



Alliance for Healthy Communities
Ken McManus, Coalition Director
12657 Fee Fee Rd., St. Louis, MO 63146
314-415-7015 (P) 314-941-4769 (C)
kmcmanus@parkwayschools.net
ahc-stl.org

Alliance for Healthy Communities 2014 Community Assessment Report **January 2015**

Introduction

Alliance for Healthy Communities (AHC) is a local, grant-funded coalition, created to address community health challenges affecting youth who live, work or attend school in the region of west central St. Louis County covered by the footprint of the Parkway School District. With funding provided through a 5-year *Community Health and Prevention* grant awarded in 2012 by the Missouri Foundation for Health, Alliance for Healthy Communities seeks to reduce rates of youth substance abuse and suicidality by addressing community conditions that enable these health issues. The Parkway C-2 School District, through in-kind contributions, serves as the fiscal agent and facilities host for AHC.

The essential mechanisms by which AHC pursues its long-term goals of reducing youth substance abuse and risk for suicide are collaborative partnerships between community stakeholders. Through these partnerships, AHC acts to identify, assess and address community conditions that enable youth substance abuse and risk for suicide. To view the list of current AHC partners, visit our website, ahc-stl.org, and review AHC's 2012-13 annual report.

Comprehensive Community Assessment

In 2014, AHC planned and implemented a comprehensive community assessment designed to detail two broad categories of information: (a) current incidence rates among area youth of substance abuse, depression and suicidality and (b) the prominent, enabling community conditions, often referred to as "causal factors". In aggregate, AHC's community assessment, conducted between March and September 2014, included 2614 community stakeholders.

AHC's Community Assessment Methodology

AHC's community assessment involved administration of the Search Institute Attitudes and Behaviors Survey (SI-ABS) involving 2122 students, grades 7-11, from Parkway School District middle and high schools and two independent high schools. The SI-ABS was selected for this assessment because it profiles youth and youth-community connections using the 40 Developmental Assets framework. The 40 Developmental Assets framework, a research based model of positive youth development, provides a common language with which diverse stakeholders can articulate important risk factors common to area youth and metrics for reducing these risks.

Additionally, AHC's community assessment included online surveys targeting Parkway district administrators (51 survey participants) and Parkway area parents (368 survey participants). Focus groups were conducted with clergy, secondary school counselors and social workers (representing both public and independent schools), police officers and youth. Finally, a community readiness survey was administered in an effort to gauge stakeholder "readiness" to act on the challenges of youth substance abuse and suicidality.

The outcome of AHC's community assessment was a large body of data that required extensive sorting and analysis. At the end of September 2014, nine AHC stakeholders formed a data analysis work group to complete this important work. Throughout the following month, AHC's data analysis work group identified six specific patterns in local conditions that appear to be important causal factors for risky behavior. As such, these causal factors are potential targets for AHC community level interventions. The following sections of this report detail the 6 identified community conditions.

1) Alcohol, marijuana (and other drugs) are easy (or very easy) for youth to get.

a) Data sets:

- i) 2010 and 2012 Missouri Student Survey (MSS)- please see table below
- ii) 2014 Focus group themes:
 - (1) Youth focus groups:
 - (a) “We can get pretty much anything we want, anytime...”
 - (b) “Weed is usually easier to get than alcohol...”
 - (c) “There are plenty of places we can party where the parents don’t care...”
 - (2) Law enforcement focus group:
 - (a) “Parents aren’t doing basic prevention like locking cabinets...”
 - (b) “Too many parents provide alcohol to minors...”
 - (c) “Increasing numbers of parents are tolerating marijuana...”
 - (3) School counselors and social workers:
 - (a) “Decriminalization (marijuana) means ‘what’s the big deal’ ...”
- iii) 2014 online parent survey:
 - (1) 44% of responses referred to parents allowing underage drinking in their home.
 - (2) 41% of responses referred to parents allowing marijuana use in their home
 - (3) 40% of responses referred to parents being “lax” in management of medications
 - (4) Parents are frustrated with each other and do not communicate effectively about managing/supervising youth risky behavior.
- iv) 2014 online school administrator survey:
 - (1) 36% of school administrators “somewhat” or “strongly” agree that parents permit underage drinking
- v) Law enforcement detail summary reports:
 - (1) 2013 and 2014 retailer compliance checks- two arrests on two separate details, each detail involving 10+ retailers; both arrests at same location.

