

Saskatchewan Rural Youth Healthy Lifestyles and Risk Behaviour Needs Assessment

Report on Youth Focus Groups

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Youth Focus Groups

1.0 Introduction

To fully understand the results of the surveys, it was important to take the results back to the youth for their comments.

When youth completed the Healthy Lifestyles and Risk Behaviours survey, they were also asked if they were interested in participating in a focus group to talk about the results of the questionnaire and were given a form to fill in their contact information. These forms were kept separate from the surveys to ensure confidentiality. In September, 2007, an amendment of the study was sent to the Research Ethics Office at the University of Saskatchewan to allow us to conduct three focus groups. This amendment included the interview schedule and consent forms for the focus groups. Approval of the amended research protocol was received on September 12, 2007.

Those schools in which there was a sizable group of youth who indicated an interest in the focus group and whose principals were willing to co-operate were approached. Additional students were recruited from each school by the school principals who announced the opportunity to the student body. 20 females and 5 male students from 3 high schools in the School Division participated in discussion groups in early October, 2007. Youth Launch from Nutana Collegiate in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan facilitated the discussion groups. This group has considerable expertise in facilitating youth in discussions of sensitive topics.

In the discussion, the students were shown some of the results from the questionnaire survey completed in the school division during the winter of 2006. They discussed the responses to questions on tobacco use, alcohol use, prescription and non-prescription drug use, gambling, violence, sports, nutrition, sexuality and personal safety. Students were shown some statistics that reflected the findings in each of these areas and we asked them:

1. Whether they thought these findings reflected what they were seeing in their lives.
2. Why they thought students get involved in these activities
3. Why they thought gender and age seem to make a difference in the rates of participation in various activities.
4. What they would like to see happen in their communities to encourage healthy choices for rural youth.

The focus groups discussions were transcribed and analysed for themes in NVIVO.

The following discussion is organized by topic area, including personal safety, gambling, tobacco, alcohol, illegal drugs, sexuality, weight and exercise and encouraging healthy choices in communities.

2.0 Personal Safety

2.1 Seatbelts

There is considerable variation among the youth as to wearing seatbelts. Some wear them all the time, commenting that they feel naked without them. Some only wear them on the highway, and some wear them if they see the police coming. Others say they don't wear seatbelts on back roads, driving short distances, or driving on the farm. When cruising (driving around as an activity) some youth stated they didn't wear seatbelts, while others did if they were driving during cruising and others did all the time.

Some youth commented that what their parents do influences what they do, when both their parents don't wear seatbelts, then they only wear seatbelts when they have to, if one of their parents insists on seatbelt use and one doesn't, they choose which one they will emulate.

"I was brought up with my Dad's morals, me and my brother, cause I know around town we never do it, my Mom does but we usually drive with my Dad, my Dad won't. So it's me and my brother and my Dad, we don't unless we see the 100 on the highway, once we're on the highway we put it on but in town we just don't bother."

In discussing the differences between females and males regarding seatbelt use, youth commented that girls are more cautious and guys are lazier, risk takers and don't worry about consequences.

2.2 Sad feelings and Suicide

Youth felt the statistics on having sad feeling to the extent that it affected their activities was likely low and that the numbers of youth thinking about suicide was either accurate or low. Sad feelings meant you were.....

"so sad, you didn't want to get up."

"you just want to sleep."

"so sad you just didn't want to go out."

"just want to sit at home all day and just cry or just sleep and just forget about everything when they're sad."

Some thought that in a small town, where everyone knows everybody so well, *“You can always tell when someone is sad or pretty depressed about something or if they don’t show up for school and you know they’re not sick because you’ve talked to them earlier in the morning”*. But others commented that there are some who you can’t tell, *“they make everything seem like it’s just peachy great and as soon as they get home they’re ready to rip themselves to pieces”*. This was substantiated by youth from another school who commented that *“One of our friends committed suicide when we were in grade 7. I don’t know, I never saw it coming at all”*.

“I think if they talk about it, they’re more looking for help than reasons not to do it. I don’t know, people that don’t say anything..... I think you’re more serious about it than the person who would say something because then you’re kind of looking out, you’re trying to reach out for someone to help you but if you don’t say anything, then I think it’s a serious problem.”

A number of the youth recounted experiences in which they had talked to friends who talked about suicide. They thought sadness and thoughts of suicide may happen when people feel alienated and don’t feel they belong; parents may put a lot of pressure on you; if parents are splitting up; if there is a death in the family and when there is abuse in the family.

Youth thought females and males dealt with depression differently. Girls talk about it with their friends, but guys won’t call a friend and talk because they don’t want to seem weak or vulnerable. Both females and males thought guys would be more likely to talk to a girl than to other guys.

“cause when I’m around guys, oh whatever, it’s no big deal, it’s just some other girl, but really, if you actually talk to him he’ll have a different opinion, when it’s more one on one ... it’s just the way they show themselves around a bigger group, a majority of guys, I think they’ve got to look like they’re a man, or tough or something.”

2.3 Fighting

Some youth thought the statistics on fighting were low, because at every party or dance there was a fight. They noted that fighting was linked to drinking. Some thought it was usually the same people, but another group commented that fights often happen with people from different towns and they had also experienced fights resulting from racism.

