

Dr David Regis is the Research Manager at the Schools Health Education Unit (SHEU).
For correspondence please e-mail: david.regis@sheu.org.uk

David Regis

Street-wise? Substance use in town and country as reported by young people

We have been interested in the differences between urban and rural schools for some time. There is perhaps a popular prejudice that our cities are associated more with use of alcohol and drugs than the countryside, but we haven't always been able to confirm such a difference in our figures.

Study 1

In our publication *Young People and Illegal Drugs into 1998*, we compared drug use levels in young people in three contrasting areas, and contrary to expectations found the highest use was in the most rural area. This alerted us to the issue, and we have looked at it again from time to time since.

Study 2

We used to have a question in the survey which asked the pupil to say what sort of area they lived in: in the middle of a city, the outskirts of a town, or outside a town or village. Using these figures we performed a similar analysis, with results again which you might find counter-intuitive:

- For drug experience 'in the last month', there was little difference with location for 12-13 yr. olds, with around 4% reporting experience
- However, more 14-15 year olds living in villages compared to towns reported drug experience 'in the last month': 21% in the villages compared with 16% in the towns
- Results about 'Having alcohol last week'

showed figures to be generally higher for village dwellers

Study 3

By 2006, the location question had been dropped from the survey, because it seemed that we were much more interested in it that our clients, but we remained attentive to the issue of location.

So, that year, we analysed levels of drink and drugs as reported in Year 10 students in different local authorities. We sorted the results and found the top five highest-using authorities, and noted whether they were London/other City council or other councils.

	MALES		FEMALES	
	DRINK	DRUGS	DRINK	DRUGS
1	Other	Other	Other	London
2	Other	City	City	Other
3	City	Other	City	City
4	Other	City	Other	City
5	City	City		

It is non-metropolitan counties, with a higher proportion of rural communities, who top three of the lists.

So, there is no evidence here to suggest that living in an urban environment exposes young people to unique risks with respect to drinking or drug use.

Study 4

During 2008 we collected responses from more pupils than we ever had before - over

100,000 in various surveys.

We repeated the analysis of authorities, using a different classification system:

Urban and *rural* authorities: **Bristol, Cambridgeshire, Camden, Cumbria, Dudley, County of Durham, Essex, Gateshead, Greenwich, Haringey, Hertfordshire, Knowsley, Lambeth, Lancashire, North Yorkshire, Peterborough, Southampton, Stockport, Sunderland, Swindon, Wiltshire, Wirral.**

We also analysed more measures of substance use:

- Smoker - proportion who smoked any cigarettes last week
- Drinker - proportion who drank any alcohol last week
- >10 units - proportion who drank more than 10 units of alcohol last week
- Drug use - proportion who had ever used illegal drugs

'rural', most young people in that authority will still be living in towns. We ask schools lots of questions about their situation, and among these questions, we ask them to estimate the proportions of their pupils who live in an area which can be described as Rural/suburban/urban/inner urban.

If 50% or more of the pupils came from a rural area, we classified the school as a rural school. In the 2008 data set, then, we found:

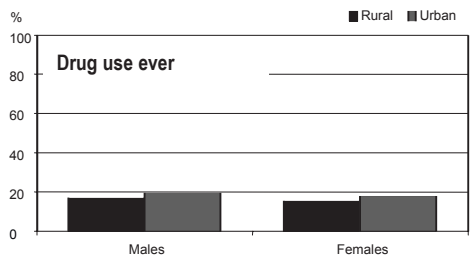
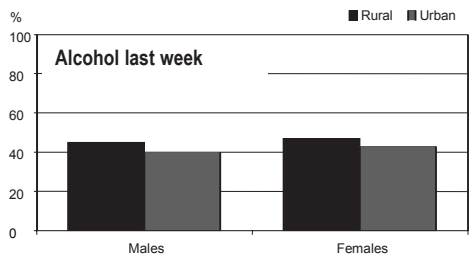
- Pupils attending Rural schools N=11,224
- Pupils attending Urban schools N=18,957
- Rural schools we found were less ethnically diverse, and pupils had a higher mean income, when compared with the more urban schools
- Looking at smoking, alcohol and drug use in Year 10 students, we found that:
- Females in rural schools were more likely to smoke than were females in urban schools
- Alcohol use was higher for males and females in rural schools
- There were no significant differences in proportions ever having used illegal drugs

MALES				FEMALES			
Smoker	Drinker	>10 units	Drug use	Smoker	Drinker	>10 units	Drug use
<i>Rural</i>	Urban	Urban	Urban	Urban	Urban	Urban	Urban
<i>Rural</i>	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Rural</i>	Urban	Urban	Urban	Urban
Urban	<i>Rural</i>	Urban	<i>Rural</i>	Urban	<i>Rural</i>	Urban	Urban
Urban	<i>Rural</i>	Urban	Urban	Urban	Urban	Urban	Urban
Urban	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Rural</i>	Urban	Urban	<i>Rural</i>	Urban	Urban

Among males, whether rural or urban is not a great predictor of coming in the top 5 authorities for substance use. For females, there seems to be a clear extra likelihood of drinking heavily and of using illegal drugs in more urban authorities.

Study 5

There is one last angle that we have tried to get insight into this issue. Analysis by authority is not very satisfactory, because even in an authority that we have labelled



There was a difference in the responses to a question, if you wanted information or support about drugs, to whom or what would you go first? Young people in rural areas were significantly more likely to say that they would 'keep it to myself'. This echoes a similar finding where young people in rural areas were much less likely to be aware of a sexual health service for young people available near them.

We also found a higher proportion of females in rural schools who reported that they had been bullied at school in the last 12 months, but we saw no differences in levels of carrying weapons in either sex.

Conclusions

We can say with some confidence there is little evidence that young people in rural

areas face any less of a challenge from substance use or anti-social behaviour than those in rural areas. In fact, several lines of enquiry over 10 years have shown that there can be higher use of tobacco, alcohol or illegal drugs in rural communities.

When we compared different authorities, we often saw a mixture of types of authority in the top five. This seems to be telling us that the characteristics of specific communities are more important in determining local levels of substance use than whether the community is rural or urban.

One last point, which we are sure is relevant to the nature of the setting, is that young people in rural areas seem less able to find support or information about drugs and other issues than their peers in towns and cities.

SHEU SURVEYS = GREAT VALUE

DEDICATED TO SCHOOL AND COLLEGE SURVEYS SINCE 1977

www.sheu.org.uk