b) Key points:

- i) Across all data sources: alcohol, marijuana and other drugs are easily accessed by area youth.
- ii) Family and friends are identified as the most likely sources of access.
- iii) Underage alcohol sales are identified as an unlikely source of youth access to alcohol (and tobacco).
- iv) The majority of parent participants in the 2014 AHC online parent survey expressed frustration about “other parents” acting irresponsibly in restricting access to alcohol and medications and in tolerating marijuana use.

Table 1: Ease of Access 2010 and 2012 Missouri Student Survey

If you wanted to get some _____, how easy would it be for you to get?				
% of youth reporting easy to very easy to get				
2012 MSS Administration	8 th Grade	9 th Grade	10 th Grade	2010 MSS All grades
Alcohol	54%	66%	77%	61%
Cigarettes	36%	48%	66%	49%
Marijuana	26%	48%	66%	38%
Prescription Drugs	22%	31%	37%	n/a

It’s clear: If area youth want alcohol, cigarettes, marijuana or other drugs, and even firearms, they have little difficulty getting them. Importantly, “underage sales” are not a significant means of access for alcohol or cigarettes in our region. Consistently, family and friends are identified as the primary means for youth access to all of these dangers. So much so, that parents’ narrative comments submitted in AHC’s online parent survey expressed considerable frustration about the willingness of “of other parents” to “provide” or “look the other way”.

For youth to thrive, parents and other community adults will consciously restrict youth access to alcohol, medications and firearms in their homes, vehicles and places of business.

2) Our communities are characterized by adult inconsistencies in participating with, and prioritizing, the health and safety of our children. These inconsistencies appear to increase as children age.

a) Data sets:

i) 2014 Search Institute Attitudes and Behaviors Survey (SI-ABS)

Table 2: 2014 SI-ABS: Youth report re: parental connections, boundaries and support

External Assets	Definition	Total Sample	Gender		7	8	9	10	11
			M	F					
Family Support	Family life provides high levels of love and support	76	77	74	76	79	74	73	74
Positive Family Communication	Young person and his/her parents communicate positively and young person is willing to seek parent(s') advice and counsel.	34	34	35	39	39	34	27	25
Parent Involvement in Schooling	Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school	35	36	33	43	37	38	28	20
Alone at Home	Spends two or more hours alone per school day	41	39	43	36	42	44	48	36
Family Boundaries	Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person's whereabouts.	50	49	53	57	48	49	48	48
Perception of Parental Disapproval	Alcohol- drink regularly	95	94	96	97	96	95	94	91
	Smoke cigarettes	97	97	97	97	97	98	95	94
	Smoke marijuana	93	93	94	98	95	93	86	87
	Prescription drugs (not prescribed for you)	97	97	97	98	97	97	94	98
Community Conditions		Total Sample	Gender		7	8	9	10	11
Drinking Parties	Reports attending one or more parties in the last year "where other kids your age were drinking."	34	36	32	8	21	40	61	62
School Boundaries	School provides clear rules and consequences.	59	59	58	71	62	58	46	54
Neighborhood Boundaries	Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people's behavior.	47	47	48	54	50	47	41	41
Other Adult Relationships	Young person receives support from 3 or more non-parent adults	57	58	57	59	57	56	55	60
Caring Neighborhood	Young person experiences caring neighbors	39	41	36	43	39	39	34	34

ii) 2014 Focus group themes:

(1) Youth:

- (a) "There are too few adults with whom you can have open and real conversations."
- (b) "Parents are too busy pushing their own agenda."
- (c) "We need adults who listen and don't judge so we can think things out."
- (d) "Strict parents create sneaky kids."
- (e) "My neighbors don't know what I'm doing or anything about me. They don't care."