Youth had some definite ideas about how females and males deal with fighting. Boys have more physical fights whereas girls are all talk. Girls are more manipulating, spread rumours and talk, they are *“mental terrorists”*. Guys and friends break up girl fights, while girls can’t break up a guy fight. Guys punch and wrestle and get over it, girls kick, scratch, bite and hold a grudge. Youth thought guys were more likely to fight because it is macho, they think it is manly

to fight. Youth also commented that they thought things were not as bad as in the city where they had heard stories of weapons being used in fights.

2.4 Forced Sex

Some of the females found it hard to understand how a guy could be forced to have sex. They felt that when girls are forced to have sex, it was often related to drinking. Another group talked about the situation where guys may feel they have put enough time into a relationship, that they should be rewarded with sex and girls were pressured to give in.

2.5 Relationship Abuse

Some youth had a narrow definition of relationship abuse, although others were knowledgeable about emotional and verbal abuse as well as physical abuse. They recognized that some youth were in relationships where there was emotional and verbal abuse but those types of abuse were sometimes hard to recognize.

“but it’s so much harder to tell if you’re being used abused emotionally because it could be twisted to make it look like love instead of hurt, that’s a big thing”.

One youth noted that whether an action was abuse depended on the intent – females and males may wrestle with each other, and bruises may result, but it is not mean.

The youth thought it was more significant when a guy slapped a girl and that the statistics may be low for girls slapping guys.

“like I didn’t think getting slapped would be real abuse. Like for guys getting slapped by their girlfriends, like they more likely did something extremely stupid to deserve it so it wouldn’t really be abuse so, like. Like I’ve been slapped before, I deserved it okay.”

[Last weekend] “we were standing outside beside this girl and this guy just came up from behind and like, I don’t know what was going on but he tried putting his hands up the girl’s shirt and the girl just turned around and whoooooo, right across the face.”

Youth also noted that abuse may be linked to drinking as well as rationalized with being drunk.

“because if your boyfriend was drunk you would be like, oh well he was drunk, he didn’t know what he was doing. So I think that goes with the....when you’ve been intoxicated the girls give the guys a lot more leeway in what’s good and what’s not good ... I don’t think that’s right at all but I’ve heard girls say that well he was drunk, he didn’t know what he was doing...well.”

In one focus group the female youth talked about how young women could take control of the relationships in their lives, though self confidence and self esteem. These young women

thought that more attention needed to be paid to building self confidence and self esteem for today, not focusing on relationships down the road.

“We need to be taught more to have self confidence in ourselves and not so much about what’s going to happen [in relationships] later on. Because we’re already too far gone if they’re going try to stop it down there, they have to start where it all begins which is like self-confidence and loving yourself.”

When girls do not have that confidence in themselves, we *“just want someone to come and love us and be there for us all the time and the problem is that we’re depending on other people for stuff so we’re willing to give things away so that we can get that love back, but you need to know that you can survive by yourself and that you can have a good time and you can have a good life without this other guy there, because having to depend on a guy is just going to....they’re going to use that to their advantage, because they know that if they ask you to do something and the girl thinks they’re going to leave the girl is more likely to do it.”*

A girl with self confidence and self esteem ... *“she’ll just hold herself in a different way. Like sometimes you can see it in the way that they stand or in the way they talk to people or the way they interact with people, they just know that they can get through the day without having to rely on their parents or friends or boyfriend.”*

“The girl who can get up in the morning and look at herself in the mirror before she’s done anything and know that she’s still beautiful and even though her hair is all over the place and she doesn’t have make-up on or she’s not wearing the perfect clothes but she can still say, well this is what I have and whether it’s not what’s perfect in magazines and whether it’s not what I think that guys want, that’s who I am and I’m going to love that, whether some days I feel good about it and some days I feel bad about it.”

They also thought that relationships should be based on common values and common interests, not just on looks and went on to say that finding that common ground takes time.

3.0 Gambling

Youth did not perceive gambling as a serious issue among people of their age although they did allow that it might be a serious issue for older people. Gambling was not considered serious because it was done for fun, the amounts gambled were considered small, and *“only the odd person gets addicted”*.

Youth felt the statistics on playing poker were low, as one youth commented *“card games are major”*. Much of the gambling is linked to sports and some of the gender difference was

attributed to males being more involved in sports than females. They also attributed the difference to girls being more interested in spending their money on material things (like clothes) while guys were more competitive and more interested in experiences and risky things. Youth observed that....

“It’s an adrenalin rush for them, that’s what they like about the card games is the fact that oh I could lose all my money or I could win it.”

Males were much more likely to buy sports selects tickets, while women bought lottery tickets.

Most of the youth saw gambling as entertainment or as a social activity, *“you’ll go and play cards and hang out with your friends and have a few drinks usually”*. Another motivation for gambling was an opportunity to make money, one youth recounted his experience *“I’d do my football picks and this year I have won every time so that’s why I do it”*.

A connection was also made between gambling and binge drinking as they both occur in the context of major sporting events such as Super Bowl, Hockey playoffs and Grey Cup.

