: Preventive Care**

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**Community Youth Program Curbs Risky Behaviors**

By Chris Emery, Contributing Writer, MedPage Today  
Published: September 08, 2009  
Reviewed by **Dori F. Zaleznik, MD**; Associate Clinical Professor of  
Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Boston and  
Dorothy Caputo, MA, RN, BC-ADM, CDE, Nurse Planner

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A community-based prevention program that targeted schools, families, and youth-focused programs reduced consumption of alcohol, cigarettes, and smokeless tobacco and curbed delinquent behavior among middle school students in two dozen U.S. towns, a new study found.

**Action Points**

- Note that middle-schoolers in towns with a broad, community-based prevention program were less likely to engage in risky behavior than in towns without these programs.
- Note that the authors and commentators argued that well-designed youth programs show promise for preventing youthful misconduct.

On the other hand, students in jurisdictions where the Communities That Care (CTC) program was not implemented were 60% more likely to start using alcohol (1.60 AOR, 95% CI 1.05 to 2.44), 79% more likely to start smoking cigarettes (95% CI 1.09 to 2.92), and 134% more likely to start using smokeless tobacco (95% CI 1.34 to 4.09) between 7th and 8th grade, according to an online report in the Sept. 7 *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*.

The study also found that students in towns without the program were 41% more likely to begin delinquent behaviors, including stealing, property damage, shoplifting, or attacking someone (95% CI 1.05 to 1.89) by the time they were in the 8th grade.

"This evidence that the early initiation of alcohol use, tobacco use, and delinquency can be prevented by coalition efforts is important," J. David Hawkins, PhD, of the University of Washington, and colleagues wrote. "The early initiation of these behaviors has negative consequences."

The authors noted that between 11 and 15, children often initiate risky behaviors that put their health in jeopardy and collectively impose large costs on society. In 2007, 39% of 8th graders had drunk alcohol, 22% had smoked cigarettes, 9% had used smokeless tobacco, and 14% had used marijuana, according to an NIH survey.

"Rather than waiting until alcohol use has turned to abuse or dependence, tobacco use has caused cancer, or delinquency has become chronically offending, leaving a trail of victims, prevention of the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, and delinquency during early adolescence should be important public health priorities," wrote Hawkins and colleagues.

While a variety of effective programs and strategies have been developed to head off these risky behaviors, few communities have implemented high-quality prevention programs, the authors wrote.

And, although experts suggest that broad-based programs that mobilize medical, educational, and service sectors in a community could curb drug use and bad behavior in teenagers, the

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**Program Overview**

**Learning Objectives**

Upon successful completion of this educational program, the reader should be able to:

1. Discuss the results of this study
2. Review the relevance and significance of the study in the broader context of clinical care

**Disclosures**

**Chris Emery and Dori F. Zaleznik, MD; Associate Clinical Professor of Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Boston.**, have disclosed that they have no relevant financial relationships or conflicts of interest with commercial interests related directly or indirectly to this educational activity.

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theory is largely untested and such programs have typically failed in the past.

In an accompanying editorial, Francis T. Cullen, PhD, and Cheryl Lero Jonson, MA, criminologists from the University of Cincinnati, emphasized the importance of the new study in countering claims that punishing undesirable behaviors in youths is the only way to prevent them.

"In a highly politicized environment in which elected officials try to trump one another regarding who can be tougher on crime, efforts at prevention and treatment risk being discredited as bleeding-heart liberalism," they wrote.

Hawkins and colleagues investigated the effect the CTC program had on curbing risky behavior in teenagers living in small towns in seven states. The program was implemented in 12 small towns, while 12 other similar towns served as controls.

In the communities assigned to the CTC group, 13 different programs known to be effective were chosen during the 2004-2005 school year and then implemented during the next two school years.

These included school-based programs (Life Skills Training, Bully Prevention Program, and Project Alert, for example), community-based youth programs (Participate and Learn Skills, Big Brothers-Big Sisters, Stay Smart), and family-focused programs (Strengthening Families, Parents Who Care, Parenting Wisely).

The impact of the programs was gauged by surveying more than 4,400 students four times about drug use and delinquent behavior. The students were in 5th grade in the spring of 2004 when the first survey was conducted and in 8th grade in the spring of 2007, when the last survey was conducted.

In addition to reductions in the initiation of alcohol and tobacco use and delinquent behavior associated with the CTC program, the results showed that 8th graders in the CTC group were less likely to binge drink and reported engaging in a smaller range of delinquent activities in the year prior to the last survey.

The CTC program did not seem to prevent students from using marijuana or inhalants.

In their editorial, Cullen and Jonson argue that reform-focused programs such as "boot camps" and "Scared Straight" are ineffective, but that the study by Hawkins and colleagues indicates that that evidence-based strategies that focus on early prevention can head off youthful misconduct.

The editorialists did note, however, that the study was conducted in predominantly white, small towns that might not be at most risk for delinquency.

"The expanded use of this approach, especially in at-risk communities, seems worthy of further investigation," they wrote.

The study was funded by the National Institutes of Health and the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention.

Co-investigator Richard F. Catalano, PhD, reported being a board member of Channing Bete Company, the distributor of Supporting School Success and Guiding Good Choices, programs that were used in the study.

**Primary source:** Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine  
Source reference:

Hawkins J, et al "Results of a type 2 translational research trial to prevent adolescent drug use and delinquency" *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med* 2009; 9: 789-98.

**Additional source:** Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine  
Source reference:

Cullen F and Johnson C, "Understanding the importance of communities that care" *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med* 2009; 9: 866-67.

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