(2) Clergy:

- (a) "Lack of family and community support structures is key to why risky behavior occurs."

(3) School counselors/social workers:

- (a) "Parents decrease their involvement in their child's schooling as their kids get older."
- (b) "More and more parents are confused about how to talk to their children."
- (c) "Parents think they are alone and don't know what to do."

iii) 2014 online parent survey

- (1) Only 17% of parents "strongly agree" that adults pay attention to the concerns of youth
- (2) Only 20% of parents "strongly agree" that parents have time to engage in the concerns of youth.

- (3) 58% of parents are “sometimes/often/very often” uncertain when they should let their children solve their own problems”
- (4) 57% of parents indicate that they “sometimes/often/very often” can’t compete with screens for their child’s attention.
- (5) 49% of parents are “sometimes/often/very often” unsure how much they should push their kids.
- (6) 48% of parents are “sometimes/often/very often” uncertain what to do about the risky behavior of other children.
- iv) 2014 online school administrator survey:
 - (1) 47% of school administrators “somewhat” or “strongly” agree that parents have time to engage with youth.
 - (2) 58% of school administrators “somewhat” or “strongly” agree that the community takes youth concerns seriously

b) Key points:

- i) There are serious relational and communication gaps between area youth and adults.
- ii) Area youth lack adults with whom they can have open and real conversations and from whom they can access role models, guidance and comfort.
- iii) Parents experience substantial ambivalence about how to interact with their children.
- iv) Parents express uncertainty about how, and how much, to influence their children’s decisions.
- v) Parents are frustrated with each other and do not communicate effectively with each other about managing/supervising youth risky behavior.
- vi) There exist substantial inconsistencies in the messages and adult postures area youth encounter about alcohol and drug use

Youth report insufficient access to adults for meaningful conversation and participation. While 76% of area youth describe family life as “loving and supportive”, only 34% report having meaningful communication and guidance. Additionally, half of youth surveyed report that family and neighborhood boundaries are unclear and inconsistent. Concurrently, area parents report difficulty with finding time for meaningful involvement with their children and many express ambivalence about how to insert themselves into their children’s lives. Both students and parents report area communities as rife with inconsistent rules and messages regarding underage drinking, and, to a lesser extent, youth marijuana use.

For youth to thrive, area communities will become characterized by meaningful communications between youth and adults and by clarity and uniformity of boundaries that prioritize youth health and safety.

3) Emotional and mental health problems are prevalent among area youth. Social stigma and confusion about area resources inhibit help seeking by youth and families suffering mental health and substance abuse problems.

a) Data sets:

- i) 2014 Search Institute Attitudes and Behaviors Survey (SI-ABS)

Table 3: SI-ABS: Incidence Rates of Mental Health Problems Among Area Youth

Risk-taking Behaviors	Definition	Total Sample	M	F	7	8	9	10	11
Depression	Young person felt sad or depressed most or all of the time in the last month	14	8	21	15	12	13	13	10
Recurring Depression and Suicide Attempts	Young person is frequently depressed and/or has attempted suicide	20	13	29	21	18	20	22	23
Attempted Suicide	Young person attempted suicide 1+ times	12	8	18	12	12	13	13	10

- ii) 2014 Focus group themes:

(1) Youth:

- (a) Youth are concerned about risky behavior more in terms of mental health than substance abuse