Youth noted that they could buy scratch tickets under age, as they were not always asked for ID, although one youth maintained that her boss made her ID people. They also mentioned that when they worked in places that sell scratch tickets they had access to them, although they are underage. In their working experiences, people buying tickets were an even mix of young and old

4.0 Tobacco

The influence of parents came out in the discussion of whether youth smoke during card games. Youth responded that they generally didn’t smoke at poker games because parents didn’t want you smoking on their house. They noted that ...

“That’s interesting though, we can have a few beers when we’re playing cards but we can’t have a cigarette.”

They felt that youth were motivated to try that first cigarette by curiosity, to try it out and see what it was like. Girls were thought to smoke so that they would remain thin. Youth thought smoking relieved stress, calmed them down. One youth thought people smoked because it gave them a buzz. Another said they smoked because it tasted good, which was disputed by others in the group.

All of the focus groups commented that they thought the percentage of youth chewing tobacco should be much higher. The use of tobacco products was definitely seen as gendered. All three

focus groups reported that girls smoked and guys chewed. The youth in the focus groups consistently perceived girls as much more concerned with reputation and appearance and commented on the link between smoking and thinness. However, one student commented on the inconsistency of using tobacco to improve your appearance when *“smoking on a cigarette is going to make you like look ugly when you’re old”*.

The females in the focus group unanimously viewed girls chewing tobacco as negative. Comments focussed on the aesthetics of chewing tobacco. That it was nasty, dirty, and looked stupid.

“Girls don’t normally chew cause it’s nasty. Cause it looks disgusting.

“It smells disgusting.”

“it’s so gross, it’s like runny diarrhoea”

Youth thought males were more likely to equate chewing tobacco with being macho and noted the strong link to sports. One male commented that *“100% of my hockey team chews. Well I guess we’ll exclude the one guy, so 95%”*. Chewing tobacco has long been associated with baseball and one youth mentioned being part of hockey teams that will *“put in a dip between intermission....[they don’t] chew on the ice but just like being part of the team”*.

Youth commented that guys were more likely to use chewing tobacco than to smoke because they perceive it doesn’t affect the lungs as much as smoking so you can play sports and still perform at a high level. Youth also commented that chew was much easier to hide than smoking, although its use was given away by guys walking around with pop bottles spitting into them and the bulge in the lip. Other reasons youth gave for the increase in chewing tobacco were that people chew when they are trying to quit smoking cigarettes, some chew when they are inside and smoke outside and that it is easier to get away with because it is less obvious than smoking.

The influence of age on consuming tobacco products arises because access is easier when you are older. Despite the regulations on selling tobacco to youth under 18 years old, underage youth reported they sometimes sold to their underage friends when they were unsupervised at work. Younger youth who may have accessed their cigarettes from their parents who smoked have less opportunity now with lower rates of parental smoking.

Students did recognize there were serious health effect from both smoking and chewing, although these were not always accurate. These included increased blood pressure, ‘screwing up’ your mouth and stomach and clogged arteries and stuff.

5.0 Alcohol

Students in all three focus groups indicated that they thought that the statistics collected on alcohol were an accurate representation of their experience.

5.1 Rural – Urban Differences

There was a definite sense of a difference between the rural and urban experience. Rural students felt that their parents trusted them more. Some thought the city was more dangerous, that city peoples parents have more rules. In the city you can get away with more because parents aren't as likely to find out.

The social dynamics of the city were also perceived as different. Rural youth thought that in the city with larger numbers of people, youth choose the group they get involved with and different groups get involved in different things. In rural areas, with fewer people, people mix more and you might be friends with someone whose activities you do not agree with, because it is a small community.

They also talked about differences in policing in rural and urban areas. Youth reported that in one town, the 'cops go to bed' while in the city, policing extends all night. The isolation of rural areas and the intimate knowledge many rural people have with their local area was also discussed youth talked about bush parties being less noticeable and less easily found, whereas in the city they had heard reports of police breaking up parties. They also felt that the police presence in the city reduced 'booze cruising' because urban youth are more afraid they will get caught drinking and driving. Some youth were also confident that their more intimate knowledge of rural roads, meant they could lose the police down a dirt road, others were less sure of that.

There is some evidence of different forms of social control for youth existing in rural and urban areas. In rural areas, social controls are perceived to be a more important than in urban areas. Youth commented on the lack of privacy in a small town, that in such a small town, "*everybody knows everything. You can't keep things hidden from your parents*". Whereas in the city, they felt that parents had less opportunity to learn what their kids were doing. On the other hand, rural youth saw the police as having a bigger impact on the actions of urban youth, in terms of breaking up parties and being a control on drinking and driving.

5.2 Pervasiveness of Drinking

When asked why they thought youth got involved in these activities, the responses included there are few options in rural areas and nothing better to do.

“Like I think it comes down to there’s nothing else more that you can do around here cause we don’t have like a youth center, we don’t have a movie theatre or anything like the city kids have advantage of. We just have our bars and bushes and our parties, that’s all we have out here.”

