

Assessing State-Identified SPF-SIG Priorities at the Community Level

Introduction

Data on the levels and patterns of substance use, and negative consequences of substance use, can be extremely useful in determining prevention priorities, planning prevention strategies, and justifying prevention planning decisions. Assembling and examining such data are key components in the community-level assessment process.

For Vermont's SPF-SIG grantees, three priority foci related to substance use have already been identified by the State:

- 1) Reduce underage drinking
- 2) Reduce high-risk drinking among persons under the age of 25
- 3) Reduce marijuana use among persons under the age of 25

All community grantees are required to focus on underage drinking and select one of the two remaining priorities. Data on the nature and levels of these priorities in your communities, along with other factors, should be considered in making your selection. These data may also be useful in drawing attention to substance use issues in your community and garnering support for interventions designed to reduce these problems.

To facilitate this process, a set of community-level data tables, or profiles, has been prepared for each SPF-SIG community grantee. These tables contain data on the three priority substance use problems listed above. For some data sources (e.g., the YRBS), data are available at the community level. For others (e.g., the BRFSS), data are only available at the level of county in which your community resides. The tables are being made available to community grantees at the time of the December 2007 training so that grantees may begin to examine the data and become familiar with them. In subsequent trainings we will focus on ways to use these data along with other considerations in selecting your community's optional priority.

Community Data Profiles

For each grantee coalition/organization, a data profile has been prepared that provides coalition/organization level data on seven items from the 2003, 2005, and 2007 Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) that address Vermont's substance use-related priorities among 8th to 12th grade students. The profiles also contain county level data on four items averaged across the 2002-2006 administrations of the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey (BRFSS) that address substance use in adults.

Community grantees that serve more than one Supervisory Union

The data for your community were created by merging data from each Supervisory Union (SU) within your coalition/organization's service area. The SUs that were included in each community's data are listed at the top of each profile. Many grantee coalitions/organizations serve only one SU, but some serve three or more. Merging the data from each SU that your coalition/organization serves is a statistically sound means of presenting population-based information, in keeping with the goals of the SPF-SIG public health model.

Using grade-adjusted rates to facilitate comparisons

The community-level YRBS data are presented as grade-adjusted prevalence rates. These adjusted rates will differ somewhat from the unadjusted rates reported in SU-level YRBS reports prepared by the Department of Health (and in Community Profile Reports produced by the Agency for Human Services). The grade-adjusted values reflect community-level prevalence rates after adjusting for differences how students are distributed proportionately across grade levels. This is useful when making comparisons because substance use varies so much across grade levels. If a community happened to have an unusually large proportion of 11th and 12th grade students one year, its prevalence rates would likely be quite high. Grade-adjustment removes that effect by forcing each grantee community's rates to be based on the same distribution of students across grades. Grade-adjustment therefore facilitates making comparisons with the state average or with other communities, and also across years.

Strategies for examining the profile data

The data profile for your coalition/organization's service area is meant to provide a foundation from which to begin making the decision of which of the two priority areas that your coalition or organization will address in addition to underage drinking. Based on the state epidemiological profile, the State selected underage drinking as a priority that would be addressed by all grantee communities. It decided to have the community grantee organizations determine whether they would prefer to also address high risk drinking among persons under age 25 or marijuana use among persons under age 25 as their second priority area.

There are several ways in which the profile data can be examined to help guide selection of the optional priority. Specifically with respect to the YRBS data, the data profiles allow grantee organizations to see their community's:

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- a) comparison with the state average on rates of alcohol use, marijuana use, binge drinking, and other relevant measures (e.g., drinking and diving) among high school students
- b) rates of marijuana use and binge drinking among high school students, as compared with one another
- c) trend over time on each measure and how their trend compares to the statewide trend

Each of these considerations may help in determining which of the two optional priorities seems more important for the community to address through its SPF-SIG. One obvious limitation of these YRBS data is that they do not capture rates of use among young adults. Two of the BRFSS items are based on data from young adults aged 18 to 25, but are limited due to their being reported at only the county level, and also the absence of a marijuana use measure. (Note: A marijuana use item was added to the BRFSS in 2007, but the number of respondents from only a single year precludes being able to provide reliable estimates yet even at the county level). Fortunately, we do know that across states, relative levels of binge drinking among adolescents are moderately correlated with levels of binge drinking among young adults. The same is true for marijuana use. Using YRBS data to help make inferences about relative levels of binge drinking and marijuana use among young adults, therefore, is a reasonable strategy in addition to using the more limited data provided by the BRFSS.

It is important to bear in mind that there are several sources of error, or variability, in the community-level prevalence estimates reported. These may be due to either small numbers of respondents on which the rates are based, or patterns of non-response among persons who were eligible for the surveys. For these reasons, small differences between community-level and statewide rates, and small differences across years, should not be given undue attention. Rather, it is more important to focus on what appear to be fairly substantial differences and patterns in the rates being compared.

Other factors to consider in selecting your SPF-SIG priorities

In addition to using the data profile for these three considerations, issues of feasibility, community readiness to address one issue over the other, and the influence of local or anecdotal data will play into each grantee's decision. These factors will be further discussed at the January community grantee training, along with a discussion regarding your use of the data profiles so far and any insights or questions that have arisen in that process. In the meantime, the data profiles will allow you begin evaluating which option might be best for your community.