- (b) “Vast majority of youth have harmed themselves...” either in the form of self-injury or substance abuse
 - (c) “I can’t talk to my parents or even some of my friends about my stress and being so down...”
 - (d) “People don’t understand...you’re expected to just be fine”
 - (2) School counselors/social workers:
 - (a) “There is stigma around seeking help for mental health among parents.”
 - (b) “No one really talks about this ...”
 - (c) “Suicide and mental health issues are in a significant upward trend... there have been a lot of attempts.”
 - (3) Law enforcement:
 - (a) “Youth and families are not seeking counseling”
 - (b) “There has been an increase in suicide rates and attempts...”
 - (4) Clergy:
 - (a) Clergy members observe depression and suicide have “roots in grief and loss” as well as “despair about the future.”
 - ii) 2014 online parent survey
 - (1) “Parents are too busy to pay attention to what their kids are doing.”
 - (2) “Increase awareness of resources available to help parents and youth at risk...”
 - iii) 2014 online school administrator survey:
 - (1) 97% of school administrators “somewhat” or “strongly” agree that mental health issues have increased.
 - (2) 95% of school administrators “somewhat” or “strongly” agree that suicide risk is a big problem.
 - (3) 43% of school administrators “somewhat” or “strongly” agree that local norms stigmatize mental health care.
 - iv) 2013 Parkway “All High Schools” Bullying Survey
 - (1) 13% of students who report being bullied indicate they tell an adult vs. 44% of students bullied do not
- b) Key points:**
- i) Youth report significant rates of mental health problems.
 - ii) Youth are afraid of peer and adult reactions to a need for emotional/mental health/substance abuse help.
 - iii) Youth and parents report stigma associated with help seeking behavior makes them reluctant to seek help.
 - iv) Counselors, social workers, school administrators and police report that social stigma associated with help seeking behavior blocks youth access to services.

In addition to substance abuse problems, as many as one in five area youth struggle with anxiety, depression and other mental health problems. Comments in focus groups reveal that youth are reluctant to tell their friends, parents and other adults about these struggles, fearing anger, judgment and rejection. Area professionals report that the stigma associated with needing and seeking help inhibits youth and parents from acting. Further, parents concerned about a child’s mental health or substance use report that they are uncertain about what constitutes a child’s need for help, what resources exist, and how to gain timely access to these resources. The net result is that area youth experience unreliable and insufficient access to available treatment resources for substance abuse and mental health problems.

For youth to thrive, parents/caregivers and families will seek help more quickly for mental health and substance abuse problems.

4) **Area youth lack the life skills to effectively cope with the stress and pressures they experience. These skill deficits, and/or the complexities of life stresses, appear to increase with age.**

a) **Data sets:**

- i) Search Institute Attitudes and Behaviors Survey (SI-ABS)

Table 4: 2014 Search Institute: Youth Capacities for Self-regulation and Interpersonal Competence

Internal Assets	Definition	Total Sample	Gender	Grade				
			M F	7	8	9	10	11
Restraint	Young person believes it is important not to be sexually active or to use alcohol or other drugs.	59	55 65	77	69	56	41	34
Resistance Skills	Young person can resist negative peer pressure and dangerous situations	52	49 57	60	51	49	47	49
Interpersonal Competence	Young person has empathy, sensitivity and friendship skills	48	37 61	55	49	44	46	38
Cultural Competence	Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.	46	41 53	55	48	42	43	35
Planning and Decision Making	Young person knows how to plan ahead and make choices	35	33 39	36	35	29	38	40

- ii) 2014 Focus group themes:

(1) Law enforcement:

(a) “Youth minimize the dangers of alcohol and drug use... they (youth) don’t understand or refuse to understand”

(2) School counselors/social workers”

(a) “Many students have big issues to cope with... divorce, death/suicide/mental health/addiction of friend or family member.”

(b) Underage drinking and substance use are often forms of “self-medicating”.

- iii) 2014 online parents survey

(1) Some parents believe that youth lack self-restraint and that it is the role of parents to provide “restraints” as youth often lack the perspective to make healthy choices.

(2) 61% of parents indicate *youth minimizing risks* contributes a “great deal” to underage drinking, 62% for marijuana use and 57% for use of medications outside of a prescription.

- iv) 2014 online school administrator survey:

(1) 66% of school administrators observe youth minimizing the risks of underage drinking and drug use.

b) Key points:

i) Youth report lacking sufficient capabilities to handle, and cope with, the scope of problems they face.

ii) Youth face complicated and painful life challenges

iii) Fewer youth report confidence in their management/coping skills as they get older.

iv) Youth report high levels of academic pressure and stress from parents and school.