Rural youth also talked about peer pressure and role modelling as important motivations. Younger kids look up to older siblings and friends, because they want to be cool, they model what they see older youth doing. Youth also mentioned that when the majority do it, it is difficult to make a different choice and that youth actively pressure those who are not drinking to drink.

Rural youth thought that parents had a scale of what was acceptable drinking which varied with the individual parent, although most noted a high level of tolerance. One youth thought that a factor behind the high levels of alcohol consumption was linked to parents’ behaviour when they were young.

“The parents did it. The parents, like they care but they’re like, well you’re a kid, it doesn’t matter, you can do what you want, that sort of thing. “

Rural youth felt that in rural areas, there was a higher level of tolerance of drinking from parents, teachers and police. They noted that drinking was a big part of the social scene, its what adults do after a hard days work (and youth are included when they work alongside adults) and that drinking plays a major role in all events.

Graduation events were brought up as an event associated with high levels of alcohol consumption. Youth in one small town commented on the high level of competition over who will have the best grad party in terms of number of people attending and the amount of alcohol consumed. Students talked about the long standing tradition of spiking the grad punch and liquor flasks being brought to grad events. Their perception was that little was done to stop these things from happening. Youth commented that many parents don’t set limits for their kids. They also noted that you go to weddings and see your teachers getting drunk. It is evident that adults are reinforcing the acceptability of drinking behaviour and adults have an important role to play in restricting or reinforcing this behaviour.

5.3 Drinking and Driving

Drinking and driving is an integral part of the experience of rural youth. In rural areas, there are no taxis and no buses, no forms of public transportation, so driving is often the only way home. However, this dilemma can be handled by designated drivers. But drinking is even more pervasive, it is part of the experience. Drinking while driving is a social activity, termed 'booze cruising' that has long been part of the rural culture.

Males youth are more likely to drink and drive. Youth reported this was because guys are more likely to have their own vehicles. Strong gender roles continue to be evident, when males and females are together in a vehicle, the male still tends to drive. Males are still initiating dating, and as a result, drive the female to wherever they are going. One youth mentioned that "guys don't like to be driven by girls".

Seventeen year olds are much more likely to drink and drive than 16 years olds. Rural youth were unequivocal in linking these statistics to the Graduated Driver's Licensing Program in Saskatchewan in which new drivers who are caught driving after consuming any alcohol automatically face drivers license suspensions (SGI Graduated Drivers Licensing Program, http://www.sgi.sk.ca/sgi_pub/drivers_licences/gdl/index.html accessed March 23, 2008). They noted that most 16 year olds find a ride to and from parties.

One student commented that at "seventeen, you can legally drink and drive. You get a thing and you can have a certain percent of alcohol in your system and then you can legally drink and drive".

This perception was supported by the following example....

*"I got a .04 a couple months ago and they just suspended my license for 24 hours, gave them my keys and said *** don't drive. Okay, didn't drive for the rest of the night. But if that would have been a couple of months earlier than that, my license would have been taken away right then and there".*

Despite the high levels of drinking and driving among the youth surveyed, a number of the students in the focus group maintained that they did not drink and drive, and that they took measures to arrange a safe ride home. One student remarked that she was surprised by the drinking and driving statistics because they had had so many presentations from MADD (Mothers against Drunk Driving) and a couple of years earlier a number of students they knew had been seriously injured in an accident that involved alcohol.

There appears to be misinformation and some bravado about the link between alcohol consumption and blood alcohol levels. This is evidenced by the following quotes:

“Usually it’s like half a beer, that’s a maximum you can have if you’re driving, well some people a beer.”

“No, no, no, cause when I got my .04 I had about a case of beer that night, I couldn’t walk ten minutes before that.”

“I can go and completely smash five drinks in like five minutes and I can go drive, be completely wasted and I can blow like .01.”

5.4 Binge Drinking

There seemed to be little understanding of binge drinking among the youth. Most were surprised at the amount of alcohol defined as binge drinking. Many thought the amounts were too high for females and too low for males. Some youth thought binge drinking was more likely at particular events, such as the ‘niner party’, New Years and weddings. Others thought it happened all the time.

“There is an expectation that you take a case of beer to a party”. Some thought binge drinking was the norm at parties, “I don’t think people ever really stop at one” and “after a number of drinks people don’t know how many they have had”.

5.5 Drinking, Age and Gender

Drinking increases with age. When you are older it is easier to get alcohol. Youth are more likely to have a friend who is of age who can get their alcohol for them, as they look older, some are able to get their own alcohol or be more convincing with another person’s ID. There is a perception that small town bars are less likely to ask for ID and as youth get older, they come to know of those bars which do and those bars which don’t ID youth or which sell to underage youth. Youth noted that some parents will buy alcohol for their kids – for parties.

Here again there is an indication of implied parental permission for youth to be drinking which is more likely for older youth. Youth said that it would not be responsible to pull liquor for 12 and 13 year olds because they thought this age group would likely not have their parents’ permission.

There were significant relationships between drinking and gender. Male youth start drinking younger, drink more often and were more likely to drink and drive. Youth thought that guys wanted to impress people, friends, older youth and girls with their capacity to drink. With respect to drinking and driving, youth in the focus group noted a greater likelihood of risk

taking behavior among male youth and *that 'guys think they are invincible and it won't happen to them'*. One youth commented on her perception of the difference between male and female youth in the image they tried to portray.....

