

EXPRESSIONS OF DRINKING/ DRIVING IN RURAL YOUTH

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Purpose: Drinking/driving is a major health problem for youth, making it a leading cause of death and disability in this age group. Drinking among teens is higher in rural America than in the nation's urban centers. Before health care providers can effectively intervene to deter drinking/driving it is important to hear what adolescents think and feel about the experience. The aim of this study was to address the question: What are the thoughts and feelings about drinking/driving described by rural youth?

Method: A qualitative method was used to study youth thoughts and feelings about drinking/driving. The 53 participants in the study included 28 young men and 25 young women who were 16 to 18 years of age and members of a 4 H group in a rural county. After obtaining parental consent and youth assent, the participants were seated in a quiet private place where they could think and write. They responded in writing to the following instructions: "Please write your thoughts and feelings about drinking and driving. Don't worry about grammar or spelling. Just describe your thoughts and feelings in as much detail as you can". The students wrote for 10 minutes. Van Manen's thematic analysis was the method used to query the data.

Findings: Four major themes were identified. Youth in this study have, 1) witnessed the harmful and dreaded effects of drinking/driving, 2) decided to take responsibility for self in drinking/driving situations, 3) acknowledged the senseless, serious and moral wrongness of drinking/driving, and 4) determined that swift and forceful justice should be taken for drinking/driving wrongness.

Discussion: The findings reveal a deep moral/ethical conviction about drinking/driving that has been influenced by family, friends, developmental stage, and culture among the participants in this study. The moral wrongness and lack of responsibility inherent in the act of drinking/driving was clear in the descriptions of the youth. The themes and detailed descriptions can be used in health promotion programs to reduce drinking/driving behavior. For instance, the theme of "taking responsibility" provided specific ideas to guide health promotion activities, such as planning ahead and making a pledge to self and others. Engaging youth in health promotion programs presented from the perspective of their life-world may resonate with them in ways that will foster decision making to avert drinking/driving.