52% of area youth report the ability to resist peer pressure, 35% indicate they can adequately plan ahead and make good decisions and only 43% feel they have any control over what happens to them: three skills commonly associated with interpersonal competence and effective life management. And, as area youth get older, fewer report having these, and other important, capabilities. This trend collides with community expectations that, with age, youth become *more* capable. Parents report that they often ‘dial back’ controls as children get older. In combination, these reports suggest area youth are expected to be better at managing problems and taking care of themselves than they actually are.

For youth to thrive, youth will have more diverse opportunities to develop personal problem solving and social-emotional skills while parents and other adults become better at basing expectations on youth capabilities.

5) Our success driven culture imposes high expectations regarding youth performance and capabilities without providing the necessary community supports.

a) Data sets:

i) 2014 Search Institute Attitudes and Behaviors Survey (SI-ABS)

Table 5: 2014 SI-ABS: Community Based Supports for Area Youth

External Assets	Definition	Total Sample	Gender		Grade				
			M	F	7	8	9	10	11
High Expectations	Parents and teachers encourage the young person to do well	64	66	63	64	65	63	58	74
Other Adult Relationships	Young person receives support from 3 or more non-parent adults	57	58	57	59	57	56	55	60
Neighborhood Boundaries	Neighbors take responsibility for monitoring young people’s behavior.	47	47	48	54	50	47	41	41
Caring Neighborhood	Young person experiences caring neighbors	39	41	36	43	39	39	34	34
School Boundaries	School provides clear rules and consequences.	59	59	58	71	62	58	46	54
Positive Peer Influence	Young person’s best friends model responsible behavior.	79	76	84	91	87	78	66	58
Family Support	Family life provides high levels of love and support	76	77	74	76	79	74	73	74
Positive Family Communication	Young person and his/her parents positively and young person is willing to seek parent(s’) advice and counsel.	34	34	35	39	39	34	27	25
Parent Involvement in Schooling	Parent(s) are actively involved in helping young person succeed in school	35	36	33	43	37	38	28	20
Family Boundaries	Family has clear rules and consequences and monitors the young person’s whereabouts.	50	49	53	57	48	49	48	48

ii) 2014 Focus group themes:

(1) School counselors/social workers:

- (a) “Freshman are required to think of success immediately after entering high school.”
- (b) “Academic pressure on students is “all the time”.
- (c) Observe that the demands placed upon youth are “great”
- (d) It is difficult to engage the broader conversation about how the community supports youth.

(2) Youth:

- (a) Youth face constant and intense pressure to succeed
- (b) Youth perceive adults as “obsessed” with grades and sports; *“Its all they care about...”*.
- (c) Youth report a link between stress and “unhealthy behaviors”
- (d) Youth report that much of the stress in their lives comes from academic pressures

(3) Clergy

- (a) Clergy observe the “affluenza” trend in community attitudes “work hard, play hard” regarding the balancing youth performance with youth health.
- (b) “Lack of support is key factor in risky behavior.”

iii) 2014 online school administrator survey:

- (1) Only 13% of school administrators “strongly agree” that youth are supported.
- (2) Only 15% of school administrators “strongly agree” that parents have time to engage.

b) Key points:

- i) Area youth face constant and rigorous pressures regarding academic performance
- ii) Youth lack sufficient social-emotional supports to effectively cope with stress and pressure
- iii) It appears that adults assume better coping capabilities in youth than youth actually have
- iv) There is a link between the observed skills deficits, depression and self-medicating behavior.

Area youth struggle with significant degrees of frustration and alienation in reaction to what they perceive as adult’s “obsessive” concern with academics and sports. In the eyes of area youth, adults over-value academics and sports at the expense of the broader range of priorities and issues with which youth identify. Further, area counselors, educators and social workers observe that students are increasingly “on their own” when it comes to handling academic pressures and that there has been a growing trend to push increasing numbers of students into advanced classes, whether students will benefit from such placement or not.