Guys are more interested in looking cooler cause how they act and stuff... what they can do, how far they can go and all that kind of stuff, that's not really a big thing for girls as much

Girls are more interested in looking cool because of how we look.... we're more addicted to the makeup, the clothes and the weight and everything like that and we all know that ... drinking and smoking and all that doesn't really do much for your appearance.

The female youth in the focus groups also talked about self image in the context that girls didn't want the reputation of being a drunk at an early age. They also talked about how their fathers don't want them to be drinking at a young age, and were concerned about the vulnerability of their daughters if they were out drinking with males.

6.0 Illegal Drugs

All of the youth felt the statistics on marijuana use should be higher and the overall statistics of use did not reflect their school. There was some surprise about the level of use of glue and inhalants . Most thought the numbers reported for drugs like cocaine and heroin were accurate because they thought there really wasn't a steady supply in their small towns, however, one youth commented that meth and coke were a bigger issue in some schools than the statistics portrayed.

"I'm sorry I'm speaking honestly, lots of people don't like to say that but yeah, there is a problem with the Coke and with the Meth that is [in our town] right now. There's a big problem with that."

Youth also discussed how drugs appeared to rise and fall in popularity, they mentioned that mushrooms were kind of big here for a while, that five years ago meth was a much larger problem and that ecstasy was much bigger a couple of years ago. They linked this to the activities of individuals in their towns who brought the drugs in as users and sellers.

The motivation to do drugs was linked most frequently to a lack of things to do.

"Just cause there's nothing really to do and if one person does it and says that they got high and it's really awesome then everybody will be like well we might as well try it cause there's nothing better to do, it sounds like fun."

Other motivations to do drugs were curiosity after hearing about other youth's experiences, peer pressure and wanting to fit in and the influence of the media.

"For whatever reason one person tries it and says hey buddy you got to try this out and so they do and it just sort of starts a chain and [he]says, nothing bad happened to me and it was really sweet or whatever."

"It's a small town, it's like rural areas. Everyone knows everyone. And if your older sister or sibling does it you're likely to try it too. Everyone else does it."

"I think a lot of it is because the media, ... last year ... hip hop culture was big, like we had MTV on in our lounge and I don't know, it seemed like that was a really big thing. And drugs and that kind of thing are made to look cool and stuff on there and some people just see that and assume that it's going to be all good like how it is on TV for them if they use them too."

Availability of some drugs in the area was also mentioned, the link was that those substances that were most available were most popular. Youth also noted their experience with people who pressure others to get involved in drugs so they can sell to them and make money.

Youth discussed the role of gender in doing drugs. They were surprised that there was not more difference between females and males in their reported drug use. Males were perceived to be more adventurous and doing things to impress others. To explain the mismatch between what they perceived and the reported statistics, they talked about how boys are more open about what they are doing, wanting to build a risk taking reputation whereas girls are more cautious and care about their image and reputation. They also discussed the different standard in behaviour for males and females, recognizing that this extended to other behaviours as well as illustrated by the following exchange.

"I don't think people look down on a guy that does Marijuana as they would at a girl. Like if you see a girl that has weed, it's kind of weird, for a guy it's kind of more publicly accepted I guess."

"It makes a girl kind of trashy when she does Marijuana and is open about it, but with guys it doesn't seem that big of a deal."

"It's like too, with other things, like a guy has sex a lot nothing really happens, but if a girl does it, she gets called a slut. It's the same thing with weed, a girl does it a lot, she's smoking up, oh you're trashy, but if a guy does it, it's like whatever."

Youth also felt that similar rates may be a result of females and males hanging around together more in rural areas and as a result engage in the same activities.

“cause rural girls and guys are all really tight friends and stuff because there’s not as many people usually and in cities it’s like the boys kind of hang out with the guys and the girls go shopping or something. Where like here you go out and booze cruise and get high and....”

Youth thought the reasons drug use increased with age were that you are less exposed when you are younger (*“unless your parents do it”*) and that you had better access to drugs when you are older. They also talked about how when you are younger you are more afraid of your parents and more likely to obey them.

Interestingly, in two of the focus groups there was a discussion of the role of values and parenting in youth drug use. This came up in three themes. Youth thought that how you were raised in terms of how to deal with problems would affect the strategies youth used and whether using drugs would be one way youth would deal with problems. This discussion also covered youth turning to drugs to feel better when dealing with parental divorce or problems at home.

Values also came up in the context of young youth using drugs...

“I know kids in grade six and grade seven who are drinking, they’re smoking marijuana, ... It just depends how you’re brought up and what your values are and everything.”

The role of parents also came up in terms of parental behaviour, whether they smoke or do drugs. Youth stated that parents are role models for their children and if *“ my parents are doing it, it can’t hurt me to do it.”*

7.0 Prescription Drugs

Youth were most unfamiliar with this type of drug. Many stated they were not aware of people using over the counter medications and prescriptions drugs for ‘unintended purposes. As one youth commented *“there is not really much we can say about it – its not really big’.*

The exception was Ritalin. In two of the focus groups, youth commented that they suspected the use of Ritalin was higher than reported. Specific examples were older youth who are using their younger siblings Ritalin and youth selling their Ritalin to others.

