

Analysis of Disparities in Mental Health Status and Substance Abuse Prevalence in the Appalachian Region and Access to Mental Health and Substance Abuse Treatment Services

A joint research project of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), a non-profit organization conducting research in the public interest, in partnership with East Tennessee State University's (ETSU) Office of Rural and Community Health and Community Partnerships and the Coalition on Appalachian Substance Abuse Policy (CASAP), with funding from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC)

Initial work in 2005 support through ARC and conducted jointly by ETSU and CASAP uncovered a deep-seated concern about methamphetamine production and use as a major threat to the health of the public of the region. A regional workshop in August 2005 helped to define the issue more generally, including a high prevalence of substance and shortage of community coalescence and resources to address the problem. Results from regional community participatory conference on the topic in March of 2006 led to a community definition of substance abuse and concern about how to define key indicators of the problem. A multi-stakeholder approach was suggested to enable measurements of substance abuse issues that would promote local credibility of data as well as encourage broad-based interest in finding solutions, suggesting both quantitative and qualitative approaches were appropriate.

The objective of this project is to assess disparities related to substance abuse prevalence and mental health treatment in Appalachia using a case study approach for 3 pairs of twinned counties in Appalachia selected by quantitative data ranking. The project will demonstrate areas of need within the Appalachian region and will provide insight into painting the picture of substance abuse and mental health in rural mountain community through on-site data collection methods and first hand description.

The project may provide validation for improved access to substance abuse and mental health treatment, research bases leading to better policy decisions, verification of state, regional and locally collected data and identification of some best practices in the community studies. The project will supplement the quantitative data analysis of the selection process with anecdotal evidence, opinion and commentary of local professionals and stakeholders as well as compile emerging and potentially unreported data sets.

The NORC team has significant experience in collecting and analyzing mental health and substance abuse data, which will form the backbone of the quantitative analysis. It is clear that data limitations will allow for only a limited quantitative analysis. Local communities have identified data sets that are collected locally but not necessarily reported through state or federal sources. To supplement this analysis, ETSU will work with NORC and CASAP to conduct a series of case studies analyzing "socioeconomic twins" - communities within Appalachian states that share similar economic and demographic characteristics, yet appear to have dissimilar rates of mental health and substance abuse concerns and varying access to treatment services.

ETSU has an extensive background in community participatory research, especially in areas of Appalachian health disparities. The Office of Rural and Community Health and Community Partnerships supplemented with the considerable experience of CASAP members will develop and pilot a case study methodology based upon this twinned model in a five-phase process:

- Selection of the 6 paired Appalachian counties.
- On-site focus group and key informant interviews with community leaders to assess public impressions of substance abuse and mental health problems including community issues, systems capacities, recent incidents and community reaction and response.
- Community reaction to secondary data indentified by NORC that led to initial selection of the county with respect to accuracy, reliability and validity of how the standard measures reflected the nature of the community's issues.
- Development of a community resource inventory tool to identify available services for prevention and treatment.
- A systemic approach to manage and analyze the textural data derived from the interviews and focus groups. Using an induction method the analysis focused on the organization of broad conceptual categories and then more refined coding for underlying themes. Finally, the textural data was triangulated with secondary data profiles, and county descriptors with researcher's field notes to produce a richer understanding of the incidence of and explanation for disparities in mental health status, substance abuse prevalence and access to treatment services in these Appalachian communities.

The case study approach provides for a comprehensive understanding of a complex instance or instances that is acquired by extensive description and analysis. Appropriate selection is crucial to internal consistency and the plausible comparison of evidence in context. One unique feature of case studies is that data is concurrently collected and analyzed leading to "thick" descriptions from multiple data sources, particularly first hand observations.

The goals of the case studies were to:

- Determine if community perceptions of substance abuse/mental health (SA/MH) issues match available data;
- Identify additional data sources used at the community level;
- Learn first hand about the community's response to substance abuse and mental health concerns including statistical presentations of local data and
- Identify potential explanations for variance in community SA/MH indicators.

The close cooperation of the research partnerships in response to the apparent health disparities including substance abuse and mental health status in Appalachia will result in a comprehensive report that will be presented to ARC in the spring of 2008.