

# RURAL EDUCATIONAL LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS ON MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS FOR ADOLESCENT STUDENTS IMPACTED BY OPIOID MISUSE

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## Abstract and Background

- In 2019 researchers calculated approximately 548,000 children were living in the same household as an individual suffering from an opioid-misuse disorder (Bullinger & Wing, 2019). Adolescents who grow up in households with opioid abuse are at an increased risk for mental health issues, drug misuse, and accidental opioid poisoning (Wistanely & Stover, 2019) The number of children in these households has steadily increased over the past years, suggesting the opioid epidemic is a growing issue within the United States of America.
- Teachers and school staff in rural districts are in a unique position to help students directly affected by the opioid crisis. Schools can use their position to support students through the establishment of mental health programming. Mental health programs establish a safe community for children to work through adverse experiences, model healthy coping strategies, and break down stigma surrounding mental health disorders. As the effects of the opioid crisis grow, it's critical to understand how mental health programs counteract adverse life experiences.
- This research gives a voice to educational leaders in PK-12 settings and allows their insights to better inform how to prepare school leaders to address the needs of students facing opioid-related trauma.

## Research Question

- How do rural educational leaders perceive the role of mental-health programs when combating the effects of the opioid crisis on their students?

## Methods and Participant Sample

- To date, 6 qualitative interviews have been completed with licensed educational leaders (superintendents, principals, teachers, school counselors) from rural K-12 school districts in Southeastern Ohio. Interviews were conducted via Zoom video conferencing systems, audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded utilizing MaxQDA. The length of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour.
- Data collection is ongoing until we reach a level of interviews that produces saturation.

## Emerging Themes

### Intersection of Rural Schools and Community Resources

- Services such as Police Departments, Hospitals, Health Recovery Services, and Counseling Services can be brought into the school building to expand resources provide for students.

#### Exemplar Quote from Rural Superintendent:

"Administrators are never going to be able to keep up with the evolution of ongoing crises, such as the opioid epidemic. Being able to partner with some type of agency, whether it's a hospital or the local Sheriff's department, is critical. Educators know Maslow. But we don't know Maslow like this. And for us, we need that person or that entity that we can rely on to say, 'Hey, I can't deal with this currently in this space. I want to support it, but you're the expert here. Help me understand how I can help these students.' Connecting with some type of healthcare organization is vital."

### Trauma Informed Care in Rural Schools

- This type of training prepares teachers to notice signs and symptoms of distress.
- Trauma Informed Care provides teachers with tools to support students emotionally, academically, and physically.

#### Exemplar Quote from Rural High School Principal:

"Whether teachers are dealing with a direct consequence of student use or predominantly adult use with family members. Teachers are always dealing with indirect impact, so yes absolutely teachers need adequate training regarding informed care. And I hate to admit it, you know, 20% of these kids are seeing somebody in their house or, somewhere in their community using, so we'd be negligent at that point if we didn't start to open up conversations about drug misuse."

## Emerging Themes

### Mental Health Programs as a Tool for Prevention

- These programs allow for meaningful conversations between adults and students regarding real-life scenarios (such as opioid-misuse). Schools are seen as a safe space to discuss positive decision-making skills.
- These programs establish a support system for students to turn to in times of distress.
- Overall, these programs have positively impacted school culture and build a sense of community among staff and students.

#### Exemplar Quote from Rural Superintendent:

"You know, we focus so much in the county, and probably throughout the state on interventions, because prevention just isn't that attractive. So what money is being spent on prevention? Well, very little. By the time that it's really becoming an issue we feel it's too late. So I would love to be able to do something in the way of prevention, which is what we're trying to do here at the school."

## Conclusions and Future Directions for Research

- Inadequate funding surrounding mental health programming has significantly limited rural school administrators' abilities to implement sustainable prevention programs. In lieu of limited funding, schools can utilize local resources to expand services provided for students.
- Adopting policies and programs that target the effects of the Opioid Crisis is an effective way for schools and communities to prevent the growth of the epidemic.
- We suggest future research in the area of funding regarding mental health programming and the role of trauma informed care with an emphasis in rural locations.

## References:

Winstanley, E. L., & Stover, A. N. (2019). The Impact of the Opioid Epidemic on Children and Adolescents. *Clinical therapeutics*, 41(9), 1655–1662. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clinthera.2019.06.003>  
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