The discussion about prescription and over the counter drugs appeared to be much more speculative than other discussions. Youth speculated that the motivations to use these drugs were similar to other risk behaviours, including just for kicks or peer pressure. They also thought youth may use them because these medications are not illegal to possess, they are

available in the home medicine cabinet and therefore cheaper, and veterinary drugs may be available on farms. They speculated that in a busy small town clinic, it may be easier to convince a doctor to give you a prescription for pain killers which you didn't really need.

However, there was some discussion about why youth would use these drugs when alcohol and marijuana were so easily available.

"I don't think prescription drugs are a problem over here 'cause you can get illegal drugs easier than you can get prescription drugs."

Boys were thought to be more likely to use these drugs than girls because males are more likely to try different things, were more daring and rebellious and wanting to one-up their friends. One male mentioned that he had heard that cough syrup acted like a steroid which may cause guys to use it to increase muscle mass. On the other hand, youth thought that girls were more concerned about self image and less likely to get involved in these drugs.

The variation in age also made sense to the youth who felt there was less pressure in elementary school and more control over what the students did.

"Like grades K-8, like we're in separate schools and stuff and the teachers are a lot more sheltering, they will tell you what you can and can't do. Once you get to high school it's kind of like you're on your own and you've got more freedom and I don't know, that kind of thing. And so like when you're told well you can do it, then as soon as you're told it's your choice then you think oh I'll try it."

Youth also mentioned that when you are younger, parents are more in control of your medications, but when you are older, youth medicate themselves and are more likely to buy their own drugs at the drug store.

8.0 Sexuality

Youth discussed the accuracy of the findings and there were a variety of opinions. Some thought the statistics were accurate, while others thought rural youth were reporting more sex than they were having. In two of the focus groups, students commented that they had a hard time evaluating the statistics because they don't talk to their friends about sex and they just don't want to know.

There was some discussion about birth control and some thought the statistics on all forms of birth control, condoms, the pill and patches were low.. They also suggested that there is more unprotected sex especially when youth are having sex after they had been drinking.

Youth also suggested that the survey should have asked about other forms of sexual behaviour in addition to sexual intercourse. One youth commented that

“there are lots of girls that I know that start doing things when they’re very young and then they’ll just stick to those things when they’re older and then they’ll change ... they’re still being sexual they’re just not having sex”.

The early age that some of the youth were reporting having sex elicited comment in all of the focus groups. Many said that 14 was a really young age for sex. They also reported that in their experience, levels of sexual activity among young girls (Grade 7 and 8) varied among schools. They claimed that some girls are labelled when they arrive in high school based on their reputation regarding their level of promiscuity.

The reasons given for having sex were consistent regardless of age. It is important to note that the reasons involve varying levels of coercion and include:

- Curiosity – youth just want to try it because their friends are doing it.
- Being in Love – *“Like in our high school I see lots of younger people in serious relationships, like they move too fast. I think that people just rush into things in relationships and I see lots of kids in grade 10 that have been dating for a year and stuff. They think they’re in love and they just do it. And then there is younger people, who think they’re in love but they’re just in lust with the person and then they go and have sex with them.”*
- Peer pressure – for both females and males.
 - Females may have sex just to fit in with everyone else who is doing it.
 - Males may be pressured to fit in with other males who claim to have had sex
- Trying to appear older or be socially accepted with older youth. One youth noted that *“it’s like a sense of power when you are so much younger than those guys and they like you, it’s like I conquered this and my friends can’t do this but I did”.*
- Role modeling
 - Look up to older youth (including brothers and sister) and want to be doing the same things. They are *“eager to act older and get attention and be part of the cool crew”*
 - Look up to movie and television personalities and emulate what they see in the media or their favourite personality doing. Role models mentioned were Paris Hilton, Nicole Richie and Joey from the television show ‘Friends’.
- Its inevitable – Some just do it just *“To get it over with I guess. There is so much hype and pressure around it...”* and *“some do it to lose their V card”.*

- Constant nagging – *“like come on, come on, come on, and then eventually the girl isn’t going to run away, she doesn’t want to be in that situation but she’s just kind of sick of hearing it so she just lets it happen..”*
- Prolonging relationships – one partner may use the threat of breakup of the relationship as leverage to have sex and the other may agree in hopes of keeping the relationship going.
- Coercion – *“the guy will understand the girl likes him and he’ll use that to his advantage to get her into bed”.*
- Incapacitated – sex sometimes happens when someone is so drunk they don’t care or they get convinced to have sex. The youth noted that the parties marking the transition into high school may be a particularly vulnerable time for females, *“girls that come in to high school, like the freshie party or something and then they’ll get so drunk that they get taken advantage of, they don’t get raped but they get convinced that they want to”.* It is significant that the youth did not define this as rape.
- Forced – *“I think some guys force the girls to have sex with them because the girls are weaker than them and they have a chance to do that to the girls because they are stronger and they are able to do that which the girls can’t and they can’t get away as fast because maybe they don’t have that much power.”*

In the discussion of age and gender, youth observed that females often have sex with older guys. They thought that the reason behind this is the increase in status that comes with dating an older guy and as noted above, a sense of power. They also noted that sexual conquests are often exaggerated and the females thought that whereas girls did not talk about sex much to each other, this was a major topic of conversation among guys. The males in the focus group did not comment on this perception.