If youth are to thrive, our communities will balance cultural expectations with the provision of meaningful supports

6) Communities do not include youth as resources in problem solving or for meaningful participation in local governance.

a) Data sets:

i) 2014 Search Institute Attitudes and Behaviors Survey (SI-ABS)

Table 6: 2014 SI-ABS: Youth as a Developed Resource in the Community

External Assets	Definition	Total Sample	Gender		7	8	9	10	11
			M	F					
Community Values Youth	Young person believes that adults in the community value youth.	28	30	27	34	29	27	26	20
Youth as Resources	Young people are given useful roles in the community.	37	39	35	37	40	37	34	32
Service to Others	Young person serves the community one or more hour per week.	52	50	54	54	46	50	50	62
Internal Assets	Definition	Total Sample	Gender		7	8	9	10	11
Sense of Purpose	Young person reports that “my life has a purpose”	64	70	57	62	67	66	62	63
Interpersonal Competence	Young person has empathy, sensitivity and friendship skills	48	37	61	55	49	44	46	38
Cultural Competence	Young person has knowledge of and comfort with people of different cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds.	46	41	53	55	48	42	43	35

ii) 2014 Focus group themes:

(1) Clergy:

- (a) “A blame the kids posture” is common among adults
- (b) “This is a culture of ‘reserve’- community members are reluctant to risk exposure of their own struggles.”
- (c) “People live in their own “siloes” which prevents ‘community narrative’”

(2) Youth:

- (a) Many young people don’t see their capacity to contribute to community problem solving.
- (b) Youth identified that “many kids” would have to “get out of their comfort zones” and “not just do what their friends do” to participate in community problem solving.
- (c) “Adults only recognize kids with good grades or high achieving athletes” (referring to community inclusion)
- (d) Youth expressed disappointment and frustration about how teachers/parents/administrators have not used past surveys as a basis for open and constructive dialogue.

iii) 2014 online parents survey:

- (1) Only 8% of parents “strongly agree” that the community takes responsibility for conditions that impact youth.
- (2) Only 28% of parents “strongly agree” that youth have opportunities for community service.
- (3) One-fourth of parents point to the fact that “youth don’t have enough meaningful things to do” as contributing a “great deal” to risky behaviors.

iv) 2014 online school administrators survey:

(1) School administrators identified “increased youth engagement with their neighborhoods” as the most important next step in reducing risky behaviors.

b) Key points:

- i) There appears to exist substantial tension and discomfort on both sides of the community-youth relationship
- ii) Area youth report being left out of meaningful involvement in community problem solving
- iii) Area youth demonstrate substantial unfamiliarity with analyzing community problems and issues
- iv) Youth report significant disappointment and frustration at adults “ignoring or avoiding” opportunities for open dialogue about life topics.

While community service appears to have grown in importance regarding college applications and other post-high school pursuits, it does not appear that youth involvement in community service fosters their experience of *being of value* in their communities or that their service involvements render them more confident in addressing community issues. Area youth express both the frustration of being undervalued and also the expectation that “others” (parents, adult authorities) will “take care” of things.

It is well established that people who believe that their actions contribute to the greater good tend to take themselves, and their health, more seriously. Further, when people experience being of value to the community around them, they are more likely to develop aspirations in sync with the values and norms of that community. Our data indicate that serious gaps exist in the meaningful inclusion of youth in community management and problem solving. Thus, as currently structured, it is unlikely that our communities are effective incubators of young people confident in their capacities to constructively influence change, intent to build and protect those capacities.

If youth are to thrive, our communities will provide more diverse opportunities for youth to be included as resources in community problem solving and local governance.

The community-level challenges in better assuring the health and safety of our youth are significant. Earnest conversations are needed to raise the collective awareness of the “disconnections” between youth and adults, between youth and their communities: disconnections that raise the risks of substance abuse, depression and suicidality. With community input, Alliance for Healthy Communities intends to identify and spearhead initiatives targeting all six of the above listed conditions. To learn more about our efforts, or to view the full report on our findings, please visit us at ahc-stl.org.