

PREVENTION SCIENCE

Prevention science involves defining a social problem, determining the extent of the problem, and then developing a research plan to evaluate potential solutions. In the context of youth development, prevention science research generates the scientific evidence regarding the efficacy of intervention and prevention, specifically of activities that seek to influence or change the well-being of children and young adults within their communities. With a developmental focus, prevention science addresses risky behaviors that begin in adolescence and young adulthood, including substance abuse, unsafe sexual behaviors, mismanaging finances and credit, or any ill-advised activity that is detrimental to the individual, their family or the community.

The UF/IFAS Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences (FYCS) is committed to investigating how to offset potential risks youths face by identifying current and needed supports, known as “protective factors,” and promoting a more positive developmental path. This may involve designing, implementing and evaluating various proactive and preventative strategies. These efforts can focus on the individual’s environment (such as neighborhood, school, and community), as well as more abstract factors that affect those environments (such as leadership, media, and culture).

NATURAL
RESOURCES

AGRICULTURE

HUMAN
SYSTEMS

Ongoing Research



MILLENNIAL HOME OWNERSHIP

The “American Dream” often includes home ownership, but many millennials (born between the 1980s and early 2000s) are delaying purchasing a home longer than preceding generations. Michael Gutter, an associate professor in UF/IFAS FYCS, is part of a multistate group of researchers who identified internal and external influencing factors by cross-analyzing more than 80 research studies, coming to three conclusions. First, stringent credit requirements only allow the most financially sound millennials to purchase, but those who do are more likely to sustain homeownership. Second, high student loan debt often delays home buying. Third, family events such as parenthood often accelerate the process. Understanding the financial behaviors of the millennial generation will help the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and other organizations determine which educational and outreach initiatives are worthy of investing resources.



COMMUNITY INTERVENTION

Native Americans are 552 percent more likely to die from alcoholism than other Americans, so Sarah D. Lynne, an assistant professor in UF/IFAS FYCS, collaborated with Cherokee Behavioral Health and other prevention scientists to reduce underage alcohol use in this population by combining Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) with a community-based intervention (CMCA). Doing research with communities presents unique challenges, but these studies are critical to understanding how interventions work in the real world. The team used experimental designs and a variety of rigorous methodological techniques to accurately determine the effects of the intervention, including random assignment and multiple comparison groups. Active engagement of communities is a critical part of the intervention (e.g., the Pirates Don’t Provide campaign). This intervention is a model for other rural, high-risk, multiethnic communities.



YOUTH STRESS

In the U.S., 7.8 million youth live below the poverty level. Social scientists are charged with uncovering controllable factors that could decrease vulnerability toward risky behaviors. Rosemary Barnett, a professor in UF/IFAS FYCS, led a team of researchers to examine how these youth perceive their community in four areas: environment, support, involvement, and connectedness. After-school programs were established to help teenagers connect with their community through participation in online support groups and volunteer efforts such as planting gardens and rehabilitating their own neighborhoods. A follow-up survey indicated that these youth are less likely to engage in risky behaviors when involved in a community that promotes belonging, community service, and high expectations. Barnett’s team is planning a five-year study to determine if these findings will remain consistent over a longer period of time.

Research with Impact



PATERNAL INVOLVEMENT

Many scientific studies have shown that absent parents have a negative effect on the sexual behavior of their adolescents. To help address issues associated with sexual activity among students, UF/IFAS FYCS professor Rosemary Barnett led a team that surveyed university students about their sexual activity, contraceptive use, and parental involvement. Results showed a strong relationship between daughters who perceived that their fathers were active participants in their lives during high school and decreased risky sexual behaviors in college. This finding provided strong support for programs that focus as much on parents as their teenagers. It also provided evidence that parental involvement affects a teenager's future decision-making and that teen-parent programs have long-term benefits.



EMERGING ADULthood

College students are considered “emerging adults” – a stage of life characterized by identity exploration – and they are likely to engage in risky behaviors. UF/IFAS FYCS associate professor Larry Forthun collaborated with researchers at 30 colleges and universities across the U.S. to survey more than 10,000 students to examine the psychological, social, and emotional correlates of their risky behaviors, with attention given to underrepresented minority groups. The results of this Multi-Site University Study of Identity and Culture (MUSIC) study showed that to reduce risky behaviors, it is important to stimulate personal and cultural identity development by encouraging strategies such as strengthening decision-making skills and doing introspection exercises. Given the diverse and substantial amount of data collected in the MUSIC study, more than 30 research studies have been published that report these findings.



UNDERAGE ALCOHOL SALES

In the U.S., approximately 5,000 youth deaths are attributed to alcohol-related causes each year, generating a significant public health concern. UF/IFAS FYCS assistant professor Sarah D. Lynne helped train adult recruits who appeared underage to purchase alcohol from commercial retailers. They were instructed to state their age truthfully and provide identification if asked but not to offer that information unsolicited. Naturalistic observation studies like this one observe individuals in a natural setting without any manipulation by the observer. Over a 10-month period, the females attempted nearly 1,000 purchases and were sold alcohol without identification nearly 25 percent of the time. Communities have used the results of this study to pass local ordinances requiring law enforcement to conduct alcohol compliance checks at all commercial outlets at least every three months, reducing underage access to alcohol.

Unit Leaders

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