They also noted that in a small town, *“You can’t [do anything] in this town without someone else knowing about it. Spreads in the school, like you would not believe it. Like in a day people know what happened.”*

There was some discussion of the use of birth control and condoms. Although most of the youth appeared to initially see condoms primarily as a means of birth control, some did recognize that condoms are a means of protection when *“you don’t really know who they’ve been with before or what they have, like you just can’t really take a risk with that”.* Birth control pills and the patch were seen as the girl’s responsibility while condoms were recognized as the responsibility of either sex. Some thought couples didn’t use condoms and the pill at the same time because they didn’t want to spend money on it. Some mentioned that some girls are on the pill or the patch as it is more reliable, especially when sex occurs when you are drinking and less likely to take precautions. Youth also mentioned that it was a good idea to use a condom,

because the female sex partner may say she is on the pill when she isn't, so the guy should be prepared anyway. Youth also mentioned that now you don't have to have your parents OK to get birth control, more girls are getting their own and not telling their parents.

9.0 Weight

The focus group discussion on weight focussed on the differences between males and females about body image. Males were seen as wanting to weigh more and claiming they weighed more. Male youth in the focus groups supported that conclusion. This desire to be larger was linked to participation in sports. As one male youth commented...

"I think I am underweight for my sports, which I am, cause there's guys my height who weigh twenty pounds more than I am and they're still in shape."

The discussion also indicated that this desire to be larger went beyond sports to ideas of what was a desirable male body. Although the females in the group thought most guys didn't care about their bodies like girls do, the males responded that they were just less open about it and less focussed on it.

"I'll openly say it, I want to be bigger. Instead of losing weight I would rather put on weight, like muscles and stuff I guess. Like for grad, I guess if you want to lose weight to fit into your dress, I want to put on more weight and get bigger to fill out a suit kind of thing."

Females were seen as typically wanting to lose weight and the youth thought the number of girls trying to lose weight was either close to accurate or lower than it should be. They noted that the girls they know held a variety of perspective. Some were *"not obsessed but wouldn't mind being thinner and they eat healthier and exercise to achieve that, but there were also some girls who "bring nothing for lunch, they eat nothing for breakfast and supper"*. Youth mentioned that they hadn't really heard of people starving themselves, taking laxatives, vomiting or taking diet pills and commented that they couldn't imagine male youth vomiting to lose weight.

Youth felt that the media influenced youth's perception of their bodies. Some of the magazines that cater to young women set up unrealistic expectations about how young women should look.

[they have] *"advertisement after advertisement of skinny girls and like they have big butts and big boobs and they're all pretty and you're like, ahhhh...."*

“I don’t think girls really realize like how much pictures on TV and on billboards and everything, how much it’s really been changed from what it really is. And so they don’t realize that they are being exposed to ‘fakeness’ they just think that that’s what’s real. And so when they read through magazines they’re like well they’re looking at the clothes but they’re not realizing that when looking at the clothes there’s a model in it too who’s been changed and made to look how the media wants them to look and so a lot of times, especially in magazines they’re looking at it for the clothes but in doing that they’re also seeing all the perfect girls and guys in it and it’s not registering like consciously but it’s sub- consciously in their minds already from every where you look.”

Youth also commented on the ads on TV and other media that glorify diet pills which send a message to girls that they should lose weight.

9.1 Physical Activity

The survey showed that males were more likely to take part in physical activity than females and some females thought the results underestimated female participation in sports. Others thought that this was the case because there were more opportunities for male youth than female youth. There are more teams for males, especially more large teams such as football while females opportunities focussed more on volleyball and golf. High profile sports for male youth such as football are an important part of the social scene in high school and historically more attention and investment has been made in male sports than female sports.

Female youth also thought the guys were more likely than girls to like competition and that because there were few activities available that are not competitive, females were less likely to play sports. They also mentioned that some males get caught up in ‘the Canadian dream to be a hockey player’ while girls know this is not an option for them so they pursue other activities which they perceive as more likely options for them, such as education. Finally in the discussion of mixed sports, because of the size difference in high school and the higher level of competitiveness exhibited by the males, some girls are concerned about getting hurt if they play sports with guys.

Female youth also noted that the survey did not cover physically demanding jobs such as waitressing, so some of their activities would not be represented.

9.2 Healthy Eating

There was little consistent comment on food. The youth did comment that it was unhealthy to skip meals and to eat late at night. They also noted that women ate differently than men, eating smaller portions

10.0 Healthy Choices in Communities

10.1 Education

The students were quite adamant about what kinds of information that impacted them and highly critical about most of the material being delivered to them at present. As one youth commented on presentations *“sometimes it just goes in one ear and out the other.”*

“Like in grade 9 we had this ____ Program where we got to miss a day of school and this guy spoke to us about drinking and driving and consequences and all that. I think people weren’t listening to that, they were just jacked that they got to miss a day of school. And they didn’t even pay attention.”

“People aren’t listening to what they’re saying and we definitely need a different approach than scaring you out of doing it. I don’t think that works.”

Youth told us that presentations needed to be delivered by people who had credibility with them and/or had a personal connection. According to these youth, being credible meant having experienced what the person was talking about, not having made what the youth thought was an unrealistic or stupid decision in the first place, or being a role model. These points are illustrated by the following quotes.

Experienced:

“When it comes from somebody who knows what they’re talking about, not somebody that’s like a Dr. in English, oh I’ve studied this for 22 years. Have you ever been in that position, no you haven’t, so you don’t know what you’re talking about”.

Realistic:

“That Teen-Aid stuff, like they come in, the girls, oh I saved my first kiss till I was 24.”

“We had a guy who came in here talking to us about safety, (healthy choices) he had tried to jump a train....Yeah, his arms and legs were severed.....And I didn’t feel bad for him at all. Like I thought you’re an idiot for trying to jump a train, like don’t come in here and tell me not to do it because you’re fricking stupid for trying to do that. Like that shouldn’t be a hard choice.”

Connected to the youth:

"During that presentation I remember him saying that he was from a small town and he said something big....300,000." And [the largest place in this region] is 5000 people and people in the audience, of course they chuckled to themselves and I remember him getting mad at us and he kind of snapped a little bit".

"I'm interested in her experience in rehab and what she went through but it means nothing to me, I don't really know her and I don't know anything about her so why do I care, you're not from here, you're not going through the same things we are."

"It's like some big corporation sends out some random Bill from accounting who can talk really good and he comes out to speak on behalf of M.A.D.D and shows us a video that is supposed to scare us because some person somewhere up north in Saskatchewan crashed her car into a ditch and I don't know, it just doesn't have any effect on you at all."

According to these youth, a speaker that would have impact on them is someone whom they know or who graduated from their school and who had made a bad decision about drugs, alcohol or sex and had addressed their problem. These people could talk to them about how they learned from their mistakes.

Role Models:

Youth also talked about the effectiveness of important role models in their experience.

"I think the presentation that the kids listened to the most last year was the Matt Dominguez one....Because he's a role model."

"Yeah, he's a role model and people listened to him 'cause he's famous and lots of people like that and all the football players were paying attention, probably taking notes and stuff."

"I think it needs to be somebody important that you know, that you look up to, that you actually have respect for and maybe you'll actually listen to him, to get through your head."

"My parents help me choose my right decisions 'cause they're like role models to me, I just look up to them"

Some students also felt a person learns best from personal experience, that behaviours are hard to change until something actually happens to someone. Unfortunately, the consequences of waiting until youth learn through personal experience could be very devastating.

Some students thought the focus group was a positive way to address healthy lifestyle issues and commented that it had been a long time since they had had a discussion like this and the mix of people in the focus group made it successful.

“Have like these groups like we’re having right now and like have consequence videos and stuff like that.”

“Last time we had a discussion like this was back like in grade six, the D.A.R.E Program. It’s been a few years ago.”

“I think you can get an even mix of people, people that you usually don’t hang around it you really get to like learn about your, not flaws but you’re not sitting there giggling with your friends or whatever and you really learn like, are you part of these statistics, are you in the bad part or are you in the good part. I think that these kinds of groups with different types of people kind of help yourself.”

10.2 Alternative Choices

Youth in all of the focus groups commented on it being hard to find things to do in small towns, especially if you are not involved in sports.

The culture of drinking as a social activity is so strong and the students voiced frustration about partying being the only option on weekends. This is illustrated by the following exchange about the pervasiveness of partying in their social scene.

“like what do we do on weekends. Okay we’re going to like drive to Saskatoon so we can go to a party or something.”

“You can’t do anything here, and like you see people so disappointed, oh there’s no party this weekend.”

“Especially when summer ends, the pools not open anymore, you can’t really be outside cause it’s freezing so you go to a party, there’s nothing else to do.”

“And even if you do go to a hockey game there’s usually a party afterwards and everybody’s drunk.”

However, once this group got brainstorming, a large number of ideas were voiced. These included:

- We need a general youth group but it’s going to be so hard to convince these guys that playing basketball is going to be cool on weekends because they’ll be like, no we’re going to go get drunk at my friend’s house.
- sometimes we’ll have movie nights just at my house, we’ll grab a bunch of movies and we’ll just eat a whole bunch of junk food.
- our school has so much stuff, like people who are interested in that, we have a movie projector and a screen but it’s not open anytime other than school
- workshops on weekends or something, ... a photography workshop ... take that imagination and put it into pottery
- a weekend drama thing where you do improv cause impromptu is so much fun

- poetry slams and poetry readings
- try to get the town to have a community movie theatre
- games like capture the flag, just sign up for a team, you can name your own team, you can make your own uniforms you can do whatever you want and we'll have a huge competition at the end we'll make you a trophy out of cardboard.

However, they weren't optimistic that alcohol would be excluded from these activities, people stashed alcohol outside the alcohol free venues, they came in drunk and they smuggled